



TWIST

Journal homepage: www.twistjournal.net

The Experiences and Perceptions of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual (LGBTQIA) Individuals Lived in Rural Areas within South Africa

N. Mbuyisa

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

E. Muleya

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

C. M. Lelaka*

The Discipline of Social Work, School of Human & Community Development,
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg 2000, South Africa

[*Corresponding author]

Abstract

Despite South Africa's progressive legal framework supporting LGBTQIA+ rights, significant challenges remain, particularly in rural areas. These regions are often shaped by traditional norms and limited access to supportive resources, contrasting sharply with the more inclusive environments of urban centers. This study explores the regional disparities in the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals through a qualitative lens. Data were gathered via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of seven LGBTQIA+ participants from rural communities. Thematic analysis revealed three core themes: experiences of homophobia, perceptions of beliefs, and encounters with gender-based violence. Findings underscore the persistent presence of homophobia, the complex role of cultural and religious frameworks in shaping local attitudes, and the prevalence of bullying, harassment, and discrimination. The study offers critical insights for policymakers, service providers, and community leaders, emphasizing the need for inclusive, culturally sensitive interventions that advance equality and support for LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural South Africa.

Keywords

Challenges, Experiences, LGBTQIA+, Perceptions, Rural areas

INTRODUCTION

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual (LGBTQIA+) community is a diverse group of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, pansexual, same gender loving, pangender, nonbinary, gender fluid, two spirit, bigender, intersex, asexual, nonconforming, gender variant, and emerging identities (Bazarsky, et al., 2022). The community has a long and complex history, stretching back to ancient civilizations. In most recent times, the LGBTQIA community has faced significant challenges, including discrimination and violence (Bardwell, 2018). However, the community has also made great strides, including the legalization of same-sex marriage in many countries and an increased visibility in popular culture (Lewitus, 2015). Despite these gains, most communities still face many challenges, including stigma and discrimination, and continues to fight for equality and acceptance. In many countries such as Algeria, Angola, Burundi etc., the LGBTQIA community is still facing discrimination and violence, and same-sex relationships are not always recognized or protected by law. South Africa is not immune to these behaviours. For example, in same-sex relationships are criminalized and punishable by imprisonment or even death. However, there has been progress made in terms of LGBTQIA rights, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage (Nel & McLachlan, 2019). In South Africa, the LGBTQIA community has made significant progress since the end of

apartheid. The country is now considered one of the most progressive in terms of LGBTQIA rights and was the first in Africa.

LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas often face a myriad of challenges, compounded by homophobia, transphobia, social isolation, rejection, and the difficult experiences of coming out. These individuals experience elevated levels of stigma and discrimination compared to their urban counterparts (Sithole, 2015). This discrimination manifests in various forms, including verbal harassment, physical violence, and social exclusion. The lack of anonymity in rural communities further exacerbates these challenges, as individuals are more easily identifiable, making them more vulnerable to targeted discrimination (Sithole, 2015). Homophobia and transphobia persistently affect LGBTQIA individuals in rural areas. These communities may lack awareness and understanding of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, leading to discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. (Ngidi, Ramphalile, Essack, & van Rooyen, 2020) As a result, LGBTQIA individuals often face prejudice, exclusion, and even violence based on their sexual orientation or gender expression.

According to Hulko & Hovanec (2018), the LGBTQIA originating from rural areas remain largely undocumented and misunderstood due to understudies from researchers. Rural environments often differ significantly from urban settings in terms of social attitudes, availability of resources, and community support structures. Social Attitudes in rural communities may have different social norms and values compared to urban areas, which are often influenced by tradition and a closer connection to nature. Looking at the availability of resources in urban areas, typically they have greater access to resources such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, whereas rural areas may have limited access due to lower population density, infrastructure or poor development. The community support structures, in rural areas often have tight-knit communities with strong support networks, but they might lack the formal support services found in urban centres.

Generally, the LGBTQIA+ individuals have been understudied with most researchers focusing more on the experiences of these individuals, in rural areas in general context that these individuals come from. LGBTQIA+ individuals have mostly been studied in international countries and most of the findings and conclusions of the challenges they face, are drawn based on these studies that are generalised without focusing on specific smaller contexts. Which is not accommodative to African individuals, as experiences differ in different contexts. The study seeks to delve into the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals resided in rural areas to unpack the unique challenges they faced, the perceptions surrounding their experiences, and by focusing on rural settings, the study seeks to highlight the distinct social attitudes and treatment they receive from their diverse communities and its impact. This research is crucial as it intends to address the gap in understanding the specific context of LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural South Africa, which has often been overlooked in favour of more generalized studies conducted in international settings. This study calls for targeted interventions, inclusive policies, and enhanced access to resources to improve the quality of life for LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural settings. The study aims to explore the experiences of the LGBTQIA individuals lived in rural areas within South Africa.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the Social Identity Theory (SIT) which was developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s. It posits that individuals derive a portion of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, which are important sources of pride and self-esteem. The theory's strengths lie in its ability to explain the psychological processes behind group formation and maintenance, emphasizing the role of social comparison and group memberships in providing a sense of belonging and self-worth. This theory argues that people's self-concepts are based on groups to which they belong (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979). This means that people differentiate between themselves, and others based on different social categories such as social status, race and most importantly sexual orientation and gender in this study. These categories are important components of individual identity and self-concept. According to Trepte & Loy (2017) this theory is built on three cognitive processes. Which is social classification, social commentary, and social comparison. Social stratification refers to the classification of individuals into groups, including oneself. Social identification is the way we acknowledge the identity of the group we are categorized as members of, and social comparison is how we compare our groups to other groups (Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2001.).

Looking at the brief background of this theory, SIT is a conceptualisation in social psychology. It looks at how group memberships affect a person's self-concept. This is a theory that Henri Tajfel and John Turner produced in the 1970s. It helps us understand the link between personal identity (the self) and social identity (group membership). This also shows how the link affects individuals' behaviour, perceptions, and group dynamics (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979). Social identity theory says people put themselves and others into social groups. These groups can be based on gender, religion, sports teams, or nationalities as explained above. These categorisations are natural social perception they help to simplify the social world. Once people identify with a group, they tend to follow that group's norms, values, and behaviours and this contributes to their social identity.

In terms of LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas, this model helps examine how their belongingness to both rural community and LGBTQIA + communities shape their identities. It provides a good point of view for understanding how these individuals negotiate their social identities within contexts that may not always be welcoming or supportive. Social identity theory in this research aims to explain how individuals who are LGBTQIA+ can thrive in two worlds, the first being a group they can avoid and the second with which they interact well (Bonetti, Rossi, & Caricati, 2023). For

example, they may choose to talk only with perceived supporters about their LGBTIQIA status, while at the same time participating in other activities that reflect their rural background. Such two life journeys are complicated and can leave you feeling disconnected or, alternatively, more difficult when managed properly. Using social identity theory as a means of understanding this phenomenon may therefore reveal some useful information about what kind of support mechanisms in rural areas work best for LGTBQAI+, such as support systems or any facilities.

Application of social identity theory in this study emphasises that research methodologies should adjust to the unique experiences of rural LGBTQIA+ individuals. It emphasizes the importance of creating research methodologies and interventions that are flexible and adaptable to the specific contexts and needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas. For instance, participatory studies can involve rural LGBTQIA+ people in the research process itself. This will help to ensure the study accurately captures their lived experiences and perspectives. Social identity theory is relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas form and maintain their social identities in the mist of potential unwelcoming environments. The theory helps to explore how these individuals balance their need for social belonging with the challenges they face due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (Byers, 2013). It also shed light on the role of community support and social networks in shaping their experiences and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

Research approach refers to the systematic and logical way of conducting research to achieve specific goals and objectives, it helps researchers plan, design, and execute their studies effectively and efficiently (Abbott & McKinney, 2013).

For this research, the selected research method was qualitative research design. Qualitative research is an approach that centres on investigating and comprehending people's experiences, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs. Qualitative research design involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data to understand social phenomena (Maxwell, 2012). The reason for choosing a qualitative approach was because it was going to help to deeply explore and understand the complex lives and explore challenges these individuals experienced.

Research Design

Whereas a research design is the plan or framework used to conduct a research study. It outlines the overall approach and methods for collecting and analysing data to answer research questions or test hypotheses (Abbott & McKinney, 2013). This study adopted an exploratory design because it is focused highly on exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of real-life problems, concepts, or phenomena (Tenny et al., 2022). Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a method of data collection that combines elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. It involves asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework, but the questions are not fixed in order or phrasing, allowing for open-ended responses and flexibility in the conversation (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This design was particularly suitable for research on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals living in rural areas for several reasons this includes flexibility to explore the topic, and it also made it easy for participants to share their own stories.

Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

Population

Population is the total set of individuals or elements that you wish to research or study about is referred to as the population. It can be described in terms of several attributes, including age, income, geography, or any other relevant factor (Rapley, 2014). The population of this study was the individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and who are living or have lived in rural areas of South Africa. A sample is a portion of the population from which data is gathered (Rapley, 2014). Because gathering data from every person of the entire population is either difficult or impossible, therefore using a sample makes it easier to conduct research.

Sampling

To guarantee reliable results, the sample needs to be representative of the overall population. The sample size for this study was seven participants, allowing for a detailed exploration of individual experiences. This sample ensured feasibility, especially with limited resources and time constraints. This smaller sample allowed for a focused data collection and pilot testing of research instruments.

Sampling Procedure

Participants were recruited from social media; WhatsApp groups and Facebook were used to post a poster that was consisting of the information about the study including the criteria for participants who meet the requirements. The interviews took place at the convenient space at the Braamfontein student accommodation, Thutong Junction. A private office was used as per arrangement with the building manager. Participants were also given an option to choose if they want the researcher to travel to their residents, if they stay in Wits accredited residences for safety reasons.

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where researchers select individuals or groups on purpose because they possess specific characteristics needed for the study (Alvi, 2016). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who meets the criteria and who can provide rich, in-depth insights of their experiences as LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural settings. Sample: refers to a subset of individuals, items, or data taken from a larger population or set (Alvi, 2016). It is used to make inferences or gain insights about the whole group without having to examine every member. The sample size for this study was a range of 10-20 participants, allowing for a detailed exploration of individual experiences. Snowball Sampling: Snowball sampling refers to asking participants to refer others who meet the study criteria and who might be interested in participating (Alvi, 2016). The process begins with a few known individuals who meet the study criteria for example friends. These initial participants will then be requested to refer other potential participants who also have a lived experiences of being LGBTQIA+ in rural areas. The sampling will continue, until the desired sample size is reached.

Data Collection

According to (Ajayi, 2017), data collection is a systematic process of gathering observations or measurements to gain first-hand knowledge and original insights into a research problem. It involves using various methods such as surveys, interviews, experiments, and observation to collect information that is relevant to the research's aim. For this study, the data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen for its ability to facilitate rich, detailed narratives, that allows for sharing of personal perceptions and feelings (Mazhar, Anjum, Anwar, & Khan, 2021). Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, using a semi-structure interview guide that allows for flexibility in questioning to explore the participants' experiences deeply. Semi structured interviews guide is a document that provides an outline of topics and questions for an interview, combining the benefits of both structured and open-ended styles. It allows interviewers to follow a clear plan while also giving them the flexibility to delve deeper into responses and explore new avenues that may arise during the conversation. This approach is advantageous because it can yield rich, detailed data while ensuring that certain key points are consistently covered across different interviews (Mazhar, Anjum, Anwar, & Khan, 2021).

Data Analysis

Methods of data analysis refers to the techniques and processes used to inspect, clean, transform, and model data with the goal of discovering useful information, informing conclusions, and supporting decision-making (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The analysing of data began with, reading of all transcripts. This was important for developing a good understanding of the content and context. Next the researcher did coding, which involved tagging specific keys of the text. With labels that summarises what was being communicated. This was followed by grouping the codes into potential themes. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The steps for thematic analysis were used and the researcher followed the Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke steps because they outlined a six-step process for thematic analysis that includes familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Stevenson, 2010). This process is widely recognized and utilized in qualitative research to systematically approach data analysis.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness of data is crucial. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher observed the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data and findings as recommended by (Impellizzeri, Savinsky, & Leitch-Alford, 2017). This proposal outlined the procedures for verifying data and enhancing the trustworthiness of the study on the experiences and perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ who lived in rural South Africa, incorporating the four components.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration involves obtaining permission from an ethics committee or board to conduct research involving human participants, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and protection of participants' rights, safety, and well-being (Jones, 2023). In this study, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). This approval signifies that the research proposal was reviewed to ensure that it met ethical guidelines, including considerations of participant safety, informed consent, and confidentiality. The ethical reference number is SW24/06/05. Furthermore, the researcher observed all the related ethical consideration in the study before, during, and after the study.

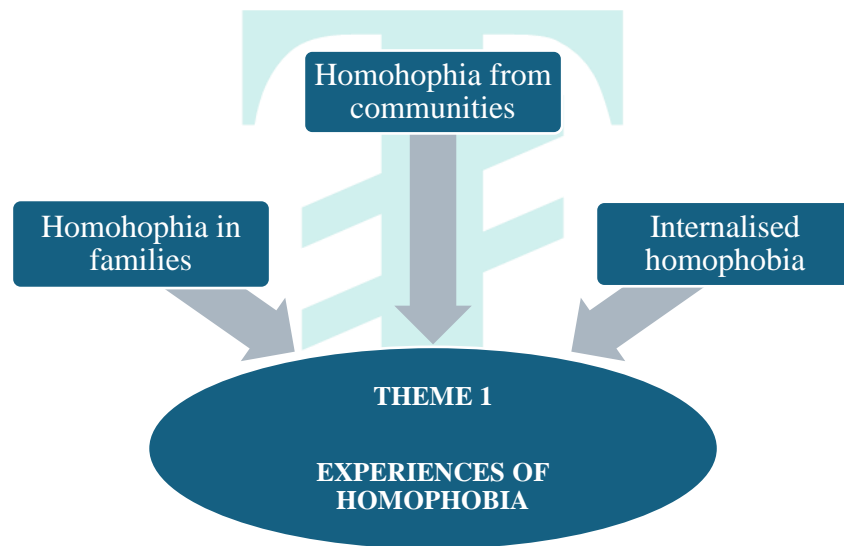
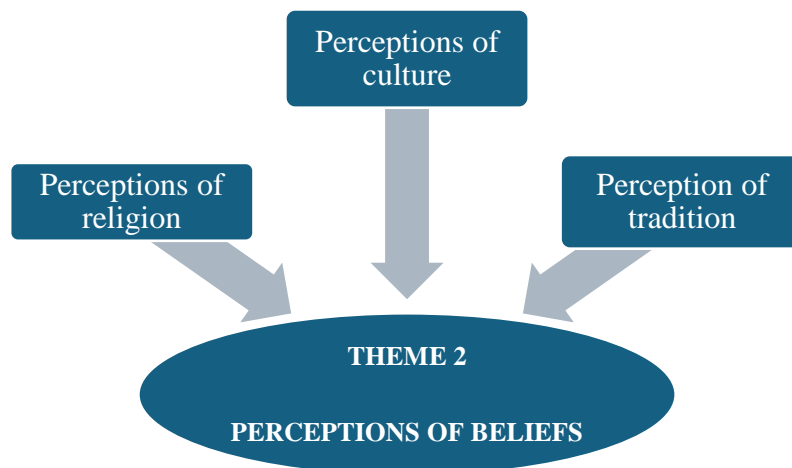
RESULTS

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of seven participants, detailing their sexuality or gender identity, age range, racial group, ethnicity, and geographical location. Participants identify as Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer, or Bisexual. Most participants fall within the 18-21 years age range, with one participant aged 21-25 years. All participants are Black, and they represent three ethnic groups: Xhosa, Setswana, and Zulu. Geographically, participants are from rural areas in the Eastern Cape, Kwa-Zulu Natal, and North-West provinces.

Table 1 Demographic Factors of participants (n=7)

Demographic factors	Sub-category	Number
Sexuality/Gender Identity	Lesbian	1
	Gay	2
	Transgender	1
	Queer	1
	Bisexual	2
Age range	18-21 years	6
	21-25 years	1
Race/Racial Group	African/Black	7
Ethnicity	Xhosa	3
	Setswana	3
	Zulu	1
Province/Rural areas of Origin	Eastern Cape	2
	Kwa-Zulu Natal	2
	North-West	3

The findings suggested the following three themes as: experiences of homophobia, perceptions of belief systems, and experiences of gender-based violence. Each theme will be discussed under various sub themes.

**Fig. 1** Themes of findings**Fig. 2** Themes of findings

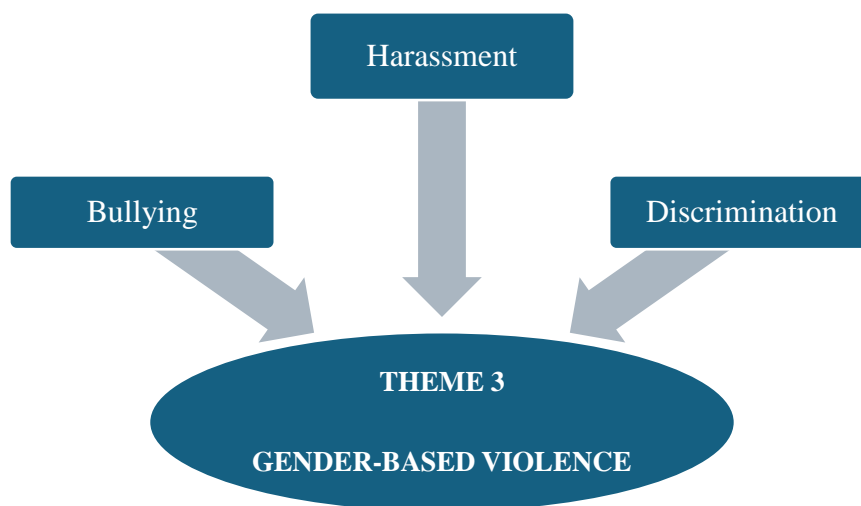


Fig. 3 Themes of findings

Theme 1: Experiences of homophobia

The data collected indicates that many participants experience homophobia within their own families, leading to significant emotional and psychological distress. This internal family conflict often results in divisions, where some family members support the LGBTQIA+ individual, while others oppose both the individual and their supporters. This homophobia manifests in many ways, such as pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations, rejection, and lack of acceptance, all of which severely impact the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals. These experiences of familial homophobia contribute to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and depression, as individuals struggle to reconcile their identities with the lack of acceptance from their closest relations. The mental health of such takes toll on a hostile environment resulting to an ongoing psychological trauma and stress. Furthermore, homophobia from community members is also a significant challenge for LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas. These individuals often face scrutiny and harassment, as community members impose gender norms and expectations on them. This is supported by participants one presented below.

Homophobia in families

*“They would throw insults and at some point, I just felt like I was excluded in the family because of like people did not understand me, abomakhelwane (the neighbours) would throw insults. **Participant 1**”*

*“Because my family is homophobic. It was extremely hard for me because I wanted to be someone who I am not, you know just to please them. So mentally I was not okay because I wanted to be something that I am not happy to be. **Participant 7**”*

Participant 3 below mentions that some people pretend to accept LGBTQIA+ individuals but hold internalized homophobia. This can result to one being nervous or shy to express themselves because they might fear the unknown, when a person pretends to like you or accept you, you may fear what they could possibly be feeling about your identity and the way you present yourself to them as a queer person. Because the truth is that when someone is pretending, they may be holding hate or anger inside them. This aligns with recent research indicating that internalized homophobia can lead to significant mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. According to a study by Puckett et al. (2016), internalized homophobia is linked to higher rates of mental health problems among LGBTQIA+ individuals.

*“There is a lot of internalised homophobias, because some people do pretend that they have accepted you or they are okay with the person that you are but deep inside they do have internalized homophobia. **Participant 3**”*

Homophobia from community members

Homophobia from community members is also a significant challenge for LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas. These individuals often face scrutiny and harassment, as community members impose gender norms and expectations on them. This is supported by participants one presented below.

*“Because my family is homophobic. It was ridiculously hard for me because I wanted to be someone who I am not, you know just to please them. So mentally I was not okay because I wanted to be something that I am not happy to be. **Participant 7**”*

*“People in the community they will follow you and tell you should not act like a woman because you are a man, or you are not a boy, or you are not a girl you are a boy. So homophobic is the big challenge in rural areas it's real; some people even use the tradition and religion thing to be homophobic to us. **Participant 4**”*

"You'll be walking around and then you'll hear people making cruel comments, speaking hurtful words about us. Sometimes they call us ndoda mfazi (homophobic names) like even teachers and community leaders. they are not ready to change this narrative. Participant 6".

Internalized homophobia

Participant 3 mentions that some people pretend to accept LGBTQIA+ individuals but hold internalized homophobia. This can result to one being nervous or shy to express themselves because they might fear the unknown, when a person pretends to like you or accept you, you may fear what they could possibly be feeling about your identity and the way you present yourself to them as a queer person. Because the truth is that when someone is pretending, they may be holding hate or anger inside them. This aligns with recent research indicating that internalized homophobia can lead to significant mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. According to a study by Puckett et al. (2016), internalized homophobia is linked to higher rates of mental health problems among LGBTQIA+ individuals.

"There is a lot of internalised homophobias, because some people do pretend that they have accepted you or they are okay with the person that you are but deep inside they do have internalized homophobia. Participant 3"

Theme 2: Perceptions of beliefs

Perception of religion

Religion plays a significant role in shaping societal attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. Many participants noted that religious beliefs are often used to justify homophobia and exclusion. The following participants highlighted this issue:

"Christians usually use the word of God to basically crucify the LGBTQIA community." Participant 3

"In my community they put religion in the centre of everything making anything that is outside heterosexuality is considered as unnatural and sinful and it's not in the Bible." Participant 6

"Religion does not accommodate us Gay people. Participant 1"

"At my church they explained that religion only considers it a sin when you are sleeping with the people of the same gender as you. Participant 2"

Not only religion doesn't support them, but also it affects their well-being, which threatens their confidence. This is what participant 4 confirmed.

"Religion makes LGBTQIA community less confident or like be less proud of themselves. They turn out to have low self-esteem about who they are, which is not good for the person at all. Participant 4".

It has also been noted that some individuals don't belong to any religion, but they use it against us. This is supported by the following exempt:

"They are people who like normal people who do not even believe in God. But when it comes to the LGBTQ, that's when they try to fit in religion to judge the LGBTQIA community. They try to fit in God Just to discriminate the LGBTQIA, Participant 3"

This reflects how religious teachings can be interpreted in ways that promote discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals. In many rural communities, religion is deeply grounded, making it challenging for LGBTQIA+ individuals to gain acceptance. Participant 6 response as quoted above, underscores the significant barrier that religious beliefs pose to the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities. According to Goodwin et al (2022), adverse religious experiences can significantly impact the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals, causing increased levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. This also aligns with the findings of Medina & Mahowald (2022), which highlights that LGBTQIA+ individuals often face structural and interpersonal discrimination rooted in religious beliefs.

Perception of culture

African culture has a strong influence in people living in rural areas since most of them they share similar values, shared beliefs and practices. Although culture evolves with time, it doesn't seem so with other individuals coming from rural areas since they continue to practice similar values. Concerns regarding culture were reported as concerns regarding LGBTQIA.

"Where I live, culture and religion have a big influence on how most people view the LGBTQIA identities. For instance, traditional beliefs often emphasize the importance of dating people of the opposite gender from yours. This may be challenging for us as LGBTQIA members who also date people of the same gender., Participant 7"

"Where I come from, like our culture and our religion, they play a huge role in our lives and that leads to them playing a huge role, also in the difficulties that I've faced because of my identity. In my community they put religion in the centre of everything in our traditional belief so anything outside heterosexuality is considered as unnatural and sinful and it's not in the Bible. Participant 6"

Cultural norms and values also impact the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Participant 1 explained, *"It is so hard being gay when you are a Zulu because Zulus believe you must be indoda (you must be masculine) you must be strong. Participant 1"* This quote illustrates how cultural expectations around masculinity and gender roles can create a hostile environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals. However, culture can also offer some acceptance, as Participant 5 noted, *"In terms of culture, I will say culture is more accommodating than religion is. I think there is more room, for breathing. I know queer couples that have gotten culturally married. Participant 5"*. This indicates that while cultural norms can be

restrictive, they can also provide spaces for acceptance and recognition of LGBTQIA+ relationships. Conron and Goldberg (2020) found that cultural acceptance varies significantly with more conservative cultures often displaying lower levels of acceptance towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. Moreover, Arcelo et al. (2023) noted that conservative cultural norms in sectarian schools and universities lead to higher levels of discrimination against LGBTQIA+ students.

Perception of tradition

Tradition in rural communities often dictates strict gender roles and expectations, which can be exclusionary towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. Participants confirm such challenges:

For instance, traditional beliefs often emphasize the importance of dating people of the opposite gender from yours. This may be challenging for us as LGBTQIA members who also date people of the same gender., Participant 7”.

“In rural areas, traditional beliefs are more upheld more strongly in rural areas and being different in rural areas obviously make one an object of isolation. So, I feel like there is more acceptance in urban areas than in rural. In urban areas than in the rural there is bullying, homophobia, you know. Participant 6”

“People in the rural area sometimes rely on their traditional old beliefs, and that leaves them with no room for understanding or accepting us as lesbian. So as the LGBTQIA we always must live in fear for being judged by our community members. Participant 4”

Traditional beliefs, much like religion and culture, can reinforce the stigma against LGBTQIA+ individuals, making it difficult for them to openly express their identities and form relationships. This is supported by Hogan and Omasta (2021), who found that traditional beliefs significantly impact the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals, often leading to exclusion and discrimination. Additionally, the study by Stevenson et al. (2024) highlights those traditional beliefs can reinforce stigma, making it difficult for LGBTQIA+ individuals to form supportive relationships and communities.

Theme 3: Gender-based violence

Bullying, harassment, and discrimination

Participants reported that gender-based violence such as bullying and violence are particularly prevalent issues faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas. There seems to be a lack of awareness and acceptance within these communities often translates into aggressive behaviours directed at those who are perceived as different. This behaviour also can include verbal harassment, physical violence, harassment, and social exclusion. The environment in rural areas, where traditional norms and values may be more deeply entrenched, often exacerbates the severity of this bullying compared to urban areas.

Participants below highlighted the disparity indicating that rural environments can be less supportive and more hostile, amplifying the risks and challenges for LGBTQIA+ individuals, by stating that:

“LGBTQIA people who live in the rural areas they get to face more bullying than people who are in the urban areas. Participant 3”

“In rural areas LGBTQIA+ Individuals do not feel comfortable to express who they are because they are more scared that they will be judged. and they would be harassed, discriminate them and call them names. Participant 2”

“I am primarily experienced a lot of bullying from like my peers like did not understand who would see this being of being gay. Participant 1”.

This finding is supported by the study conducted by Erin Stevenson et al. (2024) and found that rural LGBTQIA+ youth reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Since participant 3 mentioned that LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas face more bullying, therefore this is consistent with findings from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (2020), which reported that LGBTQIA+ youth in rural areas are more likely to hear anti-LGBTQIA+ remarks and experience discrimination in schools.

EXAMINATION OF RESULTS

The study explored the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQIA individuals lived in rural areas within South Africa. The findings suggested three themes namely: the experiences of homophobia, perceptions of beliefs and gender-based violence. The findings suggest deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the LGBTQIA+ individuals in rural areas, and the intense homophobia challenges they are facing. This also includes the various perceptions religion, culture and tradition that impacts on their lives. Furthermore, their experiences of gender-based violence exposed them to intense bullying, harassment and being discriminated. This study has the potential to contribute and inform service providers, policy makers and community leaders, promoting supportive strategies and an inclusive society that acknowledges and supports diversity in LGBTQIA+ communities in rural areas.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

In rural areas of South Africa, LGBTQIA+ individuals face a range of interlinked challenges that severely impact their quality of life, safety, and access to opportunities. Despite progressive constitutional protections, life on the ground tells a different story for many queer people outside urban centers. LGBTQIA+ people in rural South Africa navigate a harsh terrain of marginalization marked by violence, stigma, and systemic neglect. Addressing these issues requires not only national policy enforcement but also grassroots education, visibility campaigns, and inclusive community development. The study explored the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQIA individuals lived in rural areas within South Africa.

CONCLUSION

There is profound need of LGBTQIA+-friendly services in healthcare, family, and community members need to be educated about the LGBTQIA+ community to enhance and strengthen the psychosocial support. Such interventions are likely to reduce mental health challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals driven by social rejection and the pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations from their communities and families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers are thankful to the University of Witwatersrand for providing permission to conduct the study. We are also grateful to all participants who took part in the study.

FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding received for this research.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Abbott, M. L., & McKinney, J. (2013). Understanding and applying research design. John Wiley & Sons.
2. Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American college of clinical pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358-1367.
3. Ajayi, V. O. (2017). Primary sources of data and secondary sources of data. *Benue State University*, 1(1), 1-6.
4. Alvi, M. (2016). A manual for selecting sampling techniques in research.
5. Arcelo, J. M., Delim, M. C., Eribal, D. V., Magno, M. A., Robles, D. T., & Vallespin, M. R. (2023). Evaluating LGBTQIA acceptance: An exploratory study among LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students in selected sectarian schools and universities. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publications (IJMRAP)*, 6(6), 222-230.n
6. Bardwell, G. (2018). Defining (LGBTQ) Community: The Integral Role of the Homophile Association of London Ontario in Sustaining Community. *An interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate*, 22 (1)
7. Bazarsky, D., Edwards, B., Jansen, L., Subbaraman, S., Sugiyama, B., & Travers, S. (2022). Standards of Practise: Core Competencies for LGBTQIA+ Directors and Professionals in Higher Education. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 15 (2), 141-152.
8. Byers, E. S. (2013). How well does the traditional sexual script explain sexual coercion? Review of a program of research. In *Sexual coercion in dating relationships* (pp. 7-26). Routledge.
9. Bonetti, C., Rossi, F., & Caricati, L. (2023). Ingroup identification, hope and system justification: testing hypothesis from social identity model of system attitudes (SIMSA) in a sample of LGBTQIA+ individuals. *Current Psychology*, 42(9), 7397-7402.
10. Conron, K. J., & Goldberg, S. K. (2020). Adult LGBT population in the United States.
11. Goodwin, G. M., Aaronson, S. T., Alvarez, O., Arden, P. C., Baker, A., Bennett, J. C., ... & Malievskaia, E. (2022). Single-dose psilocybin for a treatment-resistant episode of major depression. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 387(18), 1637-1648.
12. Hogan, K., & Omasta, M. (2021). Performing the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals from religious backgrounds.
13. Hulko, W., & Hovanes, J. (2018). Intersectionality in the lives of LGBTQ youth: Identifying as LGBTQ and finding community in small cities and rural towns. *Journal of homosexuality*, 65(4), 427-455.
14. Impellizzeri, J., Savinsky, D. M., & Leitch-Alford, L. (2017). Conceptual mapping task: An effective verification tool for qualitative counselling research. *Counselling outcome research and evaluation.*, 8(1), 31-47.
15. Jones, P. (2023). Approval from Relevant Research Ethics Committees. *Research Ethics Review*, 18(3), 145-162.
16. Lewitus, E. (2015). Transnational convergence of civil marriage law: equal rights to same-sex partners.
17. Marques, J. M., Abrams, D., Paez, D., & Hogg, M. A. (2001.). Social categorization, social identification, and rejection of deviant group members. *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Group processes*, 400-424.
18. Maxwell, J. A. (2012). Qualitative research design: An interactive approach. Sage publications.
19. Mazhar, S. A., Anjum, R., Anwar, A. I., & Khan, A. A. (2021). Methods of data collection: A fundamental tool of research. *Journal of Integrated Community Health (ISSN 2319-9113)*, 10(1), 6-10.
20. Medina, C., & Mahowald, L. (2022). *Discrimination and barriers to well-being: The state of the LGBTQI+ community in 2022*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/discrimination-and-barriers-to-well-being-the-state-of-the-lgbtqi-community-in-2022/>
21. Nel, S. P., & McLachian, C. (2019). Queering the history of South African psychology: From apartheid to LGBTI+ affirmative practises. *American Psychological Association*, 74 (8), 954.
22. Ngidi, N. D., Ramphalile, M., Essack, Z., & van Rooyen, H. (2020). Exploring queerphobic geographies in Southern Africa. *Agenda*, 34(2), 18-31.

23. Puckett, J. A., Maroney, M. R., Levitt, H. M., & Horne, S. G. (2016). Relations between gender expression, minority stress, and mental health in cisgender sexual minority women and men. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 3(4), 489.
24. Rapley, T. (2014). Sampling strategies in qualitative research. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*, 4, 49-63.
25. Scharp, K. M., & Sanders, M. L. (2019). What is a theme? Teaching thematic analysis in qualitative communication research methods. *Communication Teacher*, 33(2), 117-121.
26. Sithole, S. (2015). Challenges faced by gay, Lesbian, bisexual and transgender (lgbtq) students at South African university. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary research in South Africa*.
27. Stevenson, A. (. (2010). Oxford dictionary of English. USA: Oxford University Press.
28. Stevenson, E., Sandman, G. R., & McGinn, J. (2024). The Role of Stigma in LGBTQIA+ Youth in Rural and Urban Areas. *Youth*, 4(4), 1374-1386.
29. Tajfel, H., Turner, J. C., Austin, W. G., & Worchel, S. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. *Organizational identity: A reader*, 56(65).
30. Tenny, S., Brannan, J., & Brannan, G. (2022). Qualitative Study. National Library of
31. Medicine; StatPearls Publishing. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/>
32. Trepte, S., & Loy, L. S. (2017). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory. *The international encyclopaedia of media effects*, 1-13.

