

The Dynamics of Sexual Minority Status and Associated Stigma among University Undergraduate Students at Laikipia University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the prevalence of non-heteronormative identities and the associated stigma experienced by undergraduate students at Laikipia University, Kenya. Amidst a contested legal and social landscape, this research provides critical empirical data on a "hidden" student population. Grounded in Minority Stress Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study utilized a descriptive survey design with snowball sampling to recruit 194 undergraduate students. Findings indicate that while 91.7% of respondents identify as heterosexual, a significant minority (8.3%) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other non-heterosexual identities. The study reveals a hostile campus climate characterized by high rates of verbal harassment (87.6%) and instances of physical assault in off-campus housing. Crucially, data on identity management shows a sharp disparity in disclosure: students are significantly more likely to be "out" to peers than to family members, reflecting a strategic response to the threat of rejection. The paper concludes that "institutional silence" exacerbates minority stress and recommends the implementation of explicit anti-discrimination policies, safe zones, and inclusive curriculum reforms to align university practice with the constitutional mandate of non-discrimination.

Keywords: Sexual minority students, Minority Stress Theory, higher education Kenya, stigma, LGBTQI+ inclusion, campus climate.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are ideally spaces for intellectual freedom and self-actualization. However, for sexual minority students in Kenya, the university environment often mirrors the exclusionary attitudes of the broader society. The discourse surrounding same-sex relationships in Kenya is polarized, heavily influenced by religious conservatism and colonial-era laws. While the *Constitution of Kenya* (2010) enshrines the right to dignity under Article 28 and freedom from discrimination under Article 27, the *Penal Code* (1930/2014), specifically Sections 162 and 165, continues to criminalize "carnal knowledge against the order of nature," creating a precarious legal existence for LGBTQI+ individuals.

The legal landscape is, however, evolving. In 2023, the Supreme Court of Kenya issued a landmark ruling in *NGOs Co-ordination Board v. EG & Others*, which affirmed the fundamental right of LGBTQI+ individuals to form associations, marking a significant victory for freedom of assembly (Republic of Kenya, 2023). Despite these judicial advances, the lived reality on university campuses remains under-researched, particularly outside of Nairobi. This study addresses this gap by exploring the "campus climate" at Laikipia University, examining how sexual minority students navigate their identities amidst pervasive stigma.

Problem Statement

Global research demonstrates that sexual minority youth face disproportionate mental health risks, including higher rates of depression and PTSD, primarily due to social stigma rather than inherent pathology. In Kenya, this stigma is compounded by the narrative that homosexuality is "un-African" or a result of "western recruitment." There is a scarcity of empirical data on how these dynamics play out in rural or peri-urban

universities. Without data on prevalence and specific stressors such as housing insecurity and verbal harassment, university administrators lack the evidence base to implement necessary support systems.

Objectives

1. To determine the distribution of diverse sexual orientations among undergraduate students.
2. To analyze the nature and frequency of distal stressors (discrimination and violence) faced by these students.
3. To identify institutional gaps and propose evidence-based policies for a more inclusive learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research from multiple regions indicates that sexual minority university students are disproportionately exposed to harassment, verbal abuse, and social exclusion (Meyer, 2003; Nduna et al., 2025). Studies in the United States, Europe, and parts of Africa consistently report higher levels of psychological distress and a perceived lack of belonging among LGBTQI+ students compared to their heterosexual peers (Conron et al., 2022; Castiglioni et al., 2025; Hill & Pettit, 2012). For example, research in the United States highlights that sexual minority students often experience thwarted belongingness, which significantly correlates with suicidal ideation (Hill & Pettit, 2012). Similarly, European data suggests that while non-heterosexual identities are becoming more visible, students still face varying levels of social support depending on the regional political climate (Castiglioni et al., 2025).

African scholarship highlights the profound influence of legal and cultural contexts on the intensity of stigma experienced by sexual minority students (Epprecht, 2008; Tamale, 2011). In settings where same-sex sexuality is criminalized or morally condemned, students often adopt concealment strategies, selectively disclosing their identities to trusted peers while avoiding family members or institutional authorities (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014; Shamrock et al., 2023). While some earlier studies describe same-sex sexuality using moralistic or deficit-oriented language—characterizing it as "moral decadence" (Munene, 2011) or a "maladjustment" (Edobor & Ekechukwa, 2015)—contemporary research increasingly challenges these framings and emphasizes sexual diversity as a normal variation of the human experience (Meyer, 2003; Tamale, 2011).

Emerging evidence suggests that inclusive policies, visible support structures, and affirming curricula are associated with improved campus climate and student wellbeing (Goldberg et al., 2015; Snapp et al., 2015).

However, such measures remain unevenly implemented across African universities, underscoring the urgent need for locally grounded research to inform institutional policy (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014).

Debunking the "Un-African" Myth

A pervasive barrier to inclusion in African higher education is the enduring belief that homosexuality is a "Western import" (Tamale, 2011). However, contemporary African scholarship fundamentally refutes this narrative. Scholars such as Tamale (2011) and Epprecht (2008) have documented a rich history of diverse sexualities in pre-colonial Africa, including socially integrated practices such as woman-woman marriages and male-to-male intimacies.

These indigenous expressions of sexuality were largely marginalized or pathologized only after the imposition of Victorian-era colonial laws (Epprecht, 2008). Understanding this historical context is vital for decolonizing the university curriculum and reframing inclusion not as a concession to Western values, but as a restoration of traditional African diversity and indigenous human rights.

Campus Climate and Mental Health in Kenya

Recent studies highlight the severe impact of stigma on Kenyan youth. Harper et al. (2021) found that 53% of sexual minority Kenyans reported clinically significant PTSD symptoms, and 26% reported depressive symptoms, directly linked to experiences of violence and stigma. Similarly, Jauregui et al. (2021) established that "distal stressors" like physical and verbal abuse are strong predictors of poor mental health outcomes among Kenyan gay and bisexual men. In the university setting, "institutional silence"—where policies exist on paper but are ignored in practice—leaves students vulnerable to abuse in hostels and common areas, mirroring findings from South African universities where heteronormativity remains the dominant culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts **Minority Stress Theory (MST)** and **Social Identity Theory (SIT)** as the dual pillars of its conceptual framework. These theories are instrumental in shifting the analytical focus away from individual pathology and locating the source of psychological distress within the social and structural environment.

Minority Stress Theory Minority Stress Theory, as proposed by Meyer (2003), posits that individuals belonging to sexual minority groups experience distinct, chronic stressors that are additive to the general stressors experienced by all people. Meyer categorizes these into two distinct types:

- **Distal Stressors:** Objective, external events such as physical violence, employment discrimination, and the use of offensive slurs. In the Kenyan context, the structural criminalization of same-sex acts as a pervasive distal stressor (Republic of Kenya, 2023).
- **Proximal Stressors:** Subjective, internal processes that occur in response to a hostile environment, including the fear of rejection, identity concealment (remaining "closeted"), and internalized homophobia. The data in this study suggests that for Kenyan students, the fear of family rejection represents a particularly potent proximal stressor (Shamrock et al., 2023).

Social Identity Theory Complementing MST, Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how individuals derive their self-concept and self-esteem from their perceived membership in specific social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For LGBTQI+ students, university life often necessitates the management of conflicting identities: the "student" identity, which is socially valued and affirmed, and the "sexual minority" identity, which is frequently devalued by the heteronormative majority.

SIT elucidates the motivations behind the "identity management" strategies observed in this study. To avoid "social identity threat"—the fear of being devalued or marginalized—students may engage in selective disclosure, sharing their identity with trusted university peers while remaining "closeted" to family members to protect their safety and financial security (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Shamrock et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design A descriptive survey design was employed to capture the prevalence of sexual orientations and the qualitative nature of stigma experiences among undergraduate students. This design is particularly suitable for exploratory studies aimed at documenting the characteristics and lived realities of a specific population (Nduna et al., 2025).

Sampling and Participants Due to the legal and social risks associated with non-normative sexualities in Kenya, the study utilized snowball sampling (chain-referral). This non-probability sampling method is recognized as the most effective and ethical approach for accessing "hidden" or "hard-to-reach" populations who may otherwise remain silent due to safety concerns (Meyer, 2003). The final sample consisted of 194 undergraduate students from the School of Education at Laikipia University.

Data Collection Instruments Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. This digital format was strategically selected to maximize respondent privacy and minimize the social desirability bias often encountered in face-to-face interviews regarding sensitive topics. The questionnaire

included structured items for demographic and prevalence data, as well as open-ended questions to capture qualitative narratives of stigma and institutional experiences.

Data Analysis Methods The study employed a mixed-methods approach to data analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Numerical data obtained from the structured portions of the questionnaire were exported to Microsoft Excel and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the prevalence of diverse sexual orientations and the distribution of various distal stressors (e.g., verbal vs. physical stigma). These data were presented using standardized APA tables and charts to illustrate demographic trends and disclosure patterns.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Responses from the open-ended sections were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved a recursive process of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying recurring themes related to "institutional silence," "identity management," and "safety gaps" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To ensure the "voice" of the participants was preserved, verbatim qualitative extracts were identified and integrated into the results to provide depth and context to the quantitative findings.
- **Data Triangulation:** Findings from both quantitative and qualitative strands were integrated during the discussion phase. This allowed the researchers to explain the *how* and *why* behind the numerical trends—for example, using student quotes to explain the high rates of identity concealment observed in the frequency tables.

Ethical Considerations Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. Participants provided informed consent digitally, and no personally identifiable information (such as names, registration numbers, or IP addresses) was recorded. This ensured total anonymity and protected respondents from potential legal or social repercussions.

RESULTS

Demographic and Sexual Profile

The study consolidated demographic data to provide a clear profile of the student body. The findings challenge the assumption of a purely heterosexual student population.

Table 1: Sociodemographic and Sexual Profile of Respondents (n=194)

Category	Sub-Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18 – 23 Years	182	93.8%
	24+ Years	12	6.2%
Sex Assigned at Birth	Female	121	63.2%
	Male	71	36.8%
Gender Identity	Cisgender (Matches Birth Sex)	189	97.4%
	Transgender / non-conforming	3	1.6%
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	175	91.7%
	Non-Heterosexual (Total)	17	8.3%
	<i>Breakdown of non-heterosexual:</i>		
	Lesbian	5	2.6%
	Bisexual	4	2.1%
	Gay	3	1.5%
	Other / Questioning	5	2.1%

Source: Research Survey Data 2025

The 8.3% prevalence rate of non-heterosexual identities aligns with global averages for youth populations, suggesting that sexual diversity is a stable demographic trait rather than a transient "vogue" or result of

"recruitment." Notably, more females (2.6%) identified as lesbian compared to males identifying as gay (1.5%), which may reflect different social pressures regarding masculinity in the Kenyan context.

Patterns of Disclosure (Proximal Stressors)

One of the most significant findings relates to *who* students choose to tell about their sexual orientation. The data reveals a strategic "compartmentalization" of identity.

Table 2: Comparative Rates of Identity Disclosure Across Social Networks (n=17)

Target Group	% "They Know"	% "They Don't Know" / Not Sure	Theoretical Interpretation (MST & SIT)
Friends at University	55.0%	45.0%	High Disclosure: Peers serve as a "chosen family" and buffer against stress.
Friends at Home	52.9%	47.1%	High Disclosure: generational peers are viewed as safer confidants.
Siblings	35.3%	64.7%	Moderate Disclosure: Siblings may be allies but risk "outing" to parents.
Parents	29.4%	70.6%	Low Disclosure: High fear of rejection, loss of fees/support (Proximal Stressor).
Extended Family	29.0%	71.0%	Low Disclosure: Extended family often enforces traditional cultural norms.

Source: Research survey Data 2025

The sharp drop in disclosure from friends (55%) to parents (29.4%) indicates Identity Concealment, a proximal stressor in Minority Stress Theory. Students likely fear the withdrawal of financial support (school fees) and familial ostracization, forcing them to lead "double lives".

Prevalence of Stigma and Violence (Distal Stressors)

The study assessed the frequency and type of stigmatization experienced by the 17 identified sexual minority students.

Table 3: Prevalence and Nature of Distal Stressors

Form of Stigma	Frequency	Primary Context	Impact on Student
Offensive Language	87.6% (Sometimes/Often/Always)	Campus common areas, Hostels	Creates a "hostile environment"; erodes sense of belonging.
Negative Social Reactions	52.9%	Social gatherings, Group work	Leads to social isolation and withdrawal from academic peers.
Physical Assault	Reported "Sometimes"	Off-campus residential areas	Direct threat to physical safety; induces hypervigilance.

Source: Research Survey data 2025

While verbal harassment is pervasive on campus, physical violence is notably located in off-campus residential areas. This is clearly apparent from anonymized illustrative sample quotes that include;

- Verbal: "They use offensive language daily in hostels—'faggot,' 'lesbo'—makes me skip classes"
- Physical: "Beaten by neighbors suspecting us; hid bruises from uni"
- Institutional: "University ignores us completely—no safe spaces, no reports taken");
- "Nothing, no interventions by management"

This suggests a security gap where university authority does not reach, leaving students vulnerable to community-based vigilante violence or "corrective" assaults.

Institutional Environment

Qualitative responses regarding university support measures were overwhelmingly negative. When asked what measures were implemented, Students provided blunt qualitative feedback regarding university that included verbatim responses that revolved around

"Ignoring them"

"None"

"Nothing"

"I haven't heard of any"

"No interventions by university management"

This reflects a culture of institutional erasure, where the university's silence is perceived not as neutrality, but as complicity in the stigmatization.

DISCUSSION

Prevalence and the "Recruitment" Myth

The finding that roughly 9% of the student body identifies as non-heterosexual is consistent with international and regional data on youth sexuality. This consistency refutes the "recruitment" or "contagion" theories often cited in moral panics about universities. If homosexuality were merely a "Western fad" or the result of peer recruitment, one might expect widely fluctuating numbers; instead, the stability suggests that diverse orientations are a natural variation within the human population.

The Mental Health Cost of "Offensive Language"

The fact that 87.6% of sexual minority students experience offensive language is a critical finding of the present study. Under Minority Stress Theory, such chronic exposure to verbal prejudice is not benign; it is categorized as a distal stressor linked to elevated risks of depression, anxiety, and academic decline (Meyer, 2003; Woodford et al., 2012). When students constantly anticipate harassment—a psychological state known as the expectancy of rejection—their cognitive resources are diverted from learning to "survival surveillance," as they must constantly scan their environment for potential threats (Meyer, 2003).

In the specific context of Kenya, these external stressors have been empirically correlated with clinically significant levels of PTSD and social alienation (Harper et al., 2021; Jauregui et al., 2021). Consequently, the university's failure to regulate hate speech or implement inclusive policies on campus constitutes a direct structural barrier to the academic success and holistic wellbeing of these students (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014).

Strategic Concealment and Family Dynamics

The disparity in disclosure between friends and parents (Table 2) highlights the acute economic precariousness of Kenyan university students. Unlike in many Western contexts where students may achieve earlier financial independence, the majority of Kenyan students remain entirely dependent on their families for tuition fees and basic upkeep (Shamrock et al., 2023). Within this restrictive socio-economic framework, identity concealment serves as a rational survival strategy intended to protect their educational trajectory and financial security (Meyer, 2003; Shamrock et al., 2023).

However, maintaining this "double life" is profoundly psychologically taxing. As a proximal stressor, the constant effort required to hide one's identity leads to heightened internal tension and effectively isolates students

from their primary familial support systems during times of crisis (Meyer, 2003; Jauregui et al., 2021). This systemic isolation underscores the urgent necessity for university-based counseling services that are affirming and specifically trained to address the unique stressors faced by sexual minority students in restrictive environments (Harper et al., 2021; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014).

The Safety Gap in Housing

The localization of physical assaults in off-campus housing is a critical finding with immediate policy implications for higher education in East Africa. This data corroborates broader reports within the Kenyan context where "neighborhood watch" groups, local vigilantes, or landlords frequently target and harass tenants suspected of engaging in "unnatural acts" (Harper et al., 2021; Jauregui et al., 2021). Under the framework of Minority Stress Theory, such environmental threats constitute a severe distal stressor—an objective, external condition that creates a chronic state of hypervigilance for the student (Meyer, 2003).

While the university lacks direct jurisdiction over private residential property, it maintains an institutional duty of care to safeguard student welfare and ensure equitable access to education (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014). The lack of protective housing policies effectively forces sexual minority students into "survivalist" living conditions that impede their academic focus. Consequently, it is imperative for the university to implement a housing accreditation system that requires landlords to sign a non-discrimination pledge and to establish emergency recourse protocols for students facing eviction or violence due to their identity (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study establishes that sexual minority students are a visible, albeit marginalized, part of the Laikipia University community. They navigate a hostile climate marked by high rates of verbal harassment and a distinct threat of physical violence in off-campus housing. The university's current stance of "silence" is insufficient to protect these students or to foster the inclusive environment mandated by the Kenyan Constitution.

Recommendations for the University Administration:

1. **Policy Reform:** The Dean of Students should spearhead the inclusion of "sexual orientation and gender identity" in the university's Anti-Harassment and Non-Discrimination policies. This provides a legal basis to discipline students or staff who engage in verbal or physical abuse.
2. **Safe Zones:** Designate the Guidance and Counselling Department as a "Safe Zone." Staff should receive training on LGBTQ-affirmative counseling to support students dealing with family rejection and minority stress.
3. **Housing Accreditation:** The university should leverage its influence by requiring off-campus hostels listed on the university portal to sign a non-discrimination pledge, ensuring safe housing for all students.
4. **Curriculum Integration:** Integrate modules on human rights, tolerance, and diversity into the common undergraduate courses (e.g., Communication Skills, HIV/AIDS) to combat the ignorance that fuels offensive language.

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