

“Straight-acting to the Front”: Investigating the Influence of a Sexually Normative Double-bind on Gay and Lesbian Students at a South African University Campus

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Abstract

Heteronormativity posits heterosexuality as the only *acceptable* and *normal* presentation of gendered and sexual identities. Similarly, homonormativity structures social life along heteronormative beliefs and ideals to construct *conventional* gay and lesbian identities. This article comments on a critical sociological exploration of the influences of these sexual normativities on the identity construction of gay and lesbian students at one campus of a South African university. Discourse was explored through a qualitative research paradigm focused on the lived experiences and reported narratives of gay and lesbian students. Three findings emerged from the data: first, how the participants socially constructed and performed their “ideal” gay and lesbian identities according to interrelated and mutually reinforcing hetero- and homonormative principles; second, these idealised typologies informed the social placement of gay and lesbian students on campus; finally, said ideals resulted in a so-called sexually normative double-bind that required gay and lesbian students to continuously navigate their membership of in- and/or out-groups on campus.

Keywords: gay students; heteronormativity; homonormativity; lesbian students; South Africa; university campus

Introduction

Matthyse (2017, 119) suggests that “[u]niversities should be places that are affirming and supportive where all students are able to explore their sexual and gender identities as this is likely to yield positive academic and development outcomes.” Such outcomes contribute to increased visibility and representation of homosexuality and debates about social transformation and acceptance inside and outside of lecture halls and campus grounds. Fields and Payne (2016), writing from an American perspective, echo this sentiment. Universities, in their opinion, provide the necessary platform for the “normalisation” of gay and lesbian identities through producing and engaging with the relevant space itself. Such “normalisation,” however, engenders varied meanings for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students.

South Africa is one of the few countries worldwide that defends gay and lesbian rights through legal protection. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (No. 108 of 1996) safeguards all South Africans’ rights to equality and non-discrimination, irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation (RSA 1996). Nevertheless, homophobia, homonegativity and sexism persist (monakali and Francis 2022). Recent studies attribute homonegativity to varying political and religious ideologies about gender and sexual diversity (Meyer 2020). Most African countries uphold ideologies that posit same-sex sexual activities as “un-African and an affront to the natural and moral order” (Mkhize and Maharaj 2021). Such beliefs extend to South Africa (Rothmann 2022). Reports continue to document the legal persecution of LGBTIAQ+ persons (Mendos et al. 2020), corrective rape of Black lesbian women (Valdés, Bolaño and Peschke 2023) and murder of gay men (Kupemba 2022) in the country.

Such discrimination extends to various social institutions, among others, universities. South African scholars contend that universities remain heteronormative, gendered and gendering institutions (Boonzaier and Mkhize 2018; Rosa and Clavero 2022) that create an unwelcoming campus climate (Beukes and Francis 2020). Examples abound of discriminatory behaviours towards sexual minority students. Examples range from physical abuse (for example, rape) (Sithole 2015); verbal derogation (for example, using the Nguni term *isitabane* or the Afrikaans labels *moffie* and *trassie*—all translate to faggot) (Msibi 2015); peers or lecturers excluding homosexual persons from class participation (Sithole 2015); objectifying them as the subordinate “other” (Rothmann and Simmonds 2015); and through pedagogical silences about LGBTIQ+ history, human rights and positive representation in university curriculum content (Blignaut, Balfour, and Rothmann 2023). University constituents prescribe power and social positioning to individuals based on their level of assimilation into a heteronormative *and* homonormative context (Tshilongo and Rothmann 2023). Wailing and Roffee (2017) opine that homosexual persons who subscribe to heteronormativity may face marginalisation from gay and lesbian communities for being “too straight”—subscribing to homonormative principles may reinforce heteronormativity insofar as it affords gay and lesbian students rights and visibility in a predominant heterosexual

context through them mirroring heterosexual behaviours by, for example, passing as ordinary and normal (read heterosexual). Homonormativity results in different ascriptions of power relations based on intersectionality—that is, how a self-identified gay and lesbian individual’s gender identity, race, sex, class and age, etcetera, afford (or exclude them from) particular rights and resources among their heterosexual and homosexual peers (Kennedy 2014).

An analysis of the prevailing gendered and sexualised nature of the university space may contribute to a better understanding of how hegemonic norms included in hetero- and homonormativity may play a role in mediating and regulating the construction of gay and lesbian identities at South African universities (Moore 2015). We investigated how hetero- and homonormativity influence the experiences of self-identified gay and lesbian students at one campus of a South African university. We sought to explore how normative values, related to hetero- and homonormativity, influenced the construction of gay and lesbian identities on the part of self-identified gay and lesbian students.

Next, we provide an overview of relevant literature and theory, the research methodology and research findings, a critical discussion, and recommendations for future consideration.

Theorising Gay and Lesbian Students on Campus

There has been a gradual increase in South African studies on gay and lesbian students in higher education. Some studies reveal that South African students do not only subscribe to negative experiences on campus; they characterise the space as “open-minded,” “gay friendly,” and “accepting” (Lesch, Brits, and Naidoo 2017). Similar scholarship suggests that having visible heterosexual, gay and lesbian support (LGBTIQ+ allies) contributes to a decline in homophobia among students in residences (Jagessar and Msibi 2015a; Munyuki and Vincent 2017) and dedicated student associations (Rothmann 2014; Tshilongo and Rothmann 2019; 2023). Other studies report on the social, mental, physical and academic challenges gay and lesbian students face in educational settings (McArthur 2015; Msibi 2013; 2015; Rothmann and Simmonds 2015; Sithole 2015). These challenges stem from the deeply entrenched *heteronormative* and *homonormative* hierarchies in such contexts. *Heteronormativity* is grounded on the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal and accepted form of gender and sexual expression (Ng et al. 2017). It is a system that privileges cisgender and heterosexual constructions of identity (Hanckel and Morris 2014). The hegemonic status of heteronormativity relates to “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980)—the societal norm and ideal of privileged heterosexuality. Fraser (2018) views compulsory heterosexuality as a socially constructed system that aims to regulate individual desires while imposing negative sanctions on those in violation of its norms (Butler 1990). These individuals are “disciplined” by mainstream (heterosexual) society through discrimination, stigmatising and marginalisation to achieve a sexual minority community concomitant of the heterosexual community (Hanckel and Morris 2014).

Universities—which could concurrently serve as a transformative context for the student coming to terms with their sexual identity—may be characterised by a heteronormative climate, resulting in discrimination against gay and lesbian persons (Boonzaier and Mkhize 2018; Nduna et al. 2017). Regardless, such attempts at identity acknowledgement and synthesis are stifled through the prevailing heteronormativity on campus due to their fears of interpersonal or institutional homophobia (Horley and Clarke 2016). Consequently, students may opt to assimilate into the mainstream heteronormative campus culture to avoid marginalisation, prejudice and discrimination (Mkhize and Maharaj 2021). Assimilating into the heterosexual community may lead to a sense of still being in the closet, as individuals enact heterosexual rather than homosexual norms.

Homonormativity mirrors the inherent principles of heteronormativity. It often enforces heteronormativity as a means for gay and lesbian individuals to succeed in a heterosexual-dominated campus context consistent with the underlying principles associated with assimilation—namely, acceptance and integration “within existing cultural norms” and access to all university services and resources (Van den Berg 2016, 28). Homonormativity regulates gay and lesbian communities from *within* through internal hegemony (Demetriou 2001), which differentiates between the “good gay” (and lesbian) and “bad gay” (or lesbian) (Croce 2015; Greenland and Taulke-Johnson 2017). The “good gay” is depicted as straight-acting, private, discreet and moderate. They sustain heteronormative beliefs, practices and institutions instead of contesting them, thus displaying their “queer skin” which, in fact, is informed by their “otherwise straight masks” (Milani and Wolff 2015, 165). The “bad gay” represents the stereotypically effeminate, promiscuous, predatory and politically persuasive gay and lesbian person. Sudenkaarne (2018, 38) argues that such an essentialist approach to lesbian and gay identity enforces the assumption that identities sharing the same categories would also share related experiences, resulting in “degenerative representationalism” (the belief that sharing similar identities automatically yields similar experiences, resulting in ideas of normativity, such as homo-, hetero-, bi- and transnormativity). Homonormativity thus comprises the societal standards and assumptions constructing the “perfect gay” or “perfect lesbian” identity configuration. This posits homosexuality (as homonormative) as predominantly White, monogamous, masculine (gay males), effeminate (lesbian females), and middle class as the ideal to aspire to (Santos 2013). Homonormativity aims to comply with and sustain heteronormative standards, including neoliberal standards and personal autonomy, where those who comply with homonormative values are deemed “worthy” and rewarded subsequent rights (Kennedy 2014). Consequently, these binaries may reinforce systemic inequality based on the assumption that there are only two natural, complementary and biological genders. These binaries simultaneously construct and reinforce contemporary social hierarchies through policing the normative assumptions of what can be perceived as gender-appropriate behaviour on university campuses (Tshilongo and Rothmann 2023).

To theorise the dependability of the above assertions, we employed tenets of *queer theory* to explore how the intersection between heteronormativity and homonormativity exacerbates or challenges the stratification of gay and lesbian students. The theory questions the anticipated “normal” expectations of sexuality and the (re)production of hegemonic discourses that attempt to reinforce heteronormativity to police gay, lesbian and nonbinary students (Pitcher 2016). Proponents of queer theory cite its disruptive and decentring properties that challenge rigid, traditional and stereotypical sex/gender and heterosexual/homosexual binaries. Furthermore, it requires scholars to acknowledge that gender and sexual identities are open, contestable and fluid (Hall 2013).

Studies show that gay and lesbian students dualistically navigate their gender and sexual performances on university campuses to gain acceptance and avoid homophobia (De Wet, Rothmann, and Simmonds 2016). On the one hand, they face discrimination if they fail to “correctly” do their gender akin to heterosexual expectations; they are required to self-consciously regulate their behaviour, which exacerbates heteronormativity. So, they may opt to downplay their experiences of homophobia as being “not too bad” (tolerable) (Jagessar and Msibi 2015a). Conversely, students who subscribe to heteronormativity may face marginalisation from gay and lesbian communities for being “too straight.” Thus, gay and lesbian identities run the risk of discrimination and marginalisation for being either “too gay” or “too straight” (Waling and Roffee 2017, 314). This hierarchy is accordingly reinforced and motivated by dominant (read traditional and stoic) gender ideals that are deeply embedded in a prevalent heteronormative culture governed by power relations, where those individuals conforming to hegemonic social norms are positively sanctioned (Luyt 2012; Msibi 2012). Therefore, the university, whether intentionally or not, serves as a ubiquitous means of surveillance through the stable visibility of certain individuals as a disciplinary instrument.

Research Methodology

We adopted a social constructionist ontology and qualitative research methodology to explore how heteronormative and homonormative values informed the inclusion or exclusion of self-identified gay and lesbian students at one campus of a South African university. At the time, the university comprised three delivery sites in three different cities. On the campus where the study was conducted, most enrolled students self-identified as White, followed by Black, Coloured, and Asian students.

Table 1: Biographical information of the participants

Pseudonym	Sex	Sexual orientation	Race	Age
Bambi	Female	Pansexual	White	19
Bernice	Female	Lesbian	Coloured	19
Brett	Male	Gay	White	28
Carol	Female	Bisexual	Black	19
Edgar	Male	Gay	White	21
Eric	Male	Gay	White	20
Granger	Female	Lesbian	White	19
Heidi	Female	Bisexual	White	19
Hein	Male	Gay	White	29
Henry	Male	Gay	White	24
IDK	Female	Lesbian	White	28
Ikai	Male	Gay	Black	23
Jennifer	Female	Bi-curious	White	38
Lee	Female	Lesbian	Black	20
Lindsey	Female	Pansexual	White	21
Martha	Female	Lesbian	White	23
Matthew	Male	Gay	Black	21
Max	Male	Gay	White	21
May	Female	Pansexual	White	21
Mukwevho	Female	Lesbian	Black	20
Ndlovu	Female	Lesbian	Black	20
Padro	Male	Homosexual	Black	28
Richy	Male	Gay	White	19
Sienna	Female	Lesbian	White	27
Skylar	Male	Gay	White	27
Tanya	Female	Lesbian	White	27
Yellow	Female	Lesbian	Black	23

Table 1 provides the biographical information of the 27 participants who participated in the study, 10 of whom were recruited through purposive sampling and 17 through snowball sampling. Fifteen participants were registered undergraduate students; the remaining 12 were enrolled for postgraduate degrees. Eleven participants self-identified as gay; 10 self-identified as lesbian; two self-identified as bisexual (sexually and/or romantically attracted to their own gender and at least one other gender); one self-identified as bi-curious (heterosexual persons wanting to experiment sexually and/or romantically with people of the same gender); and three self-identified as pansexual

(attracted to all genders without a specific preference) (Bronski, Heyam, and Traub 2023). During participant recruitment, some individuals who did not identify as gay or lesbian (self-identified bisexual, bi-curious and pansexual students) expressed their interest in the study and were allowed to participate. Their data spoke to their identities and their choice to not subscribe to the categories of gay and/or lesbian based on, among others, a disdain for hetero- and homonormativity.

Participants were aged between 19 and 38 years; the average age was 23. All participants, but one, were South African; the one exception was from Namibia. Concerning race, eight participants self-identified as Black, 18 as White, and one as Coloured. To provide a geographic and racially representative sample of the university, we originally sought to sample participants on all three campuses. We requested support from the chairpersons of the LGBTIQ+ associations on all three campuses to assist with participant recruitment. Recruitment material—containing the title of the study, its objectives, the rights and obligations of the researchers and participants, and ethics requirements—was sent to these chairpersons by e-mail to share with the members. Prospective participants contacted the primary investigators if they were interested in participating in the study. Throughout the process, only two students from the one campus and one student from the other expressed interest in participating. However, they later withdrew because of safety concerns on their respective campuses. Tshilongo and Rothmann (2023, 278) confirm the challenges associated with the “hiddenness” of prospective interviewees in sexuality research—particularly in a country where university campuses increasingly face heterosexist and religious condemnation of expressing sexual diversity (Bhengu 2023). Owing to these challenges, data collection was conducted at only one of the campuses.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Acknowledging his own positionality as a self-identified gay man allowed the researcher to build trust with the interviewees. This method allowed for in-depth discussions regarding the students’ experiences while concurrently creating a space to construct and convey their shared individual experiences and realities (Anderson 2014; Bryman 2016). As the data collection was still ongoing during the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020, 90-minute online interviews (via Zoom) were conducted, and the interview schedule was completed by those students who did not have access to electronic media. The interview schedule comprised biographical and opinion-related questions. The latter questions centred on the students’ social and sexual identity on campus. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants’ consent.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. We coded the transcripts to identify themes and categories to inductively create a storyline informed by the participants’ narratives (Braun and Clarke 2012).

Before the fieldwork, ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee (AREC) (ethics number: NWU-00297-18-A7). All participants had

to read and sign an informed consent form before the commencement of the interviews. So, they provided voluntary, informed, specific and explicit consent to participate in the study. Ensuring anonymity was especially important, as some participants were still “in the closet” and uncomfortable to openly identify as gay or lesbian. Participants were thus requested to select their own pseudonyms. Privacy was ensured by respecting the comfort of participants and not probing unnecessarily when discussing sensitive topics (Bryman 2016).

The “Ideal” Gay and Lesbian Type: Discussion of Findings

This section comprises four subthemes that encompass the narratives of students: *sourcing gender and sexual orientation(s)* to socially construct, deconstruct or reconstruct one’s sexual orientation; how the former *narrows gay and lesbian boundaries*; the *interrelatedness of heteronormativity and homonormativity*; and how assimilation into and conforming to homonormative typologies influence *social placement, gendering gay and lesbian students towards “belonging”* as part of an in- or out-group on campus.

Sourcing Gender and Sexual Orientation(s)

Participants reported two sources for constructing hetero- and homonormative typologies: the *family* (as primary socialiser) and *media* (as secondary socialisers). They recalled how their parents performed their heterosexuality to emphasise the importance of cisgenderism akin to Afrikaner (Sonnekus 2013) and African (Rwafa 2016) expectations. Heterosexuality was emphasised as being *normal, healthy, standard, compulsory* and *assumed* (Herz and Johansson 2015; Ng et al. 2017) to the exclusion of *marginal* persons who did not identify as heterosexual. Brett (gay) explained that gender roles are “[a] set of rules set by society”—gender represents *social expectations* or *rules* placed on someone based on their biological sex to act either *male* or *female* to maintain sex and gender binaries (Woolley 2017). Henry (gay) noted:

... because heterosexuality was presented by my parents and their religious community as normative, I only came to really realise that being straight was only one of many alternative identities far into my teenage years. Being straight has become [increasingly] clearly delineated as the only ethical, godly, viable, healthy sexuality and identity to associate with.

Similarly, Sienna (lesbian) had to remain closeted while growing up in her conservative “little town” because of the ignorance of others. She noted:

... nobody ever spoke about being gay, or that such a thing even existed, and when it was talked about, it was to tell us how wrong it was and to ridicule the gay person. I kept quiet about being gay because my parents were strongly against it.

Likewise, participants reported experiencing pressures at home to conform to heteronormative expectations. Scholars argue that parents associate nonconformity in

young children with future *homosexuality*, resulting in pressures to hide their gender expressions and stay in the closet (Mills-Koonce, Rehder, and McCurdy 2018). Of interest, however, were those narratives that presented a restrictive, negative and stifling view of heterosexual coupledness. May (pansexual) provided a conspicuous account of the nuclear family as the antithesis of an ideal and supportive context:

My father is an alcoholic, abused my mother, and my mother herself has been on antidepressants for 20 years now. They let expectations of what they should want and be shape their lives, and they both wound up absolutely miserable.

This made May content with *being* different. Adeagbo (2015, 41) attests that although “human society is organised in such a way that men do ‘masculine’ while women do ‘feminine,’ the possibility of ‘undoing gender’ is possible, as gender is an ongoing and vacillating set of behaviours that are created by social interactions and shaped within social contexts.” Participants showed a keen awareness of gender, sexual orientation and, in a sense, “normativity,” as being socially constructed (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). It is worth quoting Heidi (bisexual) in this regard. She described gender as “overall fluid and cannot really be pinned down to one specific term. A person’s gender can change throughout their life.” Participants mentioned that gender was defined by *themselves* and a *choice* whether to *present* or *express* masculinity *and/or* femininity. They sought to renegotiate and restructure homonormative typologies for themselves, indicating the fluidity of such typologies. This argument is reminiscent of Plummer’s (2015, 66) work. He refers to “individualised” and “reflexive” sexualities—these typologies encourage one to “deregulate” and “individualise” one’s gender and sexuality.

Such agency notwithstanding, participants cited the *media* as a source of secondary socialisation. They recalled the media portraying women as feminine and as so-called “damsels in distress” who need saving from the superior masculine man in shining armour (Max, gay). Some female participants felt fashion magazines upheld such standards. They gained such understandings of homonormative typologies through media sources such as books, the internet, quizzes and pornography. Some participants indicated actively using academic books related to sexuality, along with internet-based services such as Google, Wikipedia, YouTube and quizzes about sexual orientation. Four self-identified lesbian participants highlighted the importance of how gay and lesbian individuals are presented in the media as stereotypical—as *heteronormative*, *comical relief*, *dramatic*, *unfaithful* and *promiscuous*—resulting in the socialisation and reinforcement of such portrayals as socially expected (Pugh 2018).

Gay and lesbian individuals’ visibility on social media also refers. Max (gay) believed that *Only Fans*, for example, influences other gay and lesbian individuals to expect their fellow counterparts to also be sex-crazed and show an exaggerated interest in material or physical facets (Mercer 2017). According to him, the “idea” of a “perfect” gay identity was “distorted” for two reasons:

Firstly, there are more and more popular gays on social media, and a lot of them are porn stars that flood your social media feed with links to their *Only Fans* accounts. This personally irritates me, because a lot of people believe that that is what gays are like (sex-crazed people who are only interested in the material things of life). ... Secondly, many gays see this every day and think that that is how a gay person should look and be (perfect eyebrows, thick lips, “bubble butt” and pecs that can stop a bus, and have money to jet off to a different country every month), and then they get very disappointed and rude when the gays around them are not like that, even if they themselves do not fulfil these unbelievably high standards. (Max, gay)

Henry (gay) believed that gay and lesbian students avoid “being perceived as queer, not because they fear retribution or negative response, but because they don’t want their identities to be defined primarily by their queerness.” He confirmed that “this might be viewed as a type of internalised homophobia” (cf. Rothmann 2014). Some participants felt that as most individuals are raised and socialised according to heteronormative values (irrespective of their sexual orientation), they may unwittingly discriminate against or *pick on* others for not *fitting into* such values—they conceptualise and distinguish between the “good” and “bad” gay or lesbian according to narrowly demarcated ideals.

Next, we consider how these ideals reinforce rigid identity markers for gay and lesbian students.

Narrowing Gay and Lesbian Boundaries

Participants offered sentiments describing how homonormative stereotypes depicted a narrow image of what it meant to be gay and lesbian. These stereotypes, they opined, limited them because they favoured a “cookie-cutter” or “one-dimensional” image of gay and lesbian identities (Mercer 2017). Bernice (lesbian) said that their campus normalised the “stereotypical way to be homosexual.” Consequently, they were expected to present as stereotypically gay and lesbian to experience validation from others (Croce 2015). Examples of these typologies are a gendered demarcation between effeminate gay men (Mills-Koonce et al. 2018) and a “butch” lesbian stereotype (Creed 2013). South African scholars confirm that gay or lesbian persons conform to stereotypical heterosexual hegemony (read cisgenderism) to avoid verbal and physical homophobia (monakali and Francis 2022; Rothmann 2016).

Hein (gay) was the only participant who refuted the undisputable association between effeminacy and gay men, and masculinity with lesbians: Although “there are some gay men who exhibit feminine traits and some gay women who exhibit masculine traits ... that doesn’t mean that all gay men and women do.” Sexual minority persons may be unaware of such supposed stereotypes because of heterosexual persons being the sources thereof (Max, gay). Max stated:

It is tricky to explain this [stereotypical behaviour], as it is usually “straight” people who attribute these stereotypes to us ... my friends would say I am gay because of the way I

talk or how I express myself with my hands, or simply because I don't participate in their discussions about sex with women. I usually don't see what they see, but to them, it is apparently obvious.

Such stereotypes, the participants noted, posit effeminate gay men as dramatic, promiscuous, fickle and rude (Cox and Devine 2015; Downs 2006). Similarly, our findings reflect previous research that perpetuated the gay male stereotype as “doing *their* gay” (Dowsett et al. 2008) in an effeminate way (Kachel, Simpson, and Steffens 2018): having shrill voices (Cartei and Reby 2012), displaying sex characteristics (West and Zimmerman 1987) and gendered performances that recall Connell's (1987) reference to “emphasised femininity”—that is, being more over the top, physically weak and/or shallow (Cox and Devine 2015).

Conversely, their lesbian counterparts were thought to display orthodox masculine depictions of the patriarchal man (Creed 2013). May (pansexual) highlighted the stereotypes held by some South Africans about lesbians:

They are thought to be man-hating, rebellious, and tomboyish. They're assumed to not be fond of children, or are even disgusted by them, and much like gay men, they're thought to want to “be men” ... one would assume that lesbians [are] emotionally constipated buff women with short haircuts and a powerful dislike of men, even those men who don't deserve any degree of coldness.

Jennifer and Martha supported this view. Martha (lesbian) said, “people think that all lesbians are butch or masculine because they actually want to be men.” Yellow (lesbian) also noted, “[m]aybe because I'm a lesbian they would think most lesbians would play soccer or, you know, be like aggressive or just more guy-ish”—a thought echoed by Bernice, Eric and Heidi, too. West and Zimmerman's (1987) reference to the use of sex characteristics to explain how lesbian students sought to “do their gender” (wearing men's clothing [flannel], having a short haircut, engaging in sports, and being hypermasculine, aggressive, tomboyish or displaying anti-men behaviour) refers. Westbrook and Schilt (2014) confirm how these ritualised gendered performances institutionalise homonormativity through these idealised heterosexual expectations (conforming to the cisgendered way of “being”). Based on South African women's discourse on female (hetero)sexual pleasure, Smuts (2021) calls these “straight expectations”—that is, emphasising the significance we continue to ascribe to heterosexual rituals in our everyday sexual lives. Participants affirmed doing this. Reasons for this included having to avoid too many questions about their sexuality; the fear of homophobia (being “afraid”); avoiding potential conflict, and gaining respect—something that would not be possible “if they knew I was gay. When I go to them, I act straight to get my point across” (Max). Hein (gay) said he was not “scared to mention that [he was] gay if [he] knew it would be received well.” Heidi did this through “acting” and “dressing” more “feminine ... and in a way, that is viewed as more conventional.” Richy (gay) said, “there is a subconscious aspect that comes into play. I sometimes find myself lowering my voice and being more introverted around straight men.”

Although the participants confirmed the influence of these narrow ideals, they were aware and critical of such stoic views. Their justifications ranged from discarding the supposed links between heterosexual men with hypermasculinity (Max, Henry and Hein, gay), lesbian women being either shy or boisterous and effeminate or “butch” (Jennifer and Martha, lesbian), and gay men having to opt for the “good gay” or “bad gay” label (Brett, gay). This explains how proponents of homonormativity fallaciously force a binary-based approach on heterosexual and homosexual persons alike, not acknowledging the inherently diverse experiences of all sexual actors (Del Castillo 2015). Their critique disrupts the “heterosexual imaginary”—thus, heterosexual scripts that limit the experiences of gay and lesbian students on campus (Ingraham 1994; Msibi 2013). Padro (homosexual) said the following: “since I am part of the university community, I also deserve my space and [to] enjoy it as well without putting pressure on myself.”

The next section discusses how students engaged with the conflation of gender and sexuality that speaks to the interrelatedness of heteronormativity and homonormativity.

The Interrelatedness of Heteronormativity and Homonormativity through Genderism

Genderism refers to “discriminations ... based on not conforming to the rigid categorisation of man/woman, male/female” (Browne 2004). Reflecting on heteronormativity, Ndlovu (lesbian) critiqued normative myths that masculine and feminine roles unmistakably characterise gay and lesbian relationships (them “play[ing] the typical male and female roles”) (Gansen 2017). Likewise, Yellow (lesbian) reported how “people just want to put you in a box. Some feminine girls say the masculine girls always have to date the feminine girl. It’s just stereotypes.” Lesbians differentiate tasks according to their strengths and preferences, which others may consider to be gendered (for example, one “definitely kills the spider,” whereas the other tends to “cook every night”) (IDK, lesbian). The participants, therefore, negotiate and “undo” their gender and sexuality rather than passively conforming to cultural expectations associated with gender and sexual orientation roles (Adeagbo 2015; Butler 2004).

Our findings indicated that most of the *idealised* sub-typologies are gendered. The link between the students’ sexual orientation and gender contributed to how other students categorised them *socially* on campus—biological males presenting masculinity and biological females presenting femininity were seen as *straight-acting* or blending in with heterosexual society (Mills-Koonce et al. 2018). Accordingly, the research highlighted the following *sub-typologies* heterosexual students imposed on their gay and lesbian peers. For gay men, these ranged from labels such as *bear*, *drag queen*, *feminine gay men* and *twink* to the *jock*, *masculine gay man*, *otter*, *secret gay*, *top* and *bottom* for gay men. These gay sub-typologies mirrored homonormative beliefs linking students’ sexual orientation to a specific form(s) of masculine gender expression (them being either *masculine* or *effeminate*) (Averett 2016).

Gay students reflected on how they typically presented as *hypermasculine* (Ng et al. 2017). Some (Brett and Skylar) were more *straight-acting*. Max (gay) referred to various *masculine gay* typologies—the *bear*, *daddy*, *jock*, *masculine gay man*, *secret gay* and *top*—as those men who “act very masculine, like they are *one of the boys*. They are basically ‘straight’ except for the fact that they find their fellow male gym partners sexually attractive instead of women.” There were, however, certain gendered differences between the ways in which gay male students, who subscribed to such typologies, were expected to “do *their gay*.” According to Wailing and Roffee (2017), such typologies foreground the association between (homo)normative expectations and gay men’s gender expression or body type. Those who were *straight-acting*—Brett and Skylar (gay)—described themselves as “flying under the radar” or “blending in”; *jocks* and *masculine gay men* were expected to present *an interest in sport, gym and display a sporty demeanour*. Conversely, *bears* were more *stocky, bigger and hairy*. *Secret gays*, according to Yellow (lesbian), related to various sub-typologies, as they were solely described as presenting masculinity and “acting straight” (being in the closet) (Alvarez 2009). *Tops* were inherently assumed to be linked to all these sub-typologies, as they were expected to do *things guys would normally do* and be the dominant penetrator (linked to heterosexual masculinity) during sexual intercourse (Mercer 2017). Regarding gay students being effeminate, some embraced their *feminine* and *twink* personas. *Twinks*, for example, were expected to look *boyish, young* and have a *dainty* or *small build*, whereas *feminine gay men* typically wore *women’s apparel* and *makeup* to present *traditional femininity*. May (pansexual) commented that there was “one gorgeous guy on campus who walks from class to class in six-inch red stilettos. The power he has fills me with fear.”

As with the gay sub-typologies, the *lesbian sub-typologies* reported a trend of having a central categorising gender—either masculinity or femininity with certain gendered differences between sub-typologies associated with the same gender. Those sub-typologies associated with femininity shared descriptions of being *normal* and *straight-acting* (Jones 2014). The only two categories to be linked to a central feminine representation were the *lipstick lesbians* and *femmes*. On the one hand, the findings show that both may represent the same sub-typology, with the only reported difference being that *femmes* might be perceived as *confused*, as they might be thought of as being bisexual due to them wanting to appear effeminate to assimilate into a heterosexual context but express sexual attraction to the same sex. May (pansexual) noted that “a *fem* lesbian is also called a *lipstick lesbian*.” These women “fly under the gaydar” (IDK, lesbian) and “[they] look like models, gorgeous women who could pass for being straight” (Sienna, lesbian)—they typically have *long hair*, wear *women’s apparel* and *makeup*, and are *girly*.

On the other hand, lesbian students identified the *butch*, *stud* and *tomboy* typologies as masculine-lesbian typologies. *Butch* was prominently the most masculine of all these sub-typologies, characterised by *short hair*, a *deep voice*, someone who *looks like a man* and wears *men’s apparel*, while simultaneously exuding *strength, independence* and

confidence (Huxley, Clarke, and Halliwell 2014). Moreover, *studs* were expected to be *boyish* and *date more than one woman*—an argument reminiscent of traditional African culture’s positive sanctioning of younger men’s attempts to accrue higher social status and respect by having more than a single sexual partner as opposed to their female counterparts (Jewkes and Morrell 2012). The typology of *tomboys*, according to Sienna (lesbian), differs from these sub-typologies by being associated with a lesbian woman who is *interested in sports* (Blashill and Powlishta 2009).

Each of the identified sub-typologies was dependent on one or main gender presentation—that is, masculinity or femininity as central to categorising individuals into such typologies. Homonormative typologies may accordingly be influenced by heteronormativity through the assumption that there are only two “natural” genders (Ng et al. 2017). The gay and lesbian students reflected on how they were sometimes expected to perform their sexuality in line with their (self-)imposed gender (Herz and Johansson 2015). It can be argued that such socially constructed homonormative typologies reflect beliefs related to heteronormativity by linking sexual orientation (gay or lesbian) statically to gender presentations (masculine or feminine) and the construct identity categories (*jock* versus *twink/butch* versus *lipstick lesbian*).

Social Placement: Gendering Gay and Lesbian Students towards “Belonging”

Findings show that the interrelated relationship between hetero- and homonormativity, along gendered lines, may determine whether gay and lesbian students assimilate into mainly heterosexual or gay and lesbian university contexts. Regarding *homonormativity*, 14 participants indicated that gay and lesbian organisations expect their members to portray highly gendered behaviours to fit their gay and lesbian mould and “to behave the same” (Rothmann 2014, 88). According to participants, the main prerequisite to joining an *in-group* was the expectation to either act straight or present stereotypical gay and lesbian performances along hetero- and homonormative lines, akin to the findings of Munyuki and Vincent (2017) and Sithole (2015). They recalled strategies of assimilation and transgression, indicating the construction of a hierarchy of value based on their levels of assimilation or transgression, or their abilities to do so (Del Castillo 2015). This recalls Rubin’s (1993) reference to the so-called “erotic pyramid” and “charmed circle.” Both differentiate between the more “blessed” inner realm of sexual expression (heterosexual persons) and peripheral sexual dissidents (homosexual persons). Access to the in-group requires disconnecting and rejecting the out-group and its related norms, values and expectations (those of the “bad gay” or “bad lesbian”). Positionality and acceptance within the in-group are understood through the presentation of assimilated qualities and the presentation of the “good gay” depicted through homonormativity (Croce 2015).

May (pansexual) referred to such homonormative stereotypes as “re-indoctrinating” people into a heteronormative way of thinking. This echoes Eribon (2004) and Van den Berg’s (2016) respective references to the so-called “ordinariness” and “normalised” nature of gay and lesbian assimilationists. Commenting on this process of identifying

and categorising, Eric (gay) felt gay and lesbian communities were constantly “slicing” themselves into further sub-categories, “doing to one another what the straight community has done to [them].” This can indicate that the social perception of what is hetero- and homonormative is becoming narrower and more stratified to compensate for the legitimacy of “accepted” versions of emerging identities (those who present a *central* gender in relation to their sex and/or sexual orientation) and marginalises “undesirable” versions of the same identity (those who do not conform to the classifications of any homonormative typology) (Ng et al. 2017). Tanya (lesbian) opined that subdividing “an already minority group of people is a control mechanism set in place to keep society from unifying around a shared commonality of being human,” whereafter they “discriminate against each other. No bears, no twink[s] [for gay men], no femmes, no butch [for lesbian women]” (Sienna, pansexual).

Participants were expected to identify with and present a specific homonormative typology and sub-typology and not deviate from the scripted presentation, since such deviation could result in confusion for the rest of the community. To this point, Bambi, Matthew and Ndlovu indicated the gay community judges other gay individuals for being “too gay.” “They are jealous of each other” (Matthew, gay). Participants thought some “gay men” were discriminated against for being “too much” as it relates to “their level[s] of femininity or masculinity” (Bambi, pansexual). Likewise, Bernice (lesbian) thought, “gay individuals receive hate because they don’t fit the mould of being gay.” Likewise, Ndlovu (lesbian) noted, “[t]he community ... is very judgemental. You cannot identify as a lesbian or stud and still present feminine attributes like wearing a bra or dress. They don’t like confusion, and it’s like you’re already confused” and experiencing judgement for presenting “in ways that differ from these labels.”

The participants thus received encouragement for performing “gay-coded behaviour” (Lindsey, pansexual) and displaying a disdain for more heterosexual experiences, beliefs and traits. Such experiences and expectations indicate that the in-group is expected to present homonormative values as separate and homogenised from heteronormative typologies. Members were accordingly also expected to do their gender methodically through guided expectations indicating expressions of masculinity and femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). Complying with such expectations to gain access to the in-group may reinforce and maintain social structure and, as such, sex and gender binaries—thus, privilege is awarded to those distancing themselves from the “radically queer” individuals (Van den Berg 2016). Brett (gay) and Sienna (lesbian) saw homonormative typologies as the “rule books” of depicting expected behaviour—a sentiment echoed by Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2016).

As with the in-group, participants were relegated to the *out-group* for not conforming to a specific homonormative typology. Participants reported hiding their sexual orientation from gay and lesbian students because of a fear of discrimination based on not being able to perform their gay or lesbian identities *correctly* to their gay and lesbian audience. They assimilated into hetero- and homonormative assumptions to avoid

discrimination and marginalisation (Averett 2016). Owing to the interrelatedness of hetero- and homonormativity on campus, participants possibly ran the risk of facing discrimination and marginalisation from heterosexual, gay and lesbian communities for being either *too straight* or *too gay* or *lesbian* (Jagessar and Msibi 2015b; Wailing and Roffee 2017). Examples include policing their own gender performances (masculine and/or feminine) to obtain inclusion and even respect from students on campus and members of the LGBTIQ+ student organisations.

Figure 1 depicts this stratification of the good gay and lesbian versus the bad gay and lesbian on campus. Students received positive and inclusive social and sexual sanctioning in an in-group when they embraced and depicted the values at the top of the pyramid. However, if they failed to do so, they were relegated to the middle where they “verged” on gay or lesbian respectability (Rubin 1993) or the lower levels of homonormative value.

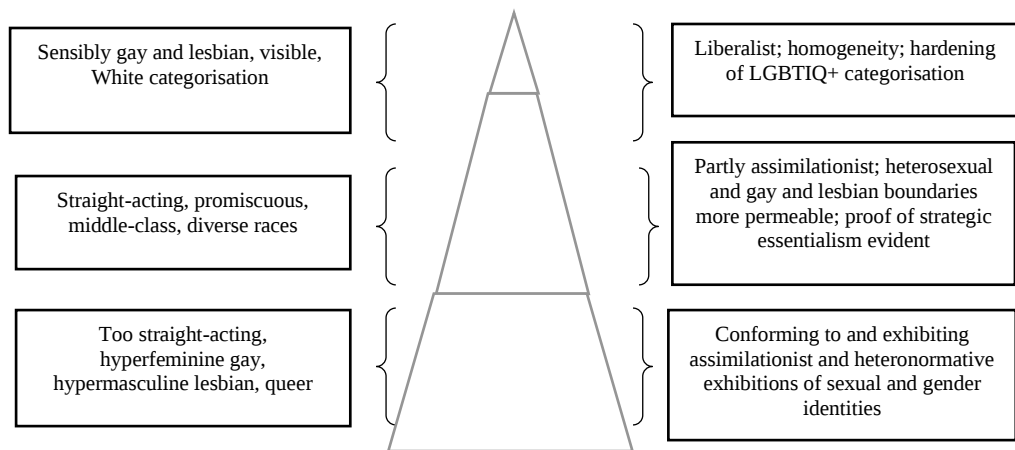


Figure 1: Homonormative pyramid of gay and lesbian value

In addition to homonormative placement, students also reflected on how heteronormativity informed their placement on campus. Concerning social placement along *heteronormative* lines, some participants reported forming part of organisations on campus with a heterosexual constituency. They joined such organisations due to the tolerance and understanding it could create through exposure to diversity by sharing struggling experiences. Martha (lesbian/queer) argued, “[f]amiliarity can be the gateway drug to empathy” (Lesch et al. 2017). Such tendencies could indicate attempts at assimilating into heteronormative expectations to challenge homophobia and stereotypes from inside the dominant social structure (Croce 2015). Contrariwise, Van den Berg (2016, 28) argues that such behaviour risks reinforcing hetero- and homonormative beliefs through integrating and presenting such beliefs instead of

“fighting for gay rights.” Other participants joined mixed-contingent organisations based on shared interests with the organisations, such as *volunteering*, and to *contribute* to the bigger *university context* through such a communal goal (see figure 1).

Experiences of marginalisation and discrimination were also reported due to not conforming to heteronormative values. Participants reported that heterosexual students expected gay and lesbian individuals to *act straight* on campus. This included expectations placed on, among others, gay men to be more masculine. Brett (gay) commented on how he and his gay male friends attempted to “look ‘tough’ and ... not to show your sensitive side [because] you will be labelled as gay or ‘moffie’.” They upheld such performances to avoid verbal homophobia—the use of homophobic discourse that seeks to subjugate gay men (McCormack 2013).

Based on heteronormative ideals, the in-group is characterised as being *straight-acting* while distancing themselves from “radically queer” students. A dualistic finding is worth noting here. On the one hand, findings support the *straight-acting* expectation by indicating that participants experienced more pressure to perform their sexual identity correctly according to gendered expectations, thus acting more *straight* around other heterosexual students. Taylor (2012, 148) argues that those who assimilate into heteronormativity for increased social power ignore “what is queer about being queer,” resulting in the reinforcement of discrimination and marginalisation based on heteronormative assumptions.

Conversely, participants reported that some of their heterosexual counterparts expected the more visible gay and lesbian students to exude a homogenised and stereotypical gay and lesbian performance. These heterosexual students might have such expectations to identify the “other” (gay and lesbian students) while expecting gay and lesbian students to be *invisible* enough to *not* challenge the dominant heteronormative order. Straight students may expect gay and lesbian students to conform to homonormativity, as influenced by heteronormative beliefs, to reinforce hegemonic heterosexuality by portraying the relationship between sex, gender and sexual orientation as the only *logical* conclusion (Averett 2016).

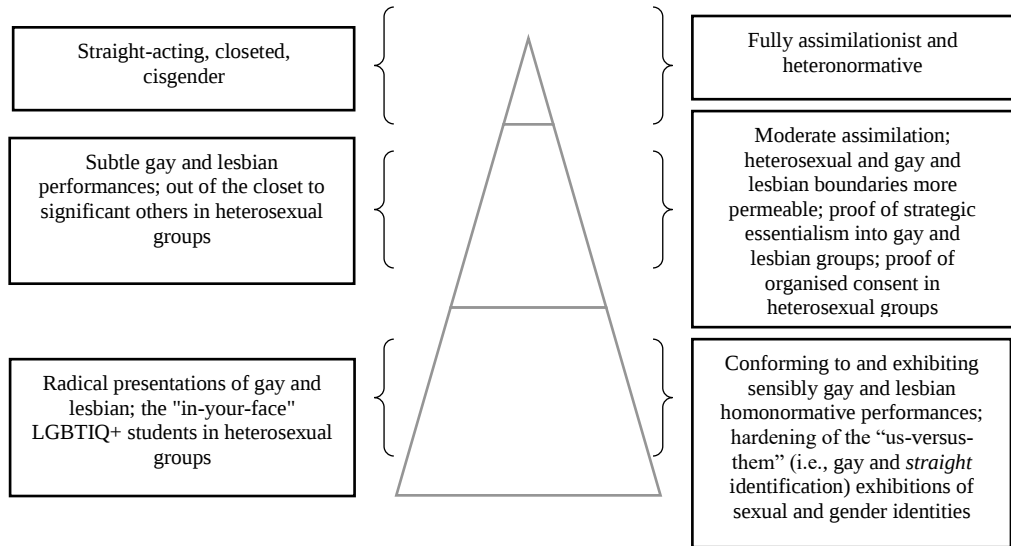


Figure 2: Heteronormative pyramid of gay and lesbian value

As with the in- and out-groups in gay and lesbian communities on campus, figure 2 shows that the acceptance into or rejection from straight communities emphasised a *heteronormative pyramid of value* based on the principles of Rubin’s (1993) *erotic pyramid*. The out-group represented the opposite of the in-group (*radical* and *stereotypical* expectations placed on “doing gay” and “doing lesbian”) (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). Gay participants recalled experiencing discrimination from heterosexual students if they were supposedly *too effeminate* and lesbian participants if they were *too masculine*. Such mechanisms might be socially placed because of the heteronormative belief that heterosexual individuals should distance themselves from gay and lesbian individuals to maintain the institutionalised superiority of heteronormativity through “othering” those who do not conform to its main tenets (Rothmann and Simmonds 2015).

Conclusion

Three themes emerged from the findings. Stereotypes of heterosexuality *and* homosexuality impede *and* encourage gay and lesbian students on campus to *assimilate* into or *transgress* homonormative typologies. Participants described homonormative typologies as narrow and hetero- and homonormativity as interrelated, overlapping and mutually reinforcing processes. This creates further hierarchical divisions among gay and lesbian persons. To this point, we found that gay and lesbian students are placed in in- and out-groups based on the specific gendered gay or lesbian constructions of identity, akin to the “good” or “bad” gay or lesbian. Concerning access to gay and lesbian groups, participants were awarded in-group access and privilege while placed highest in a hierarchy of value if they assimilated into homonormative typologies—that is, performing gay and lesbian sensibly—in addition to being White and distancing

themselves from radical or hyperpresentations of the “bad” gay and lesbian. Participants who displayed partly assimilationist behaviour (straight-acting) were placed in the middle of the hierarchy of value, with limited in-group access, likely because they sought acceptance through presenting both hetero- and homonormative values. Participants were more likely to be placed in the out-group at the lowest echelon of the pyramid if they fully assimilated into the heterosexual campus culture—that is, performing too straight, or contradictorily, too gay or lesbian—according to their sexual minority counterparts’ standards. Such placement caused feelings of isolation, loneliness and depression. Concerning placing gay and lesbian students into an in- and out-group in heterosexual campus contexts, the in-group (representing the highest level in the heteronormative pyramid of value) afforded gay and lesbian students access to heterosexual privileges if they fully conformed to heteronormative expectations (being in the closet, cisgender and straight-acting).

Finally, ideally, students would want to assimilate into and conform to the tenets of both normativities (presenting as stereotypically gay or lesbian to fit into gay or lesbian student communities, while concurrently acting straight enough to not force their queerness onto their heterosexual counterparts). Therefore, the pressure of such expectations necessitates gay and lesbian students to continuously navigate the sexually normative double-bind to gain acceptance into heterosexual, gay and lesbian campus communities. Consequently, it remains important for sociological research to inform university policies that encourage the facilitation of strategies for the inclusion of sexually diverse identities.

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