



# A Quantitative Inquiry into South African Undergraduate University Students' Perceptions of Religiously Sanctioned Homophobia

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## *Abstract*

The paper investigates the factors that inform university undergraduate students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. Data was drawn from a quantitative survey conducted in 2017 on students' perceptions of social norms, heteronormativity, and homophobia at a South African urban-based university. A total of 330 undergraduate students completed the survey. The study found statistically significant correlations between the factors of sex, degree of religiosity and family socialization and the undergraduate students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. Male students demonstrated more support for religiously sanctioned homophobia than did female students. Students with a higher degree of religiosity were more likely to support statements that enforced homophobia than did students with a lower degree of religiosity. Students who had been socialized in homophobic families were more likely to support religiously sanctioned homophobia than were students who had grown up in more tolerant families. The study did not find statistically significant correlations between the factors of frequency of exposure to religious services and place of origin and the undergraduate students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. The paper makes a substantive contribution to the limited South African studies that focus on the broader student population's perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

*Keywords:* homophobia, heteronormativity, religion, gender, South Africa.

## 1. Introduction

On 22 January 2017, a homophobic incident occurred at Grace Bible Church in Soweto township, where a Ghanaian bishop, Dag Heward-Mills, made homophobic comments during a sermon (Singh, 2017). In his sermon, the bishop said, "That's nature. Dogs, cats, leopards. Which animal has one partner? It's just like homosexuality, you don't have male and male. You don't find two male dogs, two male lions, two male impalas [*sic*], two male lizards. You don't find that in nature. That is unnatural. There is nothing like that in nature" (Singh, 2017). A famous openly gay South African artist, Somizi Mhlongo, a member of the church, felt offended by the sermon and stormed out of the church service. He expressed his frustrations on social media platforms, where he tweeted, "This is who I am. I am a gay man. Get it into your skull. My soul is alright with my God. Let me deal with my God and my soul. Don't tell me" (Singh, 2017). Social media participants reacted with mixed emotions to the above incident, with some supporting the pastor and others supporting Mhlongo. This incident has become one of the most popular reports on homophobia

in South African places of worship. It led to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) community picketing outside the Grace Bible Church to defend LGBTIQ+ rights (Pitjeng, 2017). The group held that the Church needs to stop perpetuating homophobia. They argued that homophobic sermons extend to hate crimes in South African townships (Pitjeng, 2017). Before this incident, *News24* reported that the openly homosexual priest Mpho Tutu van Furth was barred from preaching in the Anglican Church, where she was serving (Huisman, 2016). The church bishops also decided that they would not sanction the blessing of same-sex unions (Huisman, 2016). These newspaper reports support the notion that religious institutions inform homophobia in some South African communities.

A variety of factors inform homophobia in South Africa, including intolerant African cultural traditions, heteronormative gender socialization and beliefs about reproduction; however, research suggests that religion is the major contributing factor (Graziano, 2005; Maake, 2019; Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. 2015; Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Smuts et al. 2015; Vincent & Howell, 2014). Religious arguments are often used in African communities to justify punitive policies that advocate for intolerance of sexual identities that are non-heteronormative (Epprecht, 2013; Msibi, 2011). Sanjakdar (2011) argues that religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam form a united front against homosexuality, which is categorized as fornication within these religious traditions. A similar argument is held by Rebecca Davis (2017), a writer for the *Daily Maverick* newspaper, who maintains that religiously sanctioned homophobia is the greatest obstacle to full acceptance of LGBTIQ+ people in Southern Africa.

This paper explores the factors that influence perceptions that university undergraduate students hold concerning religiously sanctioned homophobia. While some research has been done on homophobia in South African universities (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Lesch et al. 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Mayeza, 2021), much of the research is qualitative, and it usually focuses on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ students, without paying attention to the perceptions of the broader student community. This study seeks to provide a quantitative account of undergraduate university students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. The research is significant, as it sheds light on some of the important factors influencing undergraduate students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. An understanding and analysis of the perceptions that undergraduate students hold concerning homophobia and a discussion of the influence of religion will be provided. The factors that influence these perceptions will be explored. This research seeks to answer the question: "*What factors influence university undergraduate students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia?*"

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 *Heteronormativity and homophobia in universities*

Homosexuality is a controversial subject in many religious traditions, and it has many arguments against it (Minwalla et al., 2005). The Bible (the holy book of Christianity) and the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam), among others, contain interpretations that condemn homosexuality and embrace heterosexuality as the only correct sexuality. Some of these homophobic interpretations are openly shared through religious teachings on television, social media and radio stations. The teachings are mainly homophobic and portray homosexuality as unnatural and immoral. As an example, Islamic teachings in the Qur'an (the central religious text of Islam), the Hadith and Sharia law are intolerant of any sexuality which falls outside heterosexual marriage (Sanjakdar, 2011). These homophobic teachings have led to the creation of a persisting dominant heteronormative discourse on homosexuality, which holds that it is unnatural and is irreverent to God (Epprecht, 2013; Vincent & Howell, 2014). Therefore, religiously sanctioned homophobia in this paper refers to homophobia legitimized through

religious arguments and teachings that enforce heterosexuality and reject the possibility of alternative sexual identities.

Heteronormativity is a concept that has been widely employed in gender and sexuality studies to develop nuanced understandings and knowledge of the complexities of the social construction of gender and gender-nonconforming identities (Munyuki & Vincent, 2018; Nduna et al., 2017; Peake, 2017). Heteronormativity can be defined as “a powerful but often unmarked set of assumptions, practices and beliefs that constantly reinforce the normalness and naturalness of heterosexuality as the only normal, natural form of sexuality” (Bell, 2009: 115). Within heteronormativity, sex, sexuality and gendered masculinity and femininity are normatively aligned to specific bodies, where male- and female-sex bodies are expected to align with either masculine or feminine gender categories and there is gendered sexual desire for the opposite sex (Butler, 1993). Thus, heteronormativity can further be described as a social and cultural institution where heterosexuality is learnt and reinforced in daily gender-normative socialization practices and ideologies (Bell, 2009). The concept has allowed scholars across the globe to interrogate social issues related to sexual identity discrimination, homophobia and gender normativity (Adikaram & Liyanage, 2017). The literature demonstrates that heteronormative ideologies often shape these social issues and justify excluding sexual minority identities from the natural discourses. Heteronormativity is deeply rooted in religious doctrines that seek to erase the idea of sexual diversity and confine sexuality to the boundaries of heterosexual marriage.

Research shows that heteronormativity is evident at some universities, and that it often perpetuates stigma, prejudice and homophobia against LGBTIQ+ students, who are often socially excluded (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., 2015; Nduna et al., 2017; Smuts et al., 2015). In a quantitative study conducted by Smuts et al. (2015) at a South African university, it was found that homophobia amongst students is often informed by earlier heteronormative socialization, which was backed up by religious teachings that the students grew up under. Similarly, in a qualitative study by Kiguwa and Langa (2017), university male residences were found to be heteronormative and homophobic spaces that embodied dominant heterosexual masculinity. Homophobic violence in the male residences instilled fear amongst gay students, who were subjected to daily violent assertions of heterosexuality (Kiguwa & Langa 2017). In another qualitative study, which sought to investigate students’ access to sexual health at a South African rural university, Mayeza (2021) found that LGBTIQ+ students who visited on-campus clinics experienced discomfort and embarrassment because of the heteronormative culture of the institution. Students in the study were asked intrusive questions about their sexual identities whenever they sought sexual health services from the clinic.

### *2.2 Sex differences in perceptions of homophobia*

Moskowitz et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study on heterosexual undergraduate students’ attitudes towards same-sex marriage, and they found that male students were more likely than female students to hold negative attitudes towards gay male marriage. It was also found that male students were more homophobic towards gays and lesbians than were their female counterparts (Moskowitz et al., 2010). Similarly, in their study of homophobic behavior in US adolescents, Birkett and Espelage (2015) found that females were less likely to use homophobic name-calling than males. Females also scored significantly lower on homophobic victimization compared to males. Some of the research done in South African studies found that males are more homophobic than females (Graziano, 2005; Reygan & Lynette, 2014; Smuts et al., 2015).

Drawing their sample from the population of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, Reygan and Lynette (2014) found that males were more likely to use homophobic name-calling than were

females. Furthermore, most homophobic assaults on gay men and women in KZN were perpetrated by males (Reygan & Lynette, 2014). An explanation for this is provided by Msibi's (2009) argument that men view homosexuality as a threat to normative constructions of masculinity and see it necessary to punish those who do not conform. Smuts et al.'s (2015) research at a South African university found that male students showed more homophobic attitudes than their female counterparts. The number of male students who agreed that they avoid contact with homosexuals was always higher than that of females across male-dominated and female-dominated faculties. When asked if same-sex relationships should be portrayed positively on campus, most male students felt strongly against it, while most female students agreed (Smuts et al., 2015). Male students were more likely than female students to be homophobic. These findings suggest that sex significantly determines students' perceptions of homophobia. This therefore deserves research attention.

### *2.3 Homophobia in rural and urban spaces*

A significant body of literature has established that geographical location has implications for people's perceptions of homosexuality, and that it informs the degree of homophobia in various spaces of socialization (Butterfield, 2018; Msibi, 2009; Rickard & Yancey, 2018; Whiting et al., 2012; Wienke & Hill, 2013). Comparative studies on urban and rural spaces regarding homophobia have found that intolerance of and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals is evident in both spaces. However, most studies have found that discrimination and violence against LGBTIQ+ people are more intense in rural than in urban communities. It is argued that rural spaces embody cultures that emphasize normative, traditional gender roles, fundamental religiosity, conservatism, heteronormative family values and patriarchy (Barefoot et al., 2015; Butterfield, 2018; Dwyer et al., 2015; Msibi, 2009; Rickard & Yancey, 2018). Thus, sexual diversity is not tolerated in rural communities, and the lack of conformity to gender-normative expectations by sexual-minority individuals is often used to initiate violence against them. For example, in a quantitative study conducted by Palmer et al. (2012) in American rural schools, participants reported repeated experiences of violence and discrimination.

Similarly, Butterfield (2018) undertook a qualitative study to explore the levels of discrimination in urban and rural spaces in Croatia and found that hostility towards sexual minorities was more intense in rural spaces, because community members know each other and can easily identify gay people, unlike the case in urban areas, which offer a higher degree of anonymity. In a South African study conducted by Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy (2015) on religion-related stigma and discrimination in a rural-based university, it was found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students were stigmatized and discriminated against by the university community. Some students and university staff labelled LGBTIQ+ students as sinners and Satanists, and they were viewed as "demon-possessed" (Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., 2015). The aforementioned research serves as evidence that geographical locations that people live in influence the extent of homophobia and discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ individuals.

### *2.4 Degree of religiosity, family socialization and homophobia*

International and South African research demonstrates that religiosity and family socialization contribute to students' hostile view of homosexuality (Graziano, 2005; Smuts et al., 2015). While the US has made significant progress in developing laws that protect the rights of LGBTI people, homophobia remains a problem in many US communities, fueled by religious traditions (Brown, 2008; Negy & Eisenman, 2005; Subhrajit, 2014). Doebler's (2015) quantitative study found that in half of Europe, more than 50% of the population find homosexuality unjustifiable, and in a third of the countries, 50% of the population reported that they would not

like to have homosexuals as their neighbors. The results revealed that religiously committed respondents were more likely to express homonegative attitudes than non-religious respondents (Doebler, 2015). In contrast, Magrath et al (2015) conducted a qualitative study in the United Kingdom (UK) and found that most of the participants in the study showed positive and inclusive attitudes towards sexual minorities. It is, however, necessary to note that Magrath's qualitative study consisted of a small sample size of 22 participants from one country, while Doebler's quantitative study consisted of a large sample drawn from multiple countries in Europe. Practically speaking, Doebler (2015) found that Europeans who attend religious services are more likely to have homonegative attitudes than those who do not attend religious services.

A study conducted by Graziano (2005) found that homosexual Stellenbosch University students cited religion as the family value that hindered them the most from disclosing their sexuality to family members. Some participants argued that they remained in the closet because of the strong religious beliefs of their family, especially among families that attend church (Graziano, 2005). Similarly, Smuts et al. (2015) found that the religious convictions of the students in their study significantly influenced their perceptions of homophobia. The students further reported that their perceptions of sexuality and gendered roles are informed more by traditional agents of socialization than by social media and friends (Smuts et al., 2015). The findings highlight the critical role that family socialization plays in producing and reproducing heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality. Vincent and Howell (2014) argue that abnormality, Christian irrelevance and 'non-African' stereotypes are the strategies used in post-apartheid South Africa to delegitimize the idea of sexual equality. The argument of abnormality is used in relation to children and child-rearing and is associated with the non-procreational nature of same-sex unions. The argument of Christian irrelevance emphasizes the 'unnatural' nature of same-sex unions, and 'non-African' stereotypes frame homosexuality as foreign to African culture (Vincent & Howell 2014).

### 3. Research methodology

This paper is based on data collected from an undergraduate survey that considered factors that influence students' perceptions of social norms related to gender, sexuality and religion. The questionnaire was developed by a group of 12 postgraduate students whose research themes were related to undergraduate students' perceptions of particular social norms, and it consisted of 26 closed-ended questions. The first section of the questionnaire asked demographic questions, while the second half of the questionnaire focused on undergraduate students' perceptions. The response options for the questions were arranged on a Likert scale to establish the extent to which factors such as sex, family socialization, place of origin and degree of religiosity informed the students' perceptions of gender, sexuality and religious social norms. Data was collected through the group administration of questionnaires in tutorial classes of undergraduate students. The researcher waited in the tutorial venue while the respondents completed the questionnaires. Over 300 questionnaires were printed for the selected tutorial groups across the different study levels, and 330 survey questionnaires were completed and captured on the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software during April 2017. Ethical clearance was provided by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (FHREC) of the university under study.

The data from the survey provided me with demographic background information on the factors that the study sought to test, as well as responses to statements that measured the extent of students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. Demographic questions asked the students to specify their sex, by choosing either "male" or "female". Students were asked to indicate their frequency of exposure to religious services, and they could choose either "more than once a week", "once a week", "2 to 3 times a month", "once a month", "2 or 3 times a year" or

“every 2 to 3 months” or “only during special events, such as weddings and funerals, or only on special religious occasions”. To determine the students’ place of origin, they were asked to indicate an area where they grew up, and they could choose “suburb of a town or city”, “city center or town center”, “urban area (suburb of a town or city, city center or town center)”, “township of an urban area (township located near a city)”, “rural area or rural town (township in a rural area, rural village or a town in a rural area)” or “farm or agricultural holding”. To determine family socialization, the following statement was posed to the students: “My family is accepting of homosexuals”. To establish the degree of religiosity, students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “I am a religious person”. Response options to the questions on family socialization and degree of religiosity were arranged on a Likert scale with five options: “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “strongly agree” and “agree”. Statements that were used to measure the students’ perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia were the following:

Homosexuals should be welcomed in places of worship.

Homosexuality is immoral.

The legalization of gay marriage is positive for society.

I avoid contact with homosexuals.

Homosexuals should be allowed to lead in religious activities.

Students were then asked to put a cross on the Likert scale response option that reflected the extent to which they agreed with the statement. The data was analyzed using the SPSS, and two tests, namely the chi-squared test and Fisher’s exact test, were used to test the hypotheses.

The research hypotheses for the study are as follows:

*H1: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ sex and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

*H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ frequency of exposure to religious services and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

*H3: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ family socialization and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

*H4: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ place of origin and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

*H5: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ degree of religiosity and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

#### 4. Description of sample

The study sample consisted of 330 undergraduate students (31.21% male and 68.79% female) across different undergraduate study levels. The participants were thus not evenly distributed in terms of sex. The sample represents the female section of the population more than the male section. However, the difference between the sample and the population is not significant, and the sample can therefore be considered representative. The mean age was 20.26

years, which indicates that the majority of the sample was in their late teens and early 20s. The youngest participant was 17, while the oldest participant was 27. Many of the respondents were aged between 17 and 22, which is the typical age for undergraduate students who are doing their first degrees. Consequently, the sample reflects the expected age range for undergraduate students. A small group was aged between 23 and 27, which represents approximately 11% of the sample. A considerable majority of the sample is part of the urban population, since a large percentage of students grew up in either a township of an urban area (41.5%) or a suburb or city center (31.8%). Only 18.5% of the sample grew up in a rural area, while just 5.8% were raised in a rural town. A small minority of 2.4% had grown up on farms or agricultural holdings. This distribution represents the general population, since most of the undergraduate students are from areas close to the university, which is primarily urban. Most of the students engage in religious practices, with 24.92% responding that they engage in religious practices more than once a week, and 27.96% answering that they engage in religious practices at least once a week. Of the sample, 13.68% responded that they engage in religious practices two to three times a month. Only 5.6% of the sample answered that they never engage in religious practices, while the remainder said that they do sometimes engage in religious practices. The majority of the sample considered themselves religious, with 34.3% responding “strongly agree” and 39.1% responding “agree” to the question “Do you consider yourself religious?” A small percentage of 16.5% neither agreed nor disagreed. Only a small part of the sample considered themselves not religious, with 6.1% disagreeing and 4% strongly disagreeing. A large part of the sample came from religious families, with 55.7% strongly agreeing and 27.9% agreeing with the statement “Religious beliefs are important to my family”. About 10% of the respondents were undecided and responded, “neither agree nor disagree”, while a small percentage disagreed (4.6%) and strongly disagreed (1.9%) with the statement. Thus, a considerable majority of the undergraduate students had grown up in religious families.

In the following section, I provide a detailed statistical overview of the responses to the demographic background questions that the students were asked.

## 5. Results

*H1: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' sex and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

This hypothesis was tested using Fisher's exact test.

Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' sex and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' sex and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

The cross-tabulation in Table 1 indicates the responses of male students and of female students to a question relating to religiously sanctioned homophobia. The question aimed to establish the extent to which students agree or disagree with the statement that homosexuals should be welcomed in places of worship. Furthermore, it aims to measure the sex differences in the responses. The majority of the respondents accepted the statement (Agree = 27.1%, Strongly agree = 42.2%). This means that regardless of their sex, the students are generally accepting of gay people. In terms of sex, female students (Agree = 27.8%, Strongly agree = 48.5%) agreed with the statement more than did male students (Agree = 25.5%, Strongly agree = 28.4%). This difference demonstrates that female students' perceptions differ from those of male students. Furthermore, it indicates a greater degree of acceptance of homosexuals amongst females. This indicates that

female students, according to the sample, are more accepting of homosexuals than male students are.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation: Sex

**Sex \* Homosexuals should be welcomed in places of worship Crosstabulation**

|       |        | Homosexuals should be welcomed in places of worship |          |                            |       |                | Total |        |
|-------|--------|---|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|-------|--------|
|       |        | Strongly disagree                                   | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree |       |        |
| Sex   | Male   | Count   | 14       | 7                          | 26    | 26             | 29    | 102    |
|       |        | % within Sex  | 13.7%    | 6.9%                       | 25.5% | 25.5%          | 28.4% | 100.0% |
|       | Female | Count   | 16       | 13                         | 25    | 63             | 110   | 227    |
|       |        | % within Sex  | 7.0%     | 5.7%                       | 11.0% | 27.8%          | 48.5% | 100.0% |
| Total |        | Count   | 30       | 20                         | 51    | 89             | 139   | 329    |
|       |        | % within Sex  | 9.1%     | 6.1%                       | 15.5% | 27.1%          | 42.2% | 100.0% |

The p-value for Fisher’s exact test is 0.001 (< 0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis is **rejected**, as the p-value is less than 0.05. Thus, it is concluded that there is a statistically significant correlation between the students’ sex and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia, as female students showed more acceptance of homosexuals than did male students.

Table 2. Chi-squared test: Sex

**Chi-Square Tests**

|                              | Value               | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (1-sided) | Point Probability |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 19.919 <sup>a</sup> | 4  | .001                              | .000                 |                      |                   |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 19.453              | 4  | .001                              | .001                 |                      |                   |
| Fisher's Exact Test          | 19.595              |    |                                   | .001                 |                      |                   |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 13.933 <sup>b</sup> | 1  | .000                              | .000                 | .000                 | .000              |
| N of Valid Cases             | 329                 |    |                                   |                      |                      |                   |

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.20.

b. The standardized statistic is 3.733.

*H2: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ frequency of exposure to religious services and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

This hypothesis was tested using the chi-squared test of independence.

Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ frequency of exposure to religious services and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ frequency of exposure to religious services and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

The cross-tabulation in Table 3 demonstrates that most students who participate in religious activities more than once a week did not support the statement that homosexuality is immoral. This is indicated by the fact that 19.8% (n = 16) strongly disagreed and 18.5% (n = 15) disagreed. This result also applies to those that take part in religious practices once a week, where the majority (strongly disagree = 33% (n = 30), disagree = 22% (n = 20)) believe that

homosexuality is not immoral. Those who never participate in religious practices also indicated positive attitudes, since 52.9% (n = 9) strongly disagreed and 17.6% (n = 3) disagreed with the statement. The results indicate no difference in perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia between those who participate often, those who participate seldom and those who never take part in religious practices, since the majority of all the groups believe that homosexuality is not immoral.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation: Frequency of exposure to religious services

**Religious practices \* Homosexuality is immoral Crosstabulation**

|                     |   | Homosexuality is immoral     |          |                            |                          | Total |        |
|---------------------|---|------------------------------|----------|----------------------------|--------------------------|-------|--------|
|                     |   | Strongly disagree            | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Strongly agree and Agree |       |        |
| Religious practices | More than once a week   | Count                        | 16       | 15                         | 26                       | 24    | 81     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 19.8%    | 18.5%                      | 32.1%                    | 29.6% | 100.0% |
|                     | Once a week   | Count                        | 30       | 20                         | 21                       | 20    | 91     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 33.0%    | 22.0%                      | 23.1%                    | 22.0% | 100.0% |
|                     | 2 to 3 times a month  | Count                        | 18       | 8                          | 11                       | 8     | 45     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 40.0%    | 17.8%                      | 24.4%                    | 17.8% | 100.0% |
|                     | Once a month  | Count                        | 6        | 5                          | 8                        | 3     | 22     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 27.3%    | 22.7%                      | 36.4%                    | 13.6% | 100.0% |
|                     | 2 or 3 times a year or every 2 to 3 months  | Count                        | 9        | 6                          | 7                        | 10    | 32     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 28.1%    | 18.8%                      | 21.9%                    | 31.3% | 100.0% |
|                     | Only with special events such as weddings and funerals or only on special religious occasions | Count                        | 16       | 12                         | 7                        | 4     | 39     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 41.0%    | 30.8%                      | 17.9%                    | 10.3% | 100.0% |
|                     | Never   | Count                        | 9        | 3                          | 2                        | 3     | 17     |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 52.9%    | 17.6%                      | 11.8%                    | 17.6% | 100.0% |
| Total               |   | Count                        | 104      | 69                         | 82                       | 72    | 327    |
|                     |   | % within Religious practices | 31.8%    | 21.1%                      | 25.1%                    | 22.0% | 100.0% |

Table 4 demonstrates that the p-value for the chi-squared test of independence is 0.195 (> 0.05). Therefore, the null hypothesis is **not rejected**, because the p-value is greater than 0.05. It is concluded that there is no statistically significant correlation between the students' frequency of exposure to religious activities and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia, since the students, irrespective of their exposure to religious activities, showed acceptance of homosexuals.

Table 4. Chi-squared test: Frequency of exposure to religious services

**Chi-Square Tests**

|                              | Value               | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 22.879 <sup>a</sup> | 18 | .195                              |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 23.260              | 18 | .181                              |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 7.267               | 1  | .007                              |
| N of Valid Cases             | 327                 |    |                                   |

a. 5 cells (17.9%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.59.

*H3: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ family socialization and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

This hypothesis was tested using the chi-squared test of independence

Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ family socialization and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students’ family socialization and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

Most students who strongly disagreed with the statement that their family members are accepting of homosexuals showed less acceptance of homosexuals, with 51.7% (n = 30) disagreeing strongly and 12.1% (n = 7) disagreeing with the statement “The legalization of gay marriage is positive for society”. This was also the case with those who disagreed that their families are accepting of homosexuals (strongly disagree = 12.7% (n = 7), disagree = 21.8% (n = 12)). However, it should be noted that a large part of this group remained neutral (neither agree nor disagree = 32.7% (n = 18)). Those who agreed or strongly agreed with the first statement were more positive in their responses to the statement on the legalization of gay marriage. For instance, the majority of the students who agreed that their families are accepting of homosexuals also agreed (33% (n = 30)) or strongly agreed (29.7% (n = 27)) with the statement that the legalization of gay marriage is positive for society. This means that there is a difference in perceptions between students from homophobic family backgrounds and those from non-homophobic family backgrounds.

Table 5. Cross-tabulation: Family socialization

**My family is accepting of homosexuals \* The legalisation of gay marriage is positive for society Crosstabulation**

|                                       |  |  | The legalisation of gay marriage is positive for society |          |                            |       |                |        |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|--------|
|                                       |  |  | Strongly disagree  | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Total  |
| My family is accepting of homosexuals | Strongly disagree                              | Count  | 30   | 7        | 10                         | 5     | 6              | 58     |
|                                       |  | % within My family is accepting of homosexuals | 51.7%  | 12.1%    | 17.2%                      | 8.6%  | 10.3%          | 100.0% |
|                                       | Disagree                                       | Count  | 7  | 12       | 18                         | 11    | 7              | 55     |
|                                       |  | % within My family is accepting of homosexuals | 12.7%  | 21.8%    | 32.7%                      | 20.0% | 12.7%          | 100.0% |
|                                       | Neither agree nor disagree                     | Count  | 6  | 11       | 45                         | 17    | 16             | 95     |
|                                       |  | % within My family is accepting of homosexuals | 6.3%   | 11.6%    | 47.4%                      | 17.9% | 16.8%          | 100.0% |
|                                       | Agree  | Count  | 3  | 6        | 25                         | 30    | 27             | 91     |
|                                       |  | % within My family is accepting of homosexuals | 3.3%   | 6.6%     | 27.5%                      | 33.0% | 29.7%          | 100.0% |
|                                       | Strongly agree                                 | Count  | 0  | 2        | 3                          | 3     | 19             | 27     |
|                                       |  | % within My family is accepting of homosexuals | 0.0%   | 7.4%     | 11.1%                      | 11.1% | 70.4%          | 100.0% |
| Total                                 | Count  | 46   | 38   | 101      | 66                         | 75    | 326            |        |
|                                       | % within My family is accepting of homosexuals | 14.1%  | 11.7%  | 31.0%    | 20.2%                      | 23.0% | 100.0%         |        |

The p-value for the chi-squared test of independence is 0.000 (< 0.5), which indicates that the null hypothesis is **rejected**, as the p-value is less than 0.05. It is concluded that there is a statistically significant correlation between the students’ family socialization and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia, since those students from homophobic family

backgrounds viewed homosexuality more negatively than those from non-homophobic backgrounds.

Table 6. Chi-squared test: Family socialization

| Chi-Square Tests             |                      |    |                                   |
|------------------------------|----------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
|                              | Value                | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) |
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 145.337 <sup>a</sup> | 16 | .000                              |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 122.174              | 16 | .000                              |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 78.991               | 1  | .000                              |
| N of Valid Cases             | 326                  |    |                                   |

a. 2 cells (8.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.15.

*H4: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' place of origin and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

This hypothesis was tested using Fisher's exact test.

Null hypothesis (H0): There is no statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' place of origin and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

Alternative hypothesis (H1): There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' place of origin and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

The cross-tabulation indicates that the majority of students from urban areas (73.3% (n = 77)) do not avoid contact with homosexuals. Similarly, students from rural areas and rural towns also demonstrated positive attitudes towards homosexuals, since most of them strongly disagreed or disagreed (71.3% (n = 57)) with the statement that they avoid contact with homosexuals. This means that students generally do not avoid contact with homosexuals, regardless of the area where they grew up. Furthermore, there is no difference in behavior between students who grew up in an urban area, a township of an urban area, a rural area, a rural town and a farm, since the majority in all groups indicated that they do not avoid contact with homosexuals.

Table 7. Cross-tabulation: Place of origin

| Area you grew up in   |                              |       | I avoid contact with homosexuals |                            |                         | Total |
|---|------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
|   |                              |       | Strongly disagree or Disagree    | Neither agree nor disagree | Strongly agree or agree |       |
| Urban area (suburb of a town or city, city centre or town centre)                           | Count                        | 77    | 17                               | 11                         | 105                     |       |
|   | % within Area you grew up in | 73.3% | 16.2%                            | 10.5%                      | 100.0%                  |       |
| Township of an urban area (township located near a city)                                    | Count                        | 108   | 19                               | 9                          | 136                     |       |
|   | % within Area you grew up in | 79.4% | 14.0%                            | 6.6%                       | 100.0%                  |       |
| Rural area (township in a rural area; rural village) or Rural town (a town in a rural area) | Count                        | 57    | 9                                | 14                         | 80                      |       |
|   | % within Area you grew up in | 71.3% | 11.3%                            | 17.5%                      | 100.0%                  |       |
| Farm or agricultural holding  | Count                        | 5     | 0                                | 3                          | 8                       |       |
|   | % within Area you grew up in | 62.5% | 0.0%                             | 37.5%                      | 100.0%                  |       |
| Total   | Count                        | 247   | 45                               | 37                         | 329                     |       |
|   | % within Area you grew up in | 75.1% | 13.7%                            | 11.2%                      | 100.0%                  |       |

The p-value for Fisher's exact test is 0.062 ( $> 0.05$ ), which indicates that the null hypothesis is **not rejected**. It is concluded that there is no statistically significant correlation between students' place of origin and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. This is due to the fact that students, regardless of their place of origin, were positive in terms of their behavior towards homosexuals.

Table 8. Fisher's exact test: Place of origin

| Chi-Square Tests             |                     |    |                                   |                      |                      |                   |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
|                              | Value               | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (1-sided) | Point Probability |
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 12.971 <sup>a</sup> | 6  | .043                              | .045                 |                      |                   |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 12.237              | 6  | .057                              | .061                 |                      |                   |
| Fisher's Exact Test          | 11.290              |    |                                   | .062                 |                      |                   |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 3.895 <sup>b</sup>  | 1  | .048                              | .048                 | .028                 | .003              |
| N of Valid Cases             | 329                 |    |                                   |                      |                      |                   |

a. 2 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .90.

b. The standardized statistic is 1.973.

*H5: There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' degree of religiosity and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.*

This hypothesis was tested using the chi-squared test of independence.

Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' degree of religiosity and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): There is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' degree of religiosity and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia.

The cross-tabulation indicates that the majority of students who strongly agreed that they are religious either agreed (19.6% (n = 22)) or strongly agreed (21.4% (n = 24)) that homosexuals should be allowed to lead in religious activities. The same applies to students who agreed that they are religious, where 24.6% agreed and 22.2% strongly agreed with the statement. Students who strongly disagreed or disagreed that they are religious showed strong support for the statement. A total of 15.2% (n = 5) agreed and 45.8% (n = 16) strongly agreed with the statement. This means that there is little difference in perceptions between religious students and those who are not religious, since small parts of each group did not support the statement. Overall, students, irrespective of their degree of religiosity, supported the statement that homosexuals should be allowed to lead in religious activities.

Table 9. Cross-tabulation: Degree of religiosity

**Religious person \* Homosexuals should be allowed to lead in religious activities Crosstabulation**

|                  |                               |                           | Homosexuals should be allowed to lead in religious activities |          |                            |       |                |        |
|------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|---|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|--------|
|                  |                               |                           | Strongly disagree   | Disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree | Strongly agree | Total  |
| Religious person | Strongly agree                | Count                     | 18  | 18       | 30                         | 22    | 24             | 112    |
|                  |                               | % within Religious person | 16.1%   | 16.1%    | 26.8%                      | 19.6% | 21.4%          | 100.0% |
|                  | Agree                         | Count                     | 16  | 20       | 31                         | 31    | 28             | 126    |
|                  |                               | % within Religious person | 12.7%   | 15.9%    | 24.6%                      | 24.6% | 22.2%          | 100.0% |
|                  | Neither agree nor disagree    | Count                     | 6   | 6        | 6                          | 10    | 26             | 54     |
|                  |                               | % within Religious person | 11.1%   | 11.1%    | 11.1%                      | 18.5% | 48.1%          | 100.0% |
|                  | Strongly disagree or Disagree | Count                     | 3   | 3        | 6                          | 5     | 16             | 33     |
|                  |                               | % within Religious person | 9.1%  | 9.1%     | 18.2%                      | 15.2% | 48.5%          | 100.0% |
|                  | Total                         | Count                     | 43  | 47       | 73                         | 68    | 94             | 325    |
|                  |                               | % within Religious person | 13.2%   | 14.5%    | 22.5%                      | 20.9% | 28.9%          | 100.0% |

The p-value for the chi-squared test of independence is 0.018 (< 0.05), which indicates that the null hypothesis is **rejected**, since the p-value is less than 0.05. It is concluded that there is a statistically significant correlation between the students’ degree of religiosity and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia, since the students who are less religious supported the statement “Homosexuals should be allowed to lead in religious activities” while the majority of those who are more religious did not support the statement.

Table 10. Chi-squared test: Degree of religiosity

**Chi-Square Tests**

|                              | Value               | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square           | 24.304 <sup>a</sup> | 12 | .018                              |
| Likelihood Ratio             | 23.622              | 12 | .023                              |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 10.687              | 1  | .001                              |
| N of Valid Cases             | 325                 |    |                                   |

a. 2 cells (10.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.37.

## 6. Discussion

The findings indicate that the sex of the undergraduate students influences their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. In line with previous research (Birkett & Espelage, 2015; Graziano, 2005; Smuts et al., 2015), which has found that males are more likely than females to show homophobic attitudes, the results of this study show that female university students are less homophobic than male students. Thus, the findings from these previous studies are applicable to the undergraduate students in this stud since female students showed less homophobic attitudes than males.

Regarding frequency of exposure to religious services, the study found no statistically significant correlation between the undergraduate students’ frequency of exposure to religious

services and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. This means that the undergraduate students' frequency of exposure to religious services has no impact on their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. This finding contradicts Doebler's (2015) and Graziano's (2005) findings that individuals who attend religious services are more likely to have homophobic attitudes than those who do not attend religious services. The results prove that this is not the case with these undergraduate students in the university under study. The difference in findings could be due to the fact that the students in this study are in constant contact with LGBTIQ+ students on campus and do not see the relevance of hate in an environment that allows people of different sexualities to study in one place.

Regarding degree of religiosity, the study found that there is a statistically significant correlation between undergraduate students' degree of religiosity and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that the students' religious beliefs influence their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. The results are congruent with research findings (Graziano, 2005; Smuts et al., 2015; Vincent & Howell, 2014) cited in the literature review, which collectively assert that religious people are more homophobic than non-religious people. While the results were generally positive, very religious students demonstrated more intolerance than students who are less religious or not religious. The difference in the effect of the above-mentioned two independent variables might be due to the fact that degree of religiosity has to do with religious beliefs, while frequency of exposure to religious services is not directly related to beliefs. Thus, the students' frequent exposure to religious services does not translate to stronger religious beliefs.

The findings on family socialization show a statistically significant correlation between the students' family socialization and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia, which indicates that family socialization is a contributing factor to the students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. The findings cited in the literature review are consistent with the findings of this study, as both Graziano (2005) and Smuts et al. (2015) indicate that the family's solid religious beliefs significantly influence the students' perceptions of LGBTIQ+ identities. Furthermore, Smuts et al. (2015) found that students value their family members' views more than those of other socialization agents, which further highlights the unavoidable influence of the family. Indeed, this is evident in the undergraduate students' perceptions, since those who grew up in families that accept homosexuals showed more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than those from families that do not accept homosexuals.

It is evident from the findings that the students' perceptions are not dependent on their place of origin, since the results indicate that there is no statistically significant correlation between the undergraduate students' place of origin and their perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. This finding is not in line with other studies (Barefoot et al., 2015; Butterfield, 2018; Msibi, 2009; Wienke & Hill, 2013), which have found higher degrees of homophobia in rural than in urban communities. The students in this study demonstrated similar perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia, irrespective of their place of origin.

Overall, the study shows that factors influencing the undergraduate students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia are sex, family socialization and degree of religiosity. Furthermore, the study proves that frequency of exposure to religious services and place of origin do not affect the students' perceptions of religiously sanctioned homophobia. The study further highlights the importance of a qualitative research methodology to obtain a deeper understanding of the student population's perceptions of homophobia in certain social spaces, and it complements qualitative research studies conducted on LGBTIQ+ students' experiences in institutions of higher learning and other social spaces.

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