

**PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND THE ATTITUDES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY AS A SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The legalisation of same-sex marriages in South Africa (1999) was a natural progression from the articles of the South African Constitution (1996), particularly those contained in the Bill of Rights, that safeguard individuals from any form of discrimination based on sexual orientation. A legal right to protection against discrimination does not, however, translate to a society free of prejudice and (covert) discrimination, and this can be clearly seen in the way that deeply biased attitudes towards homosexuality<sup>1</sup> emerge in public discourse at the level of the ordinary citizen, as well as the politically powerful. The public statements expressing extreme homophobia by a number of high profile individuals in recent years is of particular concern because it not only communicates prejudicial attitude through message transmission, but reinforces such attitudes amongst the intended audience. This kind of prejudicial communication is particularly insidious because it is impossible to prove cause and effect, even though legislation against hate speech is based on the assumption that speech communication can have a measurable harmful effect. This article explores the attitudes towards alternative sexual orientation of a sample group of 58 third-year B.Ed. students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. From the research results reported in this article it appears that there is at least an emerging tolerance towards gays and lesbians amongst the sample of educated young South Africans. This is encouraging in view of the promotion of human rights, social justice and inclusion in a democratic South Africa.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of high profile individuals have made public statements expressing extreme homophobia, notably President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (*Die Burger* 2010b: 5), and the then Deputy President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, who declared: “When I was growing up, a gay guy would not stand in front of me, I would knock him out.” In a documentary on black lesbians that was broadcast on the M-Net programme *Carte Blanche* (2007) Zuma’s statement, made at a political rally in 2006, was used as an insert, and journalist Bongani Bingwa referred to Zuma’s statement, which he had been forced to retract, as indicative of deep-seated homophobia that seemed prevalent among African men. This intolerance for alternative sexual orientation was also, according to the documentary, evident in the violence committed against black lesbians.

Deeply biased attitudes towards homosexuality emerge in public discourse at the level of the ordinary citizen, as well as the politically powerful. The public statements expressing extreme homophobia referred to above is of particular concern because it not only communicates prejudicial attitude through message transmission, but reinforces such attitudes amongst members of the intended audience. It should be noted that Zuma’s statement was made at a political youth rally in Kwazulu-Natal, and that he played on already existing prejudices, given the cheers his statement elicited. This kind of prejudicial communication is particularly insidious because it is impossible to prove cause and effect in terms of actual behaviour, even though legislation against hate speech is based on the assumption that speech communication can have a measurable harmful effect.

In the *Carte Blanche* documentary, several interviews with black lesbians revealed incidences of intolerance and severe violence against these women in specifically black African culture. A young black lesbian told of how she was violently gang-raped and forced to have oral sex with various men in order to “teach her that the only acceptable form of sexual intercourse is with men” and to “cure” her of her sexual orientation. In another interview in the same documentary, a lesbian mother of twins told of the abduction, torture and gang-rape of her 13-year-old daughters to “prevent them from becoming like their mother and to teach them that the only acceptable form of sexual intercourse is with men”. As a result of the gang-rape one of the twin daughters committed suicide during 2006.

Physical attacks and violence against gay men in South Africa are also common and well-documented. Some of these acts also seem to be based on fundamentalist religious beliefs, for example the gang attack on a gay bar in Cape Town during 1999 in which six people were injured. According to Hoard, Martin and Reid (2005: 200) the vigilante group Pagad (People against gangsterism and drugs) was behind this attack. The attack was motivated by the group’s belief that homosexuality is a satanic state and that the post-apartheid government is a satanic state if they consider homosexuality as a form of human sexuality.

In 1992 the ANC adopted a Bill of Rights which included “sexual orientation” as a right. Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation would not be tolerated in the new South Africa and this was enshrined in South Africa’s Constitution in 1996. The post-apartheid Constitution, providing protection against discrimination for gays and lesbians, made South Africa the first country in the world to guarantee gay and lesbian rights. However, South Africa’s social reality is often in stark contrast with the social ideals articulated in the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights. This fact is underlined and supported by the various reports, articles and documentaries that deal with unfair discrimination based on, inter alia, culture, religion and sexual orientation.

The mere inclusion of human rights and freedom of choice in a legal document is not enough to make tolerance and acceptance of differences a social reality. It also raises challenging debates about what the situation would be when personal choices and culture collide. Which then becomes the most important – the right to protect the cultural beliefs of the community/society or the freedom of the individual?

This article reports on the attitudes towards alternative sexual orientation of a cohort of 58 third-year Baccalaureus Educationis students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. This represented a convenience sample and the respondents were not stratified in terms of race and culture. A thematic analysis of student responses to a limited number of statements and questions on homosexuality was conducted and correlated with findings of a literature study. The statements/questions were aimed at eliciting the responses of students regarding the social “acceptability” of alternative sexual orientations (as guaranteed in the Bill of Rights), as well as their perceptions regarding the impact of culture-specific values on views of alternative sexual orientation.

Before presenting the research findings, a brief literature study of homosexuality is necessary to contextualize this study.

### **A WORD ON HOMOSEXUALITY**

Homosexuality has existed in all societies, cultures and socio-economic, religious, ethnic and racial groups throughout recorded time. These views and perceptions on homosexuality vary and range from a general tolerance towards homosexuality, for example, in ancient Greece, to ideas of homosexuality being a sexual deviation, a mental illness or a perversion that requires psychiatric treatment, to the idea that homosexuality is a fashion.

Isaacs and McKendrick (1992: XIII) define homosexuality as follows:

Homosexuality is a broad spectrum of psychological, emotional, and sexual variables in a state of interplay between people of the same sex. Homosexuality is not only sexual attraction between people of the same sex, but also includes an emotional as well as a physical bond; a fantasy system; and elements of symbolism, eroticism, and sexuality. Homosexuality can be experienced in different degrees.

This definition highlights the complexity of homosexuality and refers to the broad spectrum of variables as well as the different degrees of homosexuality. Many scientists have tried to unravel the mysteries of sexual orientation, but it should be noted that many people have misgivings about scientific efforts to understand homosexuality. Some view homosexuality as a religious issue, others see it as a lifestyle choice, while others attribute homosexuality to genetic defects, hormonal imbalances, dysfunctional families, childhood sexual abuse and even the work of the devil.

The ancient Greek tolerance of homosexuality is well-documented. Bywater and Jones (2007: 6) state:

Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, leaders such as Alexander the Great, and writers such as Sappho, were all Greek and open lovers of members of their own sex. They regarded sexual orientation as more a matter of taste and preference as opposed to being integral to someone's identity. And sexuality was firmly linked to power and status.

This correlates with Foucault's (1978) notion that power works through discourses to shape particular and popular attitudes in society. Religion has, and continues to powerfully influence attitudes by providing a meta-narrative (that functions as a "master discourse") that frames discourses on culture, in particular those regarding beliefs and values. However, it falls outside the scope of this article to explore this aspect beyond a brief consideration of the influence of Christianity on attitudes towards sexuality in South Africa.

Christianity has been the main influence on sexual attitudes and behaviour in pre- 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture. According to Giddens (2006: 489):

(...) the Christian view was particularly thought out and supported by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. He placed an emphasis on a 'natural' sexuality where semen was intended by 'nature' for reproduction and any other use of it was 'contrary to nature' and therefore against God's will. This resulted in all other sexual acts being condemned as 'unnatural' and a sin. Masturbation, oral sex, anal sex and homosexual relationships were seen as 'unnatural' and evil.

The influence of the Christian church on current Western culture has strongly declined during the last half century, particularly in terms of values and mores that inform personal lifestyles. In spite of this general decline of the church's influence on public morality, recent research on attitudes towards homosexuality conducted in Europe, Britain and America by Jensen, Gambles and Olsen (1988) and Lane and Ersson (2006) shows that Aquinas' typing of alternative sexual orientations as "unnatural" still prevails. Similar large-scale research on attitudes towards sexual orientation has not (yet) been conducted in South Africa, but given the fact that 79.7% of the population claims to be Christian (Statistics South Africa 2001), it is plausible that the conviction that a heterosexual orientation is the only "natural" one is widely held among South Africans. This coincides with a view that homosexuality is "un-African".

According to Amory (1997: 5) there is a tendency to avoid research on homosexuality in African studies, and this tendency is perhaps best captured by the recurring and insistent refrain, “There is no homosexuality in Africa!” This refrain is chanted like a mantra by politicians, scholars, and lay people alike, and is often accompanied by the similarly insidious accusation that homosexuality is a “Western perversion” imposed upon or adopted by African populations.

The debate on homosexuality entered the public domain in South Africa only during the 1980s. Until the late 1980s the ANC had no policy on sexual orientation and some senior officials openly dismissed gay issues as irrelevant. The catalyst was a particular dismissive statement by a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC, Ruth Mompati, in 1987 (in Hoard *et al.* 2005: 190):

I hope that in a liberated South Africa people will live a normal life. I emphasise the word normal ... Tell me, are lesbians and gays normal? No. It is not normal. I cannot even begin to understand why people want gay and lesbian rights. The gays have no problems. They have nice homes and plenty to eat. I don't see them suffering. No one is persecuting them. We haven't heard about this problem in South Africa until recently. It seems to be fashionable in the West.

She saw the gay issue as a “red herring” detracting attention from the main struggle against apartheid, and justified the ANC's lack of policy on lesbian and gay rights by stating, “We don't have a policy on flower sellers' either. In her view, lesbians and gays are ‘(...) not normal. If everyone was like that, the human race would come to an end’” (Hoard *et al.* 2005: 190). Her statements also clearly imply that homosexuality does not occur amongst black South Africans, since, according to her, gays and lesbians “have nice homes and plenty to eat” – thus excluding the majority of black South Africans from the categories “gay” and “lesbian”.

Solly Smith (in Hoard *et al.* 2005: 143), the liberation movement's chief representative in Britain, expressed a similar dismissal of gays and lesbians:

We don't have a policy. Lesbian and gay rights do not arise in the ANC. We cannot be diverted from our struggle by these issues. We believe in the majority being equal. These people (gays and lesbians) are in the minority. The majority must rule.

It was only during the nineties that the ANC discourse started to create space for minorities, and the efforts of various senior ANC members, including Frene Ginwala, Albie Sachs and Kader Asmal, persuaded the ANC leadership to re-evaluate their stance on gay issues and to include the rights of gays and lesbians in the Constitution, making South Africa the first country in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Gay and lesbian rights was not part of the ANC discourse, but entered it through its members in exile who were exposed to the liberal discourses of social democratic movements. According to Mark Gevisser (2000: 118):

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The primary reason why the notion of gay equality passed so smoothly in the Constitution is most likely that the ANC elite have a utopian progressive ideology, influenced largely by the social-democratic movements in the countries that supported it during its struggle: Sweden, Holland, Britain, Canada, and Australia.

Despite the inclusion of the gay rights clause in the Constitution, homophobia is intense and widespread in post-apartheid South Africa. Gays and lesbians continue to be denied cultural recognition and are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination and violence.

A particular hostile set of attitudinal constraints cohere around the notion that homosexuality is “un-African”. This has been most crudely stated by the president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, who in mid-1995 declared that gays were perverts and that their behaviour was worse than that of pigs. “They are lower than dogs and pigs, for these animals don’t know homosexual behaviour” (*Tribune* 1997).

In a letter to a Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, a reader praised Mugabe because “(...) he espouses and cherishes our traditions and customs. Homosexuality is an aberration to all thinking Africans and indeed to most of civilised mankind. Homosexuals are regarded as an abominable species, which must be punished and locked up.” The letter ends, “Viva Robert Mugabe ... who defends our continent from Satanists, sodomists and faggots” (*The Star* 1998).

Although discrimination against gays and lesbians is illegal in South Africa, negative attitudes persist. The following results of a survey of attitudes within the South African National Defence Force conducted during 2000 support this statement (Hoad *et al.* 2005: 201):

- Only one quarter of the 3 000 participants felt good about the integration of gays and lesbians in the military;
- Almost a third (30.6%) did not want to share their mess facilities with gays and lesbians;
- Almost half (46.9% and 49.3% of the African respondents) felt that the integration of gays and lesbians would lead to a loss of military effectiveness; and
- Almost a third (31%) felt that gays and lesbians were morally weaker than heterosexual people.

In journalist J.H. Thompson’s book *An unpopular war* (2006) she covers the full range of experiences by national servicemen during the era of the “Border War”, and also deals with the experiences of a hitherto “silent” minority, the homosexual conscript, through extensive interviews with actual servicemen. These recorded experiences range from fear of being “found out”, to exploitation of other servicemen’s homophobic fears, to the psychiatric “treatment” of gay conscientious objectors while in detention in Pretoria. This “treatment” reminds of primitive 18<sup>th</sup> century practices, and in some

instances involved a Pavlovian approach with electric shocks administered to the “patient” should he become aroused by pictures of naked males (cf. Van Zyl *et al.* 1999). It boggles the mind that this kind of “therapy”, clearly founded on the notion that homosexuality was a disease that had to be “cured”, took place in South Africa scarcely a decade before the adoption of the Bill of Rights.

### **DELIMITATION, RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study is exploratory and analyses the perceptions and attitudes of 58 third-year education students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The research group is a convenience sample as all the students who are registered for the third year study for the B.Ed. degree in Intermediate Phase studies were included in the study. The research sample consisted of a diverse, heterogeneous, multi-cultural group of 58 students. Of the sample 19 (36%) were male and 39 (64%) were female.

The purpose of this research was to understand current perceptions of a cohort of university students regarding homosexuality and to determine their level of acceptance of homosexuality.

A mixed-method research approach was applied as both numerical information and text information were collected and analysed. The research was open and not directed by a prescriptive framework, preconceived ideas or formal hypotheses. It has been the experience of this researcher that designing a research questionnaire with a minimum of questions, phrased in an almost naïve way, was very effective in generating responses intended for a thematic analysis. Conventional questionnaires consisting of many questions invariably exhibit inherent themes, and can therefore “prime” respondents to generate these same themes in their responses.

Data collection was done by means of the written recording of responses to two statements and two open-ended questions. The questionnaires were handed directly to respondents with the request to complete the questionnaire without prior discussion. The analysis of the data was done by identifying recurring themes and was scored by calculating the frequency of each theme.

The following questions/statements were put to the group:

- 1) Homosexuality is a normal and acceptable form of sexual orientation.
- 2) Why do you think some people are homosexual?
- 3) Indicate all cultural perceptions regarding homosexuality that you are aware of.
- 4) Will you accept a homosexual person as your best friend?

### **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF DATA**

Table 1 reflects the biographical data pertaining to the research sample.

**TABLE 1: BIOGRAPHICAL DATA**

<b>GENDER</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
Male	19	36
Female	39	64
TOTAL	58	100
<b>AGE</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
20 years	4	7
21 years	23	40
22 years	6	10
23 years	4	7
24 years	4	7
25 years	3	5
26 years	14	24
TOTAL	58	100

**Statement one:**

*Homosexuality is a normal and acceptable form of sexual orientation*

Respondents had to indicate on a scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree whether they perceive homosexuality as a normal and acceptable form of sexual orientation.

**TABLE 2: ANALYSIS OF STATEMENT ONE**

<b>RESPONSE</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>%</b>
Strongly agree	Female	2	3
	Male	1	2
Agree	Female	12	21
	Male	4	7
Uncertain	Female	6	10
	Male	5	9
Disagree	Female	11	19
	Male	3	5
Strongly disagree	Female	8	14
	Male	6	10
TOTAL		58	100



The analysis of this question revealed that 28 respondents disagree that homosexuality is normal and an acceptable form of sexual orientation. 19 respondents indicated that homosexuality is an acceptable form of sexual orientation, while 11 respondents indicated that they were uncertain.

The majority of respondents expressed a negative attitude towards the acceptance of homosexuality as a normal form of sexuality. This finding appears to be in line with the perception of various theorists and 19<sup>th</sup> century sexologists as well as current religious and cultural perceptions, as mentioned earlier.

Although the majority of respondents expressed a negative attitude towards the normality of homosexuality as an acceptable form of sexual orientation, significant in this regard is the fact that 30 of the respondents between the ages of 20-26 years indicated a more tolerant attitude and general acceptance of homosexuality. This finding is especially encouraging in view of the promotion of human rights, social justice and inclusion in a democratic South Africa.

The above findings show strong correlation with findings reported by Jensen, Gambles and Olsen (1988: 51) on research done in Spain, Germany and England, who found that “younger and more educated people had more approval of homosexuality”.

Another interesting observation from this analysis is that a significantly larger number of female respondents than male respondents chose the acceptance and strong acceptance option. In total 19 respondents indicated that homosexuality is an acceptable form of sexual orientation, of which 14 were females and 5 males.

This finding is supported by research done by Lane and Ersson (2006: 57) in America, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden who concluded that “... women, young, well-educated and high incomes are conducive to less negative orientations towards homosexuality”.

**Question two:**

*Why do you think some people are homosexual?*

This open-ended question required of respondents to indicate possible causes for homosexuality. The results were analysed according to correlation between responses and were categorised according to identified themes.

The question yielded 83 responses from the survey group of 58 respondents. These responses were analysed and consolidated into 10 sub-themes, as indicated in Table 2:

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**TABLE 3: RESPONSES TO QUESTION TWO**

Sub-theme	Gender	Number	%
1 Social and emotional consequences of child abuse, rape, violence or injury by opposite sex	Female	17	20.5
	Male	4	4.8
2 Sexual preference and own choice	Female	15	18
	Male	5	6
3 Genetic reasons	Female	11	13.3
	Male	7	8.4
4 Absence of gender role models	Female	6	7.2
	Male	4	4.8
5 Wants to make a fashion statement	Female	2	2.4
	Male	3	3.6
6 Identity confusion	Female	1	1.2
	Male	1	1.2
7 Psychological pathology	Female	2	2.4
	Male	2	2.4
8 Satanism	Female	1	1.2
	Male	0	0
9 Lack of values	Female	0	0
	Male	1	1.2
10 Sexual experimentation	Female	1	1.2
	Male	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		83	99.8

Ten sub-themes were identified, but since five of these represent marginal responses (less than 5% frequency) only the first five sub-themes are discussed.

- Theme 1: Social and emotional consequences of child abuse, rape, violence or injury by the opposite sex

Based on the number of responses (21), the majority of the respondents felt that homosexuality was the result of either sexual abuse as a child, rape, physical and sexual violence against a partner by the opposite sex and continuous disappointments in romantic relationships and rejection by partners of the opposite sex.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*People who are homosexual have also been previously molested or raped and this sometimes leads to confusion of their sexual preference.*

*Some other people become homosexual because for some reason like they have been hurt in life by the opposite sex and feel that they can be better off with people of the same gender who will understand how they feel.*

*Girl was raped, so she has a hate for all men and then turn to women for comfort and security.*

*It might be due to trauma like abuse from their childhood. They could also have gone through a rough break up with a partner and then turn gay.*

The literature research reveals contradicting views on the relation between child sexual abuse and homosexuality. In this regard Bass and Davis (1992: 256) quote the revelation of a female survivor of child sexual abuse who says: "If you were abused by a man, you may find male genitals scary or repulsive."

Both these authors are survivors from childhood sexual abuse, and admit that they themselves believed that they were lesbians because they had been so badly abused by their fathers. However, they claim that this belief is mostly due to the fact that "some survivors still believe that there is something wrong with them that caused them to be lesbian – that if they hadn't been damaged sexually, they'd be heterosexual" (*ibid.*).

- Theme 2: Own preference and choice

This theme scored the second highest number of responses (20). According to the majority of the respondents homosexuality is an individual's own choice and preference.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*I just know that you have the freedom to love whom ever who want to and it does not matter if it's a male or female, its your happiness should be most important.*

*I think it is a matter of preference. And once a person enjoys another person's company they are physically attracted to the person. So it's a matter of preference.*

*It's their personal choice.*

*I think they choose to be that way, they adopt or form their own identity.*

*It is their own feelings or life experiences which affect how they feel or their sexual preferences are.*

*I think some people are homosexual because they choose to be.*

These findings indicate strong support for the acknowledgement of homosexuality as a personal choice and an acceptable lifestyle. This postulates a positive finding especially in the light of the acknowledgement of human rights and the acknowledgement of

freedom of choice and individuality. As such it shows a clear link with the response to statement one, strengthening the possibility that the promotion of human rights, social justice and inclusion in a democratic South Africa can indeed promote tolerance and acceptance of various sexual orientations amongst the educated youth in South Africa.

- Theme 3: Genetic reasons

This theme yielded 18 responses and is significant in terms of more resent bio-medical research on homosexuality. A concerning fact however, is the expressed view of a significant number of these respondents that homosexuality is a medical or psychological disorder that can, and indeed should be “rectified” or at least treated.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*They have a hormonal problem. It is some form of a disability that needs attention and I believe can be rectified.*

*It could just be in their genes, I think that most who are homosexual doesn't actually choose to be that way and that many of them actually wish not to be like that but it just is the way that they are.*

Much has been written on possible biological “causes” for homosexuality. In 1991 Moir and Jessel published the controversial book *Brain Sex* in which they report on research where it was shown that the sexual orientation of rats could be pre-determined by manipulating hormone levels in the mother rat (cf. McKnight 2000; McKnight & Malcolm 2000; Alexander 2000). At this point there is, however, no clear consensus regarding biological factors and sexual orientation.

- Theme 4: Absence of gender role models

Six female respondents and four male respondents gave answers that indicate the absence of a particular gender role model as a reason for homosexuality. These responses represent 17% of the overall responses and is significant in the perception that homosexuality is due to identification with gender role models.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*The absence of a father/mother.*

*Being exposed to friends with only one sex. Not getting to do with the other sex.*

*It has to do with the way they grew up and were treated. A man must be a man, so as a woman.*

*Only have friends of the same sex.*

Significant in this regard is the correspondence with African literature perspectives indicating the importance of external agents to explain human behaviour. Viljoen (2003: 534) states in this regard:

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In contrast to some Western-oriented theories that explain behaviour as the outcome of intrapsychic dynamics (such as Freud, Jung and Erikson) or interpersonal dynamics (such as Adler, Horney and Rogers), the African perspective attributes behaviour wholly to external agents outside the person. Individuals cannot therefore hold themselves responsible or accountable for their own behaviour because the cause of all behaviour and events are ascribed to external, supernatural beings or powers.

- Theme 5: Want to make a fashion statement

Although this theme only yielded a 12% response it is interesting in that it contradicts the prevalent theories on homosexuality.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*I personally think that some people are trying to make a 'fashion' statement.*

*Fashion. Most of them they like to go with their friends' style.*

*I think it is becoming more of a fashion than people really being homosexual.*

Hall (2003: 74) quotes Judith Butler who said:

I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylish it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the co-modification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism.

- Themes 6, 7 and 8: Identity confusion, psychological pathology and Satanism

Although these themes yielded very low percentages of responses it is significant as it captures some of the negative perceptions of homosexuality.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*It is because it's Satanism*

*The changes that are taking place in the world and I believe something wrong has happened to these people. As people get educated they get some of the things wrong really. To me it is person that has no value and it's dirty.*

These responses will be linked with the responses on cultural perceptions as the analysing of the data revealed a correlation between these findings.

### **Question three:**

*Indicate all cultural perceptions regarding homosexuality that you are aware of*

The third question was analysed according to gender and yielded 46 responses from the survey group of 58 respondents. These responses were analysed and consolidated into 4 sub-themes.

Significant also is the fact that 17 respondents did not provide any response to this question. This might indicate an over-sensitivity regarding issues of culture in relation to sexuality, and an unwillingness to venture into what might be considered by some to constitute cultural stereotyping.

**TABLE 4: CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS REGARDING HOMOSEXUALITY**

	Sub-themes	Number of Responses		Percentage	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
1	Religious convictions	23	7	50%	15%
2	Socially practices	7	3	15%	7%
3	Psychological pathology	2	2	4.3%	4.3%
4	Homosexual people are HIV positive	0	2	0	4.3%

- Theme 1: Religious convictions

The majority of the respondents indicated religious convictions and beliefs as the main reason why homosexuality is an unacceptable form of sexual orientation.

The following verbatim responses typify the theme:

*Jehova's Witness – It's all manifested and based on the bible principle that says 'No man, who sleeps with man will enter the Kingdom of God! What more prove do you need? Men and women are design and created to be together.*

*Christians glo dit is 'n sonde, maar ek ook want in die bybel staan daar dat die Here teen dit is [Christian believe it is a sin but so do I because in the Bible it is written that God is against it].*

*Some cultures believe that you will be punished for being gay. Christians belief that gay people do not go to heaven.*

*That it is a sin. Against some people's religions and also against their moral values. That God made a woman for a man and not the same sex to have each other.*

*That homosexual can't go to heaven. Man is made for a woman and not same genders.*

*In my culture homosexuality is seen as a demonic practice.*

These findings are in line with literature on the topic and confirm that religion and religious beliefs still play a major role in adolescents' perceptions and attitudes about homosexuality that prevail even many years after a generally more liberal attitude to sexual orientation has manifested itself. The findings of this limited study are in line with the research findings by Jensen, Gambles and Olsen (1988: 47) based on a research

sample of 4766 respondents from England, Spain and Germany which indicated that the majority of respondents believe that homosexuality can never be justified and is always wrong. This has led the researchers to conclude that “[R]eligion and political values have a direct impact on the acceptance of the belief that homosexuality can be justified” (*ibid.*).

- Theme 2: Social practices

Although this theme yielded only 10 (22%) responses it is considered significant as the responses reflect evidence of rather harsh social reaction against homosexuality by specific social and cultural groups.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*It is forbidden to be homosexual more especially to an African tradition*

*In my culture, Xhosa of course this things is not allowed. Your parents can even chase you away from home because a woman and man separately have their own ways of coming up as men and women but not homosexual men/women.*

*These people are not accepted by other people*

*Black culture ostrosizes lesbians. Conservative Christian, Hindu, Muslim families outcast their own children.*

*The black culture are totally against it, it is wrong, a male must be with a female.*

These responses and findings clearly reflect an intolerance and rejection of homosexuals, supporting various literature findings. Interesting, however, is to note that this seems to be the case in other countries as well. Loftus (2001: 764) for instance refer to research done in America and concluded that:

... older, less educated people, African Americans, people living in the South of Midwest, males, people residing in small communities and religious fundamentalists are more negative toward homosexuals than are younger, more educated people, whites, those living on the Pacific Coast, females, residents of big cities or big city suburbs, and religious liberals.

- Theme 3: Psychological pathology

Although this theme yielded only 4 responses it is considered significant as it presents correlation with various research studies documented in the literature.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*These people are sick, - they need some customs to be done for themselves*

*They are crazy, perverted, confused*

*Some are seen as perverted or chemically imbalanced.*

- Theme 4: Homosexuals are HIV positive

Although this theme yielded only 2 (4%) responses it is considered significant as it is distressing that young educated adolescents still identify homosexuality with HIV despite the implementation of various HIV/Aids educational programmes and public information sharing on the myths and misconceptions regarding HIV.

The following verbatim responses typify this theme:

*Gay people are not HIV negative*

*Gays are HIV carriers*

**Question four:**

*Would you accept a homosexual person as your best friend?*

The fourth question was phrased as a closed question. Respondents had to select one of the options indicated in the Table 5. The data is recorded according to gender.

**TABLE 5: WILL YOU ACCEPT A HOMOSEXUAL PERSON AS YOUR BEST FRIEND?**

Response	Gender	Number	%
Without a doubt	Female	12	20.7
	Male	0	0
Yes	Female	9	15.5
	Male	7	12.1
Maybe	Female	8	13.7
	Male	7	12.1
No	Female	5	8.6
	Male	2	3.5
Absolutely not	Female	4	6.9
	Male	4	6.9
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>58</b>	<b>100</b>

The analysis of this question revealed that 28 respondents will accept a homosexual person as a best friend, while 15 respondents indicated that they might accept a homosexual as a best friend. Fifteen respondents indicated that they will not accept a homosexual person as a best friend.



## CONCLUSION

The literature review reveals that homosexuality has always been, and remains a contentious topic, despite wide-spread attempts for more understanding and tolerance of this form of sexual orientation. Although homosexuality has always existed in all societies, cultures and socio-economic, religious, ethnic and racial groups throughout recorded time, and has been the topic of many books, conference papers, academic articles and even political debates, it seems that general consensus about the acceptance and normality of this lifestyle is still a far cry away.

Despite major progress in South Africa on various aspects of homosexuality, like the adoption of the South African Constitution in 1996 and the legalisation of same-sex marriages in 2009, there are still wide-spread evidence of discrimination and violence against, rejection of, and fear of identification with homosexuals in South African society.

A typical example of this is found in an article in *Rapport* (Scholtz 2010: 4) titled “Gay vrou aangeval: ‘Ek sal jou reg skop’”. In this story Scholtz captures the events at a birthday party in May 2010 when a lesbian woman was violently attacked by another woman and kicked between her legs several times because she is homosexual. According to Scholtz the two women belong to the same religious denomination and on the identified date started arguing about the illegal parking of the one’s car on the property of the other woman. The lesbian woman claims that she was then attacked by the other woman and so badly injured that she lost consciousness and had to be taken from the scene in an ambulance. She later had to undergo surgery. She claims that the other woman said: “Ek sal jou p\*\*\* vir jou reg skop, want die Here het hom gemaak sodat ‘n man en vrou seks kan hê en ‘n kind in die wêreld bring. Jy is ‘n abominasie in God se oë.” [I will kick your c\*\*\* until it’s fixed because the Lord made him so that a man and a woman can have sex and bring a child into the world. You are an abomination in God’s eyes.]

However, it is clear that homosexuality is also treated with reservation and even inhumane behaviour in other communities and countries and is not restricted to South Africa. For example, Ian Herbert reports on an attempt by the British Professional Footballers’ Association to involve professional footballers in a campaign video which aims to use high-profile players as figureheads in a drive against homophobia. According to Herbert the British footballers refused to appear in the campaign video “because they fear being ridiculed for taking a stand against one of the sport’s most stubborn taboos” (*Saturday Star* 2010).

In most African countries homosexuality is still illegal and punishable by law. A recent case in Malawi where a gay couple was arrested on their engagement party and sentenced to 14 years hard labour elicited strong reaction from various gay rights groups in the world (*Die Burger* 2010a). The Malawian president has since pardoned the couple, but other African rulers remain resolute in their outright condemnation of homosexuality, a case in point being Zimbabwe’s Mugabe who, as recently as July

2010, vowed that gay rights would not feature in the country's still to be formulated new constitution.

However, from the research results reported in this article it appears that there is at least an emerging tolerance towards homosexuals amongst the sample of educated young South Africans. This is encouraging in view of the promotion of human rights, social justice and inclusion in a democratic South Africa. Encouraging also is the fact that the majority of respondents indicated that they would accept a homosexual person as a friend, in sharp contrast to the outright condemnation of homosexuality by various leaders in Africa.

Perceptions regarding the causes of homosexuality and its stigmatisation as a disease or mental disorder also seem to be changing, with the adoption of more realistic and humane positions as outlined in the literature study, and confirmed by the responses of the limited research sample.

It is clear that further research on homosexuality and related issues is needed and "that a constitution guaranteeing freedom from discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and sexual orientation, *inter alia*, is far from sufficient in creating a sexually free and empowered citizenry" (Hoad *et al.* 2005: 19)

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### *Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> The term is used inclusively and does not only refer to the traditional concept of same-sex relationships between males, but includes lesbian relationships. See Isaacs and McKendrick (1992).

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