



## The experience of LGB students in Physical Education: exploring the Spanish context

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### Abstract

Despite legal advances and greater respect for LGTBI individuals, their experience in the education system is still problematic, as they suffer discrimination of various kinds. This homophobic school environment is even more intensified in Physical Education, given the peculiarities of this subject, particularly due to its technical focus and affinity for sports content with a high emphasis on hegemonic masculinity. The aim of this study was therefore to collect data on students' recollection of their experiences, with particular attention to harassment in the educational context, participation in the subject of Physical Education, and their preferences in terms of content. To this end, an online questionnaire was used to collect data from 989 people, 47.5% of whom were gay, 21.3% lesbian, 18.6% bisexual and the remaining 12.5% heterosexual. The results showed a higher perception of harassment among LGB students than among heterosexual students (mostly verbal), especially among gay students, who displayed very negative results in almost all the items analysed. Gay students also reported that they were not chosen for activities and did not use the changing rooms at the end of class sessions, compared to their lesbian or heterosexual peers. In view of these results, it can be concluded that it is necessary to address all forms of harassment, as well as to refocus the subject in order to accommodate the obvious diversity of the student body. A critical stance towards teachers' decisions and more teacher training seems relevant today.

**Keywords:** discrimination, diversity, harassment in the educational context, heteronormativity, homophobia, teacher training.

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## Introduction

Legal protection for individuals with diverse affective-sexual orientation and gender identity has improved across various fields in Spain in recent decades (Piedra et al., 2014). These legislative advances, among other factors, have led to an increase in the visibility of the LGTBI (lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, intersex) community in various socio-cultural contexts, which has in turn attracted interest as a research phenomenon (Córdoba, 2021; Landi et al., 2020).

However, despite legislative advances, discrimination against members of the LGTBI community persists, and this reality is one of the most common reasons for hate crimes in Spain (Spanish Ministry of the Interior, 2021). The main cause of this state of affairs is the heteronormative discourse that is maintained in most social institutions (López Corlett et al., 2021), as well as in sport (Rovira-Font & Vilanova-Soler, 2022). The term “heteronormativity” refers to the privileged position of heterosexual culture in Western societies, naturalising its dominance and rendering individuals of sexual dissent invisible, categorising them as abnormal (Warner, 1991). Thus, heteronormativity is a form of social surveillance that leads to discrimination and subalternity of those who do not conform to heterocentrism, creating barriers, oppression and inequality for non-heterosexual individuals (Madureira & Branco, 2015). Moreover, it conditions gender expectations in such a way that it shapes stereotypical expressions of femininity and masculinity, resulting in different implications for men and women in sport (Lenskyj, 2013; Soler-Prat et al., 2022).

Heteronormativity is deeply embedded in various social institutions, and schools are unfortunately not immune to its influence (Dornelles & Dal’Igna, 2015; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Thus, schools assume that students are heterosexual and forcibly reject those who do not conform to hegemonic gender and sexuality standards (Madureira & Branco, 2015; Prado & Ribeiro, 2016). Multiple publications linking schooling to LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) students have shown that they are one of the minority groups that experience the highest levels of violence, harassment and discrimination in educational institutions (Birkett et al., 2009; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). Findings from a meta-analysis by Toomey & Russell (2016) on the role of sexual orientation in school victimisation indicate that sexual minorities experience higher levels of victimisation during primary and secondary school compared to their heterosexual peers. This data is in line with the state of affairs in Spain, as shown by Elipe et al. (2018).

Heteronormativity is more prevalent in Physical Education (PE) than in other subjects (Clarke, 2012;

Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022; Larsson et al., 2011; Lynch et al., 2022). This is due not only to gender separation in the development of the curriculum (Clarke, 2012), which is especially prevalent in other countries, but also to the reinforcement of male and female stereotypes provided by sport-related PE (Devís-Devís et al., 2005; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2022). Furthermore, the subject consistently harbours negative attitudes towards the wider LGB group, due to the reproduction of heteronormative values and conservative attitudes that are exclusionary, hostile and sexist (Ayvazo & Sutherland, 2009; Landi et al., 2020; Larsson et al., 2011; Sáenz-Macana & Devís-Devís, 2020). However, within the LGB community, it has been demonstrated that lesbian students’ experiences tend to be less negative than those of gay students (Landi et al., 2020; Müller & Böhlke, 2023).

In this sense, the strong influence of sport-based activities in PE promotes hegemonic masculinity and those activities in which adolescent and young men tend to excel (Gill et al., 2010; Lisahunter, 2019). Femininity, by contrast, is relegated to the background in PE, where teaching is not oriented towards female adolescents and non-hegemonic students (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Forestier & Larsson, 2023).

From this perspective, homophobia stemming from heteronormativity affects not only LGB students, but also all male adolescents who challenge conventional gender stereotypes, by threatening to demean them with the status of “faggots” or “pussies” (De Stéfano, 2017). On the other hand, women who excel in PE classes are considered “tomboyish” and “macho” (Devís-Devís et al., 2005). As a result, LGB and even non-hegemonic heterosexual students have cause to fear harassment or discrimination, which may result in their exclusion and marginalisation in the context of PE (De Stéfano, 2017). In this regard, it is pertinent to note how the use of homophobic comments and insults in PE is recurrent, as well as the use of hurtful and offensive words with sexual connotations (Gill et al., 2010; Piedra et al., 2013). In the case of female students specifically, lesbian students tend to experience these insults more because of their status as women than because of their sexual orientation (Müller & Böhlke, 2023).

The consequences of this homophobic environment are significant for the conduct of PE. Thus, the latest National School Climate Surveys carried out in the United States by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) state that the percentage of LGTBI students who avoid PE classes because they feel uncomfortable or unsafe has steadily increased from 31.9% in 2013 to 40.2% in 2019 (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020). In the UK context, data indicate that 14% of LGB students

feel harassed during PE lessons (Bradlow et al., 2017). Specifically in Spain, a statewide study that analysed the reality of LGB students in educational institutions found that homophobic harassment leads 43% of students to consider suicide, more than half (56%) to do so continuously, and 27% to do so on a sustained basis over time (Generelo, 2012). In relation to PE, Piedra et al. (2013) reported homophobic behaviour, data that has recently been corroborated by Hortigüela-Alcalá et al. (2022).

In other words, the school environment which LGB students experience is one of constant teasing, insults and exclusion (De Stéfano, 2017). Homophobic harassment is considered to be prolonged aggression over time, carried out with the intention of harming the victim, by one or more schoolchildren in an imbalanced power relationship, where the victim has difficulty defending him/herself and is, to a certain extent, helpless in the face of those who harass him/her (Olweus, 1998).

In this context, the power and influence of schools in shaping the character and personality of students is considerable. As such, it is essential that the education system and teachers take measures to eliminate the barriers, discrimination and homophobic harassment that LGB students still suffer (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022; Piedra et al., 2014); and it is a priority for PE to stop reinforcing the heteronormative framework. Despite this state of affairs, the experience of LGB students in the Spanish context has not received the academic attention it deserves. It is therefore important to carry out research that sheds light on the situation, hence the relevance of this study, which aims to collect and interpret the experiences of LGB students in PE, comparing them with their heterosexual peers, and looking especially at types of harassment, frequency, participation and content preference.

## Methodology

### Participants

A total of 1,659 people, aged 18-74, from different regions of Spain participated in this study. The data were collected during 2019 and 2020 and are part of a larger project designed to assess LGTBI people's experiences in different contexts of their daily lives. Of the total number of participants, 670 were eliminated for: a) not answering the questions of interest; b) identifying as transgender, non-binary, or cisgender with a sexual orientation other than homosexual (gay or lesbian), heterosexual or bisexual. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 989 participants, with a mean age of 33.5 years (SD = 11.1; range: 18-74) (Table 1). For the comparative purposes of this work, all individuals were cisgender and 4 subgroups were established according to sexual orientation: lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual. While there is a fair distribution in relation to the number of male and female participants, there are differences in representation according to sexual orientation. The largest group is gay (47.5%), twice as many as lesbians (21.3%) and bisexuals (18.6%). The heterosexual group was the smallest (12.5%), as the survey was mainly aimed at the LGTBI community.

### Materials and Resources. Procedure

To collect data, an online questionnaire was created in LimeSurvey (version 2.73.1+), with different psychosocial questions related to the experiences of LGTBI individuals. For the purposes of this study, data were only collected on recall questions related to harassment experienced in the educational context, as well as to the type of harassment (physical, verbal, gestural, material or cyberbullying), and to various experiences in the subject of PE throughout schooling.

**Table 1**  
Participants in the study (n = 989).

	Female	Male	Total
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Lesbian	211 (21.3)	-	211 (21.3)
Gay	-	470 (47.5)	470 (47.5)
Bisexual	144 (14.5)	41 (4.2)	185 (18.7)
Heterosexual	76 (7.7)	47 (4.8)	123 (12.5)
Total	431 (43.5)	558 (56.4)	989 (100)

Harassment refers to aggression from others that ranges from nuisance to serious abuse and may be intimidating and/or an affront to personal dignity. In relation to PE experiences, answers were recorded using a Likert scale on the frequency of certain experiences (1- Never to 5- Always); and the degree of agreement with different statements (1- Strongly disagree to 5- Strongly agree). For example, questions were asked about the use of changing rooms, strategies for avoiding or participating in the subject, and about the methodological strategies applied by the teaching staff. There were also questions about the content they found most enjoyable in PE lessons, with a choice between sports, games, corporal expression, outdoor activities, fitness and health or none at all.

As in a previous study (Devís-Devís et al., 2022), the sample was accessed mostly through ~200 Spanish LGTBI activist associations, which are committed to preventing discrimination, promoting visibility and protecting their rights. These associations were sent an email explaining the purpose of the study and containing a link for them to forward to their members and staff.

The questionnaire, which was completely anonymous and voluntary, was also disseminated through posts on social media (e.g. Twitter and Facebook). The materials and procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catalan Sports Council (023/CEICGC/2021), as part of a joint project between research groups from different institutions, to guarantee ethical principles in social research on human beings. The informed consent form authorising the

research team to publish the data collected was signed online by the participants prior to accessing the questionnaire.

## Data analysis

Data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 28.0. The statistical analysis consisted of calculating frequencies and percentages and Chi-square tests of independence to reveal the existence of significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) according to the sexual orientation of the sample among the study variables. Corrected standardised residuals were calculated to identify categories with significant differences ( $\pm 1.96$ ). To determine the effect size, Cramer's V was used as a measure of the strength of association, where  $\geq .1$ ,  $\geq .3$  and  $\geq .5$  represent a weak, moderate or strong association, respectively.

## Results

### Harassment in the Educational Context

Table 2 shows the percentages of harassment experienced by the whole sample and according to their sexual orientation. Globally, 48.9% of the population have experienced harassment at some point in their lives and 39.9% have experienced harassment in an educational context. Within this context, the most common form of harassment is

**Table 2**  
Harassment experienced by participants on the basis of their sexual orientation.

	Entire sample	Lesbians	Gays	Bisexuals	Heterosexuals	$\chi^2$	$p$	Cramer's V
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)			
Harassment	473 (48.9)	100 (48.3)	<b>279 (60.1)</b>	79 (43.6)	<b>15 (12.9)</b>	87.505	<.001	.297
Harassment in the Educational Context	386 (39.9)	<b>66 (31.9)</b>	<b>251 (54.1)</b>	61 (33.7)	<b>8 (6.9)</b>	100.145	<.001	.322
Physical Harassment in the Educational Context	120 (12.4)	<b>9 (4.3)</b>	<b>91 (19.6)</b>	20 (11)	<b>0 (0)</b>	51.310	<.001	.230
Verbal Harassment in the Educational Context	327 (33.8)	<b>46 (22.2)</b>	<b>222 (47.8)</b>	52 (28.7)	<b>7 (6)</b>	95.378	<.001	.314
Gestural Harassment in the Educational Context	300 (31)	<b>45 (21.7)</b>	<b>199 (42.9)</b>	51 (28.2)	<b>5 (4.3)</b>	78.273	<.001	.284
Material Harassment in the Educational Context	72 (7.4)	6 (2.9)	<b>49 (10.6)</b>	17 (9.4)	<b>0 (0)</b>	23.091	<.001	.154
Cyberbullying in the Educational Context	60 (6.2)	8 (3.9)	33 (7.1)	<b>18 (9.9)</b>	<b>1 (0.9)</b>	12.656	.005	.114

Corrected standardised residuals  $\pm 1.96$  in bold.

verbal, followed by gestural, physical and, to a lesser extent, material or cyberbullying. In relation to sexual orientation, significant differences have been found among all types of harassment. Heterosexual students always exhibit lower percentages (in some cases non-existent, such as for physical or material harassment in the educational context) compared to the rest of the subgroups with a LGB sexual orientation. Whilst in the case of general harassment, there are differences between heterosexual and gay students (47 percentage points more), for harassment in the educational context (and all subtypes except cyberbullying), differences can be seen between heterosexual students (who experience it the least), lesbian students (who experience it to some extent) and gay students (who experience it the most). Finally, in relation to cyberbullying, there are differences between bisexual students (9.9%) and heterosexual students (only 0.9%).

### Experiences in Physical Education

Analyses carried out to identify differences in participating students' experiences in PE (discrimination, harassment and/or avoidance) on the basis of their sexual orientation were significant for all but one item (preference for Corporal Expression content) (Table 3). The differences seen are always between LGB individuals and heterosexual individuals, demonstrating that discrimination, harassment and avoidance of the subject always affected LGB individuals more than heteronormative students. The group with the most negative experiences is gays, who have very negative results for almost all items. On the other hand, the data obtained from lesbian students is very similar to, or even more positive in some cases, than that reported by heterosexuals.

### What was happening in the changing rooms?

In relation to use of changing rooms, 31.1% of gay students never used them at the end of sessions, compared to 17.9% of heterosexual students. Furthermore, whilst almost 65% of heterosexual students always, or almost always, undress in front of their classmates, this percentage does not exceed 48.1% in the case of LGB students.

### Who avoided PE the most?

In general, LGB individuals were more likely to give excuses or reasons for avoiding PE compared to their heterosexual peers, although there were exceptions. For example, the percentages of heterosexual students (76.4%) and lesbian students (71.6%) who never faked an injury to avoid the subject are significantly higher than for gay students (59.4%) or bisexual students (56.2%). Forgetting equipment was

also another strategy to avoid doing PE that is statistically significant among lesbians, gays and bisexuals. 3.8% of gay students reported using this technique always, or almost always, while 28.9% of lesbian students and 45.9% of bisexual students used it from time to time. Among those who started sessions, there was also a percentage who gave up and finished before the end of those sessions. This strategy was significantly more used from time to time by gay students (45.5% of cases recorded) than by lesbian students (26.5% of cases recorded). However, some of the participants in this study preferred to avoid facing PE teachers by opting to play truant and not attending classes in person. In this regard, there are differences between those who played truant from time to time, namely gay students (27.9% of cases recorded) and lesbian students (14.7% of cases recorded). Furthermore, in relation to percentage participation in excursions and extracurricular activities related to PE, while 74.8% of heterosexual students and 72.5% of lesbian students attended practically all the time, percentages for this item are reduced to 65.9% for bisexual students and 44.9% for gay students. All these absences and strategies used to avoid participating in the subject could have some influence on the failure rates reported by the sample studied. While 84.3% of heterosexual and 82.9% of lesbian students never failed PE, for gay students the percentage was 64.9%. In fact, for 31.1% of students, it was usual for them to fail PE from time to time.

### How did teaching practice influence students?

There are also methodological aspects concerning the pedagogical practices implemented by PE teachers that discriminated against LGB individuals. Teachers were less likely to select gay students than heterosexual or lesbian students for demonstrations of the activities. Specifically, 25.2% of heterosexual students and 23.2% of lesbian students report that they have always, or almost always, been chosen, compared to 6.8% of gay students. In this regard, 37% of gay students stated that they were never chosen. In addition, differences are also found among the students themselves when it comes to volunteering for demonstrations. In this sense, 39.8% of heterosexual students and 37% of lesbian students always, or almost always, volunteered themselves, whilst only 18.7% of gay students did so. Finally, there are also differences in relation to being among the last people chosen when teams were formed (either by teachers or by peers themselves). Whilst this was never the case for 39.3% of lesbian students and 38.5% of heterosexual students, the percentage drops to 13.2% for gay students. In fact, 34.5% of gay students experienced this unpleasant situation always or almost always.



**Table 3**  
Differences in the frequency of experiencing various situations in Physical Education according to students' sexual orientation.

	Lesbians			Gays			Bisexuals			Heterosexuals			$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
	Never	Rarely/ Sometimes	Almost always/ Always	Never	Rarely/ Sometimes	Almost always/ Always	Never	Rarely/ Sometimes	Almost always/ Always	Never	Rarely/ Sometimes	Almost always/ Always			
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)			
<b>Changing rooms</b>															
I washed myself in the schools' changing rooms at the end of each session	52 (24.6)	75 (35.5)	84 (39.8)	<b>146 (31.1)</b>	156 (33.2)	<b>168 (35.7)</b>	40 (21.6)	71 (38.4)	74 (40)	<b>22 (17.9)</b>	37 (30.1)	<b>64 (52)</b>	17.525	<b>.008</b>	.094
I got undressed in front of my classmates in the schools' changing room	47 (22.3)	<b>73 (34.6)</b>	91 (43.1)	121 (25.7)	134 (28.5)	215 (45.7)	54 (29.2)	42 (22.7)	89 (48.1)	<b>14 (11.5)</b>	29 (23.8)	<b>79 (64.8)</b>	25.556	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.114
<b>I avoided PE</b>															
I faked some kind of injury	<b>151 (71.6)</b>	<b>56 (26.5)</b>	4 (1.9)	<b>279 (59.4)</b>	<b>169 (36)</b>	22 (4.7)	<b>104 (56.2)</b>	70 (37.8)	11 (5.9)	<b>94 (76.4)</b>	<b>28 (22.8)</b>	1 (0.8)	25.409	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.113
I forgot to bring the right equipment and clothing	<b>149 (70.6)</b>	<b>61 (28.9)</b>	<b>1 (0.5)</b>	275 (58.5)	177 (37.7)	<b>18 (3.8)</b>	<b>96 (51.9)</b>	<b>85 (45.9)</b>	4 (2.2)	79 (64.2)	43 (35)	1 (0.8)	22.845	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.107
I played truant to skip the class	<b>175 (82.9)</b>	<b>31 (14.7)</b>	5 (2.4)	<b>319 (67.9)</b>	<b>131 (27.9)</b>	20 (4.3)	129 (69.7)	49 (26.5)	7 (3.8)	97 (78.9)	25 (20.3)	1 (0.8)	21.428	<b>.002</b>	.104
I did not finish the session	<b>154 (73)</b>	<b>56 (26.5)</b>	<b>1 (0.5)</b>	<b>234 (49.8)</b>	<b>214 (45.5)</b>	22 (4.7)	114 (61.6)	63 (34.1)	8 (4.3)	78 (63.4)	40 (32.5)	5 (4.1)	38.091	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.139
I failed PE as a subject	<b>175 (82.9)</b>	<b>31 (14.7)</b>	5 (2.4)	<b>305 (64.9)</b>	<b>146 (31.1)</b>	19 (4)	136 (73.5)	38 (20.5)	11 (5.9)	<b>102 (84.3)</b>	<b>18 (14.9)</b>	1 (0.8)	38.515	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.140
I participated in excursions and extracurricular activities organised by PE	<b>16 (7.6)</b>	<b>42 (19.9)</b>	153 (72.5)	<b>90 (19.1)</b>	<b>169 (36)</b>	<b>211 (44.9)</b>	23 (12.4)	<b>40 (21.6)</b>	<b>122 (65.9)</b>	<b>7 (5.7)</b>	<b>24 (19.5)</b>	<b>92 (74.8)</b>	72.718	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.192
<b>Methodological Aspects</b>															
I was selected by the teachers to demonstrate the activities	<b>39 (18.5)</b>	123 (58.3)	<b>49 (23.2)</b>	<b>174 (37)</b>	264 (56.2)	<b>32 (6.8)</b>	56 (30.3)	103 (55.7)	26 (14.1)	20 (16.3)	72 (58.5)	31 (25.2)	66.819	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.184
I volunteered to participate in the demonstrations proposed by the teachers	<b>36 (17)</b>	97 (46)	<b>78 (37)</b>	<b>154 (32.8)</b>	228 (48.5)	<b>88 (18.7)</b>	50 (27)	96 (51.9)	39 (21.1)	18 (14.6)	56 (45.5)	49 (39.8)	52.249	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.163
I was the last person chosen when teams were formed	<b>83 (39.3)</b>	103 (48.8)	<b>25 (11.8)</b>	<b>62 (13.2)</b>	246 (52.3)	<b>162 (34.5)</b>	45 (24.3)	100 (54.1)	40 (21.6)	47 (38.5)	63 (51.6)	12 (9.8)	99.594	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.225
<b>Stereotypes and Preferences in PE</b>															
People referred to me in a derogatory way using terms like "faggot" or "tomboy"	92 (43.6)	92 (43.6)	27 (12.8)	<b>148 (31.5)</b>	<b>253 (53.8)</b>	<b>69 (14.7)</b>	<b>94 (50.8)</b>	73 (39.5)	18 (9.7)	<b>96 (78)</b>	<b>27 (22)</b>	<b>0 (0)</b>	94.704	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.219
I was very involved in content related to team sports	<b>21 (10)</b>	<b>50 (23.7)</b>	<b>140 (66.4)</b>	<b>115 (24.5)</b>	<b>244 (51.9)</b>	<b>111 (23.6)</b>	30 (16.2)	69 (37.3)	86 (46.5)	16 (13)	<b>35 (28.5)</b>	<b>72 (58.5)</b>	132.515	<b>&lt;.001</b>	.259
I was very involved in content related to corporal expression	38 (18)	101 (47.9)	72 (34.1)	108 (23)	246 (52.3)	116 (24.7)	35 (18.9)	88 (47.6)	62 (33.5)	18 (14.6)	63 (51.2)	42 (34.1)	12.412	.053	.079

Corrected standardised residuals  $\pm 1.96$  in bold.

## Insults

With regard to verbal harassment experienced in PE on the grounds of sexual orientation, there are significant differences between students. When observing the reality of students who have never received insults, the percentage varies according to whether students define themselves as gay (31.5%), bisexual (50.8%) or heterosexual (78%). In fact, no heterosexual individual claims to have always, or almost always, received insults.

## Preferences for specific content

Finally, in relation to involvement in specific content in PE classes, significant differences emerge in content related to group sports, but not in corporal expression. Specifically, 66.4% of lesbian students report always, or almost always, being involved in team sports compared to 58.5% of heterosexual students and 23.6% of gay students. Similarly, the chi-square test carried out to analyse the most enjoyable PE content according to the sexual orientation of the students (Table 4) demonstrated significant differences ( $X^2_{(15)} = 49.094, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .226$ ). The corrected typed residuals indicated that Sports was a more enjoyable content area for lesbian and heterosexual students (59.6 and 49.6%, respectively) than for gay students (16.5%). Furthermore, the highest percentage preference for Games content was obtained by gay students (28.1%), compared to lesbian students (13.9%) and heterosexual students (10.9%). Corporal expression content was least enjoyed by lesbian students (only chosen by 4.8%) and Outdoor activities was chosen more frequently by gay students (27.7%) compared to lesbians (only 12%). With regard to Physical fitness and health, no differences were obtained according to the comparison group. Finally, the highest percentage who chose "none at all" for most enjoyable content in PE lessons were gay students, specifically 7.8%.

## Discussion

In general terms, although both students and teachers perceive the environment in Spanish schools as calm (De Stéfano, 2017), some qualifications should be made in this respect. Thus, several studies and other reflective texts have pointed to PE as a subject that promotes masculine values associated with sport, relies on heteronormativity and creates a context that does not respect sexual diversity (Clarke, 2012; Gill et al., 2010; Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022; Larsson et al., 2011; Sáenz-Macana & Devís-Devís, 2020). As such, in one way or another, the homophobic environment marginalises LGTBI students and makes their experiences associated with this subject less than rewarding (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2022). However, when taking sexual orientation as a reference point, the findings of previous studies have been corroborated, wherein lesbian students have less hostile experiences in PE (Müller & Böhlke, 2023) and in sport settings (Soler-Prat et al., 2022). To this end, the new data serves to further evaluate PE and its educational role. Despite significant progress, such as the use of inclusive language (Piedra et al., 2013; Sáenz-Macana & Devís-Devís, 2020), the willingness of teachers to create safe spaces (Sáenz-Macana & Devís-Devís, 2020) and the emerging continuous teacher training on diversity (Piedra et al., 2014), the perception of students is often still worrying. It follows, then, that the perception of a respectful environment in our classrooms is due more to the normalisation and invisibilisation of homophobia than to its eradication (De Stéfano, 2017).

Thus, when comparing all the information on the experiences reported by heterosexual students, compared to students with a different sexual orientation, there can be no doubt: PE continues to promote students who meet specific standards (Lynch et al., 2022) associated with hegemonic masculinity, as can be seen in the review by Sáenz-Macana & Devís-Devís (2020). In the words of Isha Hunter (2019), PE continues to perpetuate remarkably conservative values.

**Table 4**

*Most enjoyable PE content by group.*

	Lesbians	Gays	Bisexuals	Heterosexuals
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
Sports	<b>124 (59.6)</b>	<b>76 (16.5)</b>	67 (36.6)	<b>59 (49.6)</b>
Games	<b>29 (13.9)</b>	<b>130 (28.1)</b>	43 (23.5)	<b>13 (10.9)</b>
Corporal expression	<b>10 (4.8)</b>	45 (9.7)	2 (10.9)	9 (7.6)
Outdoor activities	<b>25 (12)</b>	<b>128 (27.7)</b>	34 (18.6)	24 (20.2)
Physical fitness and health	14 (6.7)	47 (10.2)	14 (7.7)	10 (8.4)
None at all	6 (2.9)	<b>36 (7.8)</b>	5 (2.7)	4 (3.4)

Corrected standardised residuals  $\pm 1.96$  in bold.

In this regard, the difference between many of the scores of lesbian and gay students is highlighted. In general, lesbian students have satisfactory experiences, even to the extent that they outperform heterosexual students on many items. In concrete terms, it is gay students who have the worst experience of PE, both in the changing rooms and when it comes to “modelling” activities or being chosen in group formation. This fact corresponds with the heteronormative system that advocates that heterosexuality is “natural”. Homosexuality contradicts this association, and men’s homosexuality is seen as a betrayal of the hegemony of masculinity (Borrillo, 2001). This reasoning explains why homosexual students, especially gay students, deploy different strategies in order to absent themselves from PE or, if they do attend, not to participate, as Hortigüela-Alcalá et al. (2022) have previously reported. Homophobia is gendered, and it is this variable that explains why gay men experience more harassment than their female classmates, as previous studies have shown (Ayvazo & Sutherland, 2009; Morrow & Gill, 2003). Thus, it has been verified that heteronormativity functions differently according to gender, with lesbians’ experiences differing from those of their gay counterparts. Recognising that LGBTI individuals’ experiences are not uniform in PE (Landi, 2020; Müller & Böhlke, 2023) and in the sport environment (Soler-Prat et al., 2022) is essential.

This homophobic environment, whether overt or implicit, materialises, for example, in the formation of groups (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022), as this is where the affinities that are created can be observed. Thus, the fact that students perceived as “less able” and/or “traitorous” to their gender are chosen last is indicative of their status in the web of social relations among students. And it is here that gay students are the most disadvantaged. Behind this lies the naturalisation of ways of proceeding which, as in the case of the formation of groups through the election of “captains”, reinforces the hidden curriculum and perpetuates discrimination (Martos-García et al., 2023), in this case of a homophobic nature.

Another important factor explaining the problematic relationship between non-heterosexual students and PE is their content preference. Thus, while heterosexual students prefer sports, gay students prefer games and outdoor activities, which are less regulated and less masculine. This association reinforces the reasoning behind hegemonic masculinity, whereby students learn to identify with aggression, intense activities or contact; and moving away from these values is seen as a transgression of the sex-gender order (Larsson et al., 2011). This masculinity is represented in PE by sports, whilst other activities,

such as dance or corporal expression, are considered more appropriate for females (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2022). Perhaps this is why the latter are rejected by lesbian students, as for them it can be a way of escaping from these stereotypes. In one way or another, PE continues to reproduce gender stereotypes (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2022); in this case, in clear intersection with sexual orientation.

Finally, some study limitations should be highlighted. Firstly, no analysis has been carried out according to the gender identity of the participants. Despite the fact that the sexual orientation of gays and lesbians provides some comparison between men and women, this is not the case for bisexual and heterosexual participants. Gender and intersectional perspectives should be taken into account when addressing individuals’ experiences during their schooling. Secondly, and although it does not affect the statistical level, the distribution between the different groups should be more balanced. Thirdly, this is a retrospective study carried out on individuals with a wide age range, such that the recall of experiences during schooling may be varied in some cases.

## Conclusions

The data presented here supports the existence of a homophobic environment, as has been reported in other previously published studies. This could be aggravated by the recurrent sport orientation of PE and teachers’ decisions, which are suggested as future lines of research. In this case, the data also detail how this environment affects the development of the subject itself, for example, when it comes to forming groups or preferences for certain content. In this respect, lesbian students experience fewer difficulties than gay students, who are seen to “betray” male hegemony. As a result, gay students deploy different strategies to opt out.

For all these reasons, it is important to a) reflect on the consequences of teaching practices and be self-critical, b) address harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation, and c) try to improve initial and continuous teacher training in order to develop a PE that is more responsive to the diversity of students.

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