

Diversity and Inclusion in the South African Telecommunications Industry: an LGBTQIA+ Employee Perspective

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Abstract: Despite improvements globally in actions and campaigns supporting the LGBTQIA+ community, individuals who belong to the community continue to face immense backlash and challenges in their lives for their choices and beliefs. In Africa, there are still over 30 countries that criminalise acts of homosexuality. People who identify as LGBTQIA+ often face discrimination, harassment, and violence because of their sexual orientation or gender in social and workplace settings. This study aimed to understand the experiences of employees who align with the LGBTQIA+ community and how they navigate diversity and inclusion in the workplace. While examining whether organisational culture may enable the seamless reasonable accommodation and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ employees in the workplace. The study focused on one sector at this time to further understand if the South African telecommunications industry is embracing diversity, equity and inclusion of employees who identify as LGBTQIA+. The two theories which guided the study were the queer theory and institutional theory. These theories assisted in providing a greater understanding of the concepts and phenomena studied. Providing a lens that enabled an understanding of how an individual's unique experiences in the workplace may be perceived, as a deterrent for inclusion. Following a mixed qualitative methodology, data was gathered using a two-phase approach. The first phase entailed purposively selecting eight participants who engaged in a reflective diary. The second phase involved a set of interviews with fifteen participants. Data gathered from both phases were coded and thematically analysed enabling a triangulation of findings. Which revealed that diversity and inclusion measures are unmet. Employees who identify, as belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community are challenged each day with many resigning in an attempt to escape discrimination, harassment, and abuse. Participant's commitment to continue with the diary study for fear of being identified as the first limitation. The second limitation was the industry's reluctance to share their insights. Trust had to be built to continue with the research process. Recommendation for further research in this area and for studies to include other sectors with larger samples.

Keywords: Diversity, Inclusion, Organisational Culture, Workplace, LGBTQIA+, South Africa.

1. Introduction and Background

The LGBTQIA+ community is a group which experiences a lot of discrimination, judgment, harassment and bullying because of their sexuality and gender preferences (Ricciardo, et al., 2021). As society assumes heterosexuality and gender binary as a norm, these societal assumptions lead to an increase in the discrimination and harassment of people who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Mackay, 2021). LGBTQIA+ individuals' identities are devalued because of society's larger acceptance of heteronormative (Goshorn, Mason, & Sperandio, 2022).

In Africa, three out of five countries have laws that criminalise acts of homosexuality including any public expression of gender or sexuality that does not conform to societal standards or heterosexual norms (Pichon & Kourchoudian, 2019). Homophobic behaviour is still widespread globally and in a country like Cameroon people can be sentenced to up to five years in prison for same-sex relationships (Maidment, 2021). This means people who identify as LGBTQIA+ must hide who they are for fear of being castrated or arrested.

2. Research Problem

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, and asexual plus form a large community globally. However, LGBTQIA+ individuals are more likely to be discriminated against, harassed, or subjected to some form of violence because of their sexual orientation or identity when compared to those who identify as heterosexual (Subhrajit, 2014). Although there have been significant improvements over the past two decades in the human rights sphere regarding gender and sexual diversity, discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals have not ceased to exist (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015).

Homophobic behaviour is still widespread globally and in a country like Cameroon people can be sentenced to up to five years in prison for same-sex relationships (Maidment, 2021). This means that people who identify as LGBTQIA+ must hide who they are for fear of being castrated or arrested. To date, LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to face exclusion and discrimination (Pearce, Gardiner, Cumming-Potvin, & Martino, 2016; Terra, et al., 2021). Homosexuality is still illegal in certain countries and in some of those countries, homosexual acts are punishable

by the death penalty (Knight & Wilson, 2016). In such instances, LGBTQIA+ individuals are not at liberty to publicly express themselves or their sexual orientation for fear of what could happen to them or how they may be treated.

Society still assumes heterosexuality and gender binary as a norm, these societal assumptions lead to an increase in the discrimination and harassment of individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Mackay, 2021; Subhrajit, 2014). LGBTQIA+ individuals are not as free as one may assume, this is exacerbated by the stigmas associated with being part of the LGBTQIA+ community, the treatment and judgment passed on them. LGBTQIA+ individuals are often stereotyped, stigmatized, or labelled according to what others perceive them to be without really knowing the person they work alongside (Pichler & Ruggs, 2018). The LGBTQIA+ community is challenged in larger social contexts, and they continue to face several challenges globally including in the workplace (Subhrajit, 2014). Globally 64 countries have laws that criminalise homosexuality, in Africa, there are still over 30 countries that prohibit same-sex relationships, in countries like Sudan, Mauritania, and Somalia the death penalty is prescribed for those who are homosexual (Bhandari, 2023; BBC News, 2023). In a workplace environment, the majority of those who identify as LGBTQIA+ are fearful of disclosing their sexual orientation as they think that it might lead to them losing their job (Subhrajit, 2014).

Some organisational processes and business environments still do not reasonably accommodate employees who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Ricciardo, et al., 2021). Whilst in South Africa, the LGBTQIA+ community or employees' rights are protected under several regulations such as the Employment Equity Act (EEA) which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and provides procedures to follow in handling such discrimination (Benjamin, 2019). There is still a large number of organisations that do not take the initiative to be inclusive, considerate or reasonably accommodate LGBTQIA+ employees for example, including gender-neutral restrooms, implementing the use of pronouns, creating a conducive and safe workplace or amending human resource benefits such as adoption or parental leave.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were the following:

- To understand the workplace experiences of LGBTQIA+ employees within the SA telecommunication industry.
- To explore how diversity and inclusion can be used as tools or agents for the reasonable accommodation of the LGBTQIA+ community within the SA telecommunication industry.
- To examine whether organisational culture may enable the seamless inclusion of LGBTQIA+ employees within the SA telecommunication industry.

4. Research Methodology

To provide an understanding of the research question and interpret the social interaction, the study adopts a qualitative methodology approach. This research approach aided in providing an understanding of how individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ navigate daily in the workplace, and what their lived experiences are like. Following a mixed qualitative methodology, data was gathered using a two-phase approach. The first phase entailed purposively selecting eight participants who engaged in a reflective diary. The second phase involved a set of interviews with fifteen participants. The data gathered from both phases were coded and thematically analysed enabling a triangulation of findings.

5. Theoretical Framework

The two theories which guided the study were the queer theory and institutional theory. These theories assisted in providing a greater understanding of the concepts and phenomena studied. Providing a lens that enabled an understanding of how an individual's unique experiences in the workplace may be perceived, as a deterrence for inclusion.

The queer theory provided a lens to study how an individual's unique experiences in the workplace may create discrimination or privilege for them based on their gender or sexuality. The institutional theory of diversity management was used as a lens to study how LGBTQIA+ individuals in the workplace are reasonably accommodated and managed as they navigate the work environment, organisational culture, and workplace experiences.

6. Literature Review on LGBTQIA+

Many individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ are afraid to disclose their sexual orientation or identity for fear of being subjected to harassment, exclusion, or discrimination (Dau & Strauss, 2016). To date, LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to face exclusion and discrimination in their lives (Pearce, Gardiner, Cumming-Potvin, & Martino, 2016; Terra, et al., 2021). Some individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ do not disclose their sexual identity due to discrimination, harassment and silencing experienced in the workplace (Paisley & Tayar, 2016). In the year 1993, the United States of America's government implemented a policy which would allow LGBTQIA+ individuals to join the military however there was a condition that they keep their sexual orientation a secret, the policy was however later abolished in the year 2011 (Sangha, 2015). In Russia, LGBTQIA+ is not illegal however the signing of a propaganda law in March 2012 indirectly criminalises LGBTQIA+ individuals resulting in homosexuals not freely living their lives (Knight & Wilson, 2016). In Africa, homosexuality is still considered illegal in over 30 countries (Bhandari, 2023). There are however some countries such as the US where there have been some changes and improvements as attitudes of the public have improved towards LGBTQIA+ people in recent years and they now enjoy more rights equated to the past (Rhodes & Stewart, 2016).

Hossain, Atif, Ahmed, & Mia (2020) advocate the view that LGBTQIA+ individuals have gained support over the past two decades which has resulted in organisations incorporating employee equality initiatives into their diversity management strategies. As much as organisations like the United Nations condemn violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, there are still countries that punish those who identify as LGBTQIA+. In the workplace, LGBTQIA+ employees also face some form of discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, this hostility towards them prevents them from performing their core functions, negatively affects their performance and lowers their performance (Bonaventura & Biondo, 2016; Hossain, Atif, Ahmed, & Mia, 2020). In a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in African countries except for Algeria, Egypt, and Sudan it found that people were more tolerating of those who have different religious beliefs than them but did not show the same tolerance for people who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Dulani, Sambo, & Dionne, 2016). The acceptance of religious differences over the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals shows how society still frowns upon homosexuals, and they may also not be accepting of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the workplace.

There is visibility and growth towards the acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community and their rights globally and in some African countries. However, recent events reveal that homosexuality is still considered illegal in over 30 African countries (Bhandari, 2023). According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) 2023 review, in Africa, same-sex relationships are punishable by the death penalty in 3 countries, imprisonment of more than 10 years to life in 9 countries, and imprisonment of less than 10 years or other penalties in 20 countries. Not all hope is lost as numerous governments are passing anti-discrimination laws in favour of LGBTQIA+ rights (Subhrajit, 2014). There are only a few countries (South Africa, Botswana, Mauritius, Mozambique, and Seychelles) that have fully codified their laws to ensure that the LGBTQIA+ community is not discriminated against based on sexual orientation (Matebeni, 2023).

The global stance and visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community rights does not necessarily mean that the community enjoys the freedom of expression and is free from violence and hate crime. Uganda and Kenya have recently been in the news for passing harsh laws. These laws seek to further oppress those who identify as LGBTQIA+. Uganda passed the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in March 2023, with this Bill homosexuals can be sentenced to the death penalty, life imprisonment or 10 to 20 years in prison (Bhandari, 2023; Matebeni, 2023). In Kenya the government had banned the registration of a National Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission, the purpose of the commission is to work towards changes in policies and overall support to the LGBTQIA+ community, fortunately for the LGBTQIA+ community that ruling was struck down by Kenyan supreme court in February 2023 (Woensdregt & van Stapele, 2023). As a result of the societal stigma associated with LGBTQIA+ individuals, some LGBTQIA+ employees still experience unfair treatment, harassment, violence, and systematic oppression in the workplace (Webster, Adams, Maranto, & Sawyer, 2018).

In South Africa, individuals' rights based on sexual orientation have been in the constitution since 1994 however LGBT+ individuals are still encountering a lot of challenges and human rights issues (Knight & Wilson, 2016). A study titled "The Persisting Discrimination against Black LGBT Workers amidst Progressive Policies in South Africa" by Dhatemwa (2014), found that although South Africa has progressive legislation that is meant to protect the LGBTQIA+ community, they are still a group that experiences a large degree of unfair treatment, are discriminated against, and harassed throughout their careers. In contrast, a recent study by Tshisa and van der Walt (2022) found that some of the participants had positive experiences and were satisfied in the workplace whilst other participants were either neutral or had negative experiences. More still needs to be done in the

workplace for LGBTQIA+ employees to be reasonably accommodated and feel included. LGBTQIA+ employees especially the younger generation coming from townships of South African face even more challenges of homophobia (Benjamin, 2016). They are often stereotyped based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. The issue of equal rights, opportunities, and non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation seems to be on paper and not fully implemented or practised.

Formal LGBTQIA+ policies and practices consider the support of equality of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the workplace, these policies can signal the organisational culture, and acceptable or expected behaviours throughout the organisation (Webster, Adams, Maranto, & Sawyer, 2018). Policies and practices are not adequate if the climate in the workplace is not LGBTQIA+ supportive, employees must be made aware of the support available to them and the channels or means to follow to address discrimination in the workplace. Management in organisations is key in creating a work environment that is inclusive, welcoming, and supportive (Tshisa & van der Walt, 2022). Supportive workplace relationships consider the interpersonal resources available to LGBTQIA+ individuals in the workplace, these can be in the form of support groups, networks or visible allyship.

7. Ethical Considerations

This research study was conducted following the ethical considerations and guidelines of the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at the University of Witwatersrand. An ethics clearance certificate with protocol number H22/11/81 was obtained from the University of Witwatersrand ethics committee before conducting the research.

The researcher also obtained written consent from the study participants before they took part in the study. The participants were taken through what the research process entails, explaining that their participation is voluntary and there will be no compensation for their participation in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and guaranteed, if there is a need to mention a name or organisation details, pseudonyms will be used. The researcher also informed the participants that should they feel uncomfortable at any stage of the study they can request to be excused from participating and they will not be disadvantaged or penalised for doing so.

The participant's information letter as provided by the Wits Business School was shared with the study participants detailing the purpose of the study and its nature. The researcher assured the participants that any of the information collected during the research period would only be used for this study, it would not be shared with anyone else, and the information would be stored securely for three years.

8. Findings and Discussions

The data that was gathered from the reflective diaries and interviews revealed that diversity and inclusion measures are unmet. It highlighted that employees who identify, as belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community are challenged each day with many resigning in an attempt to escape discrimination, harassment, and abuse endured in the workplace. One of the research participants revealed that although he meets his performance targets, he did not receive a salary increase for three consecutive years, when asked why that was the case, he shared that his manager is homophobic and had made it clear that if he does not resign, he will make his life “a living hell”. The findings also revealed that the South African telecommunications industry does have policies that are supposed to protect the LGBTQIA+ community in the workplace, however, it does seem that there is a gap between policy documentation and implementation which results in the community members not being reasonably accommodated or treated fairly. Below are a few extracts from some of the research participants' journal entries and interviews providing a more verbatim account of their experiences.

I have noticed here at work that for our community we have to put in extra work just to show that we're capable, we can do the work and yet I'm still not recognized. I have raised this with Human Resources, but nothing came of it, considering that the person I was reporting was the Head of Department. - RPart01

Where I work, I find that there isn't anything done for LGBTQIA+ people, we are just the alphabet people. For example, there are no gender-neutral bathrooms and are no growth opportunities. A lot of people see us as a lifestyle unlike disabled people – so certain things are not considered. No law forces my employer to reasonably accommodate me, the policies are general and not explicit about LGBTQIA+. - RPart02

What I have noticed is that I need to hide my identity, and speak less because I have missed so many opportunities because of my sexuality and how outspoken I am. However, the issue is not my organisation or the culture in it but the team I work with, other LGBTQIA+ people in the same organisation have it all well and they don't have the same experience as me. - RPart03

I work in a call centre environment and the majority of my colleagues are very young, they like throwing comments at me for being gay. They would say things like "Ooh a pink shirt darling" or "You're such a softie, are you sure you can carry out that task" in a very insulting tone. Everyone would laugh about these comments including the managers. - RPart04

Some of the research participants described their workplace experiences as depressive and hostile since Human Resources does not take any actions when they report some of the incidents or treatment received.

While only one participant indicated to be working in an environment that meets diversity and inclusion measures. Below is an extract from their experience.

You know that sense of importance and knowing that I can belong here, and I can be as free as I want to be. I don't have to have multiple personalities. I don't need to be a different person when I'm at work. - RPart05

9. Limitations

The LGBTQIA+ community is a very closed one, especially if you are not part of it, that on its own is very limiting and makes it hard to gather data that will enrich the research. Participant's commitment to continue with the diary study for fear of being identified as the first limitation. The second limitation was the industry's reluctance to share their insights. Trust had to be built to continue with the research process. Recommendation for further research in this area and for studies to include other sectors with larger samples.

It is also important to mention and note that a study of this nature may be viewed by others as controversial or sensitive therefore the researcher has to be mindful of the language used to avoid causing any harm and damage in any manner or of any nature. The researcher's mindfulness and the intention not to cause harm may in itself be a delimiting factor as sometimes the researcher may want to use certain terms in the discussions but there is always a reminder that those terms can be misconstrued as derogatory, this is a necessary factor to raise from an ethical and non-bias point.

10. Recommendation for Future Research

Considering the challenges that the researcher encountered during the data collection phase, it is recommended that future researchers have multiple strategies for data collection in case the initial strategy does not work. It is important to think of challenges that may be encountered beforehand. If the study participants belong to closed communities, researchers should strive to build relationships with community leaders and gatekeepers. Another recommendation for future researchers is to consider collecting data from LGBTQIA+ employees, and the organisation's representatives and from analysing company documents such as diversity, inclusion, and equity policies.

11. Conclusion

In conclusion, strides have been made in promoting diversity, inclusion and equity for individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+. Organisational culture plays a vital role in creating and promoting a workplace environment that is free from discrimination, harassment, and exclusion of those who identify as LGBTQIA+. Although the treatment of the community differs across the world and Africa lagging, some countries are rallying behind efforts and movements that call for an end to the discrimination, harassment, and exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Most organisations have policies that promote diversity, inclusion, and equity of LGBTQIA+ employees, however, the implementation thereof is quite slow. Even with the slow implementation of such policies that promote diversity, inclusion, equity and reasonable accommodation of LGBTQIA+ employees, organisations are making commitments to embrace diversity in the workplace, particularly for LGBTQIA+ employees.

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