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To cite this article: Birgit Braumüller, Tobias Menzel & Ilse Hartmann-Tews (2022): Gender expression and homonegative episodes in sport among LGB+ athletes, European Journal for Sport and Society, DOI: [10.1080/16138171.2022.2121259](https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2022.2121259)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2022.2121259>



Published online: 13 Sep 2022.



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Gender expression and homonegative episodes in sport among LGB+ athletes

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ABSTRACT

From a historical perspective, sport is considered a male domain and heteronormative societal field. Although societal change has happened, in most sports, male, heterosexual athletes, as well as stereotypical masculine behaviour and appearance are still being privileged. Based on heteronormativity and assumed male physical superiority, mindsets about typical and appropriate gender expression permeate sporting environments. Athletes who do not meet these socially constructed, gendered expectations often experience barriers, exclusion and discrimination. Against this background, the study analyses the prevalence of (non-)conforming gender expression and its relevance for experiencing negative episodes in sport, considering the athletes' sex and the gender-typing of sports practised. The sample consists of lesbian, gay and bisexual + individuals actively participating in sport in Europe ($n = 2232$). The findings suggest that gender non-conformity is less prevalent among male than female LGB+ athletes, particularly in stereotypically masculine sports. Significant correlations between non-conformity to socially constructed expectations of typical feminine or masculine expression and negative episodes in sport occur. The results indicate that LGB+ athletes use different strategies to avoid 'homonegative bias' and that sport needs to be rethought on individual, organisational and societal levels.

KEYWORDS

Gender expression; gender non-conformity; sports; discrimination; LGB+

Introduction

As one of the most relevant structural features in Western societies, the social construction of gender binary shapes societal views on what is typically considered to be masculine or feminine behaviour, looks, dress or speech. These beliefs about binary gender differences are socially constructed and frame processes of identity construction and socialisation. Socialisation influences the development of one's gender identity and expression as well as awareness of gendered norms, values and beliefs (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). At a young age, children are already treated according to the sex they are assigned at birth and confronted with different practices and expectations

based on this assignment. Thus, they experience and learn about what gender-conforming behaviour and appearance consist of (Kauer & Krane, 2013).

In sport contexts, gendered expectations and practices are particularly common due to a strong orientation towards sex and gender binary and a hierarchical order privileging men and masculine behaviour and appearance. This heteronormative logic poses a barrier to sports participation for individuals who do not conform to socially constructed norms of femininity or masculinity, and can have negative effects. In non-sport contexts there is evidence that non-conforming individuals often experience prejudices and discrimination, frequently associated with mental stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms or the concealment of one's gender identity (Lowry et al., 2018; Martin-Storey & August, 2016; Puckett et al., 2016). As far as sport and quantitative studies are concerned, this phenomenon is quite under-researched. This study aims to shed light on the situation of gender non-conforming athletes in European sport. Due to the specific relevance of sex binary in sport, differences between non-conforming male and female athletes are considered. The quantitative data derive from an online survey of cisgender LGB+ athletes in Europe from the Erasmus + project OUTSPORT.

Terms and concepts

Before going into depth, it seems necessary to expound our understanding and use of central terms and concepts. In our social constructivist understanding, sex refers to biological aspects of the body, while gender is a socially and culturally constructed reference for being masculine or feminine according to appearance and behaviours (Enke, 2012; Griffin, 2012; Krane et al., 2012). Sex and gender are often conceptualised as binary, assuming that only two categories exist to which all individuals can easily assign. However, this assumption is being challenged by growing evidence from academia. Especially, though not exclusively, gender appears as fluid and changeable, consisting of more than being either masculine or feminine (Joel et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2019)

Referring to gender, we differentiate between gender identity and gender expression. Following Enke (2012, 18), gender identity is defined as an internal 'sense of one's self as a gendered person', whereas gender expression serves as an external indication of gender. Gender expression reflects '[h]ow people express, wear, enact, and perform gender through behaviour, mannerism, clothing, speech, physicality, and selective body modification' (Enke, 2012, 18). Apart from feminine and masculine identities, diverse gender identities become increasingly visible through different manifestations of gender expression (Griffin, 2012). However, gender identity and gender expression do not always correspond to each other, and they do not always correspond to the sex assigned at birth. Since gender expression is an external cue (Wylie et al., 2010), a mismatch between gender expression and sex assigned at birth often provokes irritation in public. Individuals, who do not look, speak, dress or behave according to the social expectations of 'typical' men and women are perceived to be gender non-conforming. Thus, gender non-conformity reflects a gender expression, which does not conform to socially and culturally constructed assumptions about

appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour and appearance based on the sex assigned at birth.

When talking about sex and gender, the social regulatory principle of heteronormativity needs to be mentioned. According to Carrera-Fernández and DePalma (2020, 746) heteronormativity is anchored in the 'unquestioned assumption of the natural existence of two exclusive, opposed and hierarchical and complementarily heterosexual sexes'. This definition refers solely to 'sexes' criticising the biological connotation of sex and instead promoting a cultural nature of sex. Other views, as ours, refer to heteronormativity being based on sex and gender binary, hierarchy and assumed heterosexuality (Elling & Janssens, 2009). Referring to sex, gender and sexuality, gender theorist Judith Butler (1990) developed the heteronormative matrix, a tripartite system accounting for assumptions about the sexual orientation of individuals based on the visibility of sex and gender. According to Butler (1990), an individual who is considered male (sex) and masculine (gender) (or female and feminine) is categorised as heterosexual, while being considered male and feminine (or female and masculine) is being read as homosexual. Kristi Tredway (2014) adapted Butler's (1990) heteronormative matrix for instances when sex and sexual orientation is known and gender is assumed. Accordingly, an individual who is considered male and homosexual is assumed being feminine (considered female and homosexual as masculine). Tredway's (2014) adapted matrix is useful for the current analyses of the relevance of gender expression in an LGB+ sample accounting for sex differences.

Heteronormative gender order in sport

To understand the impact of the heteronormative gender order on LGB+ athletes and the discrimination they experience, Cunningham's (2019) multilevel model is a beneficial theoretical framework. It consists of three levels representing societal (macro), organisational (meso) and individual (micro) factors that influence LGB+ athletes' experiences of discrimination (Cunningham, 2019). The benefit of the model lies in the interrelated nature of the levels, which illustrates the complexity of the heteronormative gender order in sports and the often slow processes of change that result from it, since they have to be implemented and established on all three levels. Heteronormativity works on all levels: As a macro-level structural principle that operates at the meso-level through institutionalised practices and organisational cultures and influences the attitudes towards and experiences of LGB+ athletes at the micro level. At the same time, individuals can support or change organisational norms, cultures, and practices through their actions and attitudes, driving change at the meso- and macro-level.

Societal factors

On the macro-level, laws on LGBTQ+ rights and equality and governing structures in sport affect the inclusive/exclusive conditions for and experiences of LGB+ athletes (Cunningham, 2019). From a macro perspective, sport appears as a heteronormative environment, which is orientated towards binary and hierarchical conceptualisations of sex (male–female), gender (masculine–feminine) and sexual orientation

(heterosexual–homosexual), and being male, masculine and heterosexual is seen as natural and rewarded in most contexts of sport (Clément-Guillot et al., 2012; Denison et al., 2021; Kauer & Krane, 2013). Heterosexuality is set as the ‘expected standard’ and homosexuality as the marginalised other (Cunningham, 2019, 371). Thus, the participation of heterosexual men appears naturally and relates to heteronormative norms and expectations regarding masculine gender expression. Kauer and Krane (2013, 55) emphasised that ‘to be perceived [in sport] as a heterosexual masculine male, one must have a male appearing body as well as masculine mannerisms and personality’.

Beliefs of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and heteronormativity drive expectations that athletes shape their sporting engagement towards what is socially constructed as accepted for men and women in terms of appearance (e.g. clothing, styling, physicality, or muscularity) and behaviour (e.g. choice of sports, teams/leagues) (Baiooco et al., 2018; Krane, 2015, 2016). If athletes fail to meet these expectations, they are suspected of being gender non-conforming and/or homosexual, which might lead to discrimination and denial of athletic abilities for men (Kauer & Krane, 2013; Krane, 2016). For women, these gendered attributes and the nature of sport establish a disadvantageous environment, since rewarding characteristics such as being strong, competitive or assertive contradict the norms of being feminine (Kauer & Krane, 2013). In the words of Lenskyj (2013, para. 10), ‘female sporting achievement tends to be viewed as a threat to feminine/heterosexual identity as well as a threat to male sporting dominance’. Thus, sportswomen—and especially those who are successful—must constantly affirm their femininity and heterosexuality in sport, sometimes even prove their sex affiliation (Kauer & Krane, 2013; Krane & Symons, 2014).

As already indicated, non-conforming gender expression and LGB+ status are often contextualised. When athletes do not conform to hegemonic gender norms related to appearance, mannerisms or the sports practised—i.e. when they cross gender boundaries—their sexual orientation is often questioned (Kauer & Krane, 2013), and they are confronted with ‘homonegative bias’ (Krane & Symons, 2014, 122). Labelling sportswomen as masculine or lesbian and sportsmen as effeminate or gay serves to perpetuate and consolidate a heteronormative gender order in sport while marginalising those with a non-conforming gender expression (Kauer & Krane, 2013; McGannon et al., 2019). In women’s sports, these practices draw on a long history of underscoring the stigma of the ‘lesbian bogeywoman’ associated with the notion that participation in sports promotes homosexuality and undermines conformity to socially constructed stereotypical feminine appearance and behaviour (Griffin, 1998, 57).

Organisational factors

On the meso level, organisational culture as a pattern of shared values and beliefs serves as an orientation for (in)appropriate behaviour in organisations and is relevant for LGB+ athletes (Cunningham, 2019). Particular sports are shaped by specific organisational cultures and patterns that influence the situation for LGB+ athletes. Amongst them, gender-typing is the most relevant in the current context as many sports have a ‘gender connotation’ that reflects traditional gender stereotypes (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2012, 165). Since the pioneering work of Metheny (1965) on the stereotypically

(in)appropriate participation in sport by men and women, a large body of research has empirically supported the persistent gendered character of different sporting activities (Koivula, 1995, 2001; Riemer & Visio, 2003; Sobal & Milgrim, 2019). As determining features of the gender-typing of sport, Koivula (2001, 377) identified 'aesthetics and femininity, danger and risk, speed, and masculinity'. In two relevant studies from the US and Europe, sports that were consistently constructed as typically masculine were ice hockey, wrestling, or baseball, whereas gymnastics, ballet, or field hockey appeared to be typically feminine sports; a broad variety of sports was perceived as neutral, e.g. swimming, running, or volleyball (Koivula, 1995; Sobal & Milgrim, 2019). Gender-typing of sport varies across national sporting cultures that establish different gendered norms for appropriate sports (Xu et al., 2021).

Organisational culture interacts with leader behaviour of sports managers/administrators, team owners, coaches, etc., in terms of openness to diversity issues, role modelling and allocation of time, resources and money. On the team level, coaches are key leaders and role models in campaigning for sensitive speech and inclusive group cultures and engaging against gender stereotypes, discriminatory behaviour and exclusion (Morris & Van Raalte, 2016). Besides, supportive allies play an important role in LGB+ inclusion by using the power and privilege of the majority to advocate for inclusive and welcoming sporting environments (Cunningham, 2019).

Individual factors

The micro level reflects factors that operate at an individual level, such as LGB+ status, personal identity and demographics (Cunningham, 2019). It has been consistently shown that LGB+ athletes witness and/or experience homonegative incidences and discrimination in sport on grounds of their sexual orientation (for an overview see Denison et al., 2021 and Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021). Gay men are perceived as especially disruptive in heteronormative and hegemonic sporting cultures (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021). Besides, many LGB+ individuals—again more men than women—generally feel excluded from (specific) sports and refrain from participating in them due to internalised feelings of not being welcome due to their sexual orientation (Denison et al., 2021). Systematic reviews have consistently supported that men—especially in masculine sports—have more negative attitudes towards LGB+ individuals and use homonegative speech more often than women (Denison et al., 2021; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021). The acceptance of sexual and gender diversity intersects with class and the appraisal of hegemonic masculinity (Laberge & Albert, 1999). However, research has indicated a decrease in negative attitudes towards LGB+ athletes in recent decades (Krane, 2016).

Literature review on gender (non-)conformity in sports

Calzo et al. (2014) analysed the impact of gender non-conformity in early childhood on participation in sport during adolescence. By means of multiple regression models, they identified that gender non-conformity relates to an increase in the time for physical activities among female participants, while it relates to a decrease among male participants (Calzo et al., 2014). Adjusting for gender non-conformity levelled the time

differences for physical activities between LGB+ male adolescents, while the differences between LGB+ female adolescents remained (Calzo et al., 2014).

Focussing on men, there is evidence for sport (and non-sport) contexts that gay men feel particularly pressured to conform to typical hegemonic masculine norms and stereotypes because they are at risk of not meeting these norms (Baiocco et al., 2018; Sandfort et al., 2007). This could relate to non-conformity being less accepted among sportsmen than sportswomen and men having generally more negative attitudes towards non-conforming athletes (Laberge & Albert, 1999; Shang et al., 2012).

Focussing on women, Steinfeldt et al. (2011) found higher conformity to masculine norms, especially to the sport-related norms of winning and risk-taking, among female college athletes when compared to female college non-athletes. No differences were found between the two groups in terms of conformity to feminine norms (e.g. thinness, investing in appearance). Likewise, no association between conformity to feminine norms and physical activity occurs among Spanish women according to a regression analysis by Esteban-Gonzalo et al. (2020). With regard to identity constructions of professional female athletes, McGannon et al. (2019) and Meân and Kassing (2008) have shown that they often focus on femininity and heterosexuality. However, female elite boxers also construct and express alternative femininities that embrace stereotypical masculine characteristics enabling them to display physicality (muscularity, strength, etc.), which appears as both empowering and constraining (McGannon et al., 2019). Alternatives to socially constructed norms of femininity appear also within the context of lesbian sport. However, femme-identified women, i.e. women expressing traditional heterosexual feminine stereotypes, are privileged, while butch-identified women, i.e. women who represent an expression associated with traditional heterosexual masculine stereotypes, are often marginalised (Caudwell, 2014). This hierarchy of lesbian identities also exists in non-sport contexts (Lehavot et al., 2012; Levitt et al., 2012).

Research questions

From a methodological view, the literature review points to a deficit in quantitative approaches in this research field. From a content-wise view, an insufficient consideration of the relevance of gender (non-)conformity in gender-typed sports (i.e. postulated by Steinfeldt et al., 2011) and the relevance of gender (non-)conformity in experiencing negative incidents in sports becomes evident. Against this backdrop, the research focus is outlined by four research questions¹:

1. What is the prevalence of (non-)conforming gender expression, i.e. appearance and mannerism, among male and female LGB+ athletes?
2. How is the choice of gender-typed sports of male and female LGB+ athletes related to (non-)conforming gender expression?
3. How is the relation of negative experiences in sport and (non-)conforming gender expression for male and female LGB+ athletes in general, and in gender-typed sports in particular?

4. What is the relation between refraining from sport and (non-)conforming gender expression for male and female LGB+ athletes?

The research questions target LGB+ individuals with cisgender identities and consider sex differences. We are aware that these questions reproduce sex and gender binary in the analyses. However, this approach seems necessary to uncover the specific circumstances for LGB+ male and female athletes who do not conform to socially constructed expectations of typical masculine and feminine expression in heteronormative, binary and male-dominated sport contexts. Tredway (2014) or Wylie et al. (2010) likewise stress the need for binary analyses to understand dominant discourses and practices.

Methods

To address these research questions, we referred to quantitative survey data of LGBTQ+ respondents from an EU-wide online survey conducted between March and August 2018.² In order to draw a systematic sample of this hard-to-reach, hidden and vulnerable population (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015), a combination of web-based sampling techniques was applied to ensure a broad survey dissemination (Braumüller et al., 2020; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021). In the call for participation, special emphasis was put on neutral promotion, i.e. not referring directly to negative experiences and discrimination in sport, which seemed important to minimise bias and draw an objective picture about the situation for LGBTQ+ athletes. The online survey was accessible in English, German, French, Hungarian and Italian. A professional agency conducted translations, and native speakers from project partners with an LGBTQ+ background carefully reviewed sensitive wordings. Anonymity was secured for the participants, and the EU General Data Protection Regulation was followed.

Participants

The used subsample contains 2232 cisgender lesbian, gay and bisexual+ respondents with a mean age of 27.7 years ($SD = 11.5$), who were actively participating in sport.³ The focus on cisgender individuals allowed an explicit consideration of the relevance of gender expression as an external cue for experiencing negative incidents among LGB+ respondents.

As preliminary analyses showed, female ($n = 1536$, 56.2%) and male ($n = 1196$, 43.8%) LGB+ respondents differed significantly with regard to some demographic and sexual characteristics: on average, female respondents ($M = 24.94$, $SD = 9.87$) were about six years younger than males ($M = 31.20$, $SD = 12.37$) and comparatively under-represented in higher levels of education (college, university). Female respondents more frequently resided in smaller towns and villages, and fewer were from bigger cities. The sexual orientation of the female respondents was mostly lesbian (51.5%), followed by bisexual (33.5%) and other sexual orientations (15.0%). The male respondents identified themselves most often as gay (84.3%) followed by bisexual (12.1%) and other sexual orientations (3.6%).⁴

Measures

Gender expression

Wylie et al. (2010, 273) developed a two-item self-report measure including appearance and mannerisms and identified a lower correlation between appearance and mannerisms among LGB+ compared to heterosexual respondents, suggesting that 'subpopulations who are most vulnerable to victimisation targeting gender non-conformity could be misclassified if only one item were included on survey instruments'. Following Wylie et al. (2010), we adapted two distinct questions to assess respondents' gendered appearance and mannerisms,⁵ both with response options on a 7-point scale from 'very feminine' to 'very masculine'. Responses for each question were recoded based on the respondents' sex assigned at birth (male/female) (following Lowry et al., 2018) and then recoded into two 3-level gender (non-)conformity variables: conforming (1–3), neutral (4) and non-conforming (5–7).

Sport participation and gender-typed sports

All respondents were active in sports in the 12 months prior to the study and were asked which of the sporting activities they practised was most important to them. A list with 48 sports and an open-ended option was presented to them.

Due to increasing participation in counter-stereotypic sports (Hardin & Greer, 2009) and cultural differences (Xu et al., 2021), gender typing of sports should be updated on a regular basis. Accordingly, following Plaza et al. (2017), respondents in our cross-cultural LGB+ population were asked to assess gender-typing of the sports practised (7-point scale ranging from 1 ('very feminine') to 7 ('very masculine')). An additional note asked the respondents to consider the image of that particular sport in their country. Responses were recoded into three categories: feminine sports (1–3), neutral sports (4), and masculine sports (4–7)⁶.

Negative incidents and refraining from sports

To address effects of gender expression and (the choice of) gender-typed sports on LGB+ athletes, we focussed on two aspects: homonegative incidents in a sporting context and refraining from participating in a certain sport of interest. Homonegative incidents were assessed by asking respondents whether or not ('yes'/'no') they had had negative personal experiences in their main sport during the past 12 months as a result of their sexual orientation. Refraining from a specific sport as a result of one's sexual orientation was assessed by asking respondents whether there were any sports ('yes'/'no') that they were attracted to that they had felt excluded from or that they had stopped participating in as a result of their sexual orientation.

Data analyses

Firstly, we conducted descriptive analyses and cross-tabulations with chi-square independence tests to examine gender differences in central demographic variables. Mean differences in gender non-conformity scales (appearance, mannerisms) between categories of demographic and sexual characteristics were assessed using ANOVA and Welch's ANOVA. *T*-tests and Welch tests (in case of heteroscedasticity) were used to

compare means of gender-typing of sports between male and female respondents. Further cross-tabulations with chi-square independence tests and Cramer's V effect size⁷ were utilised to analyse (in)dependencies between categories of gender-typed sports and gender expressions. Additionally, point-biserial correlations between gender conformity scales and the dichotomous outcome variables (negative experiences, refraining from participation in sport) were calculated. Data were analysed on a .05 level of significance using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 27.

Empirical results

Prevalence of gender (non-)conformity

Within the present sample, the degree of gender (non-)conformity was strongly associated with the respondents' sex (appearance: $\chi^2(2) = 240.37, p < .001; V = .297$; mannerisms: $\chi^2(2) = 82.48, p < .001; V = .147$). High values of gender non-conformity were significantly more prevalent among female than male LGB+ athletes. With regard to appearance, 53.8% of female respondents indicated gender conforming, 18.9% neutral and 27.3% non-conforming appearances. With regard to mannerisms, 49.2% reported conforming, 27.9% neutral and 22.9% non-conforming mannerisms. Male respondents, on the other hand, more frequently indicated conforming appearance (79.6%) and mannerisms (65.5%), and far less frequently reported non-conforming appearance (6.4%) and mannerisms (19.0%) or neutral appearance (14.0%) and mannerisms (15.6%).

(Choice of) gender-typed sports

Regarding the perceived gender-typing of sport, sports typically described as 'masculine' were in descending order: rugby, football, martial arts, basketball, weight training, and cardio-based fitness (Table 1). The respondents labelled swimming, running, and badminton as 'neutral'. Sports most frequently described as 'feminine' were

Table 1. Differences in gender-typing of sports by sex (mean value, standard deviation).

Sports ^a	n	All		Men		Women		df	t ^b
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Rugby	54	6.31	.93	6.12	1.05	6.62	.59	52	-1.973
Football	247	6.01	.82	5.97	.85	6.12	.73	245	-1.194
Martial arts	117	5.68	.97	5.63	.94	5.83	1.05	115	-.979
Basketball	70	5.53	.96	5.38	.97	5.94	.80	68	-2.193*
Weight training	106	5.47	1.30	5.10	1.45	5.61	1.23	104	-1.804
Fitness (cardio)	437	4.82	1.27	4.47	1.28	5.07	1.20	435	-4.996***
Swimming ^c	217	4.12	.72	3.91	.67	4.26	.72	188.68	-3.686***
Running/jogging	247	4.08	.52	4.05	.54	4.10	.50	245	-.803
Badminton	75	3.73	.64	3.76	.64	3.71	.65	73	.309
Volleyball	113	3.43	1.00	3.33	1.05	3.60	.90	111	-1.433
Equestrian sports	53	2.55	1.19	2.50	1.19	2.78	1.20	51	-.637
Dance	195	2.51	1.02	2.39	1.05	2.74	.93	193	-2.319*
Yoga ^c	68	2.19	.90	1.91	.76	2.74	.92	38.02	-3.726**

Question: 'How do you think people would describe this sport?' (1 ('very feminine') to 7 ('very masculine')); ^aSports with $n > 50$ participants; ^bLevel of significance: *** $p < .001$, * $p < .01$, $p < .05$; ^cWelch's test for unequal variances; horizontal lines separate masculine, neutral and feminine sports.

Table 2. Choice of gender-typed sports by sex and gender expression (percent).

	Women Choice of gender-typed sport			Men Choice of gender-typed sport		
	Feminine	Neutral	Masculine	Feminine	Neutral	Masculine
Total	23.9	33.9	42.3	13.7	43.0	43.2
Gender-related appearance						
Conforming	31.1	35.6	33.4	11.1	42.5	46.1
Neutral	17.9	35.2	46.9	22.8	44.3	32.9
Non-conforming	13.8	29.6	56.6	26.3	47.4	26.3
$\chi^2_{(4)}$, Cramer's <i>V</i>	80.20***, <i>V</i> = .162			35.05***, <i>V</i> = .121		
Gender-related mannerisms						
Conforming	32.2	35.5	32.3	9.7	42.7	47.6
Neutral	17.5	33.8	48.7	18.3	41.4	40.3
Non-conforming	13.9	30.4	55.7	23.9	45.6	30.5
$\chi^2_{(4)}$, Cramer's <i>V</i>	82.51***, <i>V</i> = .164			41.64***, <i>V</i> = .132		

Level of significance: *** $p < .000$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

yoga, dancing, equestrian sports and, to a lesser extent, volleyball. In general, female LGB+ athletes rated 'masculine' sports more masculine and 'feminine' sports less feminine than male athletes. Statistically significant mean differences occurred for yoga (.83), fitness (.60), basketball (.56), swimming (.35) and dancing (.35).

The sports practised by LGB+ athletes were predominantly indicated as 'masculine' (42.7%) or 'neutral' (37.9%) and less frequently as 'feminine' (19.5%). The share of LGB+ athletes participating in 'masculine' sports was almost equal among female (42.3%) and male (43.2%) respondents (Table 2). A considerably lower share of male respondents (13.7%) than female respondents (23.9%) participated in 'feminine' sports and, accordingly, a higher share of male respondents (43.0%) than female respondents (33.9%) participated in neutral sports ($\chi^2(2) = 50.78$, $p < .001$; $V = .136$).

The choice of sport was also associated with respondents' gender expression (Table 2). There were significant but weak correlations between participation in gender-typed sports and gender (non-)conformity among female athletes (appearance $r = .264$, $p < .001$; mannerisms $r = .253$, $p < .001$) and among male athletes to a slightly lesser degree (appearance $r = .204$, $p < .001$; mannerisms $r = .210$, $p < .001$). More specifically, LGB+ respondents with non-conforming appearance and mannerisms more frequently participate in counter-stereotypic sport activities, whereas LGB+ respondents with conforming gender expression engage more often in gender stereotypic sports than respondents with non-conforming or neutral gender expression.

Negative experiences

Only a small share of male (9.1%) and female (7.1%) LGB+ respondents had had negative personal experiences associated with their sexual orientation in their main sport over the previous 12 months ($\chi^2(1) = 3.73$, $p = .054$).

There were weak systematic correlations between the negative experiences of LGB+ athletes and gender expression that varied with regard to the two dimensions of gender expression and sex of the athletes (Table 3). Looking at sport in general, male respondents with non-conforming appearance ($r_{pb} = -.071$, $p < .05$) and female respondents with non-conforming mannerisms ($r_{pb} = -.061$, $p < .05$) were slightly

Table 3. Personal homonegative experiences (%) by gender expression in different gender-typed sports.

	All sports		'Feminine' sports		'Neutral' sports		'Masculine' sports	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Gender-related appearance								
Conforming	6.0	8.3	5.8	9.4	5.1	7.4	7.2	8.8
Neutral	8.3	10.1	5.8	15.8	4.9	8.1	11.8	9.1
Non-conforming	8.4	17.1	15.5	20.0	6.5	11.1	7.6	25.0
$\chi^2_{(2)}$	3.00	6.83*	6.73*	2.35	.37	.64	2.70	5.82
r_{pb}	-.047	-.071*	-.133*	-.104	-.022	-.066	-.009	-.054
Gender-related mannerisms								
Conforming	5.4	8.3	3.7	10.5	4.9	7.8	7.8	8.3
Neutral	8.2	11.8	12.0	20.6	6.2	10.4	8.1	9.3
Non-conforming	9.4	9.2	18.4	9.3	5.6	5.8	9.2	15.9
$\chi^2_{(2)}$	6.68*	2.37	15.85***	2.87	.35	1.28	.29	3.92
r_{pb}	-.061*	.034	-.167***	.026	-.023	-.016	-.022	-.063
n	1536	1196	367	164	649	516	520	514

Question: 'Looking back at the last 12 months, have you personally had any negative experiences in this specific sporting context as a result of your sexual orientation or gender identity?' Statistics: Chi² test of independence and point-biserial correlation (r_{pb}) between negative personal experiences (yes/no) and degree of gender-conforming appearance/mannerisms (7-point scale); level of significance: *** $p < .000$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Significant correlations are displayed in bold.

more likely to experience homonegative incidents in their sports than respondents with higher levels of gender conformity.

Referring to the different categories of gender-typed sports (Table 3), significant correlations between negative experiences and gender expression can only be observed among female respondents in feminine sports, whereby higher levels of non-conforming appearance ($r_{pb} = -.133$, $p < .05$) and non-conforming mannerisms ($r_{pb} = -.167$, $p < .05$) were associated with higher shares of negative incidents. The share of male respondents with homonegative incidents in feminine sports was higher among those with gender non-conforming appearance, although this was statistically not significant.

Refraining from sports

In total, 13.8% of the respondents had refrained from or stopped participating in certain sports of interest because of their sexual orientation (Table 4). Significantly higher shares occurred among male (18.2%) compared to female respondents (10.4%) ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 34.35$, $p < .001$). The share of respondents who had refrained from participating was highest among males with gender non-conforming appearance (26.7%) and mannerisms (27.0%). Among sportswomen, appearance was not significantly associated with refraining from sport. The highest share of females who had refrained from participating in certain sports occurred within those with gender-neutral mannerisms.

Discussion

The main aims were to analyse the prevalence of gender (non-)conformity among LGB+ athletes and its relevance for experiencing negative episodes considering the athletes' sex and the gender-typing of sports practised. The discussion is structured by these aims and is related to Cunningham's multilevel model (2019).

Table 4. Refraining from participating in certain sports (%) by sex gender expression.

	Women	Men
Total	10.4	18.2
Gender-related appearance		
Conforming	9.4	17.0
Neutral	10.7	20.8
Non-conforming	11.9	26.7
$\chi^2_{(2)}$	1.91	5.30 ⁺
r_{pb}	−.034	−.071 [*]
Gender-related mannerisms		
Conforming	8.1	15.7
Neutral	14.0	17.7
Non-conforming	10.8	27.0
$\chi^2_{(2)}$	10.28 ^{**}	15.05 ^{***}
r_{pb}	−.047 ⁺	−.106 ^{***}
<i>n</i>	1534	1195

Question: 'Are there any sports which you are attracted to which you feel excluded from or which you have stopped participating in as a result of your sexual orientation?'. Statistics: Chi² test of independence; level of significance: *** $p < .000$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ⁺ $p < .10$.

Gender (non-)conformity in (gender-typed) sports

Gender non-conformity is quite a relevant issue in sports that varies considerably between male and female LGB+ athletes as well as between the two dimensions of gender expression. Generally, more female than male LGB+ athletes reported gender non-conformity in appearance and mannerisms, which strengthens respective findings from non-sport contexts (Van Caenegem et al., 2015; Wylie et al., 2010). The gender bias in non-conformity in adults' sport appears as a continuation of increased time amounts for sports activities of non-conforming girls and female adolescents compared to non-conforming boys and male adolescents (Calzo et al., 2014). Referring to the two dimension of gender expression (Wylie et al., 2010) the respondents, and particularly male respondents, report more often about conforming to socially constructed expectations of appearance than of mannerism. In a non-sport study, this has been identified for gay men, whereas lesbian women generally conformed stronger to norms of mannerism (Wylie et al., 2010). This difference between sport and non-sport contexts points to the importance of the body and its appearance in sport for both male and female individuals. Sport appears as a social environment in which heteronormativity is expressed in terms of physical performance and bodily appearance (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021).

These individual, micro-level factors interrelate with macro-level factors, foremost heteronormativity in sports, which is based on binary, gender hierarchy and assumed heterosexuality. Heteronormativity is further strengthened by an orientation towards hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) resulting in an implicit demand of masculine behaviour, appearance and physicality for being athletically successful (Clément-Guillot et al., 2012; Kauer & Krane, 2013). Gay men do not conform to assumed heterosexuality and run the risk of further disadvantages in male-dominated and heteronormative sports contexts due to the supposed closeness to femininity as well as the related questioning or denial of athletic abilities (Baiocco et al., 2018; Kauer & Krane, 2013; Sandfort et al., 2007). Our findings support scientific literature suggesting

that gay athletes adopt different strategies against this risk: if they are crossing gender boundaries, e.g. not conforming to socially constructed expectations regarding masculinity, particularly masculine appearance demonstrating muscularity, strength, and power, they abstain or refrain from (specific) sports (Calzo et al., 2014; Denison et al., 2021). If male LGB+ athletes participate in sport, they predominately conform to socially constructed sport-related norms of masculine behaviour and appearance in particular. Kavoura and Kokkonen (2021, 19) refer to this as 'doing masculinity' among openly gay athletes displaying a strategy to disprove hegemonic expectations and deal with the tensions of being a gay man while also being a male athlete. Both individual strategies, i.e. abstaining/refraining and 'doing masculinity' contribute to understanding the rather low prevalence of non-conforming gay men in heteronormative, male-dominated sports.

For lesbian athletes the situation differs significantly, which is substantiated in the higher share of female LGB+ athletes reporting a non-conforming gender expression in terms of mannerism and particularly appearance. According to the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; Tredway, 2014), lesbian women are assumed as masculine in their gender expression, which is particularly evident in sport. Thus, lesbian athletes, and particularly those with a non-conforming gender expression, correspond to the sport-related demands of masculinity, which grants them athletic abilities (Griffin, 1998; Kauer & Krane, 2013; McGannon et al., 2019). However, non-conforming gender expression contradicts socially constructed norms of femininity and expectations regarding appearance and mannerism of 'typical' sportswomen, which leads to scrutinising sex affiliation and gender (identity) (Kauer & Krane, 2013; Lenskyj, 2013). This dilemma displays the incompatibility of the requirements of being a (successful) athlete and being a feminine female, which has been identified for female athletes regardless of sexual orientation (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). At the same time, it facilitates the situation for non-conforming sportswomen as 'aspects of masculinity (...) are reinforced and rewarded within the athletic context' (Steinfeldt et al., 2011, 402), which contributes to explaining the higher prevalence of non-conformity among female LGB+ athletes.

At the meso level, participation in gender-typed sports moderates and strengthens the interrelations just outlined between the micro and macro level. Generally, the respondents engage more in what they (thought was) perceived to be stereotypically masculine (e.g. football, martial arts) and neutral sports (e.g. swimming, jogging) than feminine sports (e.g. volleyball, dance). Thus, the share of female LGB+ athletes in masculine sports is significantly higher than the share of male LGB+ athletes in feminine sports. This finding reflects the higher acceptance of women in masculine sports compared to men participating in feminine sports (Baiocco et al., 2018; Clément-Guillot et al., 2012). Besides, it already implies a link to gender expression, as the share of female respondents that consider themselves non-conforming is quite high. This is further substantiated as gender non-conformity increases the participation in counter-stereotypic sports among male and female LGB+ athletes. These findings indicate a general consistency between respondents' gender expression and the choice of gender-typed sports enabling them to conform to gender-typical characteristics and shared norms within the respective sport (Krane, 2016). Thus, gender is expressed by means of participation in specific, gender-typed sports (Sobal & Milgrim, 2019).

Negative episodes in (gender-typed) sports

Generally, a rather low share of LGB+ athletes reported negative experiences in their main sports in the last 12 months prior to the study, which points to a climate of decreasing homonegativity in European sports (Krane, 2016). However, differences in experiencing negative episodes according to respondents' sex, gender expression and choice of gender-typed sports occur.

Male athletes with non-conforming appearances are the subgroup most affected by discrimination, particularly when they participate in masculine sports. Due to the low prevalence of non-conforming appearances among sportsmen and the 'visible' contradiction to male-dominated, heteronormative sport contexts, their non-conformity caused more irritation and disruption compared to female athletes. The higher vulnerability of non-conforming gay and bisexual+ male athletes is further evidenced by literature pointing to a more open and tolerant climate for non-conforming female athletes (Laberge & Albert, 1999; Shang et al., 2012) and to men sharing more negative attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity compared to women (Denison et al., 2021; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021). All of this together establishes a climate that reinforces internalised feelings of not being welcome or feeling safe, which can finally result in refraining from sport. This assumption is backed up by 18% of male LGB+ respondents (and 27% of non-conforming male LGB+ respondents), who refrained from certain sports of interest and supported by former research (Denison et al., 2021; Symons et al., 2017).

Less female LGB+ athletes reported about negative experiences and refraining from sports of interest compared to male LGB+ athletes. Gender non-conforming mannerisms increased negative experiences, but had no distinct impact on refraining from sports. In feminine sports, non-conforming appearance and mannerism increased negative experiences among female LGB+ athletes. Many sports that are constructed as typically feminine are aesthetic compositional sports, in which bodily expression is a major performance determinant (Sobal & Milgrim, 2019). Thus, gender non-conformity caused more irritation in stereotypically feminine sports compared to masculine or neutral sports, in which (non-)conforming gender expression was not associated with negative experiences for both male and female LGB+ athletes.

As Krane and Symons (2014) contextualised for sport, prejudices against LGB+ athletes, may result in either silencing these identities or discrimination against them. The study enhances this for non-conformity among male LGB+ athletes. On the one hand, this is reflected in the share of male LGB+ athletes with negative experiences and refraining from certain sports of interest, both increasing with gender non-conformity. On the other hand, silencing is mirrored in high conformity to socially constructed norms and expectations of masculine appearance and behaviour as well as in high participation in typically masculine sports among male LGB+ athletes.

Limitations and conclusion

Some limitations concerning the data and study design should be mentioned. (1) Due to the self-selection of respondents from an international population with unknown socio-structural parameters, the findings are not generalisable and the external validity

is limited. Further, due to differences in demographic and sexual characteristics (e.g. female respondents younger and lower educational background), differences between female and male respondents should be interpreted with caution. (2) The consideration of sex differences as well as the non-consideration of trans*, nonbinary and intersexathletes reproduces widely criticised sex and gender binary. However, to understand dominant discourses and practices regarding the gender order, it appears necessary to use binary conceptualizations of sex to uncover specific circumstances for male and female individuals (Tredway, 2014; Wylie et al., 2010). (3) Although literature points to powerful intersectional relations between *race*, sex, gender, non-(conformity), and sexual orientation (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014), the authors did not account for *race*, class, or ethnicity. Intersectional approaches are necessary in the future to get a comprehensive overall picture. (4) To map the wide range of experiences of (non-)conforming LGB+ athletes in various sports, settings and countries (Semerjian & Cohen, 2006), mixed-method approaches on the relevance of gender expression, and particularly gender non-conformity should be conducted to examine discriminatory episodes in more detail and further sport contexts.

However, the study offers major strengths. It is the first to draw a comprehensive picture of the prevalence of gender non-conformity among LGB+ athletes and its relevance to experiencing negative episodes in sport while considering the gender-typing of sports and the athletes' sex. From a methodological view assessing gender expression by means of two distinct categories—appearance and mannerism (Wylie et al., 2010), is a major strength because the categories differ considerably between male and female athletes.

To sum up, the heteronormative nature of sports makes individuals that are crossing socially and culturally constructed boundaries of stereotypic feminine and masculine expression more often the targets of discrimination than conforming LGB+ athletes (Krane, 2016). Negative incidents in sports are thus more likely to be reinforced by gender nonconformity as an external cue than by sexual orientation. Among male athletes, gender conformity can be understood as strategic 'doing masculinity' (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021, 19) to avoid the suspicion of being effeminate and the denial of athletic abilities and as protective mechanism against discrimination. Among female athletes, non-conformity to feminine norms appears as adaption to sport-related demands of masculine appearance and behaviour.

A profound reconsideration on all levels of the heteronormative gender order (Cunningham, 2019) seems necessary to establish inclusive sport contexts for (non-conforming) LGB+ athletes. Starting on an individual level with all sports participants using gender-sensitive, inclusive language and questioning expectations of gender appropriateness regarding the chosen sports, clothing, styling and behaviour on and off court. On the meso level, disrupting the socially constructed norms of gender appropriate sports would help to establish welcoming, open and inclusive sports cultures for all athletes regardless their sexual orientation and/or gender expression (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021; Krane & Symons, 2014). As important role models, coaches should be educated in the topic of gender and sexual diversity to establish these inclusive organisational cultures (Morris & Van Raalte, 2016). Finally, on the macro level, there is a severe need to raise awareness and campaign against the

strongly entangled discriminatory structures of heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, sexism and homonegativity (Denison et al., 2021). If they remain as structural principle in sports, sportsmen continue to be privileged over sportswomen, heterosexual athletes over homosexual athletes and gender-conforming athletes over those who are gender non-conforming.

Notes

1. Due to sample differences in some demographic and sexual characteristics (described in the methodology on participants) and to the exploratory character of the study in the field of sport, we refrained from making hypotheses and focused instead on research questions.
2. Subsample of the LGBTQ+ sample from the project OUTSPORT, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.
3. Respondents with missing values in one of the questions about their gender expression (appearance or mannerisms) or negative personal experiences in their sport were excluded from the total sample of 2732 LGBTQ+ respondents.
4. Age: $t(2216.14) = -14.23, p < .001$; Education: $\chi^2(3) = 83.97, p < .001$; Residency (inhabitants): $\chi^2(3) = 34.57, p < .001$; Sexual orientation: $\chi^2(2) = 324.40, p < .001$.
5. (1) 'A person's appearance, style, or dress may affect the way people think of them. On average, how do you think people would describe your appearance, style or dress?', (2) 'A person's mannerisms (such as the way they walk or talk) may affect the way people think of them. On average, how do you think people would describe your mannerisms?'
6. When talking about typical 'masculine', 'feminine' or 'neutral' sports in this paper, we always refer to the social and cultural construction of these gendered, sport-related attributes.
7. Effect sizes of Cramer V: small effect $V = .1$, medium effect $V = .3$, large effect $V = .5$ (Cohen, 1988).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The project Outsport was co-funded by the EU Commission (Erasmus+ programme) and the data used derives from this project.

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