



Research article



Terms which LGBTQI+ individuals prefer or hate to be called by

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The evolution of the abbreviation LGBTQI+ comes on the backdrop of numerous studies that were conducted as a form of advocacy to promote the inclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals into society.

Objective: This study sought to explore the terms that LGBTQI+ individuals prefer to be called and those they hate to be called by.

Methods: The study adopted a qualitative approach underpinned by Husserl's descriptive phenomenological research design. Data was collected through WhatsApp-based semi-structured individual interviews from a 19 participants who were sampled using purposive and snowballing sampling methods. Data analysis was done using Colaizzi's phenomenological analysis method, and all ethical considerations to safeguard participants were adhered to.

Results: The analysis yielded two main themes as preferred terminologies and terms that are hated by the LGBTQI+ persons. The findings show an evolution in the terminologies used in relation to the LGBTQI+ identifying persons. Terms such as Queer, LGBTQI+ community, terms confirming gender identity, SOGI neutral, and preferred pronouns emerged as terms that LGBTQI+ people preferred to be called or addressed by. On the other side of the coin, the findings revealed terms that the LGBTQI+ people hated as these were perceived to be discriminatory and derogatory, such as terms like "moffie" and "stabane".

Conclusion: LGBTQI+ terms are forever evolving and there is a need to raise community awareness and conscientisation towards moving away from the use of derogatory and hateful terms. The hated terms continue to perpetuate verbal abuse, stigmatisation and discrimination of the LGBTQI+ community. Therefore, a nuanced approach to develop and adopt inclusive language policies to promote diversity in public and private spheres.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the terms which are utilised referring for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and plus (LGBTQI+) individuals. The acronym "LGBTQI+" is an abbreviation of the mainstream terminologies related to sexual orientation and

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gender identity [1]. The exploration of these terms is based on the dilemma that some people experience when interacting with LGBTQI+ individuals. The dilemma is mostly based on how to appropriately address LGBTQI+ individuals. That leads to some people using different terms, some of which are derogatory to the individuals. Though some people intentionally use derogatory terms, as a form of bullying LGBTQI+ individuals, some use the terms because they do not know whether it is right or wrong. However, the use of some of the terminologies perpetuates stigma and discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals. Knowledge of different terms and how LGBTQI+ individuals perceive those terms may assist in creating awareness in the general community, which in turn may assist in reducing the unintentional verbal abuse of LGBTQI+ individuals through the usage of hated terms.

2. Literature review

The acronym “LGBTQI+” is an abbreviation of the mainstream terminologies related to sexual orientation and gender identity [1]. The exploration of gender and sexual orientation can be traced back to the 1950s when the terms “lesbian” and “gay” were used to describe non-heterosexual individuals [2]. Bisexuality, transgender, queer and intersex were incorporated into the abbreviation as pro-queer studies were used as a form of advocacy against various forms of homophobia [3]. Later the plus was added to the abbreviation as an indication of the inclusion of other non-binary identifying identities that may not be listed in the abbreviation. The problem is that, although academic discourses have helped to promote diversity based on gender and sexual orientation, stigma and discrimination continue to plague the LGBTQI+ community [4]. In South Africa, the Apartheid government’s treatment of homosexuals led to cultivating a society that misunderstood same-sex relations and further stigmatised those who engaged in them [5]. This stigma often manifests through the use of derogatory terms associated with sexual orientation and gender identity. The evolution of gay rights in South Africa led to the amendment of the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 [6], which now allows for same-sex marriages [7]. Although South Africa allows same-sex marriages, some neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe still has strict anti-gay and anti-lesbian laws that prohibit any form of relationships between people in the LGBTQI+ community [8]. This goes for many other African countries that are still failing to uphold the rights of sexual minorities such as the LGBTQI+ persons and decriminalise their intimate relationships and marriages. Unfortunately, such failure is both non-progressive and non-trans formative in nature, and it breeds violence which commonly manifest itself in different forms of hate crime against the LGBTQI+ persons. Also, failure to uphold and respect the rights of LGBTQI+ persons in society often puts these sexual minorities at risk of stigma and discrimination by the so-called cisgender and heterosexual community. Use of degrading, dehumanising and derogatory language terms or phrases is commonly used by those who see or identify themselves as “straight” to show their disapproval and hate towards LGBTQI+ persons. Although some of these language terms and phrases are commonly used by people in different societies, they may, or may not be appealing to the members of LGBTQI+ who continue to be violated on daily basis. So, understanding the impact these terms or phrases may have on LGBTQI+ persons are critical in order to build diverse societies where everyone feels valued both as a human-being and citizen of the country. Language is regarded as an important tool of human connection and it power to either build or destroy societies. This then becomes crucial for communities such as LGBTQI+ that are sometimes treated as “other” or those that do not fit in the tick boxes of what is perceived as normal by the society. As widely known, the LGBTQI+ community is fairly new and there are a number of new discourses that are emerging or evolving within and outside the LGBTQI+ spectrum to better understand it. So, the language or terminologies that are used within this community by the community members themselves and those externally are continuously evolving.

One of the most intriguing things about the LGBTQI+ community is that they are forever at the forefront of developing their own vocabularies and terminologies that best describe their gender and sexual identity. For example, in early years, the focus was mainly on lesbians, gays and transgender people, but over the years we have seen the emergence of other terminologies such as queer, intersex and many others, which come up as members of this community continue to find and position themselves within the broader society through self-identity. For instance, the term “queer” is used as an inclusive term for all gender and sexual minority persons. Queer terminology identifies with individuals outside the sexual and traditional gender norms of heteronormativity, those in the LGBTQI+ category. The American Psychological Association (2015) refers to “queer” as an umbrella term inclusive of all non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, and gender minority identities. In the same vein, Zane (2015) echoes a similar narrative that embraces a non-traditional and fluid approach to sexuality and gender. According to Ruud (2018), “queer” is a more inclusive and fluid term as it puts no limitations on sexual orientation or gender expression beyond societal norms.

Another term that is also commonly and casually used is transgender, which is an umbrella term used to capture the spectrum of gender identities and gender-expression diversity [9]. Transgender covers a range of gender identities and expressions that fall outside the idea that all people can be classified as only one of two genders – male or female (gender binary) [10]. Gender identity is the internal sense of being male, female, neither, or both. Gender expression, often an extension of gender identity, involves the expression of a person’s gender identity through social roles, appearance, and behaviours [10]. Although sexual and gender identity are different, people often fail to distinguish between sexual identity and gender identity. The way people identify themselves within these broad spectrums differ from society to society, or from country to country. So, understanding the terminologies or names that people within the LGBTQI+ society prefer to be used when addressing them, or terms that they hate has become imperative in order to sensitize people on the use of appropriate language terms or concepts that are appropriate and acceptable in the pursuit of gender and sexual inclusivity and diversity. Also understanding terms which are found or perceived as inappropriate by the LGBTQI+ persons is also critical for building harmonious communities underpinned by sensitive and respectful culture. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore and describe the terms that LGBTQI+ persons prefer or hate to be called by in communities of South Africa and Zimbabwe. This study forms part of a larger study conducted in South Africa and Zimbabwe using WhatsApp during the period of hard COVID-19 lockdown.

3. Methods and materials

3.1. Study design

Given the purpose of this study, a qualitative research approach underpinned by Husserl's [11] descriptive phenomenological research design was used to explore and describe the terms that are preferred and hated by the LGBTQI+ persons in South Africa and Zimbabwe. The researchers were interested in exploring these terms from LGBTQI+ persons as they are lived or experienced by them, thus a qualitative research approach became relevant to achieve this purpose. These preferred or hated terms formed part of their lived experiences explored using descriptive phenomenological design. This enabled the researchers to gather rich in-depth data on participants views and perspectives on terminologies relating to gender and sexuality identity that are used on, or against them on daily basis. Phenomenology permits researchers to explore and unpack the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it [12,13]. Descriptive phenomenology has four main characteristics, namely: bracketing, intuiting, analysing and describing [14]. In adhering to these norms, the researchers jotted down all their preconceived ideas about the terms that are used against LGBTQI+ persons to enable them to get into participants worldviews of terminologies that are used against them in its purest form without any form of contamination. This involved use of reflective diaries to set those aside. Then thereafter, researcher immersed themselves into the data and analyzed data without following any pre-determined ideology or contaminating information. Although the use of WhatsApp as a data collection tool may be viewed as not suitable for phenomenological study, it deemed fit to gather the experiences of LGBTQI+ person regarding terms that they prefer or hate to be called or addressed by. The data came in a form of audio notes and written texts with some emojis and animation to culminate the meaning that participants associated or attached to each term used against them. Therefore, WhatsApp was able to gather the phenomenological data from this key population.

3.2. Study context

The study focused on South Africa and Zimbabwe. The choice of these countries was based on their different constitutional approaches regarding gender and sexually diverse individuals. According to the Constitution of South Africa, no person should be discriminated against based on gender and sexual identity [15]. However, in Zimbabwe, sexually and gender non-binary individuals are grouped among criminals [16–18]. Both South Africa and Zimbabwe are countries in Sub-Saharan Africa often characterised by alarming reports of violence across population groups, of which LGBTQI+ are the most vulnerable as they face hate crimes on daily basis.

3.3. Recruitment, sampling and data collection

In this study, the recruitment of participants, sampling, and collection of data occurred concurrently. This simultaneous process assisted us to identify shortcomings with the use of WhatsApp as a data collection tool, and to determine the feasibility of the recruitment plan and sampling method. In this study, both purposive and snowballing sampling methods were used. Firstly, we adopted purposive sampling method to select the first two participants who were existing contacts of the LGBTQI+ community, which were known to the first author as she had previously worked with them. As a criterion-based sampling method, these participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: be a member of the LGBTQI+ community or identify as part of the LGBTQI+ member, be aged 21 years or older, be a black African, reside in Zimbabwe or South Africa, be on WhatsApp, and be willing to participate in the study. These first two participants were used as point of contacts during the snowball sampling because they are the ones who directed us to other participants, or who conveyed the study message to others that were known to them. They were provided with information relating to the study, including how data will be collected. Furthermore, the researcher sent the information brochure and the research questions to the two participants and requested them to forward them via WhatsApp to some of their acquaintances who are members of the LGBTQI+ community to respond to the questions via WhatsApp in a form of a text message or voice note [19]. Although WhatsApp was used as a platform for data collection, making it a data collection tool, the formulation of interview questions followed a semi-structured fashion to ensure that the purpose of the study is well captured. The WhatsApp-based semi-structured interview guide had the following questions: "How old are you? How do you identify yourself on the LGBTQI+ spectrum? What terms or names have you been exposed to or called as an LGBTQI+ individual? How did you feel about that? What collective term related to gender do you prefer, and why? Which terms do you hate? Please explain why?" [19]. The instruction provided was that after responding, their responses should be sent to the principal investigator; or WhatsApp the feedback to the people who forwarded them the message, until the data finally reached the initial participant and the researcher, if they want to remain anonymous to the researchers. Although this route has the limitation that other participants might see the responses, it was the method that all the participants used as they remained anonymous to the researchers for safety purposes, as most LGBTQI+ members want to be known only by their close circle of friends or their intimate partners, especially those who are still in the closet. The total number of participants who participated in this study was 19, which is adequate for a phenomenological study as many phenomenological studies are mostly conducted with sample sizes of 10–25 or less [14,20].

3.4. Data analysis and rigour

Data in the form of audio notes and texts were transferred from the principal researcher's phone to one of the researcher's phone to transcribe the WhatsApp interviews verbatim. This entailed combining of both audio notes and texts of each participant into one file,

and cleaning of data by means of correction spelling or typographical errors and converting the WhatsApp slang into proper English. The after, WhatsApp messages were also sent to another researcher to check the language and ensure that the abbreviations and emojis commonly used in WhatsApp messages turned into formal language. Data was then manually analyzed independently by two of the authors who were not part of the data collection, using Colaizzi's [21,22] seven-steps analysis method as follows: the first step involved reading and reading of each transcript repeatedly by each researcher to get sense of what is said by participants and to allow researchers to immerse themselves into the participants worldviews; secondly the researchers identified all statements in the utterances or accounts of participants that were of direct relevance to the terms that LGBTQI+ persons preferred or hated; thirdly the researchers formulated themes from the statements that were identified to be relevant to the terms that LGBTQI+ preferred or hated; Fourthly, the researchers then started sorting out those formulated themes into categories cluster of and themes (as presented in Table 2); The fifth step involved defining of emergent themes and these were labelled as preferred terms and hated terms; and the sixth step involved description of the thematic structure of the phenomenon as it emerged from the data, and this also involved extensive and rigorous discussion amongst researchers to reach consensus on the major themes that emerged from the analysis; and in the last seventh step the summary of emergent themes were sent back to the initial two participants to share with all the participants through the initial steps followed during data collections as part of member checking in order to prevent distortion of participants experiences and meaning. Data analysis yielded two main themes as illustrated in Table 2.

4. Ethical consideration

The study received ethical clearance from the College of Human Sciences Ethics Review Committee (Ref: 90187598/CREC/2021). The execution of this study was guided by the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki regarding research involving human subjects [23]. Although this was a pure qualitative study with minimal harm and non-invasive in nature, ethical principles such as seeking informed consent, maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity, respect for human dignity and avoidance of harm became very important as the LGBTQI+ population is regarded as vulnerable population that warrants extra care. First, participants were given the information leaflet detailing the study purpose, objectives, research questions, risks and benefits to the participants. Participants who were willing to participate in the study were given written informed-consent forms to sign and those who wanted to be anonymous to the researcher would verbally consent before sharing a text message or sending an audio file. To ensure confidentiality, no personal information was collected from participants during the WhatsApp data collection process, and no identifying information was gathered to can trace back the participant. All data files from each participant were assigned codes and pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, and participants were reassured that no personal or identifying information would be shared or divulged to anyone when disseminating the study findings.

5. Findings

The participants belonged to diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Lesbian (one); gay (two), bisexual (one), transgender (six females and three males), intersex (one); queer (three) and men who have sex with men (two). Four participants were from Zimbabwe. A majority (n = 15) reside in South Africa. All participants were aged 40 years and younger (up to 22 years) which is not surprising because of the data collection approach and that there seems to be limited visibility and participation of middle-aged and elderly LGBTQI+ individuals in South Africa, let alone Zimbabwe. The biographical data are presented in Table 1. Two main themes emerged from the data analysis: (i), preferred terms; (ii) hated terms. Each theme has several sub-themes.

Table 1
Biographic data of participants.

Pseudonym	Classification	Age
Tilly	Bisexual (Female)	22
Abel	Gay	23
Alice	Lesbian	23
Tammy	Queer	24
Patric	Gay	25
Benny	Transgender Male	25
Mumsy	Transgender female	27
Bandile	Transgender male	27
Given	Queer	28
Pammy	Queer	28
Jacky	Transgender Male	29
Mabel	Transgender female	30
Beauty	Transgender Female	30
John	MSM	30
Queen	Transgender Female	31
Tiny	Intersex	32
James	MSM	34
Angel	Transgender Female	35
Precious	Transgender Female	40

Table 2
Summary of themes and subthemes.

Theme	Subthemes
1. Preferred terms	1.1. Queer 1.2. LGBTQI+ Community 1.3. Terms which confirm gender identity 1.4. SOGI neutral terms 1.5. Preferred pronouns - He, them, this, they
2. Hated terms	2.1. Moffie 2.2. Stabane 2.3. Non-South African derogatory names or terms 2.4. Lesbian 2.5. Shemale 2.6. Transsexual 2.7. Intersex 2.8. Double adapter

5.1. Preferred terms

The first theme that emerged from the findings of this study related to the terms that are preferred by the LGBTQI+ persons in South Africa and Zimbabwe. These terms varied across the members of the LGBTQI+ persons and included terminologies such as queer, LGBTQI+ community, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) neutral terms, terms which confirm the gender identity and preferred pronouns.

5.1.1. Queer

The participants in this study reported that they preferred or liked being referred to as queer. This term came out strong from the majority of participants as they regarded it important for non-binary identities. For example, Tammy, a 24-year old queer man reported that he prefers gender queer as it is a non-binary language, thus reducing chances of using binary language to refer to non-binary people as follows:

“I prefer gender queer because I believe it is important for non-binary identities to not be described using binary language.” (Tammy)

On the other side, Patric, 25-year old gay man reported that he prefers queer because it resonates well with him as a gay men who likes other men as:

“I prefer the term queer. I am a gay man who likes other men and I think that’s where I relate.” (Patric)

To further substantiate their preference of the term, some participants indicated that the term “queer” is also preferred because it is non-binary, meaning that it does not place one into a box based on one’s gender identity. To further substantiate this, two of the participants said the following in this regard:

“I like collective name related to gender: genderqueer non-binary or genderqueer is an umbrella term for gender identities that are neither male or female, identities that are outside gender binary, this can also be defined as a spectrum of gender identity that are not exclusively masculine or feminine.” (Mabel)

“People should rather use the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella body that describes the entire community.” (Jacky)

5.1.2. LGBTQI+ community

To elaborate on moving away from being put in a box, while some participants preferred the use of the term “queer”, others preferred the use of the collective acronym LGBTQI+ community, instead to refrain from putting people in specific categories.

“I do not like when people put it in a box, to differentiate between which gender you are (transgender/non-binary/gay/lesbian). I would prefer them to use the term LGBTQI+ community.” (Patric)

5.1.3. Terms which confirm the gender identity

Some transgender females prefer the use of a term which really emphasise their femininity, including the names used for cisgender women. The findings of this study also revealed that there are terms that persons from the LGBTQI+ community prefer to be called by and some of these are, ‘Mavis’, ‘Mabel’, ‘sisi’ and ‘mfazi’. The findings below indicate some of these terms used by the participants:

“When trans women talk among themselves, we use the term ‘Mavis’ or ‘Mabel’ to describe ourselves and our sisters. I prefer ‘Mavis’ because its community derived.” (Precious)

“We, Bafati, Trans colour Queens, Queer dolls. It is celebrating the person I am happy and colourful.” (Precious)

“Collective terms related to gender that I prefer are ‘sisi’, ‘Ntombi’, ‘mamazi’, ‘mfazi’ because they affirm me as the woman I am in my Nguni language.” (Angel)

I prefer being referred to as “Her” a female, because I have boobs and all other things females have regardless of me loving the same sex.” (Beauty).

5.1.4. Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) neutral terms

Some participants prefer gender identity-affirming terms; however, in the same breadth there are others who prefer gender-neutral terms. The neutral terms are used to deal with the assumptions of gender identification on public and professional platforms. One of the participants reported as follows:

“I prefer using gender-neutral terms when addressing groups of people whose gender identities I don’t know. As a result, I’d address a crowd as ‘good evening honoured guests’ instead of ‘good evening, ladies, and gentlemen.’ The former is inclusive of all people, while the latter doesn’t accommodate non-binary and gender-queer people.” (Jacky)

5.1.5. Preferred pronouns – he, them, this, him, they

Among the evolving nature of non-binary and gender non-conforming terms used, the data also showed that pronouns are subjectively used by various individuals, depending on what they identify as. Usually, in the heterosexual community the common pronouns used are he, which refers to the male-identifying individuals and her/she for the female identifying persons. However, as shown below, some participants shared some broader pronouns that they prefer and the reason why they prefer them, as opposed to the generic two pronouns often used by heterosexual identifying persons:

“I would prefer to be called ‘he’, because I am still a man, just attracted to other men” (Mumsy)

“I prefer “them”. Why? so as to avoid the confusion that comes with, HE/SHE.” (Queen)

“Them”. Why? I feel confident and comfortable because I don’t identify as he or she” (Pammy)

“Him; Them; This.” (Abel)

5.2. Hated terms

The second prominent theme derived from the data analysis was the terms that participants hated. They indicated that there are terms that they hate. The LGBTQBI+ community goes through discrimination of various forms at the hands of the cis-gendered heterosexual persons. One of the identifiers of this discrimination and bullying is using terms that are derogative and demeaning to non-gender conforming persons. The terms include ‘African derogatory names/terms, ‘moffie,’ ‘stabane’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘shemale,’ ‘transsexual’ ‘intersex’ and ‘double adapter.’ These terms have been identified as non-inclusive and discriminatory towards LGBTQBI+ persons.

5.2.1. Moffie

Some people are homophobic and in their display of homophobia they use certain terms to refer to LGBTQBI+ identifying persons as a form of bullying and stigmatising. And often these are hurtful terms used as a form of insult toward gender non-conforming persons. The participants below shared some of their views on one of these terms, namely *Moffie*:

“I hate being called ‘moffie’ this is mostly used by bullies and homophobic people who intend to offend queer people.” (Mabel)

“The most hateful terms that people use are ‘moffie,’ ‘stabane’, all those hateful names that will come across as if you’re not human. We deserve a seat at the table. We are humans, we are here, and we are professionals. We are working hard every day, working hard to prove to the world that we do exist, and this is who we are – and it is either you love us or leave us alone.” (Patric)

5.2.2. Stabane

Owing to the existing social stigma on the African continent towards LGBTQBI+ identifying persons, people will often use terms in local languages to display their distaste or hate towards a specific group of people, in this instance, the LGBTQBI+ community. And among the hated terms also used and identified by the participants was the term ‘*stabane*’. This term is offensive; and, as a result, it features as one of the most hated terms:

“What we dislike, ‘stabane’ and ‘moffie’. Why I dislike the term is because society is using it to make us feel unworthy.” (Precious)

“I hate to be called stabane. They use words like ‘stabane’ which often has bad connotations.” (Angel)

5.2.3. Non-South African derogatory names/terms

Among the terms identified and hated by some participants are those used in the African language/lingo, also known as slang. The hated terms used to discriminate against the LGBTQBI+ persons differ from one culture and context to another. Some participants are

living in South Africa but originally hailed from Zimbabwe. Some of the Zimbabwean participants mentioned the following:

“I hate being called “ngito”; “ngochani”; “sis bhudi”. (Mumsy)

“I hate the term “ngochani” These terms have connotations of stigma and discrimination ... The other term I hate is: “sis bhudi”. They allude to the fact that I am confused about my sexuality which is not the case” (Queen)

“Homo; ngochani; gogo; sisi; ngito; sewage” (Abel)

“I hate being called Tsikuhuvhili (double-headed snake) and lidzakudzaku,” (Tilly)

5.2.4. *Lesbian*

Even though some members of the LGBTQI+ community do not mind being referred to as lesbians, others expressed that they do not like to be called ‘lesbians’ which goes to show that not all non-binary persons like to be called by one blanket name or term. What may not bother some may be bothersome to others. Certain individuals find this term restrictive and offensive; and, as a result, they do not like to be called by this term:

“I hate being called ‘Lesbian’ as it restricts my sexuality.” (Benny)

“People don’t call me lesbian; I am not, I am just different” (Given)

5.2.5. *Shemale*

The other hated term is “shemale”, a term normally used by transgender females:

“Terms I hate is shemale (because it objectifies, sexualises trans bodies and often linked to pornography), (Angel)

“I also hate words like ‘tranny’ and ‘shemale’ as they degrade the community.” (Tammy)

5.2.6. *Transsexual*

Some members of the non-binary community prefer the use of “transgender”; however, this is not always universal as some non-binary individuals find this term offensive; and, as a result, do not prefer to be referred to as transgender. Another term which is also hated by some participants is “transsexual”:

“I hate transsexual as is outdated and does not work within the queer 2021 lexicon. (Tammy)

“I hate terms like male MTF (male to female) identify trans women (I can’t say I’m mtf because I have never had any relation with the male identity. For me it was a sense of affirmation).” (Angel)

“I find the term ‘trans’ to be offensive ...” (Jacky)

5.2.7. *Intersex*

Some participants indicated that they do not like to be called by terms that refer to their sexuality, One of the participants indicated that he/she does not like it when the term “intersex” is used to refer to them:

“I dislike the term intersex; I find that it focuses on people’s sexualities and problematizes their biological makeup (people are far greater than their sexualities).” (Tiny)

5.2.8. *Double adapter*

The participants expressed their distaste for terms often used as nicknames or terms that jokingly refer to them as objects rather than seeing them as human beings:

“I hate it when they call me a double adaptor, I am a human being, not a gadget” (Tilly)

6. Discussion

The study showed that the terms used for the LGBTQI+ community are ever evolving with some terms affirming while others are derogatory. The LGBTQI+ language is ever evolving and there is a challenge to keep up with the changing terminologies [24]. However, this research posited that, among the evolving nature of non-binary and gender non-conforming terms used, pronouns he, them, theirs or they, are used by various individuals based on how they identify themselves [10]. Other scholars on LGBTQI+ inclusivity such as Prayson and Rowe [25] have emphasised the importance of the language awareness on daily conversations with diverse individuals. This would entail use of inclusive language terms such as addressing audience as everyone, fellas, folks, instead of using terms phrases like ladies and gentlemen in order to respect and accommodate those who might not otherwise prefer to be called as such, or may not be perceived as applying to everyone [26].

The study revealed that the term “queer” seems to be the commonly preferred term for the LGBTQI+ community in that it is a non-

binary term, and it is diverse and acknowledged by many because it does not limit an individual to a specific term or grouping [24,27]. The findings of this study are similar to earlier research which found that the word “queer” gained favour from many activists as it attempts to encourage the acceptance of an umbrella term that includes as many sexuality and gender continuums as possible [28], thus promoting the spirit of inclusivity and togetherness where people are not confined into boxes or shells.

Some terms that are used are harmful and derogatory to the LGBTQI+ community [29]. The findings of this study show that the LGBTQI+ community goes through discrimination of various forms at the hands of cis-gendered heterosexual persons, this includes bullying and the use of terms that are derogatory and demeaning to non-gender-conforming persons; and the terms identified included South African and non-South African derogatory names which are ngochane, ngito, moffie, stabane, lesbian, shemale, transexual, intersex and ‘double adapter’. Earlier research by Msibi [30] and Mavhandu-Mudzusi [31] found that derogatory terms such as *isitabane*, double adaptor, moffie, *sis bhuti*, *Jason* and *Senzo*, *Adam* and *Steve*, *Eve* and *Eve*, brother-sister were used by heterosexual students to refer to and belittle LGBTI students.

Such instances of intolerance towards students who deviate from heterosexual desire illustrate the pervasive nature of heteronormativity, even among the student population. In his study, Msibi [30] also found that students do not want to be associated with queer-identifying students and revealed an immense fear of being perceived as or even ‘becoming’ LGBTI. By using language incompatible with a person’s identity, or terms that an individual may perceive as derogatory or a slur, the description could add to the stigmatisation and discrimination an individual feels [4].

7. Limitations

WhatsApp, as a method of data collection, has its own limitations as the researchers were not able to probe any further or to ask follow-up questions on the views of LGBTQI+ individuals in relation to their preference of terminologies used to address them. This leads to difficulties in performing an in-depth inquiry into their views, therefore limiting the researchers’ efforts to collect as much information as needed. WhatsApp as a tool failed to provide the rich information needed for qualitative data analysis. The snowballing technique also had its limitations, as the researchers were only able to access individuals known to them, and were not able to identify as many individuals within the community, willing to share their perceptions. The issues of confidentiality and anonymity were somehow compromised through the to and from movements of responses among the participants. Therefore, the findings of this paper should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

8. Conclusion

This study departed from the premises of engaging with the evolving terminologies among the non-binary community, with the intention of exploring preferred terms and hated terms. Based on the findings of this study, it became evident from the findings of the study that the preferred terms or terms that are perceived to be appropriate seem to be fewer than the hated terms. Among the hated terms are terms that are used in African local languages, such as ‘moffie’, ‘*stabane*’, ‘*ngito*’, and other persisting English terms like ‘double adapter’ and ‘intersex’. The continuous use of these derogatory terms proves to be perpetuating the verbal abuse, bullying, stigmatisation and dehumanisation of non-gender conforming persons in communities thus highlighting the need to develop interventions to sensitize people and communities at large about inclusive language to avoid othering members of the LGBTQI+ community.

The findings suggest a need to educate the communities about the evolving nature of LGBTQI+ terms and a need to conscientise them on the use of appropriate language terms and avoidance of verbal abuse terms that can be emotional and psychological damaging to the LGBTQI+ community. The findings of this study also highlight the need for development of a language dictionary for non-binary and binary communities that can be used development of curriculum in primary, secondary and tertiary schools. Language is not static; it evolves with time and the same applies to language related to the sexual orientation and gender identity of the LGBTQI+ persons. It is imperative that more be done to move away from the use of derogatory terms and to embrace diversity through change of mindsets and proper use of inclusive language in communities.

Author contribution statement

Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Lucas Mamabolo; Tshifhiwa Netshapapame; Thembinkosi Ngwenya; Tlhomaro Marebane: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Anza Ndou; Andile Mthombeni; Siyabulela Eric Mgolozeli: Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

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