

# Intersecting Identities and Barriers to Knowledge: Exploring Equity and Access in South African Higher Education

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**Abstract:** This case study examined how intersecting identities create multiple barriers to knowledge access for final-year students at a South African higher education institution using a blended instructional approach. Grounded in intersectionality theory and Ubuntu philosophy, the study explored how race, gender, class, language, and other identity markers interact to shape students' educational experiences and access to knowledge. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with twelve final-year students from three disciplines: Education, Business Studies, and Social Sciences. Thematic analysis revealed five major themes: compounding identity-based exclusions; navigating linguistic and cultural barriers through Ubuntu principles; economic constraints intersecting with social identities; digital exclusion in blended learning environments; and institutional responses to intersectional challenges. The findings demonstrate that students experience knowledge access barriers not as isolated challenges but as interconnected systems of disadvantage that require complex navigation strategies. The study contributes to understanding how intersectionality manifests in South African higher education contexts and highlights the

need for institutional approaches that recognise and address the multifaceted nature of educational barriers.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, knowledge access, higher education, blended learning, educational barriers, Ubuntu.

## 1. Introduction

Intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression interact to create unique experiences of marginalisation and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Originally developed to explain how Black women's experiences could not be understood through analysing race or gender separately, intersectionality has evolved into a comprehensive analytical tool for examining how various identity markers—including race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, and language—combine in multiplicative rather than additive ways (Collins & Bilge, 2020). In South African higher education, where historical systems of oppression have created complex patterns of educational inequality that persist today, intersectionality offers essential insights into how students' multiple identities combine to shape their access to knowledge and educational opportunities in ways that single-identity frameworks cannot capture.

The South African higher education landscape remains characterised by ongoing transformation efforts aimed at addressing historical inequities (Badat, 2020). However, apartheid's educational legacies persist through continued inequalities in resource distribution, cultural alienation of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, and systemic barriers affecting particular student groups. Despite extensive policy reforms over three decades, research suggests these efforts have not been uniformly successful, with many students continuing to face multiple barriers to full participation in higher education (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017). The 2015-2016 #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements highlighted how financial barriers, cultural exclusion, and epistemological marginalisation continue to limit educational access. Therefore, understanding how

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these barriers intersect and compound each other is crucial for developing effective interventions that promote educational equity.

Blended learning approaches, which combine face-to-face and online instruction, have become increasingly prevalent in South African higher education institutions (Dziuban et al., 2018). While offering potential benefits for expanding access and flexibility, these approaches also create new barriers that may disproportionately affect students with particular identity configurations. More specifically, in the South African context, blended learning intersects with historical inequalities in unique ways, creating what can be termed “digital apartheid” – systematic exclusion from online learning opportunities based on intersecting identity markers. The spatial inequalities created by apartheid-era policies continue to shape the availability of internet infrastructure, with former bantustans and township areas experiencing limited connectivity (Mlitwa & Van Belle, 2021). These geographical barriers intersect with racial and economic marginalisation to create compounding disadvantages in accessing digital learning environments.

The intersection of traditional educational barriers with digital divides and online learning requirements creates complex challenges requiring nuanced understanding (Hrastinski, 2019). Students may simultaneously face economic constraints limiting technology access, linguistic barriers in navigating English-dominant online platforms, and spatial constraints limiting internet connectivity – creating unique exclusion patterns that cannot be understood through single-factor analyses. Therefore, this study investigates how intersecting identities create multiple barriers to knowledge access for final-year students at a South African higher education institution using blended instruction. The research is grounded in both intersectionality theory and Ubuntu philosophy, recognising that understanding barriers in South African contexts requires attention to both systems of oppression and indigenous frameworks for collective support. The research is guided by the following research questions:

- How do intersecting identities create barriers to knowledge access for final-year students?
- What strategies do students employ to navigate these intersectional barriers?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Intersectionality in higher education**

Intersectionality theory, originally developed by Crenshaw (1989), provides a framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression interact to create unique experiences of marginalisation. In the context of higher education, intersectionality has been increasingly recognised as essential for understanding the complex ways in which students’ multiple identities shape their educational experiences (Mlitwa & Van Belle, 2021). Recent research has demonstrated that intersectionality is not merely an additive process whereby multiple disadvantages accumulate; rather, it is a multiplicative process where different identity markers interact in complex ways to create unique experiences of privilege and marginalisation (Haynes et al., 2020). This understanding carries significant implications for higher education institutions striving to cultivate more inclusive environments, as it suggests that addressing singular forms of inequality may be insufficient for supporting students with multiple marginalised identities.

Studies conducted in various international contexts have revealed how intersectionality manifests within higher education settings. Research by Collins and Bilge (2020) found that students with multiple marginalised identities encountered unique challenges in accessing academic support services, as these services were often designed around single-identity frameworks that failed to address the complexity of their experiences. Similarly, work by Haynes et al. (2020) demonstrated that intersectional students frequently experienced isolation and invisibility in academic environments that were not designed to accommodate their multifaceted identities. The South African context presents particular complexities for understanding intersectionality in higher

education. The legacy of apartheid has established institutionalised systems of racial, linguistic, and economic oppression that continue to shape educational experiences. Research by Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) has shown how these historical patterns interact with contemporary forms of marginalisation, including gender-based discrimination and class-based exclusion, to create complex barriers to educational participation.

## **2.2 Ubuntu philosophy and collective navigation**

Ubuntu, the African philosophical concept emphasising interconnectedness and collective humanity, provides an important lens for understanding how students navigate intersectional barriers in South African contexts. Ubuntu's foundational principle of 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (a person is a person through other persons) suggests that individual experiences of marginalisation and resistance occur within collective contexts of support and shared struggle (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). Recent research has demonstrated the relevance of Ubuntu philosophy for transforming educational practices in South African higher education. Ngubane and Makua (2021) examined the intersection of Ubuntu pedagogy and social justice in South African higher education, arguing that Ubuntu principles offer frameworks for creating more inclusive educational environments. Their research demonstrates how Ubuntu's emphasis on collective responsibility and interconnectedness can inform institutional transformation efforts that address multiple forms of marginalisation simultaneously.

Ubuntu philosophy complements intersectionality theory by highlighting how students draw on cultural resources and community networks to navigate institutional barriers. While intersectionality theory focuses on systems of oppression and their intersections (Collins & Bilge, 2020), Ubuntu philosophy emphasises the collective resources available for resistance and transformation (Waghid, 2022). This perspective suggests that students are not merely victims of intersectional oppression but active agents who draw on cultural knowledge systems to collectively navigate challenges. Research by Waghid and Smeyers (2012) explores how Ubuntu philosophy can inform higher education pedagogy, emphasising the importance of relational approaches to learning that recognise students' interconnectedness. This work suggests that educational institutions should build upon existing cultural resources rather than impose external frameworks for addressing inequality.

## **2.3 Multidimensional barriers to knowledge access and their intersectional effects**

Knowledge access extends beyond physical institutional access to encompass students' ability to meaningfully participate in knowledge construction and academic discourse (Morrow, 2009). Recent research has identified multiple dimensions of knowledge access that intersect in complex ways to create unique patterns of exclusion for students with different identity configurations. Linguistic and epistemological barriers are particularly significant in multilingual contexts like South Africa. Language policies that privilege English over indigenous languages create considerable barriers to meaningful knowledge access (Madonsela, 2022), while research on epistemic decoloniality reveals how Westernised higher education systems systematically exclude indigenous knowledge systems and African ways of knowing (Asea, 2022). These barriers extend beyond technical challenges to encompass broader systems of power that determine whose knowledge and ways of knowing are valued.

Cultural and technological barriers compound these challenges through intersectional mechanisms. Research by Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) reveals how traditional curricula alienate first-generation students who lack familiarity with dominant institutional cultural codes. Digital divides create technological barriers encompassing not only device access but also digital literacy skills, with intersectional characteristics including age, gender, disability, race, and economic status crucial for analysing digital inequity dynamics (Sahay et al., 2024). These barriers operate intersectionally rather than independently. Women of colour in STEM face intersecting factors that create cumulative

disadvantages differing qualitatively from single-identity discrimination (Corneille et al., 2019), while African first-generation women students experience compounded barriers to meaningful academic participation (Motsa & McKenna, 2024). Similarly, LGBTQ+ students of colour navigate unique discrimination patterns requiring navigation of multiple communities with conflicting expectations (Sanders, 2021), experiencing distinct challenges in feeling safe and included as they negotiate both racial and sexual identity-based barriers simultaneously (Freeman & Stewart, 2018).

## **2.4 Blended learning and intersectional barriers**

Blended learning approaches, which combine face-to-face and online instruction, have become increasingly prevalent in South African higher education institutions. The strategic integration of online and in-person learning modalities has gained popularity across educational contexts, with some referring to blended learning as the "new normal" in education (Dziuban et al., 2018). However, there remains ambiguity about what exactly constitutes blended learning, as the term has become an umbrella concept encompassing essentially all types of education, including both face-to-face and online components (Hrastinski, 2019). While blended learning offers potential benefits for expanding access and flexibility, it also creates new barriers that may disproportionately affect students with particular identity configurations. Research indicates that blended learning can successfully accommodate increasingly diverse student populations while enhancing learning outcomes, but implementation challenges remain significant (Rasheed et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant digital divides affecting South African higher education students, revealing how the shift to emergency online learning highlighted existing inequalities between students from historically marginalised and privileged backgrounds (Mlitwa & Van Belle, 2021). The spatial inequalities created by apartheid-era policies continue to shape internet infrastructure availability, with former bantustans and township areas experiencing limited connectivity. Research on digital transformation challenges in rural South African areas demonstrates how geographical location compounds technological barriers, creating systematic exclusion from digital educational opportunities (Bond et al., 2021). These geographical barriers intersect with racial and economic marginalisation to create compounding disadvantages in accessing digital learning environments. Analysis of student experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown revealed how digital divides created particular challenges for students at historically disadvantaged universities compared to their counterparts at privileged institutions (Mlitwa & Van Belle, 2021). The intersection of traditional educational barriers with digital divides and online learning requirements creates complex challenges that require a nuanced understanding.

International research examining higher education leaders' experiences during rapid digital transformation identified multiple overlapping factors that contribute to institutions' ability to realise the potential of digital education in terms of access, learning, and collaboration (Bond et al., 2021). However, these benefits are not equally distributed across student populations. Students may simultaneously face economic constraints limiting technology access, linguistic barriers in navigating English-dominant online platforms, and spatial constraints limiting internet connectivity, creating unique exclusion patterns that cannot be understood through single-factor analyses. South African education policy recognises digital equity as a fundamental pillar, but implementation challenges persist in addressing systematic technological exclusion (DBE, 2004). The blended learning environment thus represents a complex educational space where traditional barriers to knowledge access intersect with new digital divides to create multifaceted challenges for students with intersecting marginalised identities. Understanding these intersectional barriers requires an examination of how individual students navigate multiple, simultaneous forms of exclusion across both physical and virtual learning spaces.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in intersectionality theory, complemented by Ubuntu philosophy, to provide a culturally grounded understanding of collective navigation strategies. Intersectionality theory emphasises three key principles that guided this research. First, identities are multiplicative rather than additive, creating unique experiences that cannot be understood merely by combining individual identity effects. Second, systems of power operate at multiple levels, from interpersonal to institutional to structural. Third, individuals exercise agency in navigating oppression, developing resistance strategies despite systemic barriers (Crenshaw, 1991). Ubuntu philosophy complements intersectionality by emphasising the collective nature of individual experiences and the importance of community networks in enabling educational success. Ubuntu's focus on interconnectedness provides insights into how students draw on cultural resources and peer support to navigate institutional barriers (Collins & Bilge, 2020).

### **4. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of how intersectional barriers affect knowledge access. The case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of complex phenomena within their real-world contexts, which is essential for understanding how intersectionality manifests in specific institutional settings (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen to provide rich insights into students' lived experiences and the mechanisms through which intersectional barriers operate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This combination was particularly important for intersectionality research, as it enabled the unique experiences of individuals with different identity configurations to be explored in depth.

The study was conducted at a public higher education institution in South Africa that employs a blended instructional approach, combining face-to-face and online learning components. The institution serves a diverse student population, including many students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, first-generation university students, and students from various linguistic and cultural communities. The institution has been engaged in ongoing transformation efforts aimed at creating more inclusive educational environments, making it an appropriate site for examining intersectional barriers to knowledge access. The institution's blended learning approach involves a combination of traditional classroom instruction, online learning platforms, digital resources, and flexible scheduling options designed to accommodate diverse student needs. This blended approach creates opportunities for examining how intersectional barriers manifest in both traditional and digital learning environments.

#### **4.1 Sample size and sampling justification**

The study employed a sample of twelve final-year students selected through purposive and convenience sampling methods, which aligns with established guidelines for qualitative case study research, where samples of 8-15 participants are considered appropriate for achieving data saturation in homogeneous populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling was essential for ensuring representation across diverse intersectional identity configurations, including various combinations of race, gender, language, class, sexuality, and ability identities across three academic disciplines (Education (ST1-ST4), Business Studies (ST5-ST8), and Social Sciences (ST9-ST12)), while maintaining a focus on final-year students with extensive experience navigating the institution's blended learning approach. Convenience sampling acknowledged practical constraints in accessing participants willing to discuss sensitive intersectional experiences while ensuring ethical recruitment practices. The focus on final-year students was methodologically justified, as these participants possessed extensive institutional experience and had developed sophisticated navigation strategies over time, providing insights into how intersectional barriers affect long-term academic progression, though this approach limits generalisability to earlier-stage students or other institutional contexts.

The participant profiles included diverse identity configurations:

- **ST1:** Female, 22 years old, Black African, isiZulu first language, Education student from rural KwaZulu-Natal, first-generation university student
- **ST2:** Male, 24 years old, Coloured, Afrikaans first language, Education student from Western Cape, working part-time to support studies
- **ST3:** Female, 25 years old, Black African, Sesotho first language, Education student from Free State, single mother with two children
- **ST4:** Male, 23 years old, Indian, English first language, Education student from Durban, living with disability (mobility impairment)
- **ST5:** Female, 26 years old, Black African, Sepedi first language, Business Studies student from Limpopo, LGBTQ+ identified
- **ST6:** Male, 27 years old, White, Afrikaans first language, Business Studies student from Pretoria, mature student returning to study
- **ST7:** Female, 24 years old, Black African, isiXhosa first language, Business Studies student from the Eastern Cape, international student
- **ST8:** Male, 25 years old, Black African, Setswana first language, Business Studies student from North West, living with HIV
- **ST9:** Female, 28 years old, Black African, isiZulu first language, Social Sciences student from Johannesburg, survivor of gender-based violence
- **ST10:** Male, 29 years old, Black African, Tsonga first language, Social Sciences student from Mpumalanga, former child soldier
- **ST11:** Female, 26 years old, Coloured, English first language, Social Sciences student from Cape Town, lesbian identified
- **ST12:** Male, 30 years old, Black African, Venda first language, Social Sciences student from Limpopo, former refugee from Zimbabwe

## **4.2 Data collection and analysis**

Data were collected through two methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all twelve participants, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes each. These interviews explored participants' experiences with intersectional barriers, their strategies for navigating challenges, and their perspectives on institutional responses to diverse student needs. The interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred languages, with interpretation services provided when necessary. Two focus group discussions were held, each involving six participants from different disciplines. The focus groups lasted approximately 120 minutes and explored collective experiences, peer support systems, and recommendations for institutional improvement. They provided opportunities for participants to build on each other's insights and identify common themes across different identity configurations.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach, which emphasises the active role of the researcher in identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning within the data. The thematic analysis process involved six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was guided by intersectionality theory, complemented by Ubuntu philosophy, with particular attention to how different identity markers intersect to create unique patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

The researcher engaged in multiple readings of the transcribed interviews and focus group discussions, coding data segments that related to intersectional barriers and students' navigation strategies. Initial codes were grouped into potential themes, which were then reviewed and refined through an iterative process that involved checking themes against the data and the theoretical framework.

## 4.6 Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the institutional research ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. Given the sensitive nature of intersectionality research, particular attention was paid to ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and that their privacy and dignity were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and additional support resources were offered to those who experienced distress during the research. Data were stored securely and will be destroyed after the required retention period.

## 5. Presentation of Data

The thematic analysis revealed five major themes that captured participants' experiences of intersectional barriers to knowledge access: compounding identity-based exclusions; navigating linguistic and cultural barriers through Ubuntu principles; economic constraints intersecting with social identities; digital exclusion in blended learning environments; and institutional responses to intersectional challenges.

### 5.1. Compounding identity-based exclusions

Participants described how multiple identity markers intersected to create exclusions that differed qualitatively from single-identity experiences. These intersectional exclusions manifested across academic, social, and institutional contexts, necessitating sophisticated navigation strategies often grounded in collective support systems. Racial and gender identities intersect uniquely for women of colour. ST9 explained:

*'As a Black woman in Social Sciences, I face different challenges than my male Black classmates or white female classmates. In group discussions, people often ignore my contributions or act surprised when I have good ideas.'*

This experience illustrates how racial and gender stereotypes combine to create intellectual invisibility, where ST9's academic contributions were filtered through dual prejudices that questioned both her racial and gendered capacity for scholarly thought. The intersection of race and sexuality also created particular isolation for LGBTQ+ students of colour. ST5 noted:

*'In the Black community, there's prejudice against LGBTQ+ people, but in LGBTQ+ spaces, there's often racism. I don't fit neatly into either community.'*

This double marginalisation affected both face-to-face and online group work, as ST5 had to carefully manage identity disclosure across different learning environments. Findings in this study also revealed that disability intersected with race in complex ways. ST4 described:

*'Being an Indian man with a disability means I face different challenges than White disabled students. People make assumptions about what I can do based on both my race and disability.'*

This experience revealed how intersectional assumptions operate through compounded stereotyping, where racial and ableist biases combine to create unique barriers to accessing appropriate accommodations, particularly in digital learning spaces where visual and cultural cues influence perceptions. This theme demonstrates that intersectional barriers manifest across both physical and digital learning spaces, requiring students to develop sophisticated identity management strategies that involve careful navigation of disclosure decisions across multiple contexts.

### 5.2. Navigating linguistic and cultural barriers through ubuntu principles

Language barriers intersected with other identities as participants drew on Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on collective support to navigate challenges. The principle of 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (a person is a person through other persons) manifested in students' collaborative

approaches to overcoming linguistic and cultural exclusion. ST1 illustrated this Ubuntu-informed navigation:

*'English is my third language, and academic English is different. But my study group helps - we explain concepts to each other in our home languages first, then translate to academic English. We support each other because we understand each other's struggles.'*

This collective approach demonstrates how students operationalise the principles of Ubuntu's interconnectedness, creating spaces where multilingual competencies become educational assets rather than deficits. Findings also revealed that code-switching required significant cognitive energy; however, participants developed community-based coping strategies. ST10 explained:

*'I speak Tsonga at home, English at university, Zulu with friends. Each carries different cultural expectations. It's exhausting, but my language partners help me maintain my identity while succeeding academically.'*

This experience revealed the profound emotional labour involved in multilingual navigation, while highlighting how peer networks function as cultural preservation mechanisms within institutional spaces that might otherwise erode linguistic diversity. Furthermore, the intersection of language and class created particular challenges for working-class students. ST2 noted:

*'The English we spoke at home was different from academic English. I had to learn new ways of thinking and expressing ideas, but my community study group helped bridge these worlds.'*

This experience illustrates how class-based linguistic differences extend beyond vocabulary to encompass different epistemological frameworks, with community support serving as a bridge between working-class and academic ways of knowing. The integration of Ubuntu philosophy into linguistic navigation represents a significant finding that goes beyond traditional understandings of language barriers as individual challenges. The findings on students' collective translation practices demonstrate how African philosophical principles provide practical frameworks for resistance against linguistic marginalisation. The cognitive and emotional labour required for constant code-switching shows that language barriers extend far beyond technical proficiency to include identity maintenance and cultural preservation, suggesting that effective language support must recognise and build upon existing cultural resources rather than replace them with dominant academic norms.

### 5.3. Economic constraints intersecting with social identities

Findings in this study revealed that economic barriers operated differently across intersectional identity configurations, with participants developing collective strategies that reflected Ubuntu's emphasis on community support despite structural inequalities. The intersection of class, race, and health status created compounding challenges. ST8 described:

*'Being a Black man from a poor family living with HIV means different challenges. I can't afford textbooks, don't have a laptop, and have medical expenses. But my study group shares resources - we buy one textbook and photocopy chapters for each other.'*

This finding demonstrates that health status adds another layer of economic burden that intersects with racial and class marginalisation, while revealing how resource-sharing practices embody Ubuntu principles of collective responsibility in the face of institutional neglect.

Gender and economic constraints intersect uniquely for women students. ST3 explained:

*'As a single mother, I balance studies with childcare costs. I can't attend evening classes, but other mothers in my program help with childcare when we study together.'*

This account illustrates how gendered economic responsibilities create time-space barriers that differ fundamentally from financial constraints experienced by male students, with collective childcare

arrangements representing Ubuntu-informed survival strategies. The findings also revealed that rural backgrounds intersected with economic constraints in ways that affected both traditional and digital learning. ST1 noted:

*'Coming from rural areas, we don't have public libraries or reliable internet. It's expensive to travel to campus, but we organise group transport and share costs.'*

The economic findings reveal how financial barriers operate as intersectional phenomena that cannot be understood through universal poverty frameworks. The different economic challenges faced by participants with various identity configurations demonstrate that economic support systems must account for identity-specific financial pressures. The resource-sharing practices reflect Ubuntu principles, highlighting how students create informal economic support networks that represent valuable knowledge about sustainable, community-based approaches to addressing structural inequalities.

#### **5.4. Digital exclusion in blended learning environments**

The institution's blended learning approach creates specific intersectional barriers that manifest differently across various identity configurations, revealing how digital technologies intersect with historical patterns of inequality to create new forms of exclusion. Findings from this study revealed that technological barriers intersect with linguistic marginalisation in online learning spaces. ST12 explained:

*'Most online platforms are in English, and technical language is difficult. When I have problems, it's hard to explain them to IT support in English. They don't understand my accent, which makes me feel stupid.'*

Participants revealed that these digital communication barriers compounded face-to-face linguistic challenges, creating multiple sites of exclusion within the blended learning environment. Economic constraints intersected with digital access requirements in ways that reflected broader patterns of historical disadvantage. ST1 described:

*'Coming from rural areas, we don't have reliable internet. I travel to internet cafes or the campus to access online materials, which costs money I don't have. My urban classmates don't understand these challenges.'*

This "digital apartheid" reflected apartheid-era spatial inequalities while creating new barriers in blended learning contexts, connecting historical injustices to contemporary technological exclusion. This study's findings also revealed that gender intersected with technological access within family and cultural contexts. ST3 noted:

*'As a single mother, I share the computer with my children for their schoolwork. I often do online assignments late at night when they're sleeping, which affects my concentration.'*

These gendered technological constraints created unique challenges in accessing online learning components that male students or childless women did not experience. Furthermore, rural and economic identities intersect with synchronous online requirements in blended learning. ST12 described:

*'Load-shedding affects our area more than urban areas, and we can't afford backup power. When there are live online sessions, I often can't participate because of power outages.'*

This finding reveals that infrastructure barriers intersect with economic constraints to create systematic exclusion from real-time digital learning opportunities.

#### **5.5. Institutional responses to intersectional challenges**

Institutional support systems revealed both helpful initiatives and significant limitations in addressing intersectional barriers. Support services operated through compartmentalised approaches that missed intersectional needs. ST4 noted:

*'The disability services office provides physical accommodations, but they don't understand how my disability intersects with my racial identity or address cultural barriers.'*

Similarly, ST10 explained:

*'The writing centre helps with grammar, but they don't understand the cultural challenges I face in translating ideas between languages and worldviews.'*

Blended learning support systems often failed to address how digital barriers intersected with other forms of marginalisation. ST7 described:

*'IT support helps with technical problems, but they don't understand how language barriers make it harder to access online resources, or how load-shedding affects rural students differently.'*

These technological support systems operated independently from other student services, missing intersectional digital challenges. Some participants identified individual staff members who demonstrated intersectional understanding. ST11 noted:

*'My supervisor is a Black woman who understands some challenges I face. She helps me navigate academic writing while incorporating cultural perspectives. But this depends on having the right person – it's not built into the system.'*

Participants identified institutional practices that exacerbated intersectional barriers. ST5 explained:

*'Group project assignments put me in difficult positions about disclosing my sexual orientation, and there's no guidance on handling these situations in either face-to-face or online group work.'*

These institutional practices created additional stress across both traditional and digital learning environments.

## **6. Discussion of Findings**

The findings reveal the complex nature of intersectional barriers to knowledge access in South African higher education, representing systematic patterns of exclusion that arise from interacting systems of oppression rather than isolated individual challenges.

### **6.1 Compounding identity-based exclusions**

The finding that participants experienced compounding identity-based exclusions aligns strongly with Crenshaw's (1989) foundational argument that intersectionality operates multiplicatively rather than additively. The current study's evidence supports Collins and Bilge's (2020) theoretical framework, demonstrating that race, gender, class, language, sexuality, and disability intersect to create unique patterns of marginalisation that single-identity frameworks cannot capture. ST9's experience of intellectual invisibility as a Black woman in academic discussions exemplifies what Haynes et al. (2020) identified as the unique challenges faced by students with multiple marginalised identities in higher education contexts, where intersectional discrimination manifests through simultaneous racial and gender stereotyping that differs qualitatively from either racism or sexism alone. The study's findings regarding LGBTQ+ students of colour experiencing double marginalisation extend Sanders' (2021) research on LGBTQ+ student experiences in higher education by providing specific evidence of how sexual orientation intersects with race to create particular patterns of isolation. ST5's description of not fitting into either Black community spaces or LGBTQ+ spaces supports Freeman and Stewart's (2018) analysis of how queer students of colour navigate multiple communities with conflicting expectations while revealing how these intersectional challenges manifest across both physical and digital learning environments in South African contexts.

However, the current study's finding regarding disability intersecting with race provides new insights that extend existing literature. While Corneille et al. (2019) examined intersections of race and gender in STEM contexts, the current research reveals how ableist and racial biases combine through compounded stereotyping to create unique accommodation barriers, particularly in digital learning spaces where visual and cultural cues influence perceptions. This finding suggests that disability studies literature may need to address the racial dimensions of ableism in higher education contexts more explicitly.

## **6.2 Navigating linguistic and cultural barriers through Ubuntu principles**

The integration of Ubuntu philosophy in navigating linguistic barriers represents a significant theoretical contribution that extends existing intersectionality literature. The finding that students operationalised Ubuntu's principle of 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' through collaborative translation practices supports Waghid and Smeyers' (2012) argument about Ubuntu's educational potential while providing empirical evidence of how indigenous philosophies offer practical frameworks for resistance against linguistic marginalisation. ST1's description of multilingual study groups translating concepts across languages exemplifies what Ngubane and Makua (2021) theorised as the intersection of Ubuntu pedagogy and social justice, demonstrating how collective approaches to linguistic navigation create spaces where multilingual competencies become educational assets rather than deficits.

The finding regarding code-switching's cognitive and emotional labour extends Madonsela's (2022) research on language barriers in South African higher education by revealing how linguistic navigation involves identity maintenance and cultural preservation rather than merely technical proficiency challenges. ST10's experience of managing multiple linguistic and cultural codes across different contexts supports research on multilingual students' experiences while highlighting how peer networks function as cultural preservation mechanisms within institutional spaces that might otherwise erode linguistic diversity. However, the current study's finding that class-based linguistic differences extend beyond vocabulary to encompass different epistemological frameworks provides new insights into how economic constraints intersect with language barriers. While existing literature addresses linguistic marginalisation (Madonsela, 2022) and economic barriers separately, the current research reveals how working-class linguistic differences involve different ways of knowing that require community-based bridging strategies. This suggests that language support interventions must recognise and build upon existing cultural resources rather than replacing them with dominant academic norms.

## **6.3 Economic constraints intersecting with social identities**

The finding that economic barriers operate differently across intersectional identity configurations aligns with broader intersectionality literature while providing specific insights into South African higher education contexts. ST8's experience of health status adds an economic burden that intersects with racial and class marginalisation, supporting research demonstrating how intersectional characteristics create cumulative disadvantages (Corneille et al., 2019). It also reveals how resource-sharing practices embody Ubuntu principles of collective responsibility in institutional contexts that fail to address systemic inequalities. Furthermore, the gendered nature of economic constraints, particularly ST3's experience balancing single motherhood with studies, extends Motsa and McKenna's (2024) research on African first-generation women students by demonstrating how gendered economic responsibilities create time-space barriers that differ fundamentally from the financial constraints experienced by male students. The finding that collective childcare arrangements represent Ubuntu-informed survival strategies provides empirical evidence of how women students create community-based support networks that address intersectional challenges through indigenous philosophical frameworks.

The intersection of rural backgrounds with economic constraints, as described by ST1, supports research on spatial inequalities in South African education while revealing how geographical barriers compound financial challenges in ways that affect both traditional and digital learning access. This finding extends existing literature on rural education challenges by demonstrating how students organise collective transport and cost-sharing arrangements that reflect Ubuntu principles, while highlighting the inadequacy of individual-focused economic support approaches for addressing intersectional financial barriers.

#### **6.4 Digital exclusion in blended learning environments**

The concept of “digital apartheid” that emerged from the findings provides a significant contribution to the literature on digital divides in South African higher education. The study’s evidence that apartheid-era spatial planning continues to shape internet infrastructure access supports Mlitwa and Van Belle’s (2021) research on digital divides during COVID-19, while extending their analysis by demonstrating how historical inequalities intersect with contemporary technological barriers to create systematic exclusion from blended learning opportunities. ST12’s experience of language barriers compounding technological challenges in online platforms reveals how digital learning environments create multiple, simultaneous sites of exclusion that cannot be addressed through single-factor interventions.

The finding that load-shedding intersects with rural economic constraints to create barriers to synchronous online learning extends Bond et al.’s (2021) research on digital transformation challenges by providing specific evidence of how infrastructure inequalities intersect with geographical and class-based marginalisation in South African contexts. This finding challenges assumptions in international literature about universal internet access and highlights the need for context-specific approaches to implementing blended learning that account for intersectional infrastructure barriers. However, the study’s finding regarding gender intersecting with technological access within family contexts provides new insights that extend existing digital divide literature. ST3’s experience of sharing computer access with children reveals how gendered caregiving responsibilities create unique technological constraints that existing research on digital inequities has not adequately addressed. This finding suggests that digital divide literature needs to more explicitly examine how gender roles and family responsibilities intersect with technological access patterns, particularly in contexts where economic constraints limit device availability.

#### **6.5 Institutional responses to intersectional challenges**

The finding that institutional support systems operate through compartmentalised approaches that overlook intersectional needs supports Haynes et al.’s (2020) argument about institutional limitations in addressing intersectional challenges while providing specific evidence of how single-identity frameworks fail to address students’ complex experiences. ST4’s description of disability services failing to address cultural barriers demonstrates what Collins and Bilge (2020) identified as the inadequacy of additive approaches to identity-based support, revealing how compartmentalised services create gaps in addressing intersectional needs.

The positive experiences participants described with individual staff members who demonstrated intersectional understanding, such as ST11’s relationship with her supervisor, support research suggesting possibilities for transformation through intersectional awareness while highlighting the problematic dependency on personal relationships rather than systematic institutional change. This finding extends existing literature by demonstrating how individual awareness can create inclusive spaces while revealing the limitations of relying on personal relationships rather than institutional policy transformation. However, the study’s finding that blended learning support systems failed to address how digital barriers intersected with other forms of marginalisation provides new insights into institutional responses to technological challenges. ST7’s experience of IT support failing to

understand how language barriers compound technological difficulties reveals how technological support systems operating independently from other student services overlook intersectional digital challenges, suggesting that institutions need to develop integrated approaches to supporting students in digital learning environments that account for how technological barriers intersect with other forms of marginalisation.

## **6.6 Theoretical implications**

The study's integration of Ubuntu philosophy with intersectionality theory represents a significant theoretical contribution that extends existing frameworks for understanding marginalisation and resistance in higher education contexts. While intersectionality theory provides analytical tools for understanding systems of oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2020), Ubuntu philosophy offers frameworks for understanding collective resistance and agency that complement individual navigation strategies. This theoretical integration suggests that intersectionality research in African contexts should incorporate indigenous philosophical frameworks that provide culturally grounded understandings of collective action and community support. Moreover, the concept of "digital apartheid" that emerged from the analysis provides a theoretical framework for understanding how historical patterns of spatial inequality intersect with contemporary technological barriers to create new forms of systemic exclusion. This concept extends existing digital divide literature by demonstrating how technological inequalities operate through historical patterns of oppression rather than as isolated contemporary phenomena, suggesting that digital equity initiatives must address historical injustices rather than treating technological barriers as neutral technical challenges.

## **7. Implications for Higher Education Practice**

The findings have significant implications for institutional transformation approaches in South African higher education. The evidence that intersectional barriers operate multiplicatively rather than additively supports arguments for developing comprehensive institutional responses that address multiple forms of marginalisation simultaneously, rather than through separate identity-based interventions. The study's demonstration of how students employ Ubuntu-informed collective strategies suggests that institutions should recognise and build upon existing cultural resources and community networks, rather than imposing external frameworks for addressing inequality. The findings on blended learning reveal the need for institutions to consider historical patterns of inequality when implementing digital learning approaches, particularly in contexts where spatial and economic inequalities intersect with technological barriers. The evidence that technological support systems operating independently from other student services overlook intersectional challenges suggests that institutions need to develop integrated approaches to supporting students across both physical and digital learning environments.

## **8. Study Limitations**

The study's findings must be interpreted within the following important constraints: the small sample size ( $n=12$ ) and the single-institution case study design limit generalisability to other South African higher education contexts or international settings. The purposive sampling approach may not capture the full range of intersectional experiences within the student population, particularly those involving less visible identity combinations. Additionally, the focus on final-year students may not reflect the experiences of earlier-stage students, who have had less time to develop navigation strategies or who face different types of intersectional barriers.

## **9. Conclusions**

This study provides insights into how intersectional barriers affect knowledge access for final-year students at a South African higher education institution. Students with multiple marginalised identities face complex patterns of exclusion operating at individual, institutional, and structural

levels that require sophisticated navigation strategies often grounded in Ubuntu principles of collective support. The five major themes identified—compounding identity-based exclusions, navigating linguistic and cultural barriers through Ubuntu principles, economic constraints intersecting with social identities, digital exclusion in blended learning environments, and institutional responses to intersectional challenges—reveal the multifaceted nature of these barriers and demonstrate the inadequacy of single-identity approaches to addressing educational inequality.

The research contributes to intersectionality literature by providing empirical evidence of multiplicative identity effects while demonstrating how Ubuntu philosophy offers culturally grounded frameworks for understanding collective navigation strategies. The integration of blended learning analysis reveals how digital technologies create new forms of exclusion that intersect with historical patterns of inequality, particularly relevant in the South African context, where spatial apartheid legacies continue to shape technological access. Students demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency in navigating complex barriers through strategies including multilingual code-switching, resource sharing, and building supportive peer networks that embody Ubuntu principles. These represent valuable knowledge systems that institutions should recognise and support rather than approach intersectional students through deficit frameworks.

## **10. Value and Significance**

The study provides empirical evidence of the application of intersectionality theory in educational contexts while demonstrating the relevance of Ubuntu philosophy for understanding collective navigation strategies in South African higher education. This contribution is particularly significant in the South African context, where limited research has examined intersectional barriers in higher education settings.

The study's focus on final-year students offers valuable insights into how intersectional barriers affect students' progression through higher education and their preparation for post-graduation transitions. These insights are crucial for understanding the long-term impact of intersectional barriers and for developing interventions that support students throughout their educational journey. The identification of five major themes provides a framework for understanding the different ways in which intersectional barriers manifest in higher education contexts. This framework can be employed by researchers, educators, and policymakers to develop more comprehensive approaches to addressing educational inequality. The themes also establish a foundation for developing measurement tools and intervention strategies that address the multifaceted nature of intersectional barriers. The study's findings carry important implications for institutional practice and policy. The identification of specific barriers and their intersectional nature offers guidance for creating more inclusive educational environments. The study's emphasis on students' agency and navigation strategies also highlights the importance of recognising and building upon students' existing capabilities rather than approaching them through deficit frameworks.

The research contributes to the broader literature on intersectionality by providing empirical evidence of how these concepts manifest in specific contexts. The study's findings support theoretical arguments regarding the multiplicative nature of intersecting identities while also offering insights into the mechanisms through which intersectional barriers operate in educational settings. Additionally, the study has practical value for higher education institutions seeking to create more inclusive educational environments. The findings provide specific guidance on areas where institutions can focus their efforts to address intersectional barriers, including support services, financial aid systems, language policies, and pedagogical approaches.

## **11. Recommendations**

Higher education institutions should develop comprehensive intersectional approaches that move beyond single-identity frameworks. This requires intersectional audits of policies and practices while

incorporating Ubuntu principles of collective responsibility into transformation efforts. Institutions should create integrated support systems that recognise how different barriers intersect rather than operating through separate identity-based services.

Faculty development programmes should focus on developing intersectional pedagogical approaches that recognise and value diverse knowledge systems and ways of knowing. These programmes should provide practical strategies for creating inclusive classrooms that support students with diverse identity configurations. Furthermore, curriculum review processes should examine how course content, assignments, and assessment methods may create barriers for students with particular intersectional identities. This involves developing curricula that incorporate diverse perspectives and epistemologies while also providing support for students navigating linguistic and cultural barriers.

Blended learning approaches should be designed with intersectional considerations in mind, recognising how digital technologies can both mitigate and exacerbate existing inequalities. This involves ensuring that online learning platforms are accessible to students with diverse technological capabilities and cultural backgrounds.

Student support services should be redesigned to address intersectional needs rather than operating through single-identity frameworks. This involves developing integrated approaches to support that recognise how different types of barriers intersect to create unique challenges for individual students.

Institutional policies should be developed that explicitly address intersectional discrimination and create mechanisms for reporting and addressing intersectional barriers. These policies should recognise the complex nature of intersectional experiences and provide appropriate support and remediation processes.

Future research should examine underexplored intersectional combinations, particularly disability-rurality and language-sexuality intersections, through specialised methodological approaches. Longitudinal studies tracking students from their first year through graduation could reveal how intersectional barriers evolve over time. Multi-institutional comparative studies would enhance understanding of how different contexts shape intersectional experiences while enabling broader generalisability of findings.

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