Coming Out in South Africa: What’s Beyond the Closet?

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COMING OUT IN SOUTH AFRICA:
WHAT’S BEYOND THE CLOSET?

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South Africa: Social and Political Transformation
Fall 2023
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Acknowledgements

I am so thankful to the many people who have made this project possible. I did not know what to expect from this semester before arriving in South Africa, but I am so glad that I chose SIT. First, I would like to thank Janine Hicks, my wonderful advisor, for being such a big help with this project. Your support, advice, and ideas were all very much appreciated! I’m so glad that I was able to work with you. I also want to give special thanks to the people at Transhope, who were so responsive to my pleas for help with finding participants. They did a truly amazing job setting up a focus group, and I believe a great conversation came out of it. To my participants, I literally could not have done this research without your help. I can’t thank you all enough for being open and sharing your stories with me. I learned so much about your interesting lives and perspectives and thank you for being so brave in sharing them with me.

To my SIT family, you were my favorite part of the program by far. If I was in this small program with anyone else, I think I would have gone crazy. Sophia, you’re an amazing roommate and friend and definitely one of the smartest people I know. Thanks for laughing at my stupid jokes! You bring honor to our name. Sarah, I’m so happy to have met you! You always made my day better, and you are an awesome storyteller. I will miss being a part of our favorite family in Newlands! Girls, thank you for everything, from Hunger Games to Butcher Boys. Assem, ever the contrarian, you kept things interesting. It was fun to laugh with you, and I wish you the best of luck in your newfound journey with Lil Baby in a soulless America. Sdu, you’re a real one. I can’t wait to see your NGO grow and make a real difference. Shola, thanks for being a mom to our little group! You know where to find the best food and give great advice! Nonceba, I always looked forward to our morning Zulu lesson, and I will keep practicing on Duolingo just for you. You’re a wonderful person, and I couldn’t have done this research without
your help sourcing participants and developing my ideas. Imraan, it has been an honor learning from you. I really hope I can come back to South Africa and continue this research with your help. I have learned so much from you! I will look forward to reading your lefty news columns, and good luck with the new program!

To my parents, thanks for coming to visit me! Dad, the Instagram raccoon videos kept me going. Mom, thanks for updating me on your baking endeavors. I can’t describe how much your support and encouragement means to me. I wouldn’t be the person I am today without you both, and I hope that everything I do makes you proud. Cooper, you are the best brother I could ask for. Thank you for keeping me updated on your quite interesting life, though I wish I could have been there for your first quarter in college! Penny, I know you can’t read this because you’re a dog but thinking of your cute little face helped me make it through this semester. I love you all so much! To my friends back home, I miss you all dearly. Thank you to everyone for keeping in contact and making home feel a little less far away.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my gratitude for all those in the LGBTQ+ community that have come before me. Accepting yourself and coming out in this messed-up world is a challenging process, and everyone who does so is beyond brave. I am forever grateful to be part of a community that stands for love, acceptance, and friendship in the face of adversity. Keep fighting for equality, and we can bring about a world of peace. Love is love! Trans rights are human rights!
Abstract

For many queer individuals, coming out is a significant moment in their lives. In South Africa, this process is made even more difficult due to prevalent homophobia, discrimination, and anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes. The colonial influence of Dutch and British colonization has perpetuated the notion that homosexuality is "un-African," adding to the challenges faced by queer individuals as they navigate their racial and cultural identities. Coming out can be dangerous for them, as it challenges expectations of the patriarchy, marriage, and childbirth. The response to a queer person's coming out greatly impacts their sense of self, safety, and acceptance. This study aims to fill a gap in literature by exploring the experiences of coming out in South Africa. Using semi-structured interviews with members of Durban's LGBTQ+ population, we will examine the process of coming out through a postmodern feminist lens and Yuval-Davis's framework of belonging. By understanding the never-ending choice to come out and resist heteronormative expectations, we can shed light on the impact this process has on individuals. The study will employ a narrative research strategy, conducting two one-on-one interviews and a focus group with participants sourced through local networks and a local organization, Transhope. This project is relevant to those studying the experiences of queer South Africans and will contribute to a deeper understanding of how LGBTQ+ individuals navigate the coming out process in a conservative, heteronormative society.
Introduction

The struggle for queer identity in South Africa is deeply embedded in the nation’s history, one significantly influenced by the legacies of Dutch and British colonialism. During the colonial era, Western ideologies were weaponized against the indigenous people, and one of the most harmful was the notion that homosexuality is “un-African.” This concept, a gross misrepresentation of African cultural history, has persisted into the modern era, creating an environment fraught with challenges for South Africa’s LGBTQ+ population. Queer individuals face a range of obstacles in pursuit of equality and acceptance such as widespread homophobic attitudes, discrimination, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes, and corrective rape. Despite South Africa’s groundbreaking move to become the first African country to legalize same-sex marriage, the broader society is still not accepting of this identity. Homophobia remains a pervasive issue, and the societal expectation to adhere to heterosexual norms, particularly marriage and childbirth, adds an additional layer of pressure for queer individuals. This discrimination creates an environment where coming out can be very difficult, causing feelings of exclusion and isolation for many queer South Africans. I believe that more attention must be paid to the experiences of coming out to evaluate how this process affects South Africans’ identity and security.

After my personal journey of self-acceptance culminated in coming out to my parents in June 2023, I realized just how important systems of support and a sense of belonging are to LGBTQ+ people. In my short time in South Africa, I have experienced a small part of the hardships of being openly queer in the largely homophobic society of KZN. This has driven me to tackle a project dedicated to shedding light on the coming out experiences of South Africans in Durban. The objective of this paper is to explore how the process of coming out impacts my participants’ sense of belonging in their communities, as well as how this process has affected
their lives. I hope that my research can be beneficial in closing the gap in literature that exists with this sensitive topic.

This paper will use a narrative-style approach to discuss the findings of one-on-one interviews with participants that identify as LGBTQ+. The first section of the paper will provide a review of the existing literature on coming out, being queer in South Africa, and the politics of belonging. This literature review will serve as an introduction to the topic at hand, describing the hardships of queer South Africans and why this research is necessary. The next section will explain the methodology used in this project and why they have been chosen. Next, I will discuss the limitations faced during this study. Then, I will present my research findings in nine sections: Identity and Self-Discovery, Societal Expectations, Family Dynamics, Friendship and Social Support, LGBTQ+ Community Care, Professional Impact, Religious and Cultural Contexts, Mental Health and Well-Being, and Political Engagement. After analyzing my findings, I will contextualize them with the broader existing literature. I will then explain the conclusions that I have drawn from the research and how these conclusions can be understood within and outside of the South African context. Finally, I will conclude the paper with recommendations for further study that will hopefully encourage deeper research into the topic of coming out. Additionally, a bibliography of my references and an appendix that includes my interview questions, abbreviations, and consent form can be found on the final pages of this report.
Literature Review

There is a fair amount of existing research on LGBTQ+ issues in South Africa. However, there is a gap in literature on the significant process of coming out within this community. This section will examine what it means to come out as LGBTQ+, how queer people deal with homophobia in South Africa, and what constitutes a sense of belonging. These three sections will provide an overview of the relevant ideas I will be dealing with in this study. Through this literature review, I will explore the paradox of being LGBTQ+ in a heteronormative society, offering the reader a more thorough understanding of the complex topics surrounding queerness.

First, it is important to understand the legal and social history of LGBTQ+ rights in South Africa. In the apartheid era, there were no protections in place for queer people. In fact, homosexual activity was illegal until 1998 (retroactively applied from 1994), with a punishment of a R4000 fine or imprisonment.1 As the ANC government came into power in 1994, their progressive constitution granted legal rights to many marginalized groups, aiming to provide all of South Africa’s people with the freedom of expression and right to life. This document prohibited discrimination of people for their sexual orientation, making South Africa the first country in Africa to do so. Then, in 2006, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of LGBTQ+ rights, legalizing gay marriage and recognizing same-sex unions.2 This event was a huge win for LGBTQ+ activists.

While queer people are legally protected from discrimination, these laws does not equate to social acceptance. In 2002, only 33% of South Africans said that “homosexuality should be accepted by society.”3 Interestingly, in 2013, this figure had decreased to 32% of South Africans.

2 Equaldex, “LGBT Rights in South Africa.”
But support has grown in more recent years; the same study was conducted in 2019, finding that 54% of South Africans believed that homosexuality should be accepted.\(^4\) While we see an increase in acceptance, this figure still shows that almost half of the population does not support queer people’s right to life. This highlights the intense societal discrimination that LGBTQ+ must face in their everyday lives in South Africa, making it difficult to come out as queer and exist within LGBTQ+ circles. According to Equaldex, South African LGBTQ+ legal rights score an 81/100, while public opinion received a 58/100. This results in an overall equality index of 69/100, placing South Africa at #31 in world LGBTQ+ equality rankings between Nepal and Switzerland.\(^5\) However, this research can only go so far in portraying the experiences of LGBTQ+ South Africans. Throughout this review, I will emphasize the lived experiences of queer and transgender people to highlight the reality of being LGBTQ+ in South Africa.

It is also important to note that not all LGBTQ+ discrimination is the same. With a variety of identities, there comes a variety of ways in which this community is marginalized. Gender identity issues and transgender people face their own set of difficulties in South Africa. While there are many legal protections for transgender people under the law, these protections are often not correctly implemented, and transgender individuals experience a unique form of discrimination, harassment, and violence. For example, it is possible to change your legal sex on South African documentation, but many Home Affairs officials often deny transgender people this right by failing to follow the law.\(^6\) This discrimination also persists within the South African healthcare system, as well as civil society in the form of ostracization and deliberate

misgendering. As we discuss LGBTQ+ issues in this paper, we must keep in mind that the community is diverse, and so are the forms of discrimination they face.

*The Process of Coming Out*

The process of coming out, which involves revealing one's non-heteronormative sexual orientation or gender identity, has been extensively studied by scholars from various perspectives. Coming out is a complex process that involves navigating not only personal challenges with acceptance, but the struggles of being accepted into your environment. Guisinger describes coming out as a continuous choice to “stop passing for straight” and to deliberately resist heterosexual norms, declaring that you are different. She argues that this choice requires one to acknowledge their true self and relinquish the privileges of being perceived as straight. She emphasizes the value of personal narratives and storytelling in the coming-out process. These stories serve as a powerful tool for self-assertion and community building within LGBTQ circles.

Guisinger's work highlights the influence of narratives in shaping personal and collective identities. Individuals are often seen as straight until proven otherwise, upholding the notion that homosexuality is invisible and unnatural. The burden of coming out is placed on the queer person, as they must validate their own nonheterosexuality through disclosing their identity repeatedly. In this environment, coming out can “never be accomplished once and for all” since it depends on a consistent declaration of a gay identity to every new person and place. This demonstrates the difficulty of deciding when and how to come out. If you come out too soon,

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you risk uncomfortable backlash that may put you in a dangerous situation. If you wait too long, you may experience feelings of inauthenticity and insincerity from hiding your true self.\textsuperscript{9}

Moreover, coming out is a “life-crisis event” that is always political in nature because it disrupts the societal expectation to be heterosexual.\textsuperscript{10} The idea of ‘coming out of the closet,’ or revealing yourself as LGBTQ+ from an assumed straight identity, is politicized as it is perceived that this identity is a choice. To be clear, being LGBTQ+ is intrinsic, but one’s decision on when, where, and how to come out is a choice that must be reaffirmed throughout life. The closet, often perceived as a place of concealment, paradoxically serves as a sanctuary where individuals grapple with societal expectations, personal identity, and the act of self-disclosure. Garrick takes a symbolic approach, focusing on the ritualistic nature of self-disclosure within the coming-out process.\textsuperscript{11} This perspective highlights the cultural and social significance of coming out and sheds light on how the process can be seen as a transformative rite of passage, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the symbolic aspects of this journey. Heterosexuality is framed as being better or more desirable than homosexuality, which is stigmatized and deemed lesser-than.\textsuperscript{12} From this, coming out can result in harassment, humiliation, rejection, and isolation. This paradox presents two options: to come out with one’s true identity and suffering “some degree of social rejection”; or to hide one’s identity, living a lie and pretending to be straight to avoid discrimination from society.\textsuperscript{13} Again, coming out is a complex and difficult process and must always be handled with care and compassion.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Tony E. Adams, “Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gay Identity, and the Closet,” 236.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} David A. Garrick, “Ritual Self-Disclosure in the Coming-out Process,” 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Tony E. Adams, “Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gay Identity, and the Closet,” 237.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} David A. Garrick, “Ritual Self-Disclosure in the Coming-out Process,” 5.
\end{itemize}
In Rasmussen’s “The Problem of Coming Out,” she argues that coming out results in a “sense of empowerment.”\textsuperscript{14} Therefore, she suggests that we must dedicate more research to find the best ways to come out to family and friends, especially for those within more conservative spaces. Rasmussen sees coming out through personal one-on-one disclosure as the “single most effective way to change homophobic attitudes” of the people around you.\textsuperscript{15} Through conversations with those around you, sexual orientation and gender identity can be demystified, and one can correct misconceptions about nonheteronormative individuals. As coming out is often defined as form of information sharing, expressing your identity will only increase the understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences for all involved. This is not to say that everyone should be required to come out; it is a very personal choice and there are many factors to consider when deciding whether to remain closeted or to reveal a LGBTQ+ identity. Of course, it is always important to remind ourselves of the potential consequences of this act, and Rasmussen asserts that your safety should be prioritized. She argues that “coming out is constructed differently depending on race, age, family background, time, place, and space.” This point is exemplified through this quote from Akanke, a black and queer Jamaican woman:

“Being “closeted is not a choice I wish to make. Nevertheless, because of the pervasiveness of racism, it is the one that I choose to make. Being Black, however is not a choice. As a Black woman my color is my most obvious feature, not my sexual preferences.”\textsuperscript{16}

Akanke goes on to explain how coming out would jeopardize her relationship with her black community, compelling her to sacrifice being openly homosexual for the support of her

\textsuperscript{15} Mary Lou Rasmussen, “The Problem of Coming Out,” 145.
\textsuperscript{16} Mary Lou Rasmussen, “The Problem of Coming Out,” 147.
central community. She retains her agency by staying in the closet, preventing herself from being the target of discrimination for her sexuality. Akanke states that she cannot avoid discrimination based on her race, but she can escape from homophobia by staying in the closet. This narrative highlights the importance of considering coming out within a racial lens, as a LGBTQ+ identity is often also tied to other sometimes competing identity groups. This point is furthered in Mezey’s article, titled “The Privilege of Coming Out: Race, Class, and Lesbians’ Mothering Decisions.” She argues that coming out to your family could not only affect familial relationships, but also jeopardizes relationships with your ethnic community. Sexuality and gender identity is very often racialized, painting the LGBTQ+ community to be a symptom of whiteness. Research shows that affluent white men face the least discrimination when coming out, and that confounding factors such as race, class, and gender make coming out more difficult. This phenomenon is present in the South African context where many cultures see queerness as being ‘un-African,’ which will be further explored in the next section. This notion drives a wedge between the LGBTQ+ community and cultural practices, increasing the risk factor of coming out and causing more people to remain in the closet in fear of social rejection.

Even after the transition of being ‘out,’ Pepin-Neff and Wynter explore “The Costs of Pride” in their article. They found that emotional burdens of LGBTQ+ activism are “systematically greater for young, nonwhite, and transgender” people. Those whose identities exist in multiple marginalized groups face greater challenges and experience high levels of stress from engaging with LGBTQ+ issues in the public sphere. The study focused its research on the US, UK, South Africa, and Australia. However, in South Africa, most of the population consists

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18 Christopher Pepin-Neff and Thomas Wynter, “The Costs of Pride: Survey Results from LGBTQI Activists in the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, and Australia,” *Politics & Gender*, June 7, 2019, 1–27.
of black Africans, a marginalized group, resulting in a very large amount of queer and transgender people who fall into this category, resulting in high levels of emotional distress in the LGBTQ+ population.

**LGBTQ+ Experiences in South Africa**

There is a lot of evidence of the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in South African literature. One of these narratives can be seen through the letters of activist Simon Nkoli in Martin’s “Now I Am Not Afraid.” In these letters and diary entries, Nkoli discusses his experience as a gay, HIV+ man fighting in the ANC resistance movement. An important takeaway of this article is the importance of memory-keeping in LGBTQ+ activism and the nuanced understanding of the complexities of coming out. For Nkoli, coming out was an act that did not bring “immediate relief,” but instead placed him into a hard situation within the prison that he was in at the time. His writings serve to show how coming out is not always tied to liberation, but can also provide “a politicized pathway to visibility” that provides increased attention to queer issues in a resistance movement still influenced by the colonial legacies of homophobia.

The apartheid state’s influence on contemporary notions of African cultural identity are made apparent through Spruill and Masuku’s analyses of homophobia’s history in South Africa. Spruill’s article explains that many South Africans feel that “homosexuality is alien to Africa” and was only brought by white missionaries. This idea demonstrates how homosexuality is viewed by many South Africans to be a colonial import, when in fact, homophobia is the import. It was only after settlers named same-sex activity as “homosexuality” that folktales emerged to

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discourage it. In fact, Spruill argues that “many families tolerate their lesbian and gay children until these children use the words ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ to describe themselves.” Masuku describes these folktales that have emerged with the major goal of socializing children into believing in the importance of gender roles, marriage, and childbearing. As the powers that be promote the idea that homosexuality is a Western import and “un-African,” records of same-sex relationships in pre-colonial Africa have been lost forgotten. He describes common folktales that promote women as submissive, their primary objective to marry a man and bear his children. The cultural norms that are emphasized in these stories socialize the children that hear them to believe that the only acceptable way to be “Africa” is defined by heterosexual traditions. This is how homophobia has been normalized in South African society. We must recognize that these cultural norms erase the reality of homosexuality in Africa and actually use the ruse of ‘homosexuality as a Western import’ to discriminate against homosexual South Africans that have existed forever.

Similarly, religious institutions serve to justify homophobia. In a primarily Christian society like South Africa, homosexuality is seen as subverting the social and political order. Ward argues that religious institutions play a significant role in upholding traditional notions of heterosexuality and gender roles. When the church rejected LGBTQ+ rights, so did their followers. Additionally, the church often overlooked black African homosexuality, painting queerness to be associated with white society, which encouraged the idea that homosexuality was a white issue, and therefore un-African.

The idea that same-sex attraction and ‘homosexuality’ are different is further described in Manion and Morgan’s “The Gay and Lesbian Archives: Documenting Same-Sexuality in an African Context.” When conducting research into LGBTQ+ people in South African townships, Manion and Morgan found that it was very difficult to find participants who identified as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian.’ They noted that applying Western concepts of sexuality onto queer South Africans was unhelpful, as their LGBTQ+ participants did not identify with this language. Once they changed their tactics and instead searched for people who experienced ‘same-sex attraction,’ they found more success identifying individuals in the community who wanted to share their stories. When conducting research, we must pay close attention to the language we use and understand how LGBTQ+ concepts differ across communities and cultures.

These examples of homophobic rhetoric have resulted in hate crimes and violence against the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa, often resulting in fear that drives many queer people to remain closeted. In Wells and Polder’s 2006 article “Anti-Gay Hate Crimes in South Africa,” they explain that as women begin to become empowered in the highly patriarchal society, masculinity is threatened, leading to feelings of anger and aggression from insecure men. When traditional gender roles are challenged by the LGBTQ+ community, queer and transgender individuals are targeted and the victims of harassment, humiliation, ostracization, and violence. In fact, the study found that 37% of their sample had experienced hate speech, which has proven to “lower self-esteem and increase risk of depression and thoughts of suicide.” In South Africa, there is no separate register for hate crimes, so it is impossible to know what proportion of crime

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are hate crimes targeting people for their sexual orientation and identity. The percentage is most likely much higher than 37%. When reporting these crimes, queer people are often met with challenges with the police. There exists a widespread perception that the police could or would not do anything to help the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, black participants “were more concerned about revealing their sexual orientation to the police than white respondents,” resulting in less black Africans reporting anti-gay hate crimes.\(^\text{30}\)

Another form of hate crime in South Africa is known as ‘corrective rape.’ Koraan and Geduld describe this ‘corrective or curative rape’ as “an instance when a woman is raped in order to ‘cure’ her of her lesbianism.”\(^\text{31}\) On average, 10 queer women are raped every week.\(^\text{32}\) This violent act not only violates these women, but also discredits their identity, stating that being LGBTQ+ is something that can be changed or corrected. African women, particularly those living in townships, are at the highest risk for being raped due to the popular belief that homosexuality is not in line with South African cultural practices. Lake takes a deeper look into corrective rape, her study analyzing the ideas of ‘blackwashing’ and ‘pinkwashing’ when discussing homophobia.\(^\text{33}\) The current narrative of corrective rape paints black heterosexual men as the only perpetrators against black lesbian women. She argues that this perpetuates the myth that being a lesbian is un-African and that black men are always homophobic rapists, and both ideas damage the LGBTQ+ community. The ‘blackwashing’ of these issues show that people are


\(^{32}\) R Koraan and A Geduld, “‘Corrective Rape’ of Lesbians in the Era of Transformative Constitutionalism in South Africa,” 1937.

more concerned with the narrative surrounding LGBTQ+ issues than the protection of queer people. She analyzes the reporting on the rape and murder of Nkonyana, which emphasizes her “gender non-conforming behavior” and focuses only on her death. Lake argues that cases where women have been raped and murdered receive more attention, and that “their lives only receive recognition through their death.”34 Again, by erasing the humanity of the victim, reporters are only contributing to the racialization of corrective rape through “blackwashing.” Additionally, “pinkwashing” is achieved through using the popularity of LGBTQ+ topics without any real effort to end violence against LGBTQ+ people.

Lastly, I want to end this section of the review by discussing a positive aspect of the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa. Nkabinde and Morgan found evidence of lesbian sangomas taking wives, demonstrating homosexuality in women in positions of power.35 Some of these relationships are kept secret to avoid the taboo of a same-sex marriage, but slowly, these relationships are being talked about more openly. As more lesbian sangomas come out, attitudes towards homosexuality have changed; people are more accepting of a sangoma’s same-sex relationship because of the power they hold.36 Moreover, lesbian sangomas are not subject to corrective rape due to the ancestral power they are believed to hold. This phenomenon is an example of how homophobia attitudes can be changed with more LGBTQ+ visibility. If more people in positions of reverence and power can be open about their homosexuality, then the cultural moment can shift to be more accepting of LGBTQ+ relationships. Activists can utilize the power and significance of the ancestors to endorse queer rights.

34 Nadine Lake, “Corrective Rape’ and Black Lesbian Sexualities in South Africa Negotiating the Tensions between ‘Blackwashing’ and ‘Pinkwashing’ Homophobia,” 103.
35 Nkunzi Nkabinde and Ruth Morgan, “‘This Has Happened since Ancient Times... It’s Something That You Are Born With’: Ancestral Wives among Same-Sex Sangomas in South Africa,” Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity, no. 67 (2006): 9–19.
36 Nkunzi Nkabinde and Ruth Morgan, “‘This Has Happened since Ancient Times... It’s Something That You Are Born With’: Ancestral Wives among Same-Sex Sangomas in South Africa.”
This paper hopes to explore how coming out affects South Africans’ sense of belonging. This idea of ‘belonging’ is derived from Yuval-Davis’s work, “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging,” published in 2006. The concept of belonging is centered around “emotional attachment, about feeling ‘at home’, [and] about feeling ‘safe.’”37 Individuals feel a strong need to conform to the social order of the day to fit in with others, and this stems from a fear of exclusion. She also identifies belonging as something that becomes conceptualized only when it is threatened. I argue that a sense of belonging is so important to the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa because of the violence and exclusion that queer and transgender people face in this context. These cultural practices are determined by the main power system, creating a sense of order that is categorized by the ‘correct’ or ‘traditional’ way of doing things. LGBTQ+ people in South Africa struggle to conform to this heteronormative narrative, but they still feel a desire to conform and to belong.38

Yuval-Davis argues that there are three levels of belonging – social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political value systems. ‘Social locations’ refer to the particular race, gender, class, or social group that the individual identifies themselves in, and they aim to align themselves within this positionality. However, she notes that these locations are constructed, and identity is formed along an intersectional axis that allows for belonging in multiple groups. The second level, ‘identifications and emotional attachments’, can be seen as the manifestation of emotional investments to one group or identity. This process of constructing your identity through personal and collective narratives is one of “being and

becoming, belonging and longing to belong.” We can see evidence of this in South Africa through folktales that employ a collective narrative about what it means to belong and be ‘African.’ Lastly, ‘ethical and political values’ refer to the way that the previous categories are judged and if their values hold social capital in society. It determines where the line is drawn between inclusion and exclusion.

In Van Zyl et al’s “The Politics of Belonging: Exploring Black African Lesbian Identity in South Africa,” they explore how homosexuality has become taboo in Africa and how LGBTQ+ people have continuously strived to belong despite backlash. They describe how missionaries and colonists arrived with the intention to ‘civilize’ the African people, condemning ‘unnatural’ acts such as same-sex relationships. This resulted in a new construction of sexual identity in South Africa that excluded queer and transgender people. Difficulties arise with black African homosexuals when queerness is racialized as white, while blackness is sexualized as straight. In response, black queer people want to belong, so they have traditional weddings that honor both their queer love and African cultural ties. The study reveals that these LGBTQ+ South Africans want their marriages to hold the same significant as heterosexual ones, and they want to feel a sense of belonging within their communities that centers their intersectional identities while upholding the narrative of their cultures.

Through the course of this study, I am to employ the idea of belonging through a “person-centered” lens that explores the emotions, relationships, politics, and complexities of feeling excluded in your own community. The study of belonging is relatively new, and I

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believe that it offers a much-needed look into how coming out affects a person’s sense of self and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Through this review, I have outlined the basic theories and concepts that will guide my study. As established, coming out is a difficult and life changing process, and it is made even more complex in South Africa. Being LGBTQ+ in a largely non-accepting nation is challenging and brings with it a unique set of struggles. I feel it is important to study these experiences and analyzing it with the framework of ‘belonging’ will produce a person-centered paper that seeks to highlight the wellbeing of participants. This brief snapshot of the existing literature serves to contextualize the challenges of LGBTQ+ visibility in contemporary South Africa.
Methodology

This research study employs a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing semi-structured interviews and a focus group to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Durban, South Africa, during the process of coming out. Semi-structured interview questions were chosen as they allow for flexibility and in-depth exploration of participants' narratives and experiences. The aim was to gain rich, detailed insights into the challenges, triumphs, and impacts of coming out on the participants' sense of belonging.

The study recruited a total of 11 participants from the LGBTQ+ population in Durban, South Africa. With the help of Nonceba Lushaba at SIT, I was able to connect with two participants that I completed one-on-one interviews with. Then, I held a focus group with nine participants that are part of the organization Transhope’s network. Inclusion criteria for participants includes self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals who have gone through the process of coming out. Efforts were made to include participants from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds to capture a range of experiences. All participants identified as black African.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants individually. These interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The nine-person focus group was also audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview questions were designed to explore the participants' experiences of coming out, their sense of belonging, and the impact of the coming-out process on their lives. All participants were asked the same general questions, with follow up questions differing depending on their responses. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the collected data.
Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Before any research was conducted, the project proposal was reviewed and approved by both a local Human Subjects Review board and the SIT ethics board. Additionally, informed consent (written and verbal) was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. When conducting the interviews, special attention was paid to the comfort of the participants, since this study discusses sensitive issues surrounding identity. Counseling was made available for participants through Transhope and the Aurum Pop-In clinic. Participants have the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained by using pseudonyms for participants and securely storing all data.
Limitations of the Study

With such a short amount of time and limited resources allocated to this research project, I want to acknowledge where this study is lacking. In the future, efforts need to be made to improve upon this project and mitigate these issues. First, my American perspective limits my ability to fully grasp the South African context and how it feels to be LGBTQ+ here. This limitation damages my understanding of this issue, and therefore the analysis of the data as well. Additionally, this research was conducted over a period less than a month long, which is not enough time to read all relevant literature, interview enough participants, or analyze the data thoroughly.

Another limitation of this study is the diversity of the participant pool. All participants were black African and from Durban. We need to keep in mind that this study does not represent the complete experience of any group. We cannot draw conclusions about how coming out affects LGBTQ+ South Africans as a monolith. Instead, the study simply informs us on some of the experiences of these 11 participants, and this information can add to the larger narrative of LGBTQ+ people in South Africa.
Research

Through my conversations with 11 participants, I have identified nine sections that will detail the experiences and attitudes of LGBTQ+ South Africans. Through these sections, I will analyze and dissect topics that came up in the semi-structured interviews. I hope to detail the complexity of everyday experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals who come out and how this affects their safety, mental health, and sense of belonging in their community. The topics that came up in these conversations reflect the experiences of the participants, who all identified as black African and either gay, lesbian, nonbinary, and/or transgender.43

Identity and Self-Discovery

Many participants realized they were part of the LGBTQ+ community at a young age. Even if they didn’t understand how to categorize their identity, they knew they were different from other kids. Oftentimes, feelings of guilt or shame only came about when family members expressed hate for LGBTQ+ people. Homophobic rhetoric resulted in participants staying in the closet for longer out of fear of exclusion or violence. For example, one participant said this about his high school experience:

“I think I just had to make a name for myself in order for me to stay in the closet. Because if I didn't, I think they would have found it out and I would have experienced the most hateful things because I saw how they treated the other people that were gay in school. It felt to me that I should save them, but I just couldn't” (A).44

Unfortunately, this sentiment was shared by other participants as well. Many queer and transgender children discover their LGBTQ+ identity in school, but feel that they cannot express themselves, or that they must create a ‘straight’ persona to avoid violence and hate speech from

43 Definitions for these terms can be found in the Appendix.
44 Some quotes have been slightly edited for grammar and clarity.
their peers. The threat of violence is so real that LGBTQ+ South Africans must suppress their identities, even when they are legally protected.

Exclusion also occurred when participants did not resonate with the ‘normal’ and expected feelings that South African children are supposed to have. One participant recalled that she realized that she was a lesbian because she did not like the idea of having a husband. There is a common South African children’s game that involves creating a family out of figurines. Of this game, the participant noted,

“So, I’ve noticed that they would choose for me, saying, this is your man, this is your husband. But I wanted a wife” (F).

However, this was frowned upon since heterosexual marriage is such an important part of black African culture. Through this experience, the participant felt confused and isolated, as if her imagined future did not line up with the one her family wanted her to have. However, since she wanted to participate in the game like other heteronormative children, she would play along and accept a husband for the game. This shows the sacrifices that LGBTQ+ kids have to make to fit in and feel like they belong.

Her partner also had trouble when voicing her lesbian identity. She said,

“One will come and say, ‘how do you know that you’re gay?’ And you say, ‘because I love women’. They say, ‘have you ever tried sleeping with a man?’ And that becomes terrible because our identities now are being left towards who I have to be with. And for me, I had to come out several times, like a thousand times” (I).

This sentiment was shared by others in the focus group. Even when queer people are confident in their identity, others can push their heterosexual norms onto them, casting doubt onto their sexual preferences. This results in LGBTQ+ individuals having to come out “several
times,” and it creates an atmosphere of distrust when, in fact, the participant is trying to share a very intimate part of their lives. We must believe that when someone comes out, they are being honest in their self-expression. When we question their identity, it only leads to negative self-thought.

Participants also noted violent retaliation from others after coming to terms with their identity. One participant stated that even though she reserved herself and did not come out until after her dad’s passing, she would still face abuse for being different.

“I remember when my father was still alive. He slapped me like, everything went south. I ended up being locked in a room because he wanted to hit me so badly. Apparently, he was homophobic or something. Then after his death, my father’s side disowned me. Till today going back, I think I’ve always been transgender. But because of culture and all those norms and all those things, that boy should do this and that and that, I decided to reserve myself. But as I grown I saw that now this is hating me and why am I living for people? Why am I living to impress people? Why don't I just live my life? If I should die for it, then so be it” (G).

Even though this participant had not come out to her father, he still attacked her because he believed she was LGBTQ+. Behavior like this from important familial figures damages a person’s sense of self and prolongs their journey to self-acceptance. Other participants echoed this experience, explaining how they had been humiliated or hurt because of their identity before they even came out. Homophobia is so prevalent in some South Africans that hate crimes occur even before one proclaims themselves to be LGBTQ+. For this participant, it took some years before she could accept herself and live as an openly transgender woman. It is important to note that she is prepared to die in order to express herself.
Every South African’s upbringing is different. In the case of one participant, growing up in a liberal household made it easier to come out to family and to realize their identity and accept themselves from a young age. He says,

“I come from a liberal family. For a certain person, you have to come from the liberal family, so it hasn’t been much of an issue. Some people have a difficulty. I don’t know, I think it’s that we all come from different families. Our raising up is different. My journey might be different to somebody next door. So we’re not the same” (B).

This quote shows how an accepting family can make all the difference in a LGBTQ+ person’s sense of self and safety. It is important not to generalize all South African families because we can then analyze the differences and how they affect the coming out process. When growing up around people who are accepting of the LGBTQ+ community and hold more ‘liberal’ values, it may be easier to express your identity to them. This participant claimed that coming out was “not much of an issue” due to the views of his family. If more South African parents become more accepting of gay and transgender communities, then their children will be more likely to confide in them and comfortably explore their sexuality.

Societal Expectations

In South African society, men and women are expected to adhere to strict gender roles that define their place in society, how they should act, and who they should be attracted to. LGBTQ+ people often find difficulty participating in society with these strict standards, and face backlash when they break these expectations. Participants shared many stories of times they defied social norms, noting that this decision often results in violence and ostracization from society.
One participant, who identifies as a transgender woman, spoke about how she grew up playing with girls until her aunt told her to stop.

“My aunt will say ‘I’ve long told you about you are not a girl, you are not a woman, you are a boy. So, play with boys.’ All those things rang in my head until I grew up. I feel like the natural hatred within family comes from the words they were saying to me growing up as a gay person” (D).

She was expected to play with boys, but her natural inclination towards girls was punished because it did not reflect the expected behavior of a young South African boy. She also notes that these words followed her until she was older, demonstrating how homophobic speech can really affect a LGBTQ+ person’s development. She internalized this “natural hatred,” and in turn, felt that she could not be herself around her family, leading to feelings of isolation.

Another participant believed that these gender roles can prevent a child from following their dreams and pursuing their goals. Their parents pushed guns and soccer onto the child, trying to get them to participate in more ‘boyish’ activities. They were not interested in those toys, but instead wanted to pursue swimming, and asked for a Speedo. However, the parents did not deliver on this request because they feared that they just wanted to be “naked.” The participant described the experience like this,

“So some of us, coming out, I believe that it also stands in the way of our dreams and our goals and everything. I’m limited in this direction. I have to go play soccer, I have to go do this, I have to go do that. It will no longer be a sport, but it will be now a gay sport” (H).

I believe that this shows the difficulty of growing up different. Trying to fit into strict gendered categories only damages the development of the child, forcing them away from their true
interests in favor of sticking to the status quo. All children, but especially LGBTQ+ children, benefit from being able to pursue their passions.

These issues persist into adulthood as participants became more comfortable expressing themselves as queer or transgender. One member of the focus group stated,

“Being part of the LGBT community, it comes with high risk within being accepted and mostly expressing yourself... The struggle started when the society started noticing that I’m at my comfort zone.” The same person continued, “It’s hard for me to walk so freely, putting on nails. If they don’t violate you, if they don’t rape you, or if they don’t swear at you, or if they don’t call you names or humiliate you or put a threat on you lightly, which you might not take lightly. Guys, it’s a lot” (C).

Societal expectations are so strong that disobeying these standards results in violence, rape, threats, and humiliation. Even so, this participant still puts on nails because they enjoy expressing themselves as a nonbinary and genderfluid person. This demonstrates that the LGBTQ+ community will continue to break the norms, even in the face of danger, because self-expression is so vital to one’s identity. It is important to note their dedication to self-expression and being comfortable within a marginalized identity group shows the persistence of the community. Queer and transgender individuals will not be silenced, even in the face of extreme and violent adversity.

**Family Dynamics**

From all my conversations with participants, I found that coming out to family members was the most memorable part of their coming out experience. Most participants had been outing, meaning that they did not choose to disclose their identity, rather, their family confronted them about their membership in the LGBTQ+ community. The most common ways of being outing
were through social media, family friends, and harassment noticed by the family. When participants were confronted by their families, they were forced to reveal their true identity, even if they had not intended to share that part of themselves at that point in time. In this section, I will analyze participants’ coming out narratives, drawing out how they came out/were outing, their family’s reactions, and how this conversation made them feel.

"Then there was a day I had to come out to my family. Because I was so scared. They found out about my Facebook. Then I had to sit down with my family crying. No, it's not easy to speak up" (D).

This participant shared that they had been outed through social media. Their Facebook page had included photos of them and a partner together, and when family members found this secret page, they confronted the participant. After being confronted, the participant decided to be honest and sit down with the family. He described the scene as uncomfortable, as they were crying and did not accept him. It is important to note that he also describes feeling scared, unsure of how his family would react and what it would mean for their relationship. This narrative shows how difficult it is to come out to family, especially when you are outed and do not control how you choose to discuss your identity.

"I'd say my family is very important to me. My family is just really, really important. As much as they are not supportive of my life, as much as I did not even come out to them. But I think on my social media, they found it out” (A).

In this similar quote, this participant describes being outed to his family through social media. He chose not to tell them because he knew they would not be supportive. He emphasizes how important family is to him and that this experience was very nerve-wracking and stressful. We can understand why he had not come out to his family, since he did not want to lose their love
and support. He wanted to feel like he belonged as a part of the family, so he hid his sexuality. It is clear that he was out online to friends and was only hiding this part of his life from his family. Again, this participant’s experience demonstrates how damaging it is to be outed, and we can get a better understanding of motivations for staying in the closet for your family.

In this next narrative, this participant explains the fickleness of familial love after coming out. Acceptance is dependent on how you express your sexuality.

“One day your family loves you. They accept you. The next day, you are too much. You are extra this and that, this and that behind it. I don’t know what happens or what triggers their mind. I think it’s the society mostly for my mother, because she would defend me like nobody’s business outside. And then she would come inside when you’re in the house alone and then she’ll say, I love you too much” (D).

The participant feels accepted by family when there is no outside pressure, but once there is pressure from society to conform, his family will discourage him from participating in non-heteronormative behavior. He believes that it is the cultural context that drives his mother to treat him this way, adding that she is trying to protect him from public scrutiny. This idea of conditional acceptance based on what behavior is deemed ‘acceptable LGBTQ+’ and ‘non-acceptable LGBTQ+’ demonstrates the complexity of being queer in South Africa. The notion that there is a correct way to be LGBTQ+ is wrong and harmful. Instead, we should be encouraging diversity within the community. This way, families can see that an LGBTQ+ identity is very personal and should not be influenced by what society deems acceptable. This participant describes his mother’s attempts to tone down his LGBTQ+ expression as harmful to his psyche.
Parents are not the only family members participants described coming out to. Many participants recalled a different experience when coming out to siblings. It seemed that sisters were easier to have this conversation with, and multiple participants said that their sisters already knew they were LGBTQ+ but were just waiting on them to confirm it. They felt that they had the support of their sisters and felt accepted by them. However, it proved more difficult to come out to a brother.

“It took [my brother] some time to actually recover from what he heard from me. We didn’t speak for a few months or close to a year. Then after somebody just told him and just made him understand about the life that I live, he started coming around. He doesn’t understand my life, but he’s going to try to be there for me” (A).

For this participant, coming out to his brother strained their relationship. After not talking for almost a year, his brother began accepting him. This quote shows the importance of speaking about LGBTQ+ issues; in this case, the brother was able to reconsider his reaction to the participant after reflecting and learning more about the LGBTQ+ community.

This story is another example of how coming out strained a relationship. This participant’s relationship with his mother is rocky after coming out to her.

“I’m just not happy with the relationship I have with my mom. I wish that I can change it somehow, but there is no way of changing it. I have tried so many things to change it. I have tried therapy with her. It just doesn't work. There are sensitive conversations or there are sensitive things that has happened to me in a way that I wish I could share with my mother and she would really understand. But at the age that she is, I really don’t think I can tell her because she will just normally get a heart attack and she would never
He feels hopeless to change their relationship, even though he has tried hard to fix things, even pursuing therapy. He wishes that he could talk to her about his struggles and experiences as a gay man but feels that it “would give her the shock of her life.” This experience highlights the challenges of coming out to your family because it can forever change your relationship with them. Kids need their parents but can unfortunately lose their previous bond after expressing their LGBTQ+ identity. I hope this quote sheds light on the impact that parental rejection can have on LGBTQ+ children. In this case, unconditional love does not account for queer and transgender identities. He mentions her age as a reason for her lack of support, highlighting the deep societal prejudices that affect older South Africans. To change these attitudes, we must increase LGBTQ+ visibility and awareness in society.

Financial interests were also a common theme in conversations about coming out to family. Participants noted that they felt more accepted by family when they had money to offer them.

“Until I got a job, then everything changed. Imagine when I’m at home, independent salary. And now I only get to be respected just because I’m gay and able to take responsibilities within the house... Our families, they only come to love us or understand who we are once we are employed and once they’re benefiting from us”

This participant felt that they were only accepted by their family because they were employed and supporting them. This is another form of conditional acceptance – the idea that you are only worthy of love if you are bringing something to the table. This narrative is harmful to the
participant because their identity is not really accepted, it is just tolerated because the family is
dependent on them for money.

“My dad, because I don’t know, he’s affording, so he believes he can change me with
money. He always be like, you don’t need this. I can give you money. He even said he
will give me a 500-rand stipend for just sitting at home and not having friends” (E).

This is another example of how money can affect relationships between the participant and other
family members. In this quote, the participant describes her father attempting to pay for her to
stay away from queer friends that he believed were a bad influence. This is harmful for multiple
reasons: it perpetuates the idea that you can change your LGBTQ+ identity, that your friends can
turn you gay, and that money can take the place of feelings of acceptance. This experience
damaged the relationship between the participant and her father and serves as an example of how
money can be used as a bargaining tool in response to coming out.

While money is a powerful tool for gaining respect within family and society, social
capital can also be used as a resource. One participant shared a story of how a powerful public
figure accepted her LGBTQ+ identity, causing other people in the township to follow his
example:

“I think back home, I started gaining respect when one of the most powerful, man in
the township, he accepted me. may his soul rest in peace, the former counselor in my life
decided to embrace me and accept me. Even gave me a position in his office. That's how I
gained respect. Because people come in and ask for help, and some would just act like
they like me, but eventually they'll see that I'm a good person” (G).

This narrative is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the variety of ways that
LGBTQ+ can gain respect in a homophobic society. In this case, it is not the actions of the
participant that eventually win over her neighbors, but the endorsement of a public figure. By gaining a position in his office, she accrued social capital that gave her more power within the community. Through this, she was able to show people that she is a good person worthy of love and respect. This narrative demonstrates the importance of setting a good example, especially if you hold a position of power in society. LGBTQ+ acceptance can be increased if the right people publicly announce their support of the community. This case is a great example of how LGBTQ+ visibility can promote LGBTQ+ equality.

Lastly, participants offered advice to other LGBTQ+ individuals who are planning to come out to their families:

“I feel like you don't really need to come out to your family. I always tell my friends, if you want to come out to your parents, please don't come out while you are still in high school or college. When you're done in high school, you're done in college, you've got a job, you've got your own place, I think at that time, you can just tell your parents. Even if they chase you out of the house, you know where to go. You don't need to lie to them or anything” (A).

“So, I wouldn’t advise people to come out. Just let people find out, or unless if you see it's okay, your family is strict. I will advise one to at least find an independent level on their own until they're able to stand for themselves. And once you have more information about who you are, then it's fine to come out. But challenges of coming out, guys, it's very risky. It's very risky” (C).

Both participants urged others to wait until they had a stable living situation and financial freedom before coming out to family. This way, they aren’t dependent on someone who may have a negative reaction, potentially kicking them out or disowning them for their identity. This
highlights the challenges and unpredictability that queer and transgender South Africans face, even among their own families. These narratives struck me as significant to the general themes of this project. There is so much to consider when deciding whether to come out, forcing LGBTQ+ people to weigh their safety and self-expression, since they are apparently at odds. Coming out can be dangerous, so it should be handled with care, putting yourself and your well-being first. Participants believe that an escape plan is always necessary to protect yourself from discrimination and violence due to an LGBTQ+ identity.

**Friendship and Social Support**

Participants reported that they found the most support in their chosen family, their friends. Close friends are one of the most important support systems for LGBTQ+ people because they often already know that the participant does not subscribe to heteronormative ideals. Additionally, you choose your friends and surround yourself with like-minded people who love you for who you are. Younger people are also more likely to be exposed to LGBTQ+ identities and are more accepting of them. This is what one participant said of friendship and social support:

“I felt like most of my local friends, they were quick to accept because I felt like they already knew, but they were just waiting for me to just say it. But for my family, it just became a shock” (A).

Interviewer: How did it feel when your friends were more accepting of this?

“It felt like I can be me, mostly I can be myself because my friends were accepting, even though the 10% of them were not accepting, but that 90%, it made me so happy that I could just do whatever I want” (A).
He notes that while his family was shocked by his proclamation of homosexuality, his friends already knew and did not have an issue. Their support was a very positive presence during this hard time, and he felt like he could be himself around them. Friendship proved to be very important to many participants, providing an outlet where they could express themselves outside of the expectations that family and society placed on them. This mitigates feelings of exclusion and isolation. Knowing that there are still people who love and support you no matter what your sexuality is can be very affirming and prove that you don’t need to change who you are to be accepted. I argue that social support through friends is one of the most important forms of support for LGBTQ+ people, and many participants reported leaning on their friends when their family did not accept them after coming out.

However, not all friends stick around after learning of a LGBTQ+ identity. Participants added that they had also lost friends after coming out:

“So, you lose friends. You’d lose people who are close to you because they don’t want to be associated with you” (G).

This participant stated that some of their friends did not want to be associated with them after they had publicly come out. Even though they may have had no personal problem with the LGBTQ+ community, they did not want to be associated with it and ostracized as a result. This narrative highlights the social exclusion that queer people in South Africa face. However, it also increases trust in the friends that do stick around after you come out. Overall, LGBTQ+ people face many losses when coming out, but also gain other things. You may lose support from some friends and family, but this will strengthen your relationships with the people that continue to support and accept you for who you are.
**LGBTQ+ Community Support**

Throughout the interview process, I measured the attitudes that participants had about the LGBTQ+ community itself. I found that problems exist within the community, especially internal standards that govern what it means to be queer and transgender.

“Another challenge that I normally see around the community of LGBTQI is that they judge each other within the community” (H).

This participant felt that judgement exists between LGBTQ+ people. They shared that they had been criticized for being too feminine, or not feminine enough, on different occasions. This shows that internalized homophobia can cause some LGBTQ+ to offer conditional support to people within the community, depending on how they present themselves. In the focus group, participants agreed that there is not a ‘right’ way to be queer or transgender, and that self-expression is personal and unique to everyone.

“And I think one, if you are cisgender, it's much better, but you still identify as how you were given. The problem comes in transitioning or if you’re non-binary. I feel like the community just gets so totally confused and they just have a lot of questions” (C).

In response, another participant from this focus group added that not all LGBTQ+ identities are treated equally within the community. They felt as though transgender and non-gender conforming people had a harder time being accepted, compared to people who identified as queer. I found it interesting how the participant also felt that the community itself gets “confused” on some identities. This demonstrates how prevalent misinformation and lack of education on LGBTQ+ identities are in South Africa, even within the community that encompasses all non-heteronormative people. To create a society that promotes a better
understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals, we must increase awareness of the diversity of identities and the differences between them.

Additionally, many participants said that they found support among older members of the LGBTQ+ community. An older participant shared that he felt that he was an example to young queers:

“I would say that younger gay men, they see me as an example. I usually get told that. I think it just shows that people can live free in South Africa without any worries or anything” (B).

He wants to show other members of the LGBTQ+ community that they can be open about their identity “without any worries.” While there are real threats facing the LGBTQ+ community that may cause they to worry about their safety, I believe that this participant was highlighting their right to life and happiness, regardless of their sexual preferences. It is important that young LGBTQ+ people have role models to look up to. It is also common for homophobic people to suggest that queerness and gender non-conforming people are “trendy” and did not exist when they were growing up, so older LGBTQ+ advocates disrupting this narrative can raise awareness on the historical existence of LGBTQ+ people. While it is a lot of pressure to be viewed as a role model, especially in a vulnerable community, this responsibility is significant and contributes to LGBTQ+ community care and support, creating an environment where young queer and transgender people can see themselves represented in the older, wiser crowd.

Professional Impact

When you come out to people close to you, sometimes this choice can affect your life at work. While most participants had not come out to their workplace, many still felt that their coworkers either knew or suspected that they were LGBTQ+. 
“You have those people who are just not comfortable about gay men. I dress differently and just work differently. I handle myself differently, but I’m so professional. So, you do have those elements of homophobia. I have a problem, but it’s not there because they just don’t know. You don’t need to bring it up to anyone actually. It’s none of their business” (B).

This participant, like many others in the focus group, noted that he experienced homophobia in the workplace. Even though he had not come out to any of his coworkers, he still felt that they understood his identity as a gay man. He described having to handle himself differently at work than he would at home to avoid workplace issues. In South Africa, to be professional is to be ‘straight.’ This is the reality for most of the participants; they must avoid any behavior that might be labeled as ‘gay’ because the identity is not accepted. To avoid this, the participant advises others to refrain from bringing up your identity, which can be difficult for some people whose identity is significant to their persona. This is especially hard for gender non-conforming people who must share their preferred pronouns with coworkers.

Another participant shared that they switched careers to escape homophobia attacks.

“When it comes to my career, as I was working at that time, I would experience some attacks and just by words or anything, just not physically, but by words. Then I started joining modeling, of which I became more comfortable. I feel like even though the guys were straight, they just understood me and the life that I live basically. They accept me for who I am. It’s nice. It’s really nice to have people that are literally there for you and just support it. It makes me feel like I’m safe when I’m with these people” (A).

I believe that this shows the positive impact that acceptance and identity sharing in the workplace has. When surrounded by LGBTQ+ allies, this participant felt more comfortable and
happier around his coworkers. He did not feel safe in his previous job and had to leave, even though leaving would mean becoming unemployed. Now that he feels safe in his occupation, he can express himself and make a living. Ideally, you should not have to compromise who you are at work. However, many LGBTQ+ South Africans must hide their identities to have a successful and safe career.

*Religious and Cultural Context*

Another problem facing the LGBTQ+ community is religious and cultural discrimination. As outlined in the literature review, homosexuality is considered by some to be anti-religious and anti-South African culture. While these ideas have been constructed through colonialism and false readings of religious traditions, they are still very prevalent in South African society. Religion came up a lot in the interviews:

“No, [the church] is just not supportive. A friend of mine went to the same church as I went to, but he decided to leave because of the homophobia that he faced within the church at that time” (A).

So, there were challenges inside the church. I had to come out. There were people calling us names, this and that. So, the pastor was abusive, doing all those things, calling us names and whatever” (D).

“So they’ll be like what is the church is going to say? I stopped going to church and they will ask me why I’m not going to church? Because I noticed every time when they see someone who’s lesbian or gay, the pastor would automatically start changing the topic and like, you know, people like this, they are not God’s wonder but I’m like, why are you changing the topic now?” (F).
Participants claimed that their churches were not supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, even driving some people away due to their homophobia. The church should be a safe place for those who go to worship there, but for LGBTQ+ individuals, it is instead somewhere where their identities are excluded. This alienates queer and transgender people from the religious community, which often extends to family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors who attend the same institutions. When this homophobia comes from high levels of the church like the pastor, it creates a power struggle that can leave the LGBTQ+ person feeling powerless against the church’s mistreatment. This results in many LGBTQ+ people leaving the church and being further excluded from a society that values religion and churchgoing.

Participants also remembered their families taking them to a pastor to rid them of their homosexuality.

“Even if you take me to a pastor, it’s just not going to work” (A).

In those cases, participants never felt that the church could ‘fix’ them because they were secure in their identity and recognized queerness not as an affliction, but as a valid identity. This rhetoric from family only enforces the idea that being LGBTQ+ is something that can be fixed and creates an association between this ideology and the church. It also leaves the queer person feeling invalidated and drives them away from religious institutions, sewing distrust between LGBTQ+ and religious communities.

Additionally, I asked participants their thoughts on the idea that being LGBTQ+ is un-African, as this idea came up a lot in my literature review research. They expressed a resentment towards this idea, and added that a lot of South Africans viewed homosexuality as a new phenomenon:
“I think colonialism and missionaries did a good job in drumming that to people’s brains, especially in the continent of Africa” (B).

“There was this mentality of people saying there’s never a gay person who’s 50 years old” (H).

The idea of LGBTQ+ identities being at odds with an African identity caused negative feelings and reactions in the participants. Since both identities are important to them, the idea that they cannot exist together is upsetting and invalidating. To combat this, participants try to spread awareness and increase visibility of the LGBTQ+ community and their rights. They believed that the best way to shut down these homophobic attitudes is to show that queer and transgender Africans exist, are proud of their identities, and want to be included in society just the same as everyone else. When they are excluded from their African identity, they long to be accepted and feel a sense of belonging through their social locations and identifications. For true equality to exist among heterosexual and homosexual South Africans, the culture must move to be accepting of LGBTQ+ identities through activism and queer visibility.

Mental Health and Well-Being

In this section, I will discuss how coming out affected the mental health and well-being of participants. The most prominent themes of this section include feelings of guilt, worries about safety, and newfound feelings of freedom. One participant described his coming out experience in a positive light:

“Coming out for me, it was really good. It was really good. I think it just took out that guilt that I had for a very long time because I knew when I was still a kid that I was different than anybody else. But for me coming out, I think it just took out that thing
within me and I just became free after. I just became myself. I just became like when a
bird flies, I was just like a bird. I was like, I’m free from the guilt” (A).

Coming out made this participant feel free, and it alleviated his feelings of guilt from hiding a secret life from his family. He said that he felt guilty dating girls in high school and pretending to be straight to friends and family. For him, coming out had a positive effect on his mental health, removing the pressure of keeping up the façade of heterosexuality. This was a common theme among participants who had come out; they described feelings of freedom and increased happiness after coming out, though they were very nervous to do so.

Feelings of freedom after coming out were common in my interviews. Another participant emphasized that his mental health was much improved after coming out. Even though he came from a liberal family and was somewhat accepted by his mother after coming out to her, he still reported increased comfort:

“I felt liberal. I felt freer. I was able to get into my own skin and just become an individual without thinking what the society is going to think” (B).

This pattern of feelings of freedom shows how being closeted can be damaging to mental health, as it promotes the feeling that you are trapped. When you have realized your true self but cannot express it to the people close to you, you may feel imprisoned by the lie you are living. However, after coming out, this participant felt more comfortable in his own skin and was set free from the societal expectations he was being held to. By refuting cultural norms, this participant felt that he could be who he wanted without worrying about what others think of his lifestyle. This same sentiment was expressed by others, highlighting the benefits of coming out as LGBTQ+ on mental health.
“Even when I got sick into a point where I just wanted to commit suicide, [my friends] were just there for me, supportive” (A).

The participant from the first narrative in this section also described negative moments following his coming out. After being rejected by his family, he fell into a depression and wanted to commit suicide. Thankfully, support from friends helped him through this difficult time. His experience highlights the complex emotions that one goes through after coming out, especially when they are faced with negative reactions from family. While coming out is usually seen by participants as an overall positive experience for them, it can also cause serious personal problems and mental health issues.

Participants also reported fearing for their safety because of their LGBTQ+ identity. In the focus group, one participant noted:

“But in my life, I have to report where I'm going. Go there, go there, go there, go there, report this, report there, report this, report that. I have to have my location on, I have to be worried about not texting my brother, my partner or whoever informing them, okay, I'm not coming home at seven. Normally I'm coming home at 8 today, so don't have any suspicion. So, you're walking on eggs. It's like your life is like you're walking on eggs” (H).

He describes feeling as though he is always walking on eggshells, constantly updating his friends and family on his whereabouts. He must engage in this protective behavior because violence and hate crimes are so common for LGBTQ+ people. This has a negative impact and leaves the person feeling unsafe and discouraged from going out and enjoying life. When you are constantly fearing for your life, there is a lot of stress and pressure that makes it hard to lead a normal life.
Political Engagement

Lastly, participants also spoke about how being LGBTQ+ drove them to become politically involved. In a one-on-one interview, the participant said

“Definitely, I have to vote. I have to vote. Voting is important. Unfortunately, we have to vote. That’s how we keep our democracy alive. We have to. We have no other choice. We have no other choice” (B).

He was very explicit about his intention to vote and the importance he believes South Africa’s elections hold. He felt that voting is the way to keep democracy alive. It is also important to note that this participant was middle-aged, which means that he grew up in a South Africa where he could not vote. So, after the apartheid regime was toppled and he gained the right to vote, he became strong in his views on political engagement, making it his duty to exercise his political power. LGBTQ+ people are often cast to the edges of society, but they can use the power of the vote to enact change and protect their constitutional rights.

In the focus group, participants were also politically engaged. Since participants were sourced from an activist group, Transhope, LGBTQ+ advocates were represented in the sample. One participant stated,

“The reason why I’ve become an activist now is because of trying to fight the demon out of people thinking we are not human enough. So, the reason why I’m able to fight for myself or speak for myself or either preach the LGBT rights is because I think I’ve come to be part of the community” (C).

The ‘demon’ that this person is referring to is the idea that LGBTQ+ are not worthy or “not human enough.” Throughout the focus group conversation, the participants spoke of times when others had called them demons for being homosexual or transgender. I believe that this is an
attempt to flip the script and state that the real ‘demons’ are the ones who are spreading hate towards the LGBTQ+ community. Many queer and transgender people become activists out of necessity; they want to protect their community and their right to life. Since homophobia is very prevalent in South Africa, activists want to spread LGBTQ+ pride to others and create a society that accepts people of the community. In many ways, queerness is politicized; it is seen as a political act to identify as LGBTQ+. So, since being non-heterosexual is already politicized and homophobia within the workplace is common, it makes sense that many queer people turn to politics and advocacy work as a career because it creates a safe place for them to fight for their rights, something that they already must do daily.
Conclusions

Throughout this research project, I have demystified the complex process of coming out and how it affects LGBTQ+ South Africans. With the literature review, LGBTQ+ issues have been contextualized, providing us with a greater understanding of the challenges facing the community, as well as potential impacts of coming out. Then, through conversations with 11 participants, I have explored the reality of coming out as LGBTQ+ among a sample of black South Africans.

It seems that most LGBTQ+ South Africans knew from a young age that they were different, that they did not resonate with the traditional expectations of a heterosexual marriage and having children. They felt alienated by their difference, pretending to be straight and cisgender just to fit in. Societal and cultural standards were impossible to live up to while simultaneously realizing and expressing their LGBTQ+ identities. As a result, participants experienced feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation. Additionally, many participants reported being outed to their families, rather than making the choice to come out. This robbed them of their control over disclosing their identity and put them in tough situations where they felt unsafe and rejected by their families.

Coming out to families proved to be challenging for all participants, regardless of how accepting they perceived their families to be. In most cases, family members did not embrace their LGBTQ+ identities. Instead, they asked them to change, brought them to pastors, attempted to bribe them, cried, or never brought up the topic again. It was a sensitive topic for all participants, and they all recommended that young LGBTQ+ individuals establish financial independence and stable housing before coming out to families that they were dependent on. They reported lots of uncertainty in this process, not knowing how their friends and family
would react to their LGBTQ+ announcements. This demonstrates that homosexuality and gender non-conforming identities are taboo in South African society. Participants felt strong feelings of fear and hopelessness during the coming out process. Family was important to all participants, and they all looked for acceptance from parents, siblings, and other family.

Participants also looked for this support from friends. Most of them were able to find greater support in friends, reporting that they felt like their friends already knew they were LGBTQ+. This brought comfort to participants, with many stating they felt like they could finally be themselves around their close friends. In both situations, coming out to friends and to family, participants said they felt freer after coming out, and that the experience alleviated feelings of guilt associated with their secret identity. Unfortunately, many participants also said that they lost friends during this process. They explained that some South Africans did not want to be associated with the LGBTQ+ community out of fear that others would assume they were also queer or transgender. This highlights homophobia within South African society, where people believe that the LGBTQ+ has negative connotations and will result in loss of social support.

I also discussed tensions within the LGBTQ+ community in my interviews. Participants reported that different standards exist for different identities, with transgender individuals experiencing more exclusion. They said that more rules exist for transgender people, and that they are often labeled as either ‘too feminine, not feminine enough, too masculine, not masculine enough.’ Gender identity is not understood as widely as homosexuality, and the community discriminates against gender non-conforming individuals. In the focus group, all participants expressed a desire for more acceptance and support within the community. They believed that when the community fractures, it makes it easier for outsiders to marginalize them further.
Another aspect of life that I discussed with my participants was their experiences in the workplace. Most participants had faced some form of homophobia at their jobs, namely verbal harassment and threats. Participants noted that they had not officially come out to any of their coworkers, though they believed that their appearance and behavior had made them a target. In instances where they felt threatened and discriminated against, they felt unsafe and discouraged from work. In one case, a participant even changed career fields to work in a safer environment. After moving to a job in the fashion industry, this participant felt much more comfortable and supported by those that were LGBTQ+ friendly. This demonstrates the importance of a safe working environment that promotes self-expression protects the rights of employees. Even people that choose to not come out in the workplace still experience homophobically charged harassment.

Religion was also a major topic of conversation in the interviews. It was such a big part of some participants and their families’ lives that the conversation continued to return to homophobia within the church. Religious institutions were used to try to ‘fix’ participants and ‘make them straight,’ which only resulted in loss of faith and trust in the participant. I catalogued abuse, humiliation, and harassment within the church, with participants often reporting that this discrimination came from the pastor. When this homophobia came from the person in power, it was a lot easier for other members of the congregation to excuse this behavior, resulting in participants needing to leave the church, pushing them further into isolation from social life. This and other forms of exclusion were shown to damage participants’ mental health. Through discussions of personal well-being after coming out, I found that participants felt worse when they were excluded from family, social life, and the workplace. Coming out had a complex impact on mental health, demonstrating that coming out is a double-edged sword in many ways.
Participants felt freer and more able to express themselves after coming out, resulting in greater well-being and increased happiness. However, these feelings could be overshadowed by negatives ones when the participant did not feel accepted by family and friends. I believe this highlights the challenges of coming out, which can be both liberating and isolating. Overall, participants were glad that they had come out, feeling more authentic and able to live life how they wanted to, though it also made their lives difficult in other ways.

Lastly, participants noted that coming out enabled them to participate in political life. This increased engagement came from both necessity and a goal of making South African society more welcoming for LGBTQ+ people. Some participants felt that they needed to be politically active to protect their rights. Others felt that activism was the only line of work they felt safe in because they could be surrounded by other like-minded, accepting people. All participants agreed that it was important to be involved in community or political activities to increase awareness and acceptance for LGBTQ+ rights.

In conclusion, this research shed light on the unique struggles of LGBTQ+ people in Durban, South Africa. It is important that we understand how coming out affects individuals so that we can better protect their rights, increase their well-being and safety, and create a society that is more accepting of non-heteronormative identities. Through this study, I have offered a broad picture of what life after coming out looks like. Coming out is a significant process in a LGBTQ+ person’s life and can only be understood by listening to the experiences and challenges they have faced.
Recommendations for Further Study

Due to the time and resource limitations of this study, I believe that the project should be continued with further research. With more participants from a more diverse sampling pool, researchers could gain a more complete understanding of the impact of coming out. This study only focused on black South Africans in Durban, so I recommend that further studies draw from other racial categories to investigate how coming out affects members of the white, Coloured, and Indian communities. Additionally, socioeconomic status was not considered due to time limitations. If this study were to be expanded upon, I recommend that the socioeconomic positionality of participants is explored to determine how economic status impacts the effects of coming out.

In the future, this research could be used in a comparative study that explores how different South African communities are impacted by coming out. Researchers could compare the experiences of Durban residents to the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and rural communities. Further studies could also expand to the international level, investigating the differences between coming out in South Africa and abroad. I hope to continue this research by returning to South Africa or studying this topic in another country.

Further research on LGBTQ+ communities could also benefit from a more specialized study on coming out experiences. This research could focus on one of the nine subsections of my project to provide a more in-depth analysis of family dynamics, self-expression, or religious contexts. There remains a gap in literature regarding the coming out experiences of South Africans. The question remains, what is beyond the closet? What happens after you come out in South Africa? How does this experience impact LGBTQ+ people from different backgrounds? What resources could benefit those who want to or have come out? Further research should
include a larger and more diverse participant pool, as well as a more specific area of study. Then, we will come closer to understanding how this life-changing event impacts the often abused, vulnerable community of LGBTQ+ South Africans.

Yuval-Davis’s framework of belonging could also be further explored. This research could help advocates better understand feelings of acceptance, isolation, identity, and community relationships, and how these ideas impact the participants sense of safety, community, and belonging. This framework is still developing, and I believe that it is very relevant to LGBTQ+ studies and can help researchers investigate the complexities of coming out as LGBTQ+. 
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Secondary Sources


Appendices

*Interview Questions*

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
2. Where did you grow up? Do you still live there?
3. Who do you live with?
4. What work do your parents do?
5. Do you identify as being within the LGBTIQ+ community? How do you identify your sexual orientation? How important is this identity to you?
6. How would you describe your journey of coming out? What made you decide it was time, or what prompted you to do so? Who did you tell, and why was this significant for you?
7. How did your family and/or friends react when you came out to them? Were there any surprising or unexpected reactions?
8. Did you face any challenges or difficulties during the coming-out process? How did you navigate them?
9. Can you describe any supportive or affirming experiences you had while coming out?
10. Did you find any resources or support systems that helped you during your coming out? If so, how did they contribute to your overall experience?
11. How has coming out influenced your relationships and interactions within the LGBTQ+ community?
12. Has coming out affected your social life and professional career?
13. Have there been any specific moments or situations where you felt a strong sense of belonging or acceptance as a result of coming out? Can you share those experiences?
14. How has your sense of self and identity evolved since coming out? In what ways has it affected your overall well-being and happiness?

15. Are there any lessons or insights you have gained from your coming-out journey that you would like to share with others going through a similar experience?

**Abbreviations/Definitions**

LGBTQ+: Stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and the + encompasses all other identities that fall under the non-heteronormative umbrella (intersex, asexual, genderfluid, etc).

Queer: This term is often used to describe anyone who experiences same-sex attraction and will be used as a synonym for gay and lesbian throughout this project. The term can describe anyone who considers themselves homosexual.

Transgender: A transgender person is someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. This can include someone who transitions from female to male or vice versa, someone who identifies as nonbinary/genderfluid, and someone who feels they do not fit into any gendered category.

Nonbinary: Someone who does not identify as either a man or a woman, but instead understands their gender as somewhere in between this constructed binary.

Lesbian: A non-man (woman, non-binary person) who loves non-men; commonly understood as a woman who only loves other women.

Gay: A non-woman (man, non-binary person) who loves non-women; commonly understood as a man who only loves other men.
CONSENT FORM

1. Brief description of the purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to understand the coming out experiences of queer South Africans and how they affect the well-being of an individual. This research will explore how queer people navigate the complex process of coming out.

2. Rights Notice

This research project has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. The participant may withdraw consent at any time. If you feel uncomfortable or at risk for any reason, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please read the statements below carefully.

   a. Privacy: All information you present in the interview may be recorded and transcribed. Let the interviewer know if you do not want the interview recorded.

   b. Anonymity: Pseudonyms will be used in the study to protect the participant’s identity.

   c. Confidentiality: All names and identifiable information will be kept completely confidential and protected by the interviewer.

By signing below, you give the interviewer the responsibility to uphold this contract. The participant and the interviewer will keep a copy of this consent form.

__________________________________________            _________________________
Participant’s name (printed)                                Participant’s signature and date

__________________________________________            _________________________
Interviewer’s name (printed)                                Interviewer’s signature and date