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The development of gender and sexual identity of gay and lesbian youth in the physical and virtual world

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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

The development of gender and sexual identity of gay and lesbian youth in the physical and virtual world.

This research report was submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, School of Human and Community Development, in partial requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Social and Psychological Research at the University of the Witwatersrand.

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July 2023

Declaration

I, *Philile Makhunga*, hereby declare that this research report titled *'The development of gender and sexual identity of gay and lesbian youth in the physical and virtual world'* is my original work. It is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree in Social and Psychological Research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The work has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Date: 03 July 2023

PROTOCOL NUMBER: MASPR/20/15

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents (Mr. Khulekani and Mrs. Nonhlanhla Makhunga), who supported me emotionally and financially through this journey. To my dad who saw the beginning of this journey but not the end, your wisdom that is instilled in me keeps my head high, you are dearly loved and appreciated. My mom who continues to believe in me and my dream, I love you.

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I would like to recognise the participants and the NGO which I would like to keep discrete, for their contribution to this study and sharing their most sensitive stories with me, thank you for trusting me.

I would like to acknowledge Prof. Andrew Thatcher and the school for human and community development for financial support and also the University of the Witwatersrand.

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Abstract

South Africa is one of the countries to include sexual orientation in the Bill of Rights (de Wet, 2017), however, the increase in the reported number of homophobic violence and abuse is disappointing (Gordon, 2018). This study seeks to understand the process of gender and sexual identity development among gay and lesbian youth through their interaction with the physical and virtual world. A total of 11 participants were interviewed using a purposeful and snowball sampling, five of whom were lesbian women and six were gay men. The study adopted a qualitative research methodology, and a narrative approach to acquire in-depth stories in order to explore the sexuality of homosexual individuals.

Cass's Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation was used as a theoretical framework for the study. This model provides sequenced developmental stages that homosexual individuals may encounter in the process of developing their identity. Although other models appeared vague and lacked a detailed description of the processes that homosexual individuals experience, Cass's model presented six stages based on two assumptions; identity is acquired through a developmental process and identity formation is influenced by the interaction that occurs between an individual and their environment (Gervacio, 2012). In this study, the Cass model influenced the structure of the interview questions; in essence, the challenges and successes associated with each identity stage were intentionally reflected in the interview questions. The reason for this was to acquire a thorough understanding of the sexual identity development process and to determine whether these stages relate to the participant's experience in the South African context.

The formation of the sexual identity of the participants of this study was found to be greatly influenced by religious beliefs, family traditions, and broader societal attitudes. However, each individual found their unique path in formulating their sexual identity to acquire their true

identity. Social media provided the least significant effect on their identity formation. Moreover, some of the identity stages in Cass's Model had a more significant influence while others had the least.

Keyword: LGBTQIA+, Queer, homosexuality, Cass's Model, sexual identity, gender identity

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Following the end of the apartheid regime, the South African government established equal rights for all individuals, including those who were sexually disadvantaged in 1996 (Mahomed & Trango, 2016). LGBTQIA+ is the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual. The LGBTQIA+ community is protected by the Constitution's Bill of Rights from all kinds of discrimination (De Wet, 2017). However, Mkhize and Maharaj (2020) claim that in several African countries, including South Africa, sexual orientation is still stigmatized and frowned upon. Moreover, the general society in many nations, particularly those on the African continent, upholds the idea that heterosexuality is the normative expression of sexuality and, as a result, does not tolerate non-heteronormative people, subjecting them to numerous instances of callous mistreatment as well as bursts of stigma, discrimination, and stigmatisation (Luvo & Kang'ethe, 2023). This observation is based on the continued practice of cultural and religious beliefs that shun upon same-sex relationships (Mkhize and Maharaj, 2020). In light of the staunchly upheld principles, Jones (2018) adds that LGBTQIA+ people continue to struggle with coming out in public as such. Even though, in 2008, The Other Foundation estimated that there were over 530 000 members of the LGBQT+ community in South Africa, notwithstanding the disarray caused by prejudice and sexual discrimination (Mkhize & Maharaj, 2020). Moreover, SASAS data reported that approximately 1,8% (634 000) of adults in South Africa identify as LGBTQIA+ (Nyeck & Shepherd, 2019).

Prior to the incorporation of sexual orientation into the Constitution, the apartheid government restricted the ability of gay men and lesbian women to achieve this goal (Rothmann, 2014). For instance, in the Equality Movement at the University of Natal in the early 1970s, Mark

West, a member of the student representative council announced the formation of the South African Gay Liberation Movement, which is one of the earliest attempts to liberate the sexual minority in South Africa (Rothmann, 2014). The police disbanded the movement due to the Sexual Offences Act, which stated that homosexuality is an 'alien' import, raised the age of consent for homosexual activities to 19, banned the sale of sex toys and prohibited ‘sexual gratification' acts between males at a party (Rothmann, 2014). As a result of this movement, more groups came to light to advocate for the sexually underrepresented.

The Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) organization was established in 1982, which was the first national gay and lesbian movement in the country (Rothmann, 2014). This movement’s primary concern was providing support services and social events and maintained an apolitical stance (Rothmann, 2014). Simon Nkoli was an active member of GASA, who eventually founded his own organization, the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) (Rothman, 2014). This organization was founded to support more black gays and lesbians, coupled a fervent anti-apartheid ideology with public assertiveness about lesbian and gay identity. The first gay and lesbian pride march through Johannesburg's streets was organized by GLOW in September 1990 (Bilchitz, 2015).

Moreover, the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA), intentionally partnered with organizations outside of the movement to strengthen its initiative (Bilchitz, 2015). By joining forces with the United Democratic Front (UDF), a coalition of civil society organizations founded to combat apartheid and coordinate mass demonstrations against the apartheid government, this organization took a big stride forward (Bilchitz, 2015). Due to this relationship, OLGA was able to submit a written draft to the ANC Constitutional Committee in 1990 to ensure protection and rights for the sexually underprivileged (Bilchitz, 2015).

The stage of adolescence is when people begin to question various aspects of life, including their sexual orientation and gender identity (Realista, et al 2019). According to Nagoshi and Nagoshi (2014), gender identity refers to the social classification that is connected to a person's biological sex, whether it be male or female. This term encourages the idea that one naturally assumes and fulfils the social roles that are allocated to and expected of that gender identification as a result of biological sex. The definition of sexual identity has evolved over the years, Diamond (2002) defined sexual identity as how a person perceives themselves to be either male or female. According to Hill et al (2017), there are a few aspects that affect how one's sexual identity develops, these include feelings, behaviours, and social beliefs. Individuals may report sexual attraction to men while engaging in sexual activity with both men and women. Individuals may further indicate that they do not identify with a specific sexual orientation or preference (Hill et al, 2017).

Alberts and Bennett (2017) reports that stricter gender norms and cultural expectations are being imposed in some developing countries, which affects the development and formation of sexual identity for homosexual young people. According to Realista et al (2019), developing one's sexual orientation and gender identity is a process that applies to both heterosexuals and homosexuals, although heterosexism maintains the idea that having a heterosexual relationship is necessary for living a fruitful and fulfilling life (Langa, 2015). As a result, homosexuality is seen as posing a threat to the patriarchal system, conventional gender roles, and the reliance on women's gender roles (Langa, 2015)

According to Taylor and Neppl (2021), the development of sexual identity starts during the school years; thus, this study also addresses the impact from the school setting and the family setting because adolescents spend the majority of their time in the school environment. A person’s family is their first and closest source of safety, as family support is crucial to their growth as individuals (Taylor & Neppl, 2021). The detrimental psychological and spiritual

repercussions of sexuality disclosure have been demonstrated to be mostly perpetuated through parental and family rejection (Taylor & Neppl, 2021). Nell and Shapiro (2011) contend that one's environment, which includes family, friends, and educational institutions, has an impact on how one views themselves and as well as their sexual identity. Positive feedback enhances an individual's ability to explore, cultivate, and realize their identity (Nell & Shiparo, 2011). A person is more likely to report feeling physically and mentally compromised when their sexuality is perceived negatively (Ading et al, 2021).

In the late 1970s, Cass developed a Model of Sexual Orientation Identity Formation encompassing six steps that examine the linear stages of identity formation for gay and lesbian individuals (Gervacio, 2012). This model was developed to acknowledge the diverse sexual identities and issues faced by LGB individuals, along with the management of their identities (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). Prior and after Cass's Model, a few more other models had been developed, however, they had drawn criticism in their examination of understanding the identity development of the sexual minority individuals. In this study, Cass's model is used to explain and understand participants' experiences in developing their sexual identity in their interaction with physically and virtually. Cass claim that success in these stages leads to a stable and coherent sexual identity (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). Even though, Bosse and Chiodo (2016) argued that there may be a distinctive and non-linear progress toward individual identity creation within these stages. Furthermore, according to Goodrich & Brammer (2021) Cass's model has been regarded as the cornerstone theory of the development of sexually marginalized individuals in homosexuality research. This is because it has been used for so long and it has been relevant in the academic space as reference.

Since the modern world has entered the digital age, allowing for efficient access to information and global connectivity via the Internet, it is essential to investigate the impact virtual connection has on the formation of sexual and gender identity. Therefore, this study

acknowledges the significance of both spaces and examines their impact on the development of gender and sexual identity. Previous research indicates that, on average, 90 % of American youth have an online presence, which is why the focus is solely on the younger generation (Craig & McInroy, 2014).

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm and used a narrative approach along with a qualitative epistemology and methodology. Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the deep experiences of people through emerging data (Blanche et al., 2014). In addition, the narrative approach will provide detailed life histories of homosexual individuals to gain an in-depth understanding of their gender and sexual identity development. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling from an NGO in Kwa-Zulu Natal and through referrals, this study includes eleven gays and lesbian participants from the LGBTQIA+ community. Participants were required to have internet access and active social media accounts. The results of this study were analysed using a thematic narrative analysis.

Research Aim and Question

This study aimed to understand the process of gender and sexual identity development of the LGBTQ+ community from a narrative perspective, mainly focusing on lesbians and gays. The main objective is to examine the impact that the society, community that they grew up from has on the development of their gender and sexual identity in contemporary South Africa. The study will also look at the role that modern digitalisation of social life, virtual connectivity plays on their development. The main question of this study is:

- How do gay and lesbian youth develop and make sense of their sexuality through their interaction with the physical and virtual world?
- What impact does the society, community that they grew up from has on the development of their gender and sexual identity in contemporary South Africa?

- What role does the modern digitalisation of social life; virtual connectivity plays on their development?

Research Rationale

Sexual diversity is one of the controversial topics that divide individuals worldwide. Some South Africans find sexual diversity difficult to comprehend and embrace. The African customs, cultures, and religions that deny the existence of homosexuality may be the cause of this evident contradiction. Evidently, culture is a significant factor fuelling homophobia. This is because it encourages individuals to internalise sexual norms and communicates sexual schemas, such as the idea that sex and sexuality should be seen as naturally occurring and essential to people rather than as a product of culture (Luvo & Kang'ethe, 2023). On the one hand, it is believed that homosexuality was imported from the Western culture with the advent of colonialism (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). The purpose of this study is to bridge the divide between speculation and reality; to provide a greater understanding of the reality that homosexual individuals face as they accept their sexuality and eventually come out to the rest of the world. Even though, there is a fair number of articles that have been published on the topic, this study focused on understanding the deeper narratives of their journey of growth from a young age.

Structure of the Report

In the literature review, the chapter investigates prior research conducted on the subject of this study. Five topics were discussed in particular: the development of gender and sexual identity, Theoretical Framework: Cass's Model of Sexual Identity Formation, homosexuality development, the physical world and sexual identity development, homosexuality and religion, and the influence of the virtual world. In the chapter that follows the literature review, the procedure and methodology for participant recruitment and data collection are described. This

chapter describes the methodologies utilized to direct the investigation and obtain results more pertinent to the study. This chapter also contains ethical considerations pertaining to the safety precautions of research. The third chapter provides a summary of the research findings and excerpts from participant accounts. In chapter four, the study's findings are discussed in relation to the findings of prior research and concluding remarks are presented.

CHAPTER 2

Literature review

Introduction

Individual development begins internally and progresses externally (Hoffarth & Gordon, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to understand the fundamental concepts of gender and sexual identity, as well as how they relate to the dependence on society to achieve an ideal sexual identity (Rosenbloom, 2016). This chapter examines the preliminary knowledge of the previously examined studies pertaining to the formation of gender and sexual identity of the LGBTQIA+ community, focus on the homosexual individuals, the influence that the physical world has on their sexual development, as well as the role that the virtual world plays.

Gender and sexual identity formation

Identity formation and sexuality is an essential part of a person's development. Therefore, it is important to understand concepts such as gender, and sexual identity before we proceed. According to Prince (2017), gender is a noun in its own right and should be treated as such, therefore defines gender as the two human classifications, male and female, thus, recognising gender identity as an individual's subjective sense of self as a gendered person. This notion includes three components, including the physical, the social/cultural, and the internal or subjective world (Prince, 2014). Identity is acquired through a developmental process, and identity formation is influenced by an individual's interaction with their environment (Gervacio, 2012). According to Prince (2017) the physical aspect of gender identity includes the biological phenomenon of being male or female, the social/cultural aspect reflects the expression, role, and behaviour; the way one presents oneself, this can include clothing, hair, and the way one carries themselves. The internal or subjective aspect of gender affirms a

person's own view of themselves as a gendered person, which includes the psychological feeling of being masculine or feminine (Prince, 2017).

Sexuality is the source of our deepest private emotional and physical experiences. It has the power to give us both intense pleasure and pain in life. Although we know much about the biological and physiological development of the body's reproductive and sexual functions, we are not nearly as well informed about the cultural, psychological, and social processes involved in the development of sexual identity (Mayer & McHugh, 2016). According to (Hoffarth & Gordon, 2017) sexual identity is an internal and external matter, i.e., how one perceives oneself and how one describes oneself to others. Frankhanel (2010) points out that the complexity of sexual identity includes the cognitive, emotional, and social factors to complete a person's sense of belonging. Furthermore, depending on the cultural and community influences inherited, their self-perception of sexuality varies. Sexual identity is defined as how an individual conceptualises romantic and sexual attractions to others (Ading et al, 2021). Therefore, sexual identity development is the process of recognizing sexual attraction, and going through the process of understanding, accepting, and developing one's sexual identity (Taylor & Neppl, 2021).

The development of sexual identity is a process for which LGBTQIA+ individuals have not been prepared and which is contextually unsupported and stigmatized, it seems that this process is characterized by inconsistency or incongruence between its affective, cognitive, and behavioural components (Rosario et al., 2016). Over the years, homosexuality has been studied by various theorists, including Sigmund Freud, who analysed sexual orientation from a biological perspective and concluded that homosexuality is an impairment caused by a complex desire which he named the 'arrested development' in the childhood of one of the parents (Hall et al, 2021). Therefore, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness until the American Psychiatric Association abolished it from being a disease (Hall et al, 2021). The development

of sexual identity in homosexual individuals begins with the first awareness of same-sex attraction in adolescence, followed by exploration of one's sexual attraction in early adulthood, and finally sharing the identity with others (Hoffarth & Gordon, 2017). Hall and Rodgers (2019) add that during adolescence, sexuality assumes a prominent role in the lives of adolescents.

The average age at which adolescents become aware of sexual attraction and to identify their sexual orientation is between 11 and 18. Fisher (2010) adds that sexual identity development is an ongoing process of accepting and identifying oneself as homosexual and also disclosing one's sexuality to loved ones and society. In addition, Dillon (2011) and Hoffarth & Gordon (2017) note that sexual identity formation is a process that occurs throughout a person's lifespan. Furthermore, Fisher (2010) notes that the development of sexual identity is not a fixed process, but rather a long, complex process of self-labelling and choosing to reveal one's sexuality to some people. Furthermore, the process of identity formation brings additional difficulties, such as social stigmatisation and rejection by the family, which can lead to psychological problems and suicidal thoughts (Realista et al., 2019). These problems are significantly influenced by social norms, cultural beliefs, and religion, which prohibit same-sex relationships on the grounds that they are immoral, un-African, and un-Christian. (Mkhize & Maharaj, 2020).

Homosexuality Development

The deficiencies of this model, highlighted in the study by Degges-White et al (2000), may indicate that each homosexual person undergoes a unique and distinct process of growth and identity development. The focus of this study is mainly on the sexual and gender identity of homosexual individuals, lesbians, and gays. The primary objective of this process is to achieve a healthy and stable sexual identity development, with Bosse and Chiodo (2016) concluding that there may be a distinct and non-linear progression of individual identity development

within the stages of identity development. Moreover, according to Hoffarth and Gordon (2017), homosexuals are more likely to be accepted in modern-day society than in the past, which makes the process of identity formation even more significant and crucial. It is found that more LGBTQ+ individuals are coming out at earlier ages compared with the past (Hoffarth & Gordon, 2017).

For instance, Ading's et al (2021) study of gay youth revealed that the majority of participants were aware of their effeminate appearance at a young age; they admitted to recognising affection for their same-sex classmates and were likely to have female peers as friends. However, as illustrated by Nkosi and Masso's (2017) research, homosexual people struggle with their sexual identity once they realize that their sexual desires do not align with heterosexual'' expectations. However, once their sexual feelings were identified, they began to perceive and have a positive experience (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). According to Graziano (2005), same-sex attraction awareness does not always result in self-labelling.

Lesbians also reported self-denial, the suppression of same-sex thoughts, and endured the internal conflicts brought on by the denial of their sexuality (BICKRUM, 1996). Nonetheless, the uniqueness of their experiences with identity formation and same-sex attraction has been characterized as a crucial aspect of sexual identity development (Realist et al., 2019). Reilly and Woo, 2004 argued that the primary objective of identity formation within a person's dominant paradigm is to maintain a distinctive identity without disregarding cultural norms and traditional values. These characteristics of a person are part of a solid and consistent identity that incorporates traditional and contemporary cultures (Reilly & Woo, 2004).

It is found that homosexual adolescents may exhibit internalized homophobia due to the homophobic and discriminatory attitudes toward sexual minorities (Bickrum, 1996). Internalized homophobia is defined as the incorporation of society's negative attitudes and

presumptions regarding homosexuality (Bickrum, 1996). It occurs when a homosexual is subjected to derogatory comments and homophobic attitudes from others, and they begin to inflict self-hate. In patriarchal societies that uphold patriarchy in social norms, homophobic violence is viewed as a means of social control (Gordon, 2018). Homophobia is characterized by prejudice against homosexuality as well as negative attitudes and beliefs (Marumo & Chakale, 2019). According to Marumo and Chakele (2019), homophobia is believed to be a result of discriminatory societal norms, fundamentalist religious beliefs, and teachings handed down from family members and/or parents.

The physical world and sexual identity development

Rosenbloom (2016) stated that a person's healthy existence is contingent on their social ties. Thus, belonging to a community can also led to sexual liberation. Ading et al., (2021) noted that the healthy process of identity formation involves not only intrinsic factors but also social influences and community support. Therefore, Graziano (2005) and Arndt and de Bruin (2006) assert that environmental, social, and religious forces are the primary determinants of whether or not a homosexual person "comes out". Edwards & Brooks (1999) use the "coming out" to define the process of identifying as queer and breaking the silence by becoming visible in society. Consequently, the presence of a supportive environment and close homosexual role models are two essential elements that encourage sexually marginalized individuals to come out (Arndt & de Bruin, 2006)

Participants in a study conducted by Graziano (2005) indicated that community systemic institutions, such as religion and traditional values, acted as impediments to their coming out. Fisher (2010) asserts that LGBT youth frequently choose to come out to their close friends and siblings, but not to their parents, out of dread of parental rejection. In this instance, parental disapproval refers to parent's' negative perceptions of their child's sexuality (Taylor & Neppl,

2021). In Fisher's (2010) study, one-third of the adolescents reported parental victimization following the disclosure of their sexual orientation. This form of rejection is linked to the starting point of substance abuse, mental health issues, and suicidal ideation. It is believed that parental rejection is the primary cause of physical and mental health problems among homosexual adolescents. Talyor and Neppl (2021).

Munyiki and Vincent (2017) and Wagaman et al., (2020) conducted studies with university students who reported being rejected and ridiculed by their own families. These views support the notion that LGBTQ+ adolescents are less likely to have supportive relationships with their parents (Wagaman et al., 2020). In another study, Nell and Shapiro (2011) found that homosexual adolescents placed a high value on how their parents would react to their coming out, as this would affect their ability to interact effectively with the outside world. The reaction of parents may influence or encourage the development of the adolescent's homosexual identity (Nell & Shapiro, 2011). Consequently, some homosexuals do not disclose their sexual orientation to their families until they have finished high school or enrolled in university (Butler & Astbury, 2005). According to Butler and Astbury (2005), the reason for deferring communication with parents is apprehension that it may compromise emotional and financial dependence on them. Nell and Shapiro (2011) stated that some parents would even evict their homosexual children from their houses. Some homosexual youth choose not to come out to their parents due to the sense of alienation and loss of familial support that this decision may induce (Butler & Astbury, 2005).

Taylor and Neppl (2021) discuss a model that can be used to examine parental opposition to and family acceptance of sexual diversity, the minority stress model. The minority stress model explains the relationship between the increased discrimination, rejection, stress, and family support experienced by sexual minorities. The majority of sexual minorities conceal their identities out of fear for their safety and to avoid internalized social stigma, according to this

model (Taylor & Neppl, 2021). According to Ghosh (2020), parents'' reactions are typically based on their understanding of sexual diversity, or lack thereof. Some parents might try to assist their children with understanding their sexuality but lack the expertise needed and therefore seek assistance from society (Ghosh, 2020). According to Jaspal's (2019) research, some parents attribute their child's sexuality to inadequate parenting. In a similar research, Ryan et al., (2009) discovered that some parents felt shame and embarrassment and feared for their children's reputation in society. In Ryan et al., (2009) study, some parents chose to limit their children's contact with homosexual peers in order to guide them in assimilating into heterosexual society. Nevertheless, some parents are tolerant and accepting of their children's sexual orientation (Nell and Shapiro, 2011).

As stated previously, the concept of coming out is profoundly rooted in the potent influences of community values, religious beliefs, and cultural norms. It is believed that a holistic and compelling form of homosexual identity is developed and promoted during the coming out process (McCormick, 2013). The process of coming out differs between individuals (Nell & Shapiro, 2011). Thom and Coetzee (2004) observe that in South Africa, multiple cultures, backgrounds, practices, religions, and social conventions influence how an individual develops their sexual identity. According to Dlamini (2006) certain African cultures are sensitive and require homosexuals to repress their affections for same-sex partners. This implies that if one has these emotions, they should be repressed through silence. This is due to the potential threat posed to established gender norms and traditional norms of heterosexual structure (Marumo & Chakele, 2019).

In accordance with the constitutional amendment, the government is required to protect the rights of homosexuals; however, this law is rarely implemented (Marumo & Chakele, 2019). There are still reports of discrimination against sexual minorities in the country (Marumo & Chakele, 2019). In addition, Nkosi and Masson (2017) contend that homophobia and

discrimination are less prevalent in urban areas than in rural ones. Resistance to the acceptance of homosexuality is ingrained in both Western and African cultural and traditional practices (Marumo & Chakele, 2019). In 2017, approximately 38 African nations considered homosexuality to be a criminal offense and upheld their anti-homosexuality laws (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). These nations believe that same-sex relationships violate African traditions and values and that homosexuals have adopted Western lifestyles foreign to African culture (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). This misunderstanding, according to Brown and McCann (2018), originates from the misconception that homosexuality never existed in Africa, that colonization caused this behaviour, and that the emergence of sexual rights organizations in the West is to blame. Those who continue to oppose these traditions are met with verbal insults, physical violence, and physical assault (Marumo & Chakele, 2019). Rural areas are more likely to deny the LGBTIQ+ community than urban ones (Brown & Njoko, 2020). This may be due to the structured and traditional way of living by rural residents, which is rooted in their cultural and religious beliefs (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015)

Particularly lesbian women are viewed as a threat to the traditional patriarchal system (Marumo & Chakele, 2019). According to Marumo and Chakele (2019), they are believed to imitate the character and behaviour of men and therefore do not submit to masculine dominance. As a result, heterosexual conservative men violently rape lesbians; this form of rape is known as ‘corrective rape’ (Brown & McCann, 2018). Corrective rape is the consequence of ignorance and intolerance of same-sex affections in society (Brown & McCann, 2018). According to one male participant in Brown and McCann’s (2018) study who mentioned that lesbian behaviour is demeaning, and it’s like telling us men we are not good enough. Gordon (2018) provides an example of this behaviour in which a participant was assaulted by a man who pursued her intrusively, and when she refused, she was harassed and traumatized for not behaving like a woman. When she reported the harassment, police officers verbally harassed her instead of

providing her with support and assistance (Gordon, 2018). Homosexuality is also considered a threat to the patriarchal structure of the family and a violation of religious and cultural conventions (Langa 2015). According to Marumo and Chakele (2019), the cultural expectation for a male child is to become a father, but family attitudes shift when this structure is disrupted.

Traditional beliefs and communal expectations have a greater impact on female youth than on male youth (Langa, 2015). According to Msibi (2012) this behaviour is reinforced by the school uniform dress code, which mandates females to wear skirts as part of the school uniform. Msibi (2012) discovered that teachers in South Africa ridiculed and humiliated lesbian females who wore trousers to school, which are typically worn by male students. In conservative areas of South Africa, particularly rural KwaZulu-Natal, the wearing of pants, which are typically reserved for males, is still frowned upon (Msibi, 2012). According to Hammer (2023), public values and public morality are contextual and dynamic; therefore, it is neither justifiable nor desirable for a teacher to hold the same moral positions as the state at any given time. Teachers play a vital role in the lives of students and influence the school climate. The attitude of a teacher toward LGBTQ individuals is significant because it affects his or her behaviour and interactions with LGBTQ students, which can contribute to a supportive or hostile school climate (Hall & Rodgers, 2019).

While South African schools are required to provide a safe space and a supportive learning environment for all students, the requirements of LGBTQIA+ youth are typically overlooked (Francis D. , 'Keeping it straight' what do South African queer youth say they need from sexuality education?, 2019). Frequently, the belief that homosexuality is un-African and un-Christian lies at the root of such discriminatory conduct. One participant in Langa's (2015) study, for instance, defended his prejudice with religious arguments such as "The Bible says to procreate and reproduce" "and "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam.". This

perspective promotes the notion that same-sex relationships are aberrant, sinful, and contrary to the Bible (Langa, 2015). The primary goal of marriage, according to many civilizations' cultural lenses, is procreation; hence, homosexuality is seen as being incompatible with the traditional cultural ideals of procreation and livelihood because two men or two women cannot procreate (Luvo & Kang'ethe, 2023). According to Francis (2017) and Wells and Polders (2006), LGBTQIA+ adolescents in South African schools are subjected to high levels of prejudice, victimization, and isolation. Teachers contribute to this abusive behaviour toward homosexual people by not protecting and supporting them (Wells & Polders, 2006; Bhana, 2012; Msibi, 2012).

According to Msibi (2012), the lack of support from teachers is reflected in the spread of the belief that homosexuality is contagious, which threatens heterosexual students. According to Langa (2015), teachers play a significant role in the perpetuation of homophobia because they typically fail to intervene when assaults occur in the classroom and continue to make remarks about homosexual students. In a study by Sithole (2015), students reported being insulted and called derogatory names by their peers. Included on the labels were derogatory terms such as trassies (Afrikaans) and istabane (Nguni word). According to Sithole (2015), these labels convey the impression that society views engagement in the LGBTQI community as sick and immoral.

According to Bhana (2012), verbal abuse through jokes and overt prejudice by students or educators in the classroom was regarded as normal. Some educators respond to these homophobic incidents with silence and neglect; typically, other students also isolate these students (Francis & Reygan, 2016). As stated by Msibi (2012), this behaviour stems from misinformation, illiteracy, and an inability to adjust to homosexuality. In the study conducted by Nell and Shapiro (2011), a teacher who had worked in both the township and suburban

schools reported encountering more discriminatory attitudes toward LGBTI pupils in township schools than in suburban schools. Francis (2017) detailed incidents discovered during a three-year investigation in secondary schools, including the suicides of two homosexual students who were threatened with expulsion for their homosexual behaviour.

Furthermore, Arndt and de Bruin (2006) note that LGBTQIA+ students in higher education continue to encounter discrimination. According to Mukwevho and Fhumulani's (2018) study of social perspectives on homosexuality at a rural South African university, the social, cultural, and religious backgrounds of homophobic students influence their behaviour. Additionally, Graziano's (2005) research demonstrates that LGBT university students are four times more likely than other students to experience victimization on campus. As Nagoshi and Nagoshi (2014) demonstrates, male pupils who identify as LGBT are frequently victimized. Arndt and de Bruin (2006) report an instance of a young man who was brutally murdered by fellow college students in 1998 as an illustration of what can occur. Attacks against homosexuals are also on the rise in communities, and pupils often model acts that are representative of the society from which they come (Nduna, Mthombeni, & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017).

In South African universities, there are few and short-lived homosexual and lesbian support networks and organizations (Graziano, 2005). According to Graziano (2005), some students were hesitant to join the LGBTQ+ network on campus out of fear of being outed in front of their heterosexual peers, others sought counselling. In addition, other studies have shown that LGBTQ+ students residing on campus report feelings of isolation and neglect (Munyiki & Vincent, 2017). Therefore, it is believed that university residence halls are not a welcoming environment for homosexual students. In men's dormitories, there have been allegations of severe physical and verbal abuse of LGBT students (Munyiki & Vincent, 2017). Nduna et al (2017) further states that students who believe they will leave hometowns to be safer and have

more freedom to express themselves may be disappointed to find homophobia in these campuses due to the fact that some students are still conservative.

According to Mahomed and Transgos (2016), male heterosexual students are more likely than female heterosexual students to behave negatively towards LGBTQ+ students. According to Jagessar and Msibi (2015), inadequate sensitization and training of administrative and security staff in university residence halls regarding how to effectively deal with prejudice and violence against LGBTQ+ students is an additional concern raised by LGBTQ+ students. This is evident when allegations are made against those who harm LGBTQ+ students and no action is taken, which frequently discourages students from reporting the incidents (Graziano, 2005). According to a study conducted at Stellenbosch University by Jagessar and Msibi (2016), some homosexual students internalize homophobia and even embrace their own victimization in order to be accepted and accepted by others. Strong religious beliefs and traditional values that contribute to more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ students are the primary cause of stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ students in rural South African universities (Mavhundu-Mudzisi and Sandy, 2015).

In addition, Mahomed and Transgos (2016) found that Black African students are less tolerant of homosexuality than white and coloured students. In an additional study conducted by Marumo and Chakele (2019), it was discovered that Black students are violent towards LGBTQ+ students, White students verbally discriminate against homosexuals, and Indians and/or Asians take a dismissive stance by physically and violently abusing their homosexual family members. According to a study by Arndt and de Bruin (2006), race explains less than 1% of violence against lesbians and homosexual men. Additionally, educational attainment has a number of positive consequences. The proportion of respondents who believe LGBTQI+ pupils should have equal rights rises with their level of education (Mahomed & Transgos, 2016). In their study of a rural South African institution, Mukwevho and Fhumulani (2018)

found virtually identical results, although negative expressions persisted. The interviewed first-year students were aware of the rights of LGBTQI+ students but continued to harbour prejudice and the belief that homosexuality violates both social and religious norms.

Homosexuality and Religion

Religion is one of the most influential socialization determinants in explaining homosexuality rejection. This relationship is predicated on the assumption that socialization instances, in this case religious institutions, shape the moral attitudes of individuals (Janssen, 2019). According to Platt & McCown (2021) the pinnacle of religion is the relationship between God's nature and human behaviour. At a high level, gods are seen as angry and punitive towards those who are ungodly and unfaithful (Janssen, 2019). However, this plays a role in how people respond to actions that deviate from the Word of God. Therefore, the messages of God's Word, i.e., the theological messages that compel compliance, are important when trying to understand sexual identity and religion (Janssen, 2019). Furthermore, adherence to traditional Christian beliefs is often related to how strictly one views the Bible as the literal Word of God (Platt & McCown, 2021). Textualists believe that the scriptures of the Bible, Quran, Hadith, and Sunnah have one true meaning that does not change as societies change (Glas, 2021) and (Hammer, 2023).

On a global scale, Muslims are found to be more opposed to homosexuality than Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and those with no religious affiliation (Janssen, 2019). Participation in worship and moral conduct are evaluated differently by various religions. According to (Janssen, 2019), the more actively one participates in church services and the more frequently one attends, the more one conforms to the conventions of that institutional group. In a study by Glass (2021), nearly half of the participants disapproved of homosexuality, but tolerant disapproval was also an important factor, demonstrating that one

in five Arab Muslims disapproved of homosexuality but tolerated homosexuals in the social environment.

It is believed that exposure to religious institutions has a significant impact on a person's attitude toward homosexuality. The dynamics of prejudice and discrimination are greatly influenced by a person's attitude. Attitudes are evaluations of people, places, objects, events, and events (Hall & Rodgers, 2019). In a study conducted by Arndt and de Bruin (2006), participants indicated that religious people hold more conservative views on homosexuality, and that churchgoers frequently exhibit homophobic behaviour. Religious individuals believe that homosexuality is immoral and that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are sinful (Gerena C. , 2019).

In the study by Nell and Shapiro (2011), a participant from the Roman Catholic Church admitted to having some reservations about homosexuality. Rosenbloom (2016) reports that approximately 80% of South Africans identify as Christians. According to Bhana (2012) and Francis and Reygan (2016), religion plays a significant influence in the formation of a person's attitude and worldview. Furthermore, the portrayal of homosexuality as evil and unnatural in biblical passages depicting homosexuality as evil and demonic, which serve as a source for the religious perspective on homosexuality, contributes to the religious perspective on homosexuality. In fact, according to Reygan (2019), biblical texts advocate homophobia and violence against homosexuals.

Christianity is a Bible-based faith, and its adherents adhere to the traditional and biblical principles set forth in the Bible (The Other Foundation, 2017). According to Nkosi and Masson (2017), theology condemns homosexual behaviour because the Old and New Testaments forbid it. This way of thinking precludes homosexuals and gives them the impression that they have no place in the Christian church's institutions. The participants in Nkosi and Mason's (2017)

study who identified as homosexual feared damnation and felt abandoned by God. Therefore, the solution for these participants was to abandon religion and become atheists, while others attempted to adopt heterosexual roles, and still others learned to lead two distinct lives. According to Nkosi and Mason's (2017) study, homosexuals found solace in biblical texts, particularly those dealing with themes of love and forgiveness, despite the fact that many study participants viewed the church as an unwelcoming and judgmental environment.

In the autoethnographic study conducted by (Gerena, 2019) about his experience with religion and sexuality, he confirms the Christian community's rejection from the moment the pastor preached that homosexuality was the devil's work. According to Gerena (2019), he pleaded and repented to God to cast the adversary out of him, and he engaged in more church activities to demonstrate his obedience to God. He decided to live a double existence by being straight by day and visiting gay nightclubs and dating other men by night (Gerena, 2019). As soon as church members and his family discovered that he was homosexual, he was immediately dismissed and excluded from church activities. In contrast, the author felt that he was abandoning his religion by coming to this conclusion. As he grew older and attended university, he was eventually instructed by a Christian priest who was tolerant of sexuality and helped him overcome his concerns regarding religion and sexuality.

As evidenced by the preceding, there appears to be a connection between traditional values, religion, and the education system. According to (Gerena, 2019), values were brought home from the church and transmitted as cultural values within the community. According to a study conducted by (Janssen, 2019), there is a positive correlation between traditional gender beliefs and religious practices in terms of homophobia. People who are more traditional and religious are more likely to oppose homosexuality. This is a distinct indication of the origins of British colonization and Christianity in South Africa, according to Ubisi (2023). This political history has been adopted and perpetuated through hegemonic sociocultural discourses of

predominantly heteronormative normative sexuality and religion. One study found that male instructors in South Africa were unable to teach about homosexuality due to their traditional and religious values (Ubisi, 2023).

The virtual connection on sexual identity development

The physical world has implications that pose threats to the formation and disclosure of the sexual identity of the LGBQT+ community (McConnell, et al., 2018). According to Lucero (2017), social interaction is essential to the formation of sexual identity, and an individual's experiences cannot be separated from this context. Therefore, LGBTQ+ individuals utilize social media for exploring their identities and, once they've realized their ideal selves, to relate and convey that self into the physical world (Zhao, 2023).

Due to its ability to challenge mainstream narratives and reinforce personal views of self-expression, social media has become an influential platform for sexuality discourses (Ukonu et al., 2021). According to Lucero (2017), social media has become an essential factor for socialization, entertainment, and education. On social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and dating sites, people are instantaneously connected to one another. Queer individuals are found to be more active on social media than heterosexuals, according to studies (Mkhize & Nunlall, 2020). Facebook users log in more than once per day and spend an average of 20 minutes per day on the platform.

According to Chan (2023), LGBTQ+ individuals use the internet for a variety of purposes. Firstly, they use social media to find information about their sexuality that is not discussed offline. This includes information about queer culture, sexual health, LGBTQ+-related events, LGBTQ+-specific organizations, and available services. The significance of social media for self-exploration and identity formation has been emphasized by Chan (2023) and Lucero (2017). Social media is viewed as a safe and comfortable environment for LGBTQ+ individuals

to investigate, as doing so in the physical world can be challenging. According to McInroy and Craig (2015) and Wagaman and Watts (2020), social media is an essential resource for LGBTQI+ adolescents to maintain their well-being by participating in events and utilizing safe services. McInroy and Craig (2015) also noted that access to social media provides LGBQT+ with social campaigns, activities, and organizations that can help them develop and strengthen their affirmation of sexual orientation.

According to Zhao (2023), identity construction involves constructing a stylish image and using avatars to represent oneself; anonymity prevents the identification of homosexual individuals. Consequently, online connections with other LGBTQI+ peers promote self-acceptance and disclosure of sexual orientation in the real world (Floyd & Stein, 2002). The LGBTQ+ community views social media as an escape from the corporeal world (2023, Zhao). Thirdly, social media enables queer people to make online connections and cultivate friendships with like-minded people to whom they can reveal their true identity (Chan, 2023). Some users utilize the platform to satisfy their sexual and romantic relationship requirements. According to Chan (2023), some queer people use dating sites such as Tinder and Grindir to locate potential partners, sexual partners, and casual partners.

In their study, McInroy and Craig (2015) noted that sexual identity disclosure requires personal and emotional fortitude, and that social media strengthens these qualities. As a space that can provide support, the stories of others provide solace and the fortitude to strategize the "coming out" procedure. However, Nell and Shapiro’s (2011) research verified that the accessibility of social media platforms may not have a positive effect on the coming out procedure. Participants in their study reported that a relative with access to their Facebook timelines outed them.

According to previous research, social media may have both positive and negative effects on the development of the LGBTQ+ community. While social media is perceived to facilitate

social support and meaningful relationships, it may not always be simple for homosexual members (Chan, 2023). Hendricks (2020) states that virtual connections have been linked to increased cyber victimization, name-calling, declining self-confidence, and peer rejection, etc. The ability to conceal one's identity encourages the creation of a false identity; individuals deceive LGBTQ individuals into believing they are potential romantic partners. According to Zhao (2023), 40% of Facebook accounts are fake, which enhances the likelihood of cyberbullying. According to a study (Mkhize & Maharaj, 2020), homophobic individuals disguise themselves to gain access to LGBTQ+ community groups in order to insult and disgrace the members. Insofar as the physical sociocultural world has been represented, this is significant because these behaviours play a crucial role in the formation of gender and sexual identity.

Theoretical Framework: Cass's Model of Sexual Identity Formation

Homosexuality has been studied for decades, and some researchers have devised models to explain and understand the formation of sexual identity. Due to a lack of accuracy, models have evolved, with some attempting to explain homosexuality from a biological perspective and others focusing on a specific sexual identity, namely queer men. Lesbian and gay individuals are especially accommodated by Cass's model. This study will explore Cass's Model in relation to the development of homosexual identity. Vivienne Cass developed Cass's Model of homosexual identity development in the late 1970s to describe her observations while working with Australian queer men in a clinic (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). Other scientists have described it as the most affirming, nuanced, and comprehensive model of sexual identity development, even though it was not the first to be proposed, Cass's model consists of six phases based on these two assumptions; identity is acquired through a developmental process and identity formation is influenced by the interaction that occurs between an individual and their environment (Gervacio, 2012). Cass also clarified that the model proposes an interactionist account of homosexual identity formation and acknowledges the importance of both psychological and social factors (Gervacio, 2012).

According to Cass an individual's identity is formed through interactions with their environment: people aim to form cognitive, affective, and behavioural congruence between themselves and their surroundings (Gervacio, 2012). Individuals play an active role in their identity formation and are able to manoeuvre between various developmental paths of sexuality (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). These paths lead to options that either help the individual develop their sexual identity or advance them through the 'coming out' process. To identify as lesbian or homosexual, one must possess both an individual and an environmental identity.

Identity, as defined by Cass, pertains to how one perceives oneself and how one is perceived by others. It is rooted not only in an individual's experience, but also in relation to other groups or individuals (Goodrich & Brammer, 2021). According to Ferdoush (2016), Cass presumed a linear progression from Stages 1 to 6 of homosexual identity development.

Degges-White et al (2000) argued that Cass's theory has been criticized for its shortcomings in relation to homosexual identity formation. Despite this, the model remains an essential instrument for comprehending the evolution of homosexual identity (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014) The Cass model continues to be regarded by many scholars as the benchmark for identity development and coming out, and in some instances, it applies to understanding the needs of certain homosexual individuals. Kenneady and Oswalt (2014) assert that the process of coming out in Cass's model is in line with that of contemporary adolescents and the challenges they face when coming out. This study will investigate whether this model can be used to learn about the gender and sexual identity of contemporary homosexual individuals in a linear and staged manner consistent with Cass's model.

The stages of identity that Cass incorporated into the Model are discussed below. The first of the six stages is identity confusion, which is characterized by uncertainty regarding same-sex feelings and emotional turmoil (Degges-White et al et al, 2000). This phase is characterized by the conscious awareness and realization that one's behaviour and emotions may be associated with homosexuality (Degges-White et al et al., 2000). The second stage, identity comparison, is characterized by social isolation; a person becomes more aware of differences and is able to distinguish himself from others. While some individuals respond positively, others may vacillate and attempt to alter their feelings. In the third phase, an individual begins to embrace the possibility of homosexuality by seeing information about their perceived sexual identity (Degges-White et al et al., 2000). In the fourth stage, when a person acknowledges their sexual orientation as lesbian or gay, this is known as identity acceptance. This results in increased

contact with homosexuals and a sense of normalcy (Degges-White et al, 2000). In the fifth stage, identity pride, the individual professes a commitment to the LGBTQ+ community. The final phase, identity synthesis, focuses on clarity and establishing connections with the group one identifies with. At this stage, a person's identity is unified because they have fully embraced their homosexuality, their sexuality h's become an integral part of their personality, and their interaction with affirmative heterosexual people has increased (Degges-White et al, 2000).

Degges-White et al (2000) use' Cass's paradigm to interpret the sexual identity development of homosexual women in their study. Lesbian-identifying adult women were interviewed, and the results were analysed according to Cass's model of the phases of sexual identity development' Cass's first stage was supported by the study's findings that participants were aware of their homosexual feelings and that these feelings were accompanied by confusion. Lesbian women who became aware of their sexual desires at a young age responded constructively, whereas those who deemed these feelings undesirable reported feeling like freaks, sinners, and outcasts (Degges-White et al, 2000). While some women sought therapy to suppress their homosexual feelings, others reported dating males during this period of confusion. Participants who were self-assured at a young age acknowledged their homosexual orientation in the second phase without experiencing inner turmoil; however, not all participants adhered t' Cass's model.

Those who struggled with accepting their identity described feeling distinct and out of place in the social group. Due to feelings of isolation, shame, and depression, the confused participants experienced mental and psychological repercussions, including a suicide attempt. Until they attained a sense of self-acceptance, they also refrained from seeking out other lesbians. They sought out other lesbians in churches, gay bars, dorms, and sporting events, as well as through

lesbian friends, once they fully accepted themselves. Self-identification is facilitated by the ease of interaction with other lesbians and homosexual men during the fourth stage (Degges-White et al, 2000). Several participants indicated in the fifth stage that they did not feel compelled to publicly disclose their sexual orientation, verifying that some of them do not require external validation and affirmation. Participants who reported being in significant relationships are indicated in the sixth phase. This phase was linked to healthy development. In contrast t' Cass's model, the majority of participants disclosed their sexual orientation to a solitary, trusted friend. The synthesis process begins when one is confident that telling a heterosexual acquaintance about one's sexuality will be a positive experience.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Research Design

The research methodology employed for this study will be discussed in detail in this chapter, including the procedure that was used, the analytical techniques, and finally, the ethical considerations of the study. The design of this research study is guided by the interpretative paradigm, while adopting an intersubjective epistemological stance on reality. This study also adopted the method of qualitative approach. The interpretative paradigm provides the researcher with deep understanding of social action (Pham, 2018). Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2014) stipulate that this paradigm aims to explain the subjective reasons and meaning that lies behind social action. Through the use of narrative inquiry, the qualitative approach was used in this study.

A qualitative design aims to describe how individuals experience their social environments (Kelly, 2014). According to Birch (2011), narrative stories provide great insights about the intricacies of humans as well as the meaning they convey in human social interaction. Data were collected from a narrative approach, which was essential in understanding and examining the LGBQTI+ youths' lived experiences as they grow. Life history narratives refer to "an entire life story, woven from threads of interviews, observations or documents" (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 394). Clandinin and Connelly (2001) contend that narrative inquiry focuses on how people engage with one another throughout time through the social bonds they develop with their peers.

Participants and Recruitment

The data were gathered through purposive and snowball sampling. In-depth information can be gathered through purposeful sampling, which was useful for this study (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Reaching sexually marginalised people and gaining their trust are both possible through snowball sampling (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). Gay and lesbian youth between the ages of 18 and 35 who had access to the internet and were active on social media were the participants that were sought out for this study (see Appendix A). The young people who participated in this study had to regularly visit at least one blog or be a member of one of the social media sites Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp (see Appendix A). Additionally, they had to be actively involved in a nearby non-governmental organization (NGO) catering to the LGBTIQ+ community, whether through volunteering and employment, or through regular participation or affiliation. This is due to the fact that these participants are more likely to be open about their sexuality in public and to be more knowledgeable about it. Additionally, it serves as a space where LGTBQI+ individuals may connect with peers, encouraging them to further explore and understand their sexual identities.

From the sample frame of the LGBTQI+ community, specifically lesbians and gays, eleven people took part in this study. Six of them were gay, and five of them were lesbians. Despite having moved to various regions of the country over the course of their lives, all of the participants were originally from Kwa-Zulu Natal. Four of them are from rural areas, five are from townships, and two live in the city. They are all IsiZulu speakers. They were 20 to 31 years old.

Data Collection Procedure

Non-governmental or community-based organisations renowned for or linked to supporting the LGBTQI+ community were used to recruit participants (see Appendix A). Nine of the group's eleven participants had phone interviews, while two had in-person interviews. Eight individuals were found through a non-governmental organization, three were found through snowballing effect on the social media app WhatsApp.

The COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak when the interviews were conducted. Therefore, throughout only two interviews were done face-to-face, Covid-19 safety protocols were followed and maintained by social distance and periodic hand sanitization (see Appendix A). A semi-structured interview method was used to interview the participants (see Appendix B). In order to make the interviewing process more efficient, interviews were structured to yield rich, dense, and thorough information. Before being questioned, participants were required to sign an informed consent form and an informed consent for audio recording (see Appendices C and D).

Data analysis

With the help of a thematic narrative analysis, the study's findings were examined. According to Riessman (2008), thematic narrative analysis is concerned with the content of speech, interpreting what is said by concentrating on the meaning that any language user would discover in a narrative. As a result, the narratives' content is the main focus. Riessman (2008) contends that although being rigorous, concentrated, and in-depth, this analysis nonetheless captures the essence of the interviewee's narrative. The sequencing of the story must be maintained during interpretation, which is why thematic narrative analysis is straightforward and intuitive (Riessman, 2008). By locating patterns or themes in qualitative data, this sequencing process is carried out ((Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)

Thematic narrative analysis comprises of the following steps for analysis: 1) familiarising yourself with data, 2) coding, 3) generating themes, and 4) looking for commonalities and differences between the cases in relation to each theme. Answering the study's research questions was made easier by using these processes of analysis. The procedure used is primarily intended to divide and classify huge amounts of data into more insightful units for analysis by looking closely at themes that surfaced repeatedly from many participants and those that had a strong and legitimate relevance to the study. The project's focus on the historical accounts of the LGBTQI+ youth was supported by using this approach of analysis to direct the project's production of those outcomes.

The transcripts did not have all of the interviewer's and interviewee's words, such as "uhm", "mmm", and "yeah", as well as any pauses and laughter. The importance of including these statements was not discovered, and as verbatim transcription proved to be time-consuming, the above-mentioned utterances were left out of the other transcripts. Any information that could be used to identify a participant, such as name, NGO, university, or specific residence, was excluded. I assigned each participant with a pseudo name, alphabet from A to K to avoid this from happening. I changed the names when they disclosed their names or any other identifying information by replacing them with [The university, the NGO, his/her name]. To preserve the original content and feelings conveyed in that piece, I offered a translation in brackets where individuals talked in a vernacular. I went back over the interview audios and re-aligned them with the transcripts to make sure no information was lost and to make sure the transcripts were written accurately.

I spent hours immersing myself in each transcript after a laborious transcription procedure to code each life event that seemed significant. Finding recurring patterns in the participant's life

events was made easier thanks to this technique. Six themes were further developed through coding. Through interpretation, raw data and data blocks were reduced to concise concepts or themes (Thomas, 2006). Self-realization, self-acceptance, the coming-out process, societal influence, and social media influence are the six themes that emerged from the analysis. The creation of text blocks and their organisation according to each theme made up the second step. Some of these extracts have been condensed for clarity and to avoid repetition and extraneous information. The third phase compared the likenesses and dissimilarities of each participant's narrative structure. Additionally, the narrative structures for lesbians and gays were compared.

Reflexivity

The purpose of reflexivity is to help qualitative researchers preserve objectivity in their work (Dowling, 2006)This is done to lessen and prevent personal biases between the researcher and the participants. This procedure keeps the researcher conscious of his or her place throughout the entire research process (Haynes, 2012). Haynes (2012) argues further that reflexivity calls into question the compatibility of the researcher's prior knowledge with the data being gathered. The researcher kept an open mind and questioned the interviewees in circumstances that called for clarification of the indicated notion, maintaining the study's reflexivity throughout the interview procedure. The researcher established the flow of the conversation by posing the same questions to each participant in the same order. Biases were reduced by the researcher not knowing the subjects who were recruited. All of the audio recordings were verbatim transcribed by the researcher during analysis, with the exception of the utterances. The researcher maintained a consistent attitude when analysing the data by allowing the data collected to produce its own findings without interfering with the previous research. The researcher allowed for the research to unfold on its own.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the smooth running of the research, ethical clearance was sought from the Non-medical Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Witwatersrand, the NGO's manager provided consent after a meeting about the objective of the study and the terms and conditions to maintain participants safety. The manager consented for the study's participants to be recruited from the organization, so participants were asked for their approval to take part in the study as well. Before beginning the interview, the participants were given an information sheet (see Appendix A) outlining the goals of the study and the steps involved. Additionally, they were required to sign consent forms (Appendix C and D) authorising their participation in the study as well as permission to record their interview. Confidentiality implies that the dignity of the subject will be respected. It is also critical to note that the identity of the organisations will be kept anonymous. It is also important that participants do not doubt that any of their identifying information provided will be kept confidential. As a result, participants were given pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. Additionally, only the researcher had access to the participant data, which was kept secure on a password-protected computer. For the study participants, there were minimal risks involved. Participants were advised and provided with information on how to email the researcher or the research supervisor to get the final report. Additionally, it was suggested that they use the University of the Witwatersrand website to access the final report.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, the findings of the data collected with all participants are presented. These results are presented in a way that reflects the participants' narratives and provides the extracts to convey a detailed and raw understanding of their story. Providing these extracts allows the reader to connect with each participant's story of their sexual and gender development. Care was taken to preserve the narrative when presenting the interview extracts. Six themes that emerged from the research are as follows. In this section, the narratives of the lesbians are presented first for each theme, followed by those of the gay men. Both the lesbian and gay participants had differing experiences, respectively. As a result, each person has a unique story, the structure of which depends on the environment in which they grew up.

Self-realisation

The point at which an individual becomes aware of their sexuality depends not only on their environment, but also on how the community perceives and receives homosexuality. Some lesbians did not admit to realising their sexuality at an early age however they displayed a sense of denial and reluctance towards the realisation. Some gay participants also mentioned being exposed by their effeminate behaviour at a young age which made them realise their sexuality. Participant A mentioned that as a young child she participated in rough plays and was a friend, mostly of boys. Although she had brief but intense feelings for a girl earlier on, she did not have the ability or knowledge to label her feelings and act towards them.

> *"Well, I grew up playing with mostly boys. I rejected the idea that I should play with girls and play with dolls like girls do. I used to play rough games… I don't know when I realised that I*

was lesbian, cause honestly, I rejected homosexuality, I was against this gay thing, I didn't understand it until I met someone in 2019, my entire perspective changed towards gays. I dated that person of the same gender I guess that's when I realised that I'm in a situation like that…I could say I was aware from grade 9 but I wasn't paying much attention to it because of my background, where I come from, we didn't know anything about sexual orientation". (Participant A)

Unlike Participant A, Participant B had a different experience because of the knowledge and circumstances she was exposed to. She believes that knowing about sexual orientation at a young age gave her the tools to understand her feelings when she realised her attractions to a female. Nonetheless, these feelings were associated with guilt and shame.

"When I went to a multiracial school and the kind of environment was vastly different cause before then had I never thought about dating and sexuality and even just my own gender identity…. And then I met friends who are openly lesbian in like grade 5, who'd say I had a girlfriend since grade 3...So, it was something that I saw from the upside, but it didn't affect me personally…until matric then I'd say that's when I was like oh really, like maybe I do maybe I don't… maybe I was trying to run away from my feelings or just late. But also not late cause when I was in matric I was only 16 so I only thought about it when I got there and realised that maybe me too but I also it wasn't, I didn't feel like I had to clearly make a decision about anything…But then going back to the safe space and finding people talking about it, it was easier, it was confusing and conflicting also and then it was easier when I got back to that space with peers…" (Participant B)

Participant E reported that her character and behaviour differed from that of a typical girl. She exhibited boyish traits and characteristics, from the way she walked to the way she interacted with the others, such as befriending boys. Eventually as she grew older, this behaviour also

confused and concerned her when she developed feelings for a girl. These characteristics also frightened her family, so they tried to correct her behaviour to fit social norms and family traditions.

> *"I was a bit sceptical about my sexuality, it felt very weird to be the way that I am, being different, I think they[family] saw it when I was growing up, I was a bit boyish, did not play with girls, I had male friends until it came to where I was 13/14 whereby I also myself was very confused at what was happening because I'm from a society that tells you how to live your life, like how a woman should dress up, how a woman should behave, so, growing up in a very Zulu traditional family, they tried to sort of get rid of my sexuality. So, I started attending reed dances, ngihamba umhlanga (attending reed dances), they saw that, that was not working, and then they enrolled me into a modelling school because the way I was walking was odd to them. So, I was entering pageants and fashion shows and when I got to high school that's when things got a little serious. I had the first boyfriend and never really felt like I liked the guy because the friends I had at that time were forcing me to be in a relationship, you know, it's pretty cool to date. I dated this guy and I fell in love with his sister, so I did not know what was happening at the time…" (Participant E)*

Despite a little confusion, Participant G enjoyed the attention she received from girls, and she would reciprocate the same attention than to boys. Moreover, Due to traditional norms, Participant J was confused when she perceived her emotional reaction to the sight of naked females. From a heteronormative perspective, this event confused her and caused her to avoid this occurrence. Although, she points out that she eventually dated girls as an experiment.

> *"In grade 7, I started realizing that I didn't like boys because I had feelings for girls, actually she approached me, and I was giving her a lot of attention more than boys and I would enjoy her attention". (Participant G)*

"…growing up knowing that heterosexual relationship is the only thing but then with you, you're fascinated by women's boobs and I'd say to myself, 'girl you're also a girl'... And the first time I touched a women's boobs I felt good… You know at school we had gyms and then afterwards you had to go shower and I started not showering cause my mind would get so distracted when I'm seeing a lot of naked women but then I was like no girl you're not okay. And actually, kissing a girl turned me on and that was a wow for me.

…when it comes to my sexuality, like I didn't realise it at an early stage but I can say from grade 8, it was more of a funny thing, experimental thing, nobody took it seriously until this girl I dated in matric, we continued dating until we went to varsity that's where it started to be a real thing" (Participant J)

The behaviour and character that is effeminate suggested to some gay participants that they were different. Participant H explains that while his friends were interested in girls, his dream about another boy made him realise that he was attracted to other boys.

"I had friends who were interested in girls, but I have never been interested in girls in my whole entire life… I discovered myself at a very young age, I think I was in grade 6… I had a crush on a guy, and he also had a crush on me, and he never understood what's happening… I never had a wet dream with a girl, I had a wet dream with a guy, that's where I discovered myself ukuthi [that] I'm gay." (Participant H)

Participant C, Participant K and Participant I indicated that they exhibited effeminate behaviour from an early age, assumed female tasks, and had female friends. However, this did not immediately indicate that they were aware of their sexuality, but family and community members expressed disapproval of this type of behaviour.

"I'll tell you a story, we were just playing as kids and not realising the intensity of what we were doing, I was 6 years old at that time, we were playing house, so one of us was to be a mother and the other to be a father and then my family caught us cause we were at my grandmother's house. It got to a point where I was so angry and scared…I used to play a skipping rope with girls and I never thought it was anything hectic and it never occurred to me that I shouldn't be playing what I was playing. The way people would look at me and talk about me in general, it was bad." (Participant C)

"…it started when I was very young like "as far as I can remember from preschool I was always around girls uhm I used to always refer to myself as the mother or a sister, never a brother, never a father…when I got to primary that's where I was like okay, I'm different from other kids…I was around 8-10 years old, that's when I knew I was different from the boys because I was looking at the way engikhula ngakhona [I grow up] with the things I enjoy they were different from boys. I never liked soccer, I never liked playing with cars, I never liked having a soccer ball, I was always into dolls, teddy bears… in grade 4, that boy, oh my God, I was like why am I suddenly building a family and getting married with this guy in my head." (Participant K)

"What made me realize was…that me growing up, I was more into the feminine side, I enjoyed doing feminine roles, chores. I would want to assist with cooking and I hated hard labour which was considered male chores…I realised when I knew about those kind of things, I think it's more like an exposure because back then I didn't know what was going on and me not knowing I didn't even think of figuring out from there I was just reluctant about it…but when I got to know and realise was in grade 6, I got information about these kind of things, that's when I knew ukuthi [that] oh probably that's why I feel this way, probably because I belong in this particular category" (Participant I)

The lack of information and knowledge about sexual orientation caused internal battle for Participant F mentioned that people around him expressed disapproval of the behaved and realising that he was attracted to other boys brought confusion and internal conflict.

> *"I grew up playing with girls and trans boys but mostly with boys, playing all of those games that are feminine. Growing up was kind of difficult in a way because people never seemed to understand my sexuality and I also didn't understand what was going on with me so as I was growing up I had crushes here and there…then I had a crush on a boy, we were close friends, he saw me as a friend, not knowing how I felt, I was still confused at what was going on. But then due to the society, I could see that this is who I am, and I thought I should embrace who I am" (Participant F)*

Although Participant D was aware of his sexuality when he was still young, these feelings were inconsistent in the way they occurred.

> *"...sometimes I would wear dresses and I didn't play with boys; I was always with the girls…that feeling started in 2000, I was in grade 6 when school closed for terms we used to go to dams to swim with my friends, It was June holidays when we went there I saw this beautiful guy and I knew he wasn't from Kwa-Zulu Natal, obviously he was from Joburg and we had a conversation, I was so attracted to him, I was 10 years old, I always wanted to be close to him, touch him talk to him, then he moved back to Joburg, and that feeling disappeared, when I was in grade 9 the feeling came back but it was not the same guy that I was attracted to in the first place…"*

Self-Acceptance

Individuals' experiences varied depending on their background, geographic area, and ability to accept their sexuality. The theme of self-realisation explores both the crucial steps participants took to understand their sexuality and the role of intermediary NGOs that helped them do so. Our first focus is on Participant A, as her attitudes about homosexuality changed, she was able to accept her sexuality.

> *"…And I told myself I was dating her because she was just attractive and was not concerned about her gender until I met another girl and I met her in February, and we are still dating till today…initially I used to have anxiety attacks and depressed I would lock myself up in my room. But life goes on, I realized that I cannot live like this, and life is too short to be listening to people...It [the NGO] has helped me a lot and it gives me so much confidence and being able to help someone gives me pleasure and I'm learning a lot cause I too had a lot that I didn't know about the LGBTI" (Participant A)*

Participant B mentioned that through confusion and inner conflict regarding her feelings for another woman, she was able to accept her sexuality with the help of her queer friends and the NGO.

> *"…then it was easier when I got back to that space with peers and then started expected relationships even though there was this thing of spectrum of sexuality so the first person, I dated…and I think it was easier because we were in an environment that was 90% of everyone who was there was in some form or shape queer…*
>
> *…when you are uncertain and you find a space [the NGO] that could provide some sense of certainty when you have questions about yourself and you're not sure and then you stumble upon a space that could provide…kind of gave us the platform to say I can be me and that is totally okay with people who are identifying as yourself, just to have that space, to have friends." (Participant B)*

Participant E's family did not provide her with the support she needed to explore her sexuality. This shows the lack of information and education about sexual orientation, even though the family tried to assist her in providing the resolutions for what they perceived as a problem. They were only able to help her with what they knew.

> *"So, I had a talk with my sister…I don't know what is happening to me, I'm dating a guy but at the same time I am developing feelings for his sister…and she's like we should go to church. They are going to pray for you and you gonna be okay, okay so I went to church…well I continued praying and attending the church, when people tell you that your sexuality is a curse…now I am grown, and I can see that this is not a curse, like I am told. It's not a lifestyle that I have suddenly developed but it's something that has been happening from a young age...then I got to campus, I was very lonely and this thing has been eating me up and I start attending therapy, until I was okay and realized that there's really nothing wrong with me, this is not a lifestyle, this is not something that I wake up in the morning and decide that today I wanna be gay. But it's something that I have been stopping since I was a kid.*
>
> *...it [the NGO] has really helped me a lot, to know that I'm not the only person going through this." (Participant E)*

Participants G and J, on the other hand, acquired the ability accept their sexuality at a young age. We note that Participant G's experience in an all- girls boarding school gave her the freedom to fully embrace who she was, and that Participant J's experience in high school, which she may have perceived as an experimental phase that would quickly pass, took a serious turn after high school graduation and on her way to university:

> *"…then in grade 8 it was official that I was dating girls because I had moved to a boarding house, where I stayed with girls. That's where I found someone that I dated, that I had a serious relationship with." (Participant G)*

"It was more of a funny thing, experimental thing, nobody took it seriously until this girl I dated in matric, we continued dating until we went to varsity that's where it started to be a real thing… and I got used to just coming home with a girl…" (Participant J)

Participant C reported that he only became aware of his bizarre appearance and behaviour when he was insulted by his community; the insults piqued his curiosity and elicited questions about his sexuality. He continued to date women despite his desire to discover matching feelings for other men. However, when he saw queer people on university campuses, he soon felt empowered again and began to explore.

… I think it happened when I realised that this is not going to change, it happened when I got to varsity cause I saw some people who looked like me, I was like here they are and there is nothing wrong with them, bayaphila [the are alive] and why would I do that to myself."

As with other gay participants, the path to acceptance of their sexuality was not easy and led to internal conflict, as it did for participants D, F, and H. The following participants reported their lack of information about sexual orientation and being subjected to insults from their communities.

"…we were friends with this guy, but that feeling disappeared because we finished matric and I became a normal guy because I couldn't go to guys and approach them and tell them how I felt and showing my sexuality but they could see that I am homosexual, because I never had a girlfriend in high school…everyone noticed that I am homosexual but then I was in the closet and out of the closet at the same time, so I was trying to find myself, I understood that I was attracted to guys but what is happening and how was I going to live my life, am I going to date with guys for the rest of my life because I thought it was the feeling that was going to disappear at some point. I think I was questioning my sexuality that is why the feeling was like that, I think another thing was, I saw myself as a girl so I don't think I should be approaching guys, they should be approaching me first." (Participant D)

"…I didn't understand myself at first, so from time to time I would ask myself ukuthi [that] why is this happening to me, why am I different from other young boys, why do I feel different, why am I attracted to other boys and I wouldn't understand cause I had no idea what was going on and I didn't have any information on any sexuality besides heterosexuality...But since I didn't understand myself, I tried to justify myself and I ended up using alcohol…I use to drink alcohol a lot cause I was troubled inside, I'm trying to understand myself… Up until I ended up finding peace in alcohol, finding a home in being drunk and forgetting…I could feel that this is my home [the NGO] and where I'd like to be all the time cause I feel so free... more information to understand my sexuality and then accept and loving who I am" (Participant F)

"My wet dream was with a guy, I tried fighting this thing because when you discover yourself especially sexually, it's a battle with you and your body, you try by all means to fight it away ukuthi [that] I'm not like this but you'll never fight feelings away, you would never. Ama-feelings ucontrol-lwa iwona [you are controlled by feelings], my feelings controlled me in a way that my external being at that time didn't matter because khonalento eyayingaphakathi kumina [there was something inside of me] that was like you are like this" (Participant H)

Participants I and K reported that they had fewer problems with their sexuality and were able to accept that they were homosexual. The NGO helped them to express their sexuality freely and to develop a deeper understanding of homosexuality. The NGO provided them with plethora of information to equip them with dealing with rejection and basically understanding themselves and their sexual identity.

"it didn't confuse me because I knew what I wanted and I knew ukuthi [that is] how I feel so I never used to get confused cause I knew what I wanted and I'm not opting for anything else than what I want and people around me did not pressure me to change, I was able to live

freely without any boundaries or me being able to restrict myself around people, I was always me at all times and people around me tried to accommodate me…they [the NGO] helped me as an individual first to reach my level best, they helped me to come out of the shell" (Participant I)

"Well for me it was like 'yey awungiboni yini ukuthi nami [hey, do you not see that I'm also]' I'm one of the girls', so for me in my head it was like that but then I'm not the one to make a move on a guy" (Participant K).

The 'coming out' process.

This theme examines each participant's 'coming out' process, although some of the participants did not place a high value on being open about their sexuality, The accounts given by the participants varied widely. Some claimed to be afraid of being rejected by their families, while others claimed they were never given the chance to come out because their communities had already begun calling them derogatory names even before they were aware of themselves. Participant A maintains that coming out was not an essential step in the development of her sexuality as her family is unaware of her sexuality.

"I have never had that conversation with my parents, I have never told them that I am homosexual' (Participant A)

Participant B was unknowingly outed to her family by her ex-lover, even though she did not view this as a critical stage in the formation of her sexual identity. She was shunned after the family learned of her sexual orientation.

"…but at home when it came out…it was challenging cause firstly I had never thought of coming out as an important thing to do I just didn't see it and then I was outed without my consent it got bad I was chased out of home I was homeless for a while, I had to stay with a girlfriend…

and then to friends, it was easier with friends cause they understand the situation, I didn't sit them down, I didn't do anything…I've done it 3 times already [coming out], and for whatever reason I'm not going to keep wanting to come out to the same individuals merely because they refuse to accept it, you know like how much value does that acceptance of me to my true self really means to me. I had to weigh it out like, is it really that important". (Participant B)

Participant A's lack of relevance in not coming out is shared by Participants E and H. They view it as an insult because heterosexual people are not expected to "come out" to them or anybody else. It seems that they only see the benefits of "coming out" in terms of supporting heteronormativity or heteronormative sexual standards.

"Well I don't think I'm gonna come out to my family because they have never came out to me about themselves being straight, so me coming out to my family means that I'm doing something wrong, I don't believe in just coming out to them, but when I'm ready I'm gonna show them that this is who I am, but the coming out issue, I like to differ when it comes to coming out, my brothers have never gathered people around the lunch and then wanted a meeting just to tell them that they are straight, so why should I as a gay person gather people around and explain who am I and the way that I am." (Participant E)

"There's no need for me to tell her[mother], if I tell her it's gonna be like I know my…my life is bad but accept me the way I am which I am not gonna do that, she would see, she needs to discover for herself ngoba use-discovile manje useyabona [she has discovered, I can see]." (Participant H)

Participants E and H also think that by "coming out", one is essentially admitting that they are acting inappropriately. Some of the participants did, however, see the advantages of coming out. G and J, the participants, haven't faced any difficulties coming out.

"My other sister noticed that I was different but didn't say anything cause I remember the other day she did say that she can see what kind of a person I am but she doesn't want to meddle in my business, as long as I know what I'm doing and will be able to keep up with it. So, she was not hard on me" (Participant G)

"I wouldn't say I have actually came out, cause the way I used to dress and behaving was kind of obvious, having girls over to my house I mean people seeing me, every time they see me with women, obviously I'd change partners but I have met someone who came up to me and asked if I was dating women I would tell them but I've never actually came out cause even my mom knows because she's seeing me with women and that I am actually dating them but at first she got a little bit confused with me having a baby but at the end of the day she got over it but I did tell my sister that I am dating women and I love them. Well actually I came out to people who asked me but others kind of knew because of my behaviour" (Participant J)

Even though Participant C's parents were educated about homosexuality, he fears disappointing them because his family is Christianity oriented. Those who had the Christianity religious background reported being uncomfortable and were conscious of themselves and their sexuality.

"I never came out to them, weird thing is that my mother, she got training and she was recognized as a LGBTI counsellor…maybe she thought I was bi-sexual cause I used to date girls, then my older brother knows that I'm gay, when I'm with them I don't hide I'm free I have always wanted to come out…my mother almost lost her life while giving birth to me, it was either she aborts me or we both die. So, me telling her it felt like I was betraying her so then I chose to not tell her at the moment, since my brother knows, he will be the one telling them".

Participant D described how people have always assumed he is gay because of his forthright personality. Participants F, I, and K also thought that even though there was no pressure to come out, everyone else had made their own assumptions about them based on their character. There were some reluctances from the family but were quick to accept.

> *"And then I never had a chance to come out, or given a chance to come out of the closet cause most of the people around me immediately noticed that I am different but then they would talk about it or tell me what was going on cause they were older than me and were informed…my grandmother said she thought I was behaving like that because I was still a child and she never thought that I'd grow up and be like this. And then my mother chased me out of her house and I had to go live with my gran and then after 2 months we amended things with my mother, we made peace and reconciled, and everything was okay" (Participant F)*

> *"There haven't been a time where I held a meeting and tell people and talk about my sexuality but they do know, they know from things I did but I never specifically told them but they do know from the things I do (Participant I)*

> *"I was never in a closet…mind you, pre-school, mother, sister: primary, mother. You know when you play house, umasgcozi. I was always the mother, if not the mother I was always the daughter, if not the daughter I was the aunt." (Participant K)*

The society's influence.

A person's development depends greatly on societal and cultural values. This theme on society's influence places special attention on how family, school environment, culture, and tradition play a part in how one develops their sexual identity. Even if some of the participants were able to become aware of their sexuality and rebel against the judgment and condemnation they

received as a result, the impact that these norms had on the participants affected how they developed as individuals. Participant A reported that in order to be valued as a woman and a lesbian in her field of study—politics—she had to prove her worth:

> *"Since I'm in a political space, there were judgmental people about my relationship…and they would say that "you're dating girls" but I really don't care what other people say…when you're in political space you have to fight for your position as a female but it's even worse when you have to fight as a lesbian or gay in a political space. And it became even more difficult for me to fight for my position". (Participant A)*

Despite finding a secure place with friends, Participant B struggled to navigate many social settings because of her sexuality, including the risk of becoming a victim of a specific sort of corrective rape intended for LGBTIQ+ individuals. She found her religious upbringing particularly challenging, and her family eventually abandoned her:

> *"… then when it came to other social spaces like gatherings, like perhaps the home setting environment, that was completely different and then it would be different also in a working environment…but it was more challenging within the home environment more than anywhere else…because we had to do the whole biblical thing, it's a sin, what is wrong with you, you need to be prayed for, which they did but also you putting your life in danger…then you can no longer be a part of this family… it was clearly planned and the guy that planned it…it got very violent…so it's not a choice I promise you and I think every people I know if they had a choice to just switch back, maybe they would……when we were growing up, we were told that this thing is "unafrican"…you sit back and ask yourself and be like maybe it's not cause we didn't have people we could relate to that looked like you that sounded like you, all you had was just images of Ellen DeGeneres, that have nothing on your life..." (Participant B)*

Participant E also had to deal with a difficult home situation. In one case, they had even persuaded her to get conversion treatment. Her family's religious and cultural views underlie their opposition to her sexuality. Her family's perspective on homosexuality was also lacking, as evidenced by their attitude.

> *"… Then in high school I started losing friends cause I was very honest with who I am and what I felt for a woman and for them Zulu cultural people, it was very strange. Well my gran was in denial and thought it was a phase, she thought that maybe it's because I have 6 brothers and they could have influenced me…my sister then suggested conversion therapy…with the pressure, you know as an older person you be like, okay this person knows what she's talking about maybe there's a possibility that this is an evil spirit and I attended every church service …when I go home I have a certain bag that I take home with me, that consists of items that I have to wear at home, the dresses, the way I walk, the way I carry myself, it's a thing of when I'm about to go home I have to rehearse what to say and what not to say… it even came to a point whereby my little cousin doesn't have access to Netflix anymore because they feel like Netflix will teach her to be gay, because a lot of shows on Netflix are, they have homosexual shows…" (Participant E)*

Participant G, on the other hand, mentioned not experiencing discrimination in her community and homophobia because of her sexuality. However, she avoids being exclusively verbal about her sexuality.

> *"So, what I could say is that people around me have never been homophobic or shown any signs of it and they are comfortable with the way I live. (Participant G)*

Participant J's community and family found it difficult to understand how she had managed to have a boyfriend, a child, and still be attracted to women. Although she was aware of her attracts towards women more than males and mentions that she never harboured any romantic

feelings for her ex-boyfriend and that their connection had occurred when she was still coming to terms with her sexuality. She believes that her being a lesbian may raise questions in her family and community.

> *"…so, my friends were more understanding. When I talked to my friends, they were very supportive. Well when it comes to the society, I think because I had my daughter, I had a child on my third year, just because I had a baby and I had a boyfriend so it was kind of hard for them to understand that I never had feelings for this guy and I felt like I had to explain to each and everyone but eventually I decided to let it go, let them think whatever they do. So, I think that's what confused them ukuthi [that] how can you have a baby and then tell us that you love women.… because it's a location and most things happen in front of them, and they are not unfamiliar it's just that when it happened close to them, they react differently and growing up elokshini (township)has an impact" (Participant J)*

In the case of Participant C, the harassment he faced came from other kids at school, particularly in primary school, who made fun of him for possibly not acting like the other boys. Meanwhile, he learned that going to college had given him freedom. He attributes his increased sexual comfort to his time at university.

> *"In primary kids would mock me but it didn't appear to me that I should report it to my father, I was in the same school as my brother, but it never occurred to me to tell my brother and I don't know why…in the first year we were mixed so it was much deeper, but I managed to build relationships, to some of them I came out, because with the chairperson of the organization so I had to come out cause I needed his support and so far it has been good and I'm enjoying" (Participant C)*

Participant D had experienced similar discrimination at school as Participant C, despite always having a thick skin about his sexuality and who he is. Similar to Participant C, Participant D is

more courageous to be who he is as a result of going to school. He has benefited from seeing that people at his university do not conceal or feel ashamed of who they are, that you can be yourself without fear.

> *"I was raised in a rural area, in a village, but people from my area are very understanding, evolved and westernized, but some community members, especially the kids at school, they didn't treat me well, they were calling me names, 'Sis'bhuti', 'Mfana'ntombazane' but that didn't affect me that much because I knew who I was and I was telling them that I am like this I can't change who I am…I remember there was this teacher, who didn't teach me, this other day…he called me up and I went to him and he said to me, are you male or female, and I said whatever suits you to call me so I sensed that he was homophobic because he was with other teachers….in 2010, I went to university to study, when I was there, because [university] is a small town and it is in a rural area, I realised how people were living their lives, and I asked myself why should I hide myself then that's where I explored my sexuality" (Participant D)*

Participant F probably experienced the greatest antagonism coming from his own community. From his narrative, it appears that his family was unaware of his sexuality. His grandfather's fear that he would be hurt or even killed because of his homosexuality almost came true when he and his buddies were chased out of a local bar by people with knives and machetes.

> *"I'd hear people calling me names and when I got older I started asking myself what "istabane" means, and I found out what it meant and I told my parents that people are calling me istabane and they would brush it off …my grandfather, when I visit him and do the chores for him he would say he doesn't like that I hang out and play with girls…There was this one time when my friends and I went to a local shebeen. When we entered the place, I don't even know where those knives and a machete came from, but they chased us and said we are spreading a rotten seed in the community…Then I met [the NGO], so trying to think smart and also trying to get information in a way, cause when I met the organization crew, we did*

workshops, I asked them to come teach my own community so that they can teach them and also trying to create a safe space for the next generation to come…"

Participant H experienced discrimination from school pupils, especially boys and male teachers. However, moving to a different environment and university gave her hope for better experiences regarding her sexuality.

"…I think the kids were more enlightened there, they knew that the LGBTQ community existed and the fact that they like grew up with different people…some of them could tell who I was but some would say it's just a phase maybe it will pass and he's still young and juvenile up until I grew up to be this age , girls were nice to me but some were not nice to me. Boys were never nice to me, boys hated me, 'he's gay he's gonna want us, he's gonna force us to sleep with you'…there were teachers who were very mean, they'd like, pass words and then they'll say all these nasty stuff…but I said I'm not going to do Maths just because of this teacher whom I know who's very homophobic...when I got to university, I said to myself…I wanna fully express who I am, I wanna be friends with people who are gay." (Participant H)

Participant I show how a supportive home environment can greatly increase a person's chances of coming to terms with their sexuality. Participant K's homophobic experience is another example of the challenges that gay children, or perhaps even younger students who are still coming to terms with their sexuality and identity, may face at school:

"I'm not the only one at home, I do have cousins who are homosexual, so they are well informed about it "Participant I)

"…they used to carry knives at school, so I was like okay, these people have a chance of killing me cause I-hatecrime at that time it was there but it was not as big as it is now. So it was there, so for me I was like okay, what am I gonna do now, the insults came in every

single day every time when I left home I would always prepare myself mentally…2005 I remember there was a time whereby I wanted to quit school because it got so, too much I wanted to quit school and move back here eGreytown, leave pmb [Pietermaritzburg]. …there are some girls who are like argh towards me, but what I've realized is that it's sometimes because a gay person stole their boyfriend, so they end up hating all gays that's number one, number two: it's their upbringing ukuthi [that] homosexuality is a no, no. so there are people who still think like that, even girls." [Participant K]

Participant K also highlights the role that education or socialisation plays in the persistence of homophobia. An important factor contributing to the dehumanisation of LGBTIQ people is religion in conjunction with culture. In the following section, I detail how participants' sexuality and identity were shaped or influenced by religion.

Religion and homosexuality

Participants' experiences with religion or religious institutions were described in different ways. They struggled with their religious affiliation and the negative attitudes that some churches have toward the LGBTQ community. Participant B's account illustrates the different experiences with different churches towards the LGBTIQ community, stating that some churches are very conservative and patriarchal in their beliefs and practices, while others are more open to the LGBTIQ community.

"I feel like in most cases Christianity has the sick mentality kind of vibe, you can't ask questions you need to get in line and do what is done and don't cause trouble and I'm a troublemaker…It's also the patriarchy at church that grinds my teeth a little bit. Well, some churches want to pray for you and the church will not accept you, but it's not all churches, we can't stereotype and say all places of worship are like that, my friend whose non-gender conforming goes to a church, and they are very accepting" (Participant B)

In terms of religion, participant E claimed to have two separate lifestyles, one in the city and one in the country. She noted that, in contrast to Johannesburg, where no one paid attention to her, she had to be careful about how she carried herself and presented herself in a conservative church in order to avoid disclosing her sexual orientation.

> *"when I go to church, I'm a very feminine person so they only know the 'me' that I give access to, they don't know anything about my sexuality, who am I dating and not dating, even so like, some members are asking me out and I'm like I don't date…at church [at home] they curse homosexual people but the church that I attend in JHB it's a different story, there are homosexual people, so it means that I'm living 2 lives now, there's a different me when I'm living in KZN and there's also a different me when I'm in JHB" (Participant E)*

Participant G's faith forbids homosexuality, and she lives her life in such a way that she hides her sexuality, even though her partner belongs to the same church.

> *"I'm a catholic and they never seemed to believe there was something like that so they never knew how to react cause they have never said anything to me besides the person I am currently dating, she would say that she knows that homosexuality is wrong and it is bad luck but we can't control our feelings" (Participant G)*

The next two participants, who had conflicting opinions about how their churches view them because of their sexuality, were more adamant that their experience in church had been quite unpleasant. Despite this, they remained somewhat committed to their churches. The participant D believes that the religion is hostile and discourages open sexuality.

> *"I went to Zion church but then I was afraid that I would feel discriminated because we were grouped by gender, boy sit with boys and girls with girls and when that happened I would sit by myself. And I would wake up feeling like a girl and I will want to sit with women so I*

couldn't sit with them when I wanted to, I had to sit with boys and we had nothing in common to talk about, so I would say that I was a little bit discriminated" (Participant D)

Further asserting his church's hostility and rejection of LGBTIQ persons, participant H said:

"…I would attend services whereby they'd demean gay people and say all these bad stuff about gay people but I didn't care because I was like I know who I am, I know I'm much better than what they are saying I just need to get my matric… only the black side of the church I had problems with but the white side I never had problems with"(Participant H).

Participant H believes that his fellow black church members are more hostile to LGBTIQ individuals than his fellow white church members.

The impact of social media

With one notable exception, participants generally felt that social media had minimal influence on how they formed their sexual identities. Social media is a tool they utilize to interact with the queer community and help those in need. The stage of self-acceptance is followed by social networking. In this regard, participant A's use of social media serves as an illustration:

"I am a big user of social media especially Facebook and Tiktok. So, what I mostly use it for is promoting the queer community and that we are here to help those in need of help. I'm also learning a lot, today I was scrolling on my Facebook timeline I learned about bisexuals and it helps me to teach and help those on my forum to fulfil my mission. And I use it as a platform to fight for the rights of people in the forum, basically I'm the voice for the voiceless…It didn't help me that much but it plays an important role to see other lesbians accept themselves and live their lives freely.

So, through social media, Participant A can represent the "voice of the voiceless." Similar to, Participants D and F utilize social media sites like Facebook and Instagram to express themselves, share information, and advocate for the queer community:

> *"social media plays a huge role, Facebook, a lot of people I do know and some I don't, so working with two organizations made me a queer activist, I fight for the queers on that platform, and I post about everything that I want to and I am not afraid of everything…it is a safe space because I use it to express myself and for people to see the real me and not gossip about me…I have a family there which have created a safe space for me to express myself, and also helping other queers to express themselves and I teach them to speak for themselves" [Participant D]*

> *"I have Facebook, Instagram, tweeter, TikTok, you know on these socials, they will always be a hater and others will love you, lucky for me I was mostly loved on social media, lovers outweigh haters…I try to post what is relevant what could be helpful to other people" [Participant F]*

For a number of reasons, Participants B and E have found social media to be quite beneficial. These include introducing them to the LGBTIQ community, serving as a learning resource that exposes them to recent information important for fostering their own understanding of what others are going through, and enabling them to assist those in need even by retweeting to raise awareness and aid those who are homophobic victims. Here are some quotations from them describing the benefits of social media for them:

> *I'm also not big on social. I was born before technology but it does sometimes help in situations for people who don't have the platform to be themselves yet, I know someone who's sharing their transitioning on youTube so for someone who may be identified as a trans but not really sure what that means, that could be another aid… I feel like social media maybe my generation's method of learning through it but right now those that are coming after and*

things that we try to, is document it…I guess in that sense social media is really helpful cause it's a personal thing, its private it's on your phone, on your tablet and you're on your own." (Participant B)

"Social media is very helpful, like there are things that I have been exposed to through social media. There are platforms that I did not know about but because I scroll through social media I come across a post and then I'm like, I like this I can retweet this or re-post this so that it helps someone who needs help, and social media you find people that are kicked out of their homes and there are people that help with instances like that, it has really been helpful" [Participant E]

The fact that Participant G could communicate with people on Facebook and YouTube made these platforms extremely significant in her life when it comes to the participants' preferred social media sites. Facebook in particular has taught her a lot. She summed it up like this:

"YouTube you get to see people who are really going through that, talking about it, and seeing their lives and having people to explain. Facebook, you get to share your story with other people and it's another way of coming out and this is how I live and getting more people who are more like you and then knowing that there's many of us. YouTube helps as in you get to know a lot and see and hear their views and it's like you're socializing with those people who are like you and its much safer there"

Access to social media has been helpful for Participant C on his quest for self-awareness. He spends more time on YouTube than any other platform, and his first romance began on Facebook:

"It has played a big role in me trying to understand myself because I'm from a farm and we don't have things like, internet café, internet access and people who are queer and out of the

closet, so for me it played a huge role. I started watching YouTube videos and I really liked YouTube cause I got to see people who were gay. And It really helped me accept myself, especially me owning up to myself, because at some point I had to accept that this is who I am, and YouTube plays a huge role in that regard" [Participant C]

TV and social media had a big role in Participant F's ability to embrace who he was. His favourite TV Telenovela, *Generations*, allowed him to see people who were similar to him on television. He also gains more acceptance on social media.

"I think television, especially generations played a very, a very good role. They introduced uSenzo and Jason, it was difficult because people were like argh, they are not watching 'Generations', they are now introducing this side. This is not nice and everything but… the majority of the people were like, hooray we are being represented and then that's where I was like I'm not the only one who's in this situation. I took it from the television, the advice ukuthi [that] you are fine the way you are from the media and hence sometimes I value the media… …I had no idea there was a gay flag, but social media showed me ukuthi [that] there's a gay flag. I've never been to a gay pride but through social media I've been to a gay pride…I can discuss my sexuality on social media and then people will be like oh we accept it, they accept it on social media but face to face, physically, they shy away" (Participant F)

Participant I used social media to express himself and his ideas, which is just as important as the fact that it has broadened his horizons in terms of knowledge. Perhaps in contrast to the real world, he is also able to handle or tolerate the negative attitudes of others regarding his sexuality while maintaining his dignity.

"…because I'm a very inquisitive person, I do research, I research about everything just because I want to know and I'm that kind of person who wants to be updated, so I used the internet very much, it was 'pride month' and there was this person, Christian guy who

commented on my post and he had his opinion about homosexuality is wrong and what the bible says and what not, I don't entertain negativity and I don't have time for arguing, once I face something that I am against or see that it offends me I just delete, block and move" (Participant I)

Therefore, it seems that social media has not significantly impacted the majority of participants' sexual development. It is very clear to someone like Participant K that social media had no appreciable influence on either his sexual development or his capacity for self-acceptance:

"Well, it didn't help me, by the time social networks came I was already out there, ngase ngi-ripe already [I was already ripe]. I cannot live my life and say I want to be like this person because I saw them on TV cause whatever might work for you might not work for me. But I just write it down, like okay Beyonce has 123, 'will this method work for" (Participant K)

Participant K had accepted and embraced his sexuality by the time social media became widely used. Despite this, as Participant K indicates and the majority of the other participants have said, social media has provided them the space to be more real, to connect with individuals who share their interests, and to educate themselves on issues that concern the LGBTIQ community.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Introduction

How do gay and lesbian youth develop and make sense of their sexuality through an interaction of the physical and virtual world? Due to the rich cultural and traditional heritage in South Africa, it is important to examine how sexual identity develops within these norms as it interacts with the modern world. According to Vignoles (2017) each person's process of identity construction is unique; hence these influencing paradigms are necessary for a cohesive identity. This study set out to deconstruct the components of homosexuals' development of gender and sexual identity under the influences of cultural norms, religious beliefs and engagement with virtual platforms. This chapter will discuss each theme from the findings in in light of the body of knowledge on the literature review and interpret to the present study's findings. The themes will be discussed in the order that is presented from the results section, starting with, self-realisation, self-acceptance, the coming out process, religion and homosexuality, the society's influence and the impact of social media of the development of sexual and gender identity.

The development of sexual identity is both an internal and an external phenomenon (Hoffarth, 2017). Therefore, the beginning of identity development is the recognition of one's own sexual orientation (Hoffarth, 2017). This indicates that the inner consciousness comes to realisation that one may be a male, a female, or homosexual, external circumstances have an impact on how one interacts with their identity (Prince, 2014). In this study, participants acknowledged that self-realization was not a linear process, both lesbians and gays encountered challenges on their journey. Most of the gay participants in this study reported exhibiting effeminate behaviour at a young age. Realista et al (2019) have found that this is common in gay people's

accounts of their sexual development. Even though they were in their developing stages of sexuality and had little understanding of the nature of their personalities, this kind of behaviour was observed. This involves engaging in tasks that are perceived as or reserved for women, dressing femininely, and participating in games that are deemed to be for girls. This further confirms that the culture roles in our society have too much to do with the way our identities come into existence and the way they are shaped and constructed (Naidoo, Mabaso, & Chikovore, 2022). Inquiries about their sexuality and even the nature of the name-calling began to be raised as they were aware of and received comments about their peculiar behaviour. This is further confirmed by Ading et al (2019) that gay men recognise their same-sex affection and the likeliness of having female friends.

Additionally, this period in their lives caused confusion and raised questions about the nature of their sexuality; participant D mentioned having questions about his sexual orientation and questioning the thought of dating men for the rest of his life. As some participants indicated confusion about their sexuality because they were uneducated and unaware of sexual orientation and the emotions they were experiencing. Participant A asserted that she had only become aware of the LGBTQIA+ community in university, but she remembered having strong feelings for another girl in her early adolescence, even though those sentiments eventually faded until they were invoked again at university. This further confirms that the signs are observable from a young age and the societal norms often cloud one's judgement and perspective.

A further point made by participant D was that the sensations of same-sex attraction would come and go, which exacerbated their uncertainty regarding their sexual orientation. Additionally, some of the lesbian participants claimed having masculine qualities, such as playing activities that are specifically reserved for young boys, befriending boys, and having characteristics associated with boy children. Participant A talked about playing rough games

with boys and not giving dolls the same importance as many young girls does. Participant E also affirms that her family found her behaviour unusual for a girl, which suggested to her that she was different.

The notion that some lesbian participants may have "experimented" while they were teenagers highlights issues with the misunderstanding and lack of knowledge surrounding sexual orientation. Prior to realizing the term associated with their feelings, it is discovered that those feelings were never questioned. Participants' realisations and experiences with acknowledging the term associated with their feelings varied; some were called out by members of their communities and others by students at school. For instance, participant K reported that before his community members started calling him names like "istabane" (a derogatory term for gay people in IsiZulu), he was oblivious of this terminology as a child. According to Sithole (2015), name-calling implies that a person's behaviour is not appropriate for society. Some participants spoke of looking for support to understand their emotions and the significance of the name-calling, but they were dismissed or sent for counselling facilities, such as conversion therapy and church prayers.

For some, the unresolved questions led to internal conflict and a negative experience. For instance, Participant H recalls having a dream with another boy, which is how he came to terms with his sexual orientation. However, Participant J became aware of it after experiencing a strange feeling after seeing naked girls. Given that they were solely aware of heterosexuality, this caused a lot of uncertainty and confusion because it made them feel like they were sinful. In contrary, some reported having no trouble recognizing and comprehending what was happening to them. This was due to having queer siblings or family members who were queer.

In Cass' model above it is explained in the phenomenon called identity confusion. This is consistent with Cass' initial stage of identity conflict; they displayed awareness of their

sentiments and expressed doubt about their sexual attraction. Some of the participants did not come to terms with their sexuality right away. In a study conducted by Degge-White, Rice, and Degges-White et al (2000), it was found that participants who were aware of homosexuality at a young age were more likely to embrace their sexuality.

Due to the lack of knowledge and information about sexual orientation and their sexuality, some of the participants in this study struggled with self-acceptance. Nduna's study (2017) shows the importance of knowledge production about sexual orientation, especially in the rural areas as the majority of students from the rural area were resistant towards homosexual individuals. How society perceived homosexuality and how those perceptions were reflected in their sexual development had a significant impact. Participant F reported about going through a denial period in which he questioned God and why was this happening to him. The use of alcohol addiction as a coping technique by participant F is the best example of participant F's intense frustration and struggle to reconcile their sexuality with cultural expectations of who or how they should be as men. Additionally, some participants stated having trouble embracing their emotions since they were inconsistent, i.e., "coming and going", making it difficult to determine which sexual orientation to accept. A further reason why Participant C is a good example is that he struggled to accept his sexuality and continued to date women until he had the courage to do so. Due to his family's rejection and his desire to not let his family down, this happened. The self-doubt of other LGBT individuals who wonder if they will remain attracted to males throughout their lives was noted. The battle to accept one's sexuality and to avoid conforming to society's views on sexuality are the main motivators behind this idea.

The resistance to accepting one's sexuality led to depression, insecurities, and self-isolation during the development of sexual and gender identity. Participant A mentioned isolating herself and struggling with emotional turmoil, because of the judgements she would receive from her colleagues in the university. The university environment had varied influences on different

participants, while some experienced a sense of freedom and acceptance others struggled. Before they had the courage to accept who they are, participants C and J originally conformed to society's expectations by dating heterosexual partners. However, because Participant J had previously given birth to a child, her relationship with her sexuality was conflictual, which made her path to self-acceptance difficult. Although Participant C initially dated female fellow students, he gradually gained the trust of other gay students, accepted his sexuality, and began to cultivate his sexuality. Participant D added that the experience of being with other LGBT students who accepted their sexuality gave him confidence in the university environment.

Some individuals found it easier to accept their sexualities with the help of information and understanding regarding sexual orientation and one's own sexuality. This information was acquired through meetings with various persons at the institution and through NGO's they were a part of. The majority of them remarked how the NGO team's support and encouragement helped them feel more confident to accepting their sexuality. Moreover, others even chose to embrace their queerness above meeting society's standards due to their capacity to accept themselves. Nearly all of the participants agreed that being a part of an NGO had greatly aided them in accepting and comprehending their sexuality. Other participants added that they decided to accept themselves and their sexuality after realising that their feelings and emotions will not go away, adding that self-acceptance is essential for a peaceful life. This is consistent with Cass' stage of identity tolerance. None of the participants reported comparing themselves to others, although identity comparison is a component of the second stage of Cass (Degge-white, Rice, and Degges-White et al, 2000). However, this is more aligned with identity acceptance, some participants mentioned that they were able to accept themselves while others were assisted by the knowledge received from the NGO that they were associated with. Khuzwayo (2023) further illustrates in her study the importance of safe spaces for the queer

community, as the queer women created a safe space for themselves where they would be liberated and meet those identifying as them.

Even though McCormick (2013) sees coming out as a crucial step in developing a holistic identity, most participants in this study reported that it made them feel out of control. The formality of “coming out” meant that they were giving themselves up in order to gain acceptance for their homosexuality in a society where being heterosexual was the only acceptable sexuality over being homosexual. Some individuals rejected the idea of coming out, stating that doing so would mean admitting to the public that homosexuality is unacceptable.

Participant E, for example, chose not to come out because she did not want to be perceived as different from her heterosexual brother, especially because he did not come out to her family either. She claimed that coming out was not a necessary step in her personal development. Participant H preferred not to come out because he thought it would upset his parents. In addition, participants B and F were shown the door by their families after coming out. Nell and Shapiro (2011) state that fear of family and parental rejection is the main reason some homosexuals decide against coming out. Participant F was chased out of the house after coming out to his mother, and Participant B reported that her family had thrown her out of the house. Some parents were found to tolerate their children's sexual orientation rather than accept it.

According to McCormick (2013), the coming-out process is crucial. The ramifications of coming out, as some study participants are expressing, could, however, be more harmful to their mental and psychological health. The views and actions of those closest to them had a significant impact on some participants' decision not to come out (Nell & Shapiro, 2011). Contrary to popular thought, which holds that "coming out" strengthens one's development of sexuality, for these individuals, coming out is associated with societal and familial rejection. Participant C was afraid that even though she had come to know and attended a program about

the queer community, her mother would reject him because of her fervent Christian faith. In a study by Naidoo et al (2022) it is reported that from the religion principle, there are some insecurities which compelled many LGBTQIA+ community persons to repress their identities. However, some participants mentioned being the creatures of God and that God created them with a unique sexual orientation for a reason. This is also seen and verified by participants from Naidoo et al's (2022) study. Furthermore, as Participant J had a child before coming out as lesbian, her community was sceptical and viewed her sexuality as a 'lifestyle' rather than a natural attraction to same-sex relationship. In a study Francis (2023) a participant reported a gay individual as a 'show-off' and the way lesbians dress up shows that they "don't belong". When the LGBTQIA+ people make the decision to acknowledge their sexual orientation and come out to others, it is often a difficult decision and process as it a route with many possible outcomes (Naidoo, Mabaso, & Chikovore, 2022).

Participants who displayed effeminate behaviour spoke of not going through the coming out phase because their looks had already revealed their sexual orientation. Those that came out said that the NGO helped them and that they were guided through the coming-out process of coming out so that they wouldn't experience social hostile response. In additional other participants reported using social media as a tool to help them come out. This was because the space was allowing to explore and express themselves as the wish, they further applauded the privacy and the ability to choose who you interact with on the social media platforms. The majority of participants didn't come out to their parents on average because either the topic was never discussed or, if it was, the parents' opinions were hostile or unfavourable. Naidoo et al (2022) further emphasizes that sexual prejudice contributes to stress and confusion as the LGBTQIA+ come to terms with their identities. Additionally, the discrimination and stigma that LGBTQIA people encounter cause stress and anxiety, which has a negative impact on their physical, psychological, and behavioural health (Luvo & Kang'ethe, 2023). This is also in line

with the fourth stage from Cass's model, identity acceptance and also identity pride the fifth stage. The moment some participants found the ability to accept themselves, they were prideful of their sexuality. However, Cass's fifth stage, identity pride, mentioned that, in this stage, homosexual individuals are not blending in with the heterosexual persons. This is the opposite of what the participants experienced, as they never mentioned their isolation form the heterosexual world.

In South Africa, the rigid patriarchal society and deeply held religious convictions continue to stifle homosexual liberty (Brown & Njoko, 2019). These cultural rituals, which promote binary gendered and sexual identification, are characterised by their conservatism and strong patriarchal roots (Luvo & Kang'ethe, 2023). In most cases, people are likely to act and behave in a way that is more acceptable within their cultural beliefs and religion. When one deflects from these norms, the society reacts in a way that is discriminatory, critical, resentful, and violent (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). This segment of the discussion will look at how society reacted to the participants' homosexual orientation because it is relevant to the LGBTQ+ community. Most of the participants mentioned discrimination coming from their own families, the schools they attended, and the community at large for posing a threat to traditions and cultural values.

The results demonstrate that a person's living area had a substantial impact on how they perceived their own sexuality. Rural residents claim that they have been harshly mistreated and rejected by their homes and communities (Brown & Njoko, 2019). Parents that keep their LGBT children away from their houses frequently do it out of embarrassment and worry about how others in the community would react. Most parents feared that if their homosexual child came out, they might suffer abuse or even be killed (Taylor & Neppl, 2021). For instance, Participant F related how his grandfather voiced anxiety that Participant F would suffer as a

result of being gay, if not die. Participant F claimed that his grandfather's anxiety was a result of what he had witnessed as a child during his own period. Moreover, other interviewees described how their older relatives would reference verses from the Bible, making them feel bad for being homosexual. For example, due to Participant E's unusual behaviours and appearance at first, which are not common for young females, prayers have been made to cast out the demons that torment her. She came to believe she had been sinful as a result of this. According to Bickrum's (1996) definition of internalized homophobia from 1996, her self-perception can be characterized as such. Some respondents described experiencing blatantly cruel treatment in their social environment. Participant F noted that homosexuality was seen in his community as a contagious disease that could affect anyone. As a result, they were assaulted and almost killed by members of their community. Some people claim that their communities had inaccurate or incomplete information about the queer community. The South African Constitution amended the law to protect the marginalised, but the majority of homosexuals still report feeling unsafe and rejected by the government (de Wet, 2017).

Participant E, who grew up in a conventional rural family, serves as an example of this. Her family's passion for finding ways to rectify her sexuality after they became aware of it, is what makes her story unique. They tried prayer, virginity tests, modelling lessons, switching schools, conversion therapy, and other methods to modify her sexual orientation. Conversion therapy is a method used to change a person's gender identity or sexual orientation, claim Berishvill et al (2020). Following this therapy, Participant E quickly understood that being a lesbian is not a curse, although she still avoids upsetting her family. Some parents, according to Ryan (2009), seek to alter their children's sexuality in order to make it correspond to a heteronormative identity. Participant E also indicated that she prohibited watching television programs that support sexual diversity in her family in order to prevent younger kids from adopting this behaviour.

Furthermore, Participants E and F demonstrate the lengths to which some families will go in order to conceal the homosexual or lesbian orientation of their children by setting up heterosexual relationships for them. Most parents and families are uninformed and unaware of sexual diversity, which causes some of them to respond in a resentful manner or because they are unsure of how to react (Ghosh, 2020). For instance, Participant E's older sister desperately wanted to help her but had no idea how and ended up sending her to church. Participant C is also aware that her mother went to a sexual diversity training session at her place of business. But he feared disappointing her and getting the cold shoulder. The majority of participants were also unaware of their own sexuality. They had only a limited understanding of their sexuality based on what was given to them by society and religion. Therefore, they had problems with self-acceptance. This led to emotional turmoil and to them relying on coping mechanisms to survive. Participant F, for example, turned to alcohol to ease the pain and to fit in with friends.

The belief that male heterosexuals are the most homophobic people prompted participant H to recall in the interview a time when he had been humiliated and mistreated by classmates because of his sexual orientation. The majority of LGBT participants admitted that they had encountered male rejection, whether from crushes, male teachers or male authorities at home. The majority of participants said that the most derogatory comments in the classroom came from their classmates and teachers. Despite the Department of Basic Education implementing the safe school environment and equality policy, these participants claimed that schools do not provide a welcoming atmosphere for LGBT people (Reygan, 2016). Participant E experienced rejection and judgment when she came out to her schoolmates. Many of the participants claimed that their schoolteachers had discriminated against them. While Participant H dropped out of maths class because he was tormented by a teacher who engaged in homophobic behaviours, Participant D was made fun of and mistreated by male teachers. This homophobic behaviour was clearly demonstrated in Reygan’s (2016) study, which produced similar results.

In this study, only gay participants complained about being treated unfairly by teachers, particularly male teachers. Because of these homophobic behaviours that affected how they interacted and accepted their sexuality, some of them took longer to understand and embrace their sexuality.

Three individuals shared their stories of being severely abused by homophobic members of their society. In the middle of the night, Participant B was attacked by a male co-worker who had been forcing them to his house. According to Gordon (2018), guys frequently have no respect for women who voluntarily identify as lesbians. Lesbianism is frequently not taken seriously. Participant A highlighted how she had to struggle for her position as a woman and, more specifically, as a lesbian, in a male-dominated political environment where she is not taken seriously.

Participant J's pregnancy triggered doubts and criticism about her sexuality. Her pregnancy led to her community stigmatising her sexuality and calling it a lifestyle. She mentioned that she suffered from self-reproach and anger towards herself for becoming pregnant. Participant C and J reported that due to confusion about their own homosexuality and fear of going against the values of their society, dating the opposite sex. Additionally, those who were raised in towns and cities reported that their communities were more tolerant and accommodating than those in rural areas. Nell and Shapiro (2011) argue that it is harder for homosexual people to embrace their sexuality and find acceptance in conservative communities. This is also seen in Nduna's (2017) study, he stated that commonly students from the rural communities come to the urban areas with their perception of the unacceptability of sexual orientation.

However, some areas of society were discovered to be safe spaces, where people felt the least discrimination for their sexuality. Participants thought they had a chance to express and develop their sexuality in academic settings. The majority of them entered universities with

high expectations/impression that their lives would improve. They talked about how being around people who shared their identities at university helped them develop their confidence. Participant E gained new understanding of her sexual orientation and her own sexuality as a result of attending a university in the city. These facts and expertise were learned during a seminar for one of her modules and from the NGO she was affiliated with. Participant E also indicated that she resolved to live two lives: when she is at home, she behaves in a way that suits the family, but when she travels to the city, she reverts to being homosexual. She did this because she knew her family would not accept her. A decent upbringing and acceptance accelerated the individuals' early formation of their sexual identities (Taylor & Neppl, 2021). Other individuals assert that they interacted favourably with their communities. They even praised their societies for being informed of their sexual variety. Additionally, they claimed that their family never questioned their sexual orientation but rather welcomed and loved them.

Religion appeared to have a substantial influence on both the participants' lives and the communities in which they resided, which is not surprising considering that almost 90% of South Africans identify as Christians (Brittian et al., 2013). It makes reasonable that the laws derived from Christian religious belief would filter people's thoughts and perspectives on life. Mavhudu-Madzusi and Sandy (2015) stress the significant impact that Christian religion has on the prohibition against homosexuality. However, the participants in this study appeared to have differing attitudes towards Christianity, with some of them reporting that they have experienced rejection from the churches through the rules and the setting that promoted patriarchy. Gay participants in particular have observed criticism from the looks of congregants and biblical scriptures that were quoted from the bible. These scriptures were found to be judgemental of their sexuality and offensive. It also seems like more male than female congregants are homophobic. One participant mentioned that women from his church are more receptive because of the realisation that their children might also come out as queer.

Three participants described hearing a scripture that discriminated against them and condemned same-sex relationships from their church. There was a difference in the way churches treated the individuals, the more conservative the church is, the likelihood that the church and the pastor will be against homosexuality. Brown and Njoko (2019) proposed that Christian churches from the rural areas were likely to be more conservative and negate homosexuality, and churches from the city would be more accepting. This is evident with Participant E who reported that the church that she went to in Johannesburg is receptive of homosexual individuals in comparison to the church from her local area. Nkosi and Masson (2017) have found that the majority of homosexual individuals end up rejecting religion and becoming atheist. Some participants never felt discriminated from the churches, merely because some members would tolerate their sexuality. Participants B mentioned that in racially mixed churches, she felt acceptance from white people than from black people. Churches in urban areas appear to be more tolerant than those in rural areas or the townships, according to one of the participants, suggesting that there are geographical variances in how LGBTIQ people are treated.

As much as social media is currently prevalent and easily accessible to people, most of the participants mentioned that social media was not a major influential factor of their fully achieved gender and sexual identity. Social media never appeared to amplify or impacting their perspective of their sexuality development. The reason for this occurrence was that some participants were introduced to internet connection when they had already accepted themselves. The majority of youth on a global scale reported the significance of social media access with regards to sexual identity development (Shava & Chinyamurindi, 2018), however it appears that in the South African context internet has not played a major role. One of the reasons for the slow adaptation to social media influence is that some participants argued that there is a lack of South Africa LGBTQ+ documented stories. Another reason is that other

participants mentioned that social media is filled with white people's perspective of homosexuality therefore they rarely relate with the information provided. Most participant complained that they seldom find South Africa homosexuals who look like them, and those sharing their homosexual stories about how they navigated their sexual identity development.

Even though some of them mentioned using social media to inform those who need help and the younger generation. P. A as a political activist, she uses her voice to reach those in need of help and being "the voice of the voiceless". They mentioned Facebook and YouTube as being the most used platforms to obtain information. YouTube is helpful in that there is a display of an actual person talking through their process of coming out and that gives the queer members the courage to come out as well. P. C states that he heavily relies on YouTube because he can see people like him tell their stories and that helps one to be comfortable with their own sexuality. Facebook also helped those from the rural areas who mentioned that they did not have internet access, and only access the internet from libraries or internet cafes.

Facebook played an important role in informing and enlightening homosexual individuals about the existence of sexual diversity and the queer community. P. H mentioned that he found out a lot about the pride community and the queer flag on social media which made him feel that he belonged with a certain group of people. Seeing people who were like them on social media made them feel normal and part of a larger community. Television also was a big factor into informing them that the queer community exists outside of themselves, P. H mentioned a popular television series that introduced gays characters for the first time around 2009 on South African television. He stated that he was empowered, even though most people were confused and angry about the introduction of queer content on Television. Social media platforms have also helped some participants create a community in that space, meet friends and others found relationships. Those who found social media helpful further mentioned that social media

created a safe space for them to fully express their feelings. This was due to the privacy option that social media provided for them.

The option to choose people who viewed their social media content feed, and their friends circle was a significant point about social media. Even though some were not affected by social media, those who did found positivity in that access. However, they further mentioned that social media has its own underperformances. They mentioned the criticism from other social media users and the judgement that comes with it. Since anyone can post and write about anything, it also affects them because they end up seeing those judgements. One participant mentioned that even relationship that began from the online platform were usually a scam. Some participants reported that married men would reach out to them so that they can use them for sexual fornication. Others mentioned that expressing one's feelings on social media invited more people to have their opinions about your life.

Conclusion

South Africa is a country rich with versatile cultural and religious beliefs which carry potency to one's stance of reality. In this study the society appeared to have the major impact on the way that gay and lesbian individuals navigated and engaged with their sexual identity development. As Hoffarth (2017) had stated that the development of sexuality is an internal and external experience, most participants of this study valued the internal aspect growth and proceeded to search for safe spaces to commune. Even though many social settings rejected and discriminated sexual diversity, they sought for belonging and safety from the non-Governmental organizations and social media. Most of them learned about the history of sexual diversity from the NGO's and the process of self-acceptance was clarified. Those who came from the rural areas found liberty in moving to the city universities because they were reassured of the existence of same sex attraction. Previous research highlighted the delayed self-

realisation of lesbian women, this study confirmed those findings. The reason for these findings is yet to be explored, Langa (2015) found that female adolescents are likely to be heavily affected by the traditions and cultural norms of the society. However, some reported homosexuality consciousness at an early age.

Participants in this study aligned with several stages of Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation. When they first became aware of feelings of same-sex attraction, confusion was reported by the majority as the initial stage. During the second stage of identity comparison, some of them mentioned questioning if they would be homosexual for the remainder of their lives and if their emotions were temporary. No participant mentioned passing through the third stage, which is identity tolerance. Some participants stated that they were able to embrace and be proud of their sexual orientation with the assistance of the NGOs. They were better able to relate to their emotions and reality as a result of the acquired information and knowledge. Participants at this point were already leading healthy lives. However, Cass's Model did not account for the impact that society had on the development of these individuals. Society appeared to have had a significant effect on when and how the participants realised their sexual orientation and came out.

Gay participants were more inclined to realising their sexuality at an early age due to their observed effeminate appearance and behaviour (Ading et al., 2021). Those whose appearance relied more on masculinity had a difficulty accepting and coming out to their families and the society. The problem began when the socially constructed gender identity roles are expected of that individual. The narrative approach helped in providing rich information and subtle details that are usually missed. The narrated stories provided by all participants had a unique beginning and continued to be unique experience. Even though the society may believe that the existence of sexual diversity is derived from the western countries and that reflected lifestyle that homosexual individuals have chosen for themselves, the depth and uniqueness of

each story proves to be otherwise. It is a shame that the South African government fails to protect the LGBTQ+ community when they proclaimed the policy to provide a safe and equal environment for all citizens. Therefore, non-heteronormativity has been characterised as unacceptable, un-African, a threat to African moral and cultural sensitives, as well as an affront to African moral and family values, in the many African contexts that are present today. There is ample evidence that many regions of Africa are heavily influenced by homophobic sentiments and see homosexuality as a sinister attempt to westernise the continent (Luvo & Kang'ethe, 2023)MENTA. This study in comparison with the previous research confirmed an improvement in homosexuality acceptance from the previous years. Religious influence was the most potent because the societies perception of homosexuality is drawn from the scriptures and older women in particular valued and protected the Word of God. Even though it was apparent that the participants received more negative responses from the male side.

Moreover, this study had limitations that may have affected the results of this research, those limitations include the process of conducting interviews. Due to the restrictions of Covid-19 most interviews were conducted telephonically, only two interviews were done face to face. The interviews on the phone were relatively shorter than those done face to face and the reason for this is that some participants had an opportunity to eliminate and reserve some details and information. The conversation was likely to be structured than narrative because participants expected the interviewer to lead and probe. Therefore, there was a great chance of asking the same questions differently to each participant.

The interview questions were able to get answers from the participants, but these questions were too broad and created difficulties for some participants to answer. The researcher had to constantly interject and break down the question. Even though the narrative inquiry was beneficial but created problems in breaking down the broad chunks of information into meaningful extracts. The participants were all from the province of Kwa-Zulu natal and that

created bias in the generalization of the experiences of these narratives since it did not represent the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ youth in South Africa. The research also had black participants only, therefore this provided the experience from the black homosexual person's perspective only. Only eight participants were recruited from the NGO and the other two participants were recruited from social media and one participant was recruited through the snowballing effect.

Recommendations

Homosexual identity development is an under researched topic in South Africa and the entire African continent, this may be caused by the controversy attached to the homosexuality phenomenon. The affluency of cultures and traditions influences the perception of people on homosexuality. The application of Cass's model to the people of South Africa was unfit since it failed to account for contextual influences. Therefore, there may be a need to re-create ~~a~~ modern and relatable model to understand and explain the development of gender and sexuality in the South African and African context. Future research could focus on the LGBTQI+ individuals from the rural areas because they feel unrepresented on the broad perspective in South African homosexuality. Their stories are valid, and worth being documented.

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APPENDIX A

Information sheet

School of Human and Community development: Psychology

Title: The development of gender and sexual identity of gay and lesbian youth in the physical and virtual world.

Student: Phililе Makhunga

872806

Supervisor: Dr Nkululeko Nkomo

- We would like to invite you to participate in a study.
- The purpose of the study is to capture the biological histories of the LGBQTI+ youth in relation to their sexual identities and sexual agency. To examine and understand their evolving sexuality in the social contextual settings and social media platforms.
- To be part of the study you need to be a member of the LGBTQI+ youth between the ages of 18-35with internet access and use social media frequently. A participant should be following at least one blog or have an active account on these following social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp etc. They should also be involved in a non-governmental organization, they could either be working or volunteering.
- Should you decide to participate in the study you will be required to have a mobile phone in order to communicate via Skype or Zoom. This is due to the current circumstances of Covid-19 pandemic.
- The interview should take about 30 minutes to an hour.
- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary however, should you decide to withdraw from the study you are free to do so.
- Participants may have no immediate benefit from the study; however, your participation will be valuable to the study and the final project will be available on the University of the Witwatersrand or the participant shall contact the researcher to request the copy via email.
- Your personal details will be kept confidential in a password protected computer.
- Should you have further questions feel free to ask the researcher before the interview proceeds or contact the supervisor. 872806@students.wits.ac.za or Nkululeko.nkomo@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule

Opening

1. [Greetings]. I am Philile Makhunga, a Research Psychology student at the University of the Witwatersrand. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. It is a great honour to have you participate.
2. I would like to ask you questions about your background (childhood) and growing up as a homosexual individual in your family and community. We will also talk about different aspects of life as part of your growth, life experiences, your friendship, education, sexual identity, sexual agency ad your presence on social media platforms.
3. I hope to use this information to enlighten and inform the incompetent bunch about the depth and the reality of homosexuality, and hopefully challenge the stigma and prejudice towards the LGBTQ+ community. I hope to educate myself and the community about homosexuality through their life stories.
4. The interview should take approximately 40 minutes to an hour.

Body

Section A

- Tell me about your childhood
    - Where did you grow up?
    - Who were your guardian and people you grew up with, friends?
- Now tell about the relationship you have with your guardian(s), family, and your friends

Section B

- How did you know you were attracted to the same sex?
    - How would you describe the first time you experienced strong attractions towards the same sex?
    - Tell me about the memories that stand out for you
    - Now tell about the response you received from your surroundings and the society in general (School, church, university, neighbourhood)

Section C

- Tell about the social networking site you use

- How would you describe your relationship with your social media contacts?
- How is your sexuality being received by social media?
- How is/has social media platforms helped or jeopardised your sexual identity formation (the role it played or plays in your life)

Closing

Have you ever been interviewed about your sexuality for any reason?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
- Is there any question you feel I should have asked you, but did not?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your time and what you have shared with me.

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

I……..hereby agree to participate in the research study on examining the evolving sexual agency of LGBTQI+ youth in social contextual settings and social media platforms. I understand that I am participating voluntarily and not forced to do so. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any given time should you not want to continue and this decision will not affect me negatively. I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not to necessary benefit me personally to immediate term. I understand that my participation will remain confidential.

…….. Date:……..

Signature of participant

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent: Audio Recording

I……..hereby agree to be audio recorded during my participate in the research study on examining the evolving sexual agency of LGBTQI+ youth in social contextual settings and social media platforms. I understand that I am participating voluntarily and not forced to do so. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any given time should you not want to continue and this decision will not affect me negatively. I understand that this is a research project whose purpose is not to necessary benefit me personally to immediate term. I understand that my participation will remain confidential.

…….. Date:……..

Signature of participant