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The unseen struggle: Queer employee experiences with subtle discrimination in KwaZulu-Natal corporates

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Orientation: Sexuality and gender diversity have gone unnoticed as an important area of scholarship, practice and policy within organisational work. This is based on heteronormative bias that goes unchallenged, reproducing a restrictive heterosexual or homosexual binary.

Research purpose: This study aimed to understand the workplace experiences of queer employees in corporate workplaces in South Africa.

Motivation of the study: Literature suggests that queer employees manage their sexuality with constant fear of discrimination. However, not much is known about queer employees within corporate workplaces in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Research approach/design and method: The study employed a qualitative research approach. A sample of 25 participants was selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using face-to-face in-depth interviews and were analysed using thematic analysis.

Main findings: The participants experienced subtle rather than blatant forms of discrimination. This is because blatant discrimination, among other protected identity forms, is unlawful under South African anti-discriminatory legislation.

Practical/managerial implications: The study proposed fostering an authentic culture of inclusivity by integrating an all-encompassing diversity management policy into the strategic plans of corporate workplaces and educating employees on subtle discrimination.

Contribution/value-add: The study highlights a 'blind spot' in formal diversity efforts, showing that sexuality is often overlooked, creating a clear implementation gap between existing diversity management policies and the lived experiences of queer employees in corporate workplaces. This research advocates for the development of diversity programmes that are tailored to the needs of queer employees in corporate workplaces.

Keywords: workplace experiences; diversity; queer employees; culture of inclusivity; sexuality; gender; discrimination.

Introduction

Until the past few years, literature on diversity management within the field of Human Resource Management has given limited attention to sexual orientation as a form of diversity (Dialeet al., 2023; Ntombela, 2020). Previous research within the field has paid particular attention to race, gender, ethnicity, disability and age as forms of diversity. This is largely because of South Africa's deep-rooted history of racial ordering and discrimination, which is still deeply racialised and sexist (Dibobo et al., 2022). Furthermore, traditional diversity management in workplaces has primarily focused on overt characteristics that heavily convey meanings that are reproduced in daily interactions (Bell & Leopold, 2024; Cox, 2019). However, there has been a slight shift in the field where the focus has been on the review of covert differences such as disability (especially non-invisible ones), illness, religion, beliefs as well as sexuality, and the implications of carrying a difference not easily recognisable socially (Castrillón, 2024; Ecklund et al., 2024).

Research purpose

This study aimed at understanding how queer employees experience South African corporate workplaces.

Literature review

The South African context: Navigating queer identities in corporates

A frequent theme in South African literature on sexuality is the homophobic nature of African societies (Bhana et al., 2021). This is because of the belief that queer identities[1] are a foreign influence, which deviates from the indigenous African values that are closely upheld and often used to justify discrimination (Ezeador & Okpara, 2024; O'Connell et al., 2024). Indigenous African values are not understood as a monolithic reality but rather as a set of cultural, moral, social and religious norms that are commonly presented as traditional or authentically African. Moreover, conservative religious belief systems have reinforced the framing of heterosexuality as 'normative' and socially legitimate, thus shaping what is widely regarded as culturally acceptable (Tamale, 2011). Despite having the world's most advanced anti-discriminatory legislative framework, South African professional spaces continue to be contexts of discrimination based on sexual and gender identity (Brown, 2024). Scholarship reaffirms that despite the robust anti-discriminatory legislative framework, queer employees experience noticeable disparities between the legal ideals of equality and the day-to-day lived realities in both the public sector and the communities at large (Tucker, 2019). This article wishes to further investigate the discrimination of queer employees, particularly in corporate workplaces.

Diversity in the workplace

Diversity is understood as any salient attribute that distinguishes individuals during social interaction (Ferdman, 2017; Friday & Friday, 2003). This is often classified as 'surface-level' diversity, which includes visible or demographic traits such as race, gender, disability, language, culture and sexuality to mention a few. The queer community represents a vital component of this category because its members frequently navigate systemic marginalisation and underrepresentation (Cech & Waidzunas, 2021); their inclusion is necessary for diversity and to challenge traditional norms, advancing equity within organisations (Shore et al., 2011). Contemporary organisations are faced with intensified levels of diversity than before. This is largely because of the evolution of societies through processes such as mass migration, same-sex legislation, ageing population, changing career patterns and shifting generational lifestyles (Post et al., 2021). These differences affect the organisation's human resource management practices, customer expectations, investor relations and strategy formulation (Mihaylova & Rietmann, 2025). While some corporates support and recognise diversity as a powerful resource, others have been resistant to meaningful change (Galvin, 2006). Organisations that value diversity, which have committed transformational leadership, have recognised that diversity is a strong resource that can be used to create a competitive edge (Lee & Shin, 2024; Hunt et al., 2020). This article wishes to advance literature in the field by redirecting the focus onto sexuality as a social diversity category, by making sure that queer employees are visible, protected and incorporated in the daily workplace activities.

Stigmatisation and discriminatory practices in corporate workplaces

The past two decades of work conducted internationally and locally on sexuality in the workplace indicate that queer employees continue to experience discrimination one way or another with limited organisational support (Sibande & Gobind, 2025). Modern scholarship shifts our understanding of workplace discrimination from a more simplistic interpretation to a more complex and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by context-specific experiences (Oliveira et al., 2024). Building on the earlier frameworks by Chung (2001) and Cavalier (2013), research emphasises that discrimination is not experienced in a linear or clear-cut fashion; way, intention, perception and actions all matter and shape its measurement and lived reality (Diale et al., 2023; Ng & Sears, 2020). Formal overt or institutional discrimination is explained as explicit discrimination rooted in institutional policies, rules or formal decision-making processes such as discriminatory promotion policies (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Informal, subtle or interpersonal discrimination is often less overt but equally damaging and affects interpersonal dynamics within the workplace. Moreover, experiences of discrimination can span from potential or anticipated, where people adapt their behaviour out of fear or expectation of bias, to encountered or actual discrimination which can be explained as direct experiences that may have occurred because of unfair treatment (Gordon et al., 2020). Perceived discrimination may be seen as an employee's perception of their employer's action, in this case, based on their sexual identity, while actual discrimination is discriminatory practices directed at queer employees (Sibande & Gobind, 2025). Employees may only react (turnover intentions, withdrawal and stress) to workplace discrimination based on their interpretation of that discriminatory practice (Triana et al., 2019). Thus, the crucial distinction between perceived and actual discrimination underscores the subjectivity of experiences of discrimination and significantly impacts queer employees' well-being and workplace engagement (Wölk et al., 2025). Nonetheless, there is a scarcity of literature that explores actual workplace discrimination against queer employees in South African corporate workplaces, particularly studies providing organisational experiences across racial groups in the corporate sector (Tshisa & Van der Walt, 2021). However, what we know from literature is that perceived workplace discrimination may arise from queer employees experiencing differential treatment in terms of fair treatment when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, especially if their sexual identity is known (Fric, 2019). In the process of this study, it has been observed that some of the work done in the field is on the significance of the anticipated fear of discrimination of a sexual identity once it has been revealed

1. Queer identities are understood as concepts that challenge fixed binaries of sexuality and gender. They encompass sexual orientations and gender identities that fall outside heterosexual and cisgender norms (Ed. Phelan, 2020).

in the workplace. This is because of the societal stigma attached to being queer. In the early work conducted by Goffman (1963), he repeatedly refers to queer employees as a 'stigmatised group' in the United States around the 1960s, when being queer was criminal and considered a psychiatric disorder (Kaplan, 2014). Similarly, in South Africa under the apartheid rule, being queer was criminal and punishable by imprisonment (Matetoa-Mohapi, 2021). According to Sears et al. (2021), discrimination at work and other labour market discriminations are the most prevalent type of discrimination experienced by many queer employees and job seekers, not only in South Africa but globally as well. Such discrimination may be both overt acts of bias (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) and subtle and insidious (Newman et al., 2025) and affect the entire employment cycle in hiring, promotions, firing and regarding salary ranges when compared to their heterosexual colleagues. Discrimination in the workplace not only has economic disadvantages to queer employees but also impacts their psychological well-being, often making it difficult for them to advance in their careers (Ubisi et al., 2023).

Drawing from the aforementioned discussion, it is evident that discrimination is multifaceted. Queer employees experience multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination and stigma. These can include formal or virulent homophobia that manifests itself through prejudicial behaviour, treatment or practices, including being overlooked for hiring and promotion processes, being fired because of sexual orientation, a lack of access and distribution of resources or sabotaging of work and lower pay rates (Badgett et al., 2013). As a result, some queer employees, as a matter of necessity, remain 'closeted' because of the prevailing negative organisational and cultural factors (Tshisa & Van der Walt, 2021).

Theoretical framework

To guide the analysis of this study and to effectively capture the complexities of the workplace experiences of queer employees, two theories were used, namely Queer theory and the gendered organisations theory. However, before discussing the theoretical framework, it is necessary to clarify how the term 'queer' is used.

For the purpose of this article, the term 'queer' is utilised in two ways: firstly, as a theoretical lens using queer theory and secondly, as an inclusive umbrella category to encompass the diverse range of non-heterosexual identities represented by the participants, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and pansexual individuals. While remaining attentive to the distinct factors that shape the unique lived experiences and forms of marginalisation, the author adopts 'queer' both for its economy of language and its political utility. By grouping these identities under one term, this article emphasises a shared positionality of 'otherness' in relation to dominant heteronormative structures (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2019). In addition, the term 'queer' has been reclaimed to align with contemporary South African discourse, which uses 'queer' to challenge binary classifications and address the intersectional nature of sexual and gender diversity (Msibi, 2011).

Queer theory was first introduced by Teresa de Lauretis and later developed by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and David Halperin. In this study, queer theory provides a crucial foundation for understanding and centring queer experiences in corporate workplaces by challenging heteronormative systems, which keep in check the 'normative' relations of sex and gender binaries (Corlett et al., 2023). This theory helped to interrogate how workplaces, which are subsections of society, characterise certain behaviours to 'other' queer identities in the most subtle or institutionalised ways (Lee & Shin, 2024). Consequently, queer theory is well-suited for this study as it elevates the real voices from personal experiences of employees, which is also important for qualitative work. It also explains how subtle discrimination is woven into organisational culture and language.

Drawing from this foundation, the theory of gendered organisations is used to explain how workplaces are inherently gendered through their processes, policies and practices that reproduce gender 'norms' and power dynamics. Joan Acker first coined this theory in the 1990s to show how the distribution of power in workplaces is exercised through organisational logic and perpetuates gender inequalities in the positions that employees hold in the corporate hierarchy (Bates, 2022). Such structures systematically privilege 'normative' gender performances, alienating those who do not adhere to these institutional expectations (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Using this theory to understand queer experiences, it demonstrates that discrimination stems from both individual prejudices and institutional norms (Connell, 2009). These institutional norms influence the communication styles, clothing standards, organisational culture and routines, which reinforce heteronormativity while marginalising queer employees (Benschop, 2009; Browne, 2014). Ultimately, such gendered spaces also create an environment that pressures queer employees to align, often leading to subtle forms of discrimination (Acker, 2006; Schilt & Lagos, 2017).

Research design

Qualitative research design was utilised to generate data as it aims to understand phenomena and subjective experiences within their natural contexts (Creswell & Proth, 2018). It is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and attitudes of people concerning a particular phenomenon. Qualitative research design was appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to understand individual 'truths' attached to the experiences of queer employees at work. Narrative enquiry was employed because this study is concerned with identity and identity construction. This type of methodology is suitable as individuals narratively construct and develop their identities through socially constructed narratives (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

Research methodology

This study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal province, situated on the east coast of the country. The study

specifically focused on queer employees employed in corporate workplaces across the province.

Sampling

The total sample comprised 24 participants who reported varying levels of disclosure of their sexual and/or gender identities at work. Out of the total sample, 15 participants had not disclosed their sexual identity to any of their colleagues. The sample included 16 black African employees, 3 Indian employees, 3 white employees and 2 mixed race employees. The age range spread from 20 years to 45 years, with a mean of 31 years. The distribution by gender was 68% male (17 individuals) and 32% female (eight individuals). A homogeneous type of purposive technique was used because all participants had to adhere to criteria, which included self-identifying as queer, being permanently employed in the private sector, and residing and working in KwaZulu-Natal. The second strategy used to recruit potential participants was the snowball sampling technique.

Data collection

Given the sensitivity of this study, ethical integrity in the research process was closely observed. In order for queer employees to feel comfortable sharing their workplace experiences, the environment needed to be secure, supportive and comfortable. The data collection tool employed needed to create an environment that would allow participants to freely disclose sensitive information regarding their workplace experiences without fear or discomfort. The tool also needed to be informal, allowing for casual one-on-one interaction, to foster trust with the researcher. The most widely accepted approach in narrative inquiry research is interviews. Narrative inquiry interviews differ from conventional, formal interviews as they focus on a 'conversation' between the researcher and participant in eliciting data. According to Sikes and Hall (2020), these interviews are 'grounded conversations' because they are largely concerned with establishing and maintaining rapport during interviews. Narrative inquiry interviews, unlike conventional interviews, are relational and focus on open-ended conversations to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Finlay, 2024). Grounded conversations form a central data-gathering feature of this study. These conversations between participants were semi-structured and informal, allowing for editing and adjusting of questions in the light of the participants' responses, while also probing interesting and important areas (Ruslin et al., 2022). In that way, the conversations were steered by the participant, thus levelling the power inequalities between the participant and researcher (Lima, 2023). Grounded conversations as a data collection tool worked well to meet the unique needs of the study.

Careful consideration was given to the location in which the in-depth interviews took place. Because of the sensitive nature of the study, the comfort and safety of the participants

TABLE 1: Biographical information of the participants.

Participant	Self-identified sexual identity†	Race	Age (years)	Gender	Work experience (years)	Occupation
A	Lesbian	black African person	23	Female	3	Administration
B	Lesbian	black African person	44	Female	20	Human resource manager
C	Gay	black African person	20	Male	2	Marketing intern
D	Gay	black African person	30	Male	5	Quantity surveyor
E	Gay	black African person	38	Male	7	Software development manager
F	Gay	Mixed race person	32	Male	10	Attorney
G	Gay	Indian person	45	Male	23	Senior researcher
H	Gay	black African person	23	Male	2	Intern property agent
I	Gay	black African person	30	Male	8	Human resource administrator
J	Gay	black African person	29	Male	7	Advertising
K	Bisexual	black African person	37	Male	9	Logistics consultant
L	Gay	black African person	22	Male	3	Receptionist
M	Gay	White person	30	Male	5	Insurance consultant
N	Lesbian	black African person	35	Female	7	Finance officer
O	Bisexual	black African person	29	Female	5	Junior editor
P	Gay	black African person	25	Male	3	Marketing intern
Q	Bisexual	Mixed race person	38	Male	8	Pharmacist
R	Lesbian	White person	35	Female	5	Researcher
S	Lesbian	White person	32	Female	5	Public relations consultant
T	Pansexual	Indian person	40	Male	17	Medical technician
U	Gay	black African person	33	Male	7	Marketing manager
V	Transexual	black African person	35	Female	6	Advertising consultant
W	Bisexual	Indian person	38	Male	3	Professional accountant
X	Lesbian	black African person	22	Female	1	Finance officer

Source: Ntombela, L.L. (2020). *Experiences and identity constructions of sexual and gender 'non-normative' employees in corporate workplaces in KwaZulu-Natal*. Doctoral thesis. University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Note: Participant identifiers (A, B, C, etc.) are used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

†, Gay: A term used to describe a person who has sexual, physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions to people of the same sex.

Lesbian: A term used to describe a woman who has sexual, physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to other women.

Bisexual: A term used to describe a person who has sexual, physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions to more than one gender.

Pansexual: A term used to describe a person who has sexual, physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions to any person, regardless of gender or sexual identity.

Transexual: A term used to describe people who have permanently changed or are seeking to change their bodies through medical interventions (Koenig, 2019).

were prioritised, particularly when discussing personal or potentially stigmatised experiences (Creswell, 2013). As such, participants were given the opportunity to choose interview locations in which they felt at ease. All Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the author to ensure confidentiality and to protect participants' identities.

Data analysis

Although narrative analysis is typically employed when using narrative inquiry, this was not the case for this study. A thematic analysis was deemed more appropriate to identify patterns and shared meanings across the group of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis followed a hybrid approach, which integrated both deductive and inductive reasoning (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To ensure methodological thoroughness, Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework was utilised, facilitating a systematic movement from raw data to overarching themes. For data management, the researcher engaged in a multistage reduction process with the help of NVivo 8. Firstly, segments of the transcripts were highlighted that addressed the research objectives; secondly, the theoretical 'lenses' were applied to generate more nuanced codes; and finally, inductive codes to emerged to capture unique South African workplace realities.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human Research Ethics Committee (HSS/1210/016D). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were also assured that confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld through their responses in accordance with the *Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013* (*POPIA*). As such, their real names were not disclosed, instead pseudonyms were assigned. To ensure emotional and psychological support for participants, appropriate measures were implemented. Participants were informed of their right to pause or withdraw at any time during the interview process. The researcher also monitored the emotional well-being of the participants during the interview process and, where necessary, referrals to support services were provided.

Results

The findings of the study indicated that participants experienced subtle forms of discrimination rather than blatant. This is because blatant discrimination against queer employees, among other protected identity forms, is prohibited, based on anti-discriminatory legislation in South Africa, particularly the *Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998*. Despite some participants denying experiences of workplace discrimination, the study revealed ongoing, less visible incidents of subtle discrimination, often in the form of microaggressions in everyday interactions. This demonstrates that microaggressions are defined by minor, ambiguous acts that are not easily recognisable for those who are experiencing them (Gonzales et al., 2023). Furthermore, the absence of explicit references to sexual or gender identities makes these acts less recognisable, thus making them more difficult to address at an organisational level (Di Marco et al., 2018). Other participants were able to explicitly categorise their experiences of discrimination as subtle. The following are the key findings.

Subtle workplace incivility: Humour and jokes in a mocking manner

Inappropriate jokes and humour were used to disguise discriminatory remarks. Participants shared that some of the jokes referred to conventional gender roles and pronouns, including masculinity. Although some participants initially felt that the comments were harmless, the jokes were sarcastic and consistently repeated to portray negative attitudes towards queer identities, causing participants to interpret the acts as intentional and oppressive. For instance, Participant X indicated that her colleague addressed her as 'sir' even though she had made it clear that she prefers to be called 'miss':

> 'She came in there and she said "excuse me, Sir" so I kept quiet. "Sorry, Sir" and that's the first thing I always say when I get to a new place, do not call me sir or mister. It's miss. So she was like "excuse me, sir" I knew that there was a sarcastic tone, she was just fooling around. "Excuse me, sir" and I kept quiet. Kept on calling me sir. And she was like, "you know what, you homosexual people are confused" and all that, in front of everyone. It not the first time, she always says it, this time she took it so far with the comment about that lesbian women are confused and all of that.' (Participant X)

Although X found that it was initially a joke, it quickly became confrontational. Participant V observed that her colleague uses inappropriate pronouns when referring to her at work. Although the comment was not to her face, it was intended for her. Jokes were also passed to make inappropriate comments about gender roles:

> 'For me it's tricky because I have not come out to people that I'm transgender, people just know that I'm not straight that's for sure. But even then you will hear those comments that are below the belt. Like the one time my colleague was asking if I was in the office, was asking this other girl we work with "is [*participant's name {excluded for confidentiality}*] there" and she said "he, she, he, she is here." Seriously? She doesn't stutter; she was kept on saying "he, she, he, she" just to make a joke and a mockery of me.' (Participant V)

Participant L also shared that he was once told jokingly that it was a 'waste' that he was 'gay' because he would have made a good husband one day.

Subtle discrimination: Heterosexist name-calling

Name-calling was also identified as another type of subtle discrimination experienced by participants, which was used to marginalise queer employees. Derogatory language and labels are used to normalise and sustain stereotypes and attitudes about queer identities (Hall & LaFrance, 2012). Heterosexist language is among the most frequently used

pejorative terms, accompanying other categories such as racism, sexism, and phallocentrism that continue to marginalise queer employees (Galupo & Resnick, 2016). Like jokes, name-calling is harmful and negatively impacts queer people (Davis et al., 2021). Participant K shared that he overheard customers use derogatory labels to describe people who identify as 'bisexual' to staff in the presence of supervisors:

> 'For me, it's not so much my colleagues, but it's some of the customers that we regularly work with, but I guess they influence each other – many of which do not agree with issues concerning LGBTI and publicly will say it. A colleague of mine who knows my story asked what they think of this whole thing. They then said it was the worst because it was unclean, because you are into both woman and men. Others even used the word "double adapter"… like that you are sexually promiscuous, that you want to explore with everyone at any given point. Which isn't true.' (Participant K)

Insensitive language or workplace incivility is used freely within the working environment (Page &Ngwenya, 2023). What we gather from the above is that the heterosexist names that are typically used to refer to participants were based on stereotypical misconceptions of queer identities. Participant N indicated that she is called 'one of the stronger women' at work:

> 'They try to be very subtle about it but you can see that that's where they are going with it but they know – especially the managers – they'll say that "when we look at you we saw that you are one of the stronger females," what does that imply? They'll say that I am more like a man; they actually say that. It's so mean. She likes to pick on me. Always.' (Participant N)

The participants' manager sees her as 'mannish' in appearance, which contributes to the ongoing discussion on gender-atypical appearance and sexual identities (Freeman et al., 2010; Paprzycka et al., 2022). Often, such cues are based on the flawed perceptions that women who self-identify as 'lesbian' aspire to be men or masculine because of their deviance to heterosexuality (Klysing et al., 2021).

Workplace ostracism: Isolation and rejection from colleagues

Data also suggest that subtle discrimination is experienced through workplace exclusion where fellow heterosexual colleagues have ignored, avoided or rejected their queer counterparts. It became apparent during the interviews that the behaviours of colleagues had shifted once their queer identities became known. This is because of the stigma attached to the queer sexual identities of participants. Participant 'I' mentioned that he had lost a good friend because of a rumour of having a love affair at work:

> 'Yes I do, mixture of girls and guys, in fact I have two now because the other one and I are no longer friends … He just became distant. I think it had to do with the fact that people started speculating because we were always together during lunch break and we used to go home together, not together-together but I would catch a ride with him home because we stayed in the same area. So, people start suspecting that he was also gay or that we were dating. I think it hit him, I also felt it because I feel like I lost a genuine friendship … It's one of those things that the elephant in the room but I think he knows. I hadn't told him. Unless someone else at work told him and confirmed everything. I don't know.' (Participant I)

This perception came because he was spending a lot of time with his friend at work, as a result, some colleagues spread false rumours of a love affair between them. Participant A also shared how being queer is perceived negatively at work. She shared that some colleagues would distance themselves from her because of her queer sexual identity:

> 'Some people, because of their religion, they make sure that just because you are a Muslim, I'm making an example because the people I've always had problems with are Muslim, so they don't want to be associated with you, even sometimes we praying together at work, we holding hands. If the person had to hold my hand they go on the other side. I've had that a lot. They don't hold my hand at all. But they don't know that this is who I am and I can't and won't change. They saw me and the way that I am when they hired me, what has changed now?' (Participant A)

Some will distance themselves from her because of their religious beliefs. The above comments suggest that participants who experience ostracism are physically present in the group but socially ignored by others. Although participants are physically visible to colleagues at work, they may feel socially invisible and marginalised, which can contribute to internalised homophobia, stress and depressive symptoms (Holman, 2018).

Discussion

Sexual prejudice experienced by participants in this study was predominantly subtle and therefore difficult to identify or directly link to overt discriminatory acts. Such prejudice commonly manifested through workplace humour and jokes that conveyed negative assumptions about queer sexual identities. Although often framed as harmless office banter, these behaviours contribute to an uncivil work environment and operate as micro-aggressive behaviour that undermines the dignity and compromises queer employees' sense of belonging (Ford et al., 2013). Research on disparagement humour indicates that jokes are frequently used to trivialise prejudice and normalise hostility in ways that appear socially acceptable, thereby reducing the likelihood of challenge or sanction (Di Marco et al., 2018). Similarly, humour operates as a powerful mechanism through which prejudicial attitudes are communicated, justified, and masked, allowing discrimination to persist under the guise of collegiality or workplace banter (Ford et al., 2013). From a gendered organisations perspective, such practices are embedded within organisational cultures that privilege heterosexual norms, reinforcing hierarchies of power and legitimacy (Acker, 1990, 2006). Queer theory further highlights how humour functions as a regulatory practice that polices sexual difference and reinforces normative assumptions about professionalism and acceptability (Butler, 1990; Rumens, 2018). Within these power relations, heterosexual colleagues, who occupy the dominant social position, exercise symbolic

power over queer employees, repeatedly positioning them as inferior or marginal, thus reinforcing unequal status relations in the workplace (Williams et al., 2003).

Heterosexist name-calling and derogatory labels represent a pervasive form of subtle discrimination embedded within everyday workplace interactions (Freeman et al., 2010). Like workplace humour, name-calling functions as a verbal microaggression that communicates exclusion, inferiority and normative expectations regarding sexuality and gender (Nadal et al., 2016). Drawing from gendered organisations theory, such practices are not incidental but are produced and sustained through organisational cultures that privilege heterosexuality as the normative standard, rendering queer identities as deviant or marginal (Acker, 2006). Research on microaggressions indicates that heterosexist language is frequently normalised and reproduced even in workplaces that have formal diversity and inclusion policies, thus suggesting a disconnect between institutional commitments and everyday practices (DeSon & Andover, 2024; Hong et al., 2016; Oliveira et al., 2024). Furthermore, queer theory further highlights that heterosexist name-calling operates as a regulatory mechanism that controls sexual difference through repeated routine behaviours, thus reinforcing heteronormative power relations (Butler, 1990; Perales et al., 2025). Although name-calling is a recognised form of subtle discrimination, it frequently goes unchallenged because it is framed as 'ordinary', thus its harmful impact is often overlooked (Platt & Lenzen, 2013; Sue, 2010).

Workplace ostracism, which is often defined as being ignored, excluded or avoided by colleagues, is another form of subtle discrimination embedded within heteronormative workplaces. Based on the gendered organisations theory, workplaces are not neutral spaces but are structured through gendered and heterosexist norms that privilege heterosexuality while marginalising queer sexual identities (Acker, 2006). Moreover, research indicates how ostracism has significant implications for well-being, with queer employees experiencing increased stress, emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction (Holman et al., 2021). From a queer theoretical perspective, such exclusionary practices serve to reinforce normative assumptions about professionalism and belonging, as workplace behaviour is guided by dominant norms and expectations.

Practical implications

This article proposes that corporate workplaces need to prioritise creating a true and authentic culture of inclusivity and move beyond symbolic approaches. The study's findings underscore the lack of sustained effort to attend to sexuality and gender identity, calling for more proactive and integrated diversity initiatives (Ntombela, 2020). According to Dobbin and Kalev (2016), meaningful diversity is impactful when managed as a complex, systematic and ongoing than a compliance-driven activity. It is imperative that organisations examine their human resource value chain so that they do not subtly exclude queer employees. Furthermore, in order to de-stigmatising queer identities, a comprehensive diversity policy is essential where it explicitly acknowledges sexual and gender identities so as to promote inclusive work environment (Mor Barak, 2020) Together with the structural interventions suggested, organisations should offer targeted workshops for queer employees to prepare them for the realities of the workplaces and equip them with strategies to effectively handle challenging workplace situations. Another way that diversity commitment can be meaningful is to encourage continuous learning and sensitisation initiatives that are focused on microaggressions and subtle discrimination. This is at the centre of effective organisational change.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for further study

Because this work contributes to the existing literature within a less-investigated domain in South African literature, much work remains. Limitations of the study do not undermine the value and impact of the work but rather create room for inquiry into corporate workplaces in South Africa. Firstly, this study was limited to one province. Although generalisation was not a priority in this study, it remains a limitation because the scope of the study limits the full development of the theory. There is a need to spread the study across provinces where the context is less conservative and see if the findings from this study will be replicated in other contexts. Secondly, this sample was made up of queer employees who had less than 10 years of working experience. Although this may not have been a serious challenge for the study, the information drawn from participants who had more than 10 years of experience could have been valuable, showing another perspective on how these participants managed their queer identities over time and the professional dynamics they navigated. Moreover, future research can explore whether age and years of experience can shape the workplace experiences of queer employees.

Conclusion

The study's findings provide insight into the subtle forms of discrimination within corporate workplaces in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Findings revealed that queer employees did not experience overt acts of discrimination, instead participants described daily micro-aggressions, which were embedded in long-established conservative and heteronormative cultures in the workplace. This was affirmed by the significant number of participants who opted to conceal their sexual identity at work, as well as the non-inclusion of queer-related issues in diversity management policies. Participants related their lived experiences with subtle discrimination and how, at times, they felt unseen. They explained how diversity was mostly understood only in categories of race, gender and religion within diversity management policies, while issues of sexuality and gender identities were disregarded. This reveals the blind spot in organisations' approaches to diversity. This article provides a profound comprehension of subtle discrimination in corporate workplaces by bringing into light the foundational

power dynamics that generate it. In conclusion, the article illuminates the gap between formal inclusion and diversity commitments and the daily workplace realities, highlighting the critical need for responsive strategies that address the needs of queer employees.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Lungile L. Ntombela: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualisation. Vuyokazi N. Mtembu: Visualisation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Lungile L. Ntombela, upon reasonable request.

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