

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Navigating Physical Education: LBQ Women Students' Experiences in Philippine Colleges

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Abstract

Physical Education (PE) in higher education often reinforces fixed gender roles and heteronormative practices that marginalise students with diverse sexual orientations. This descriptive phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of cisgender women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (LBQ) in a Philippine state university, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and proposed inclusive pathways in college PE. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and were analysed thematically. The students' experiences were marked by ambivalence: enjoyment and social engagement coexisted with emotional discomfort, identity concealment, and pressure to conform to binary gender expectations. Challenges were institutional, pedagogical, and social, including rigid gender divisions, limited curricular representation, and instructor silence. Participants recommended gender-inclusive curricula, safer, more flexible physical spaces, supportive school cultures, and participatory teaching practices. These findings underscore the need to redesign PE as an inclusive and affirming environment responsive to diverse sexual identities. By situating these experiences within the Philippine higher education context, this study addresses a significant geographical and cultural gap in predominantly Western-centred LGBTQ+ sport and PE research.

Keywords:

LBQ women students, physical education, inclusive pedagogy, gender equity

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Introduction

Physical Education (PE) is widely recognised as essential to students' holistic development, yet for LBQ women students, it often reflects exclusionary practices. Activities divided by gender, strict uniform rules, and locker room setups are often based on traditional ideas of gender and sexuality that mainly favour straight students (Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Frederick et al., 2020) These arrangements make PE a source of anxiety rather than well-being, particularly in higher education,

where young adults are negotiating both identity and participation in institutionalised physical activity (Peterson et al., 2025).

LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term encompassing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities. LBQ women students—specifically cisgender women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer—encounter intersectional barriers in education and sport. Women identifying as sexual minorities (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, queer) typically report lower levels of physical activity participation compared to heterosexual women (Herrick & Duncan,

2018). For transgender women, sexism and transphobia increase barriers to accessing safe spaces, uniforms, and recognising their gender identity in PE and sport settings (Jones et al., 2016).

International studies indicate LGBTQ+ students experience ambivalence in PE: they often enjoy participating, but experience discomfort and identity concealment (Müller & Böhlke, 2021; Landi et al., 2023). For instance, Frederick et al. (2020) found LGBTQ+ college students reported significantly less participation in aerobic and resistance training than their peers due in part to fear of being judged and discomfort in gendered spaces. Greenspan et al. (2019) found that youth LGBTQ+ individuals frequently avoid PE activities and locker rooms due to safety concerns.

In the Philippines, evidence also suggests the presence of exclusionary experiences. Gamutin et al. (2022) documented student-athletes' application of ossifying experience of LGBTQIA+ members in gendered sports with mixed attitudes that spanned acceptance to anxieties about fairness and identity. Similarly, a study on LGBTQIA intercollegiate athletes in 2023 highlighted incidents of harassment and discrimination at institutions of higher education, with many athletes adopting silence as a coping mechanism (Pocan, 2022). This evidence from the Philippines indicates that the challenges faced by LBQ women students in PE are not unique but are situated within normative and institutional practices.

LBQ women students face institutional, pedagogical, and social barriers in physical education. Barriers at the institutional level include fixed gender divisions in activities, a lack of appropriate spaces, and generic policies that do not reflect a diverse range of identities (Holder et al., 2022; Peterson et al., 2025). Barriers at the pedagogical level take the form of teachers' lack of awareness of, or decisions not to address, LGBTQ+ issues, which ultimately reinforce marginalisation (Drury et al., 2022).

Social barriers include stigma, misgendering, and peer harassment that contribute to negative encounters (Greenspan et al., 2019).

Philippine research also highlights these challenges. Addatu-Cambri (2024) noted that LGBTQ+ students at Cagayan State University described intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental barriers that prevented them from being active participants in physical activity. The same has been reported among gay and lesbian Filipino athletes in their study of coping mechanisms, for example, hiding their identity, selective participation, and avoiding locations they perceived to be unsafe (Moncal et al., 2024).

Addatu-Cambri (2024) also provided recommendations, including structural changes such as gender-neutral restrooms or changing facilities, a flexible dress code, and ensuring that LGBTQ+ topics are part of the school curriculum (Neary & McBride, 2021; Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024). In addition, Gamutin et al. (2022) and Pocan (2022) argue that inclusive sports plans, teacher training, and better enforcement of non-discrimination policies should be implemented.

The literature reviewed indicates that the absence of LGBTQ+ representation in curricula, combined with instructors' silence, was perceived as exclusionary. International research emphasises that curricular omission is not neutral but rather reinforces invisibility and marginalisation (Drury et al., 2022; Neary & McBride, 2021).

In the Philippine context, however, institutional silence may also be rooted in broader sociocultural dynamics. Filipino society is often characterised by collectivist values that prioritise social harmony, relational interdependence, and the avoidance of open conflict. Concepts such as *pakikisama*—the maintenance of smooth interpersonal relationships—may discourage both students and teachers from addressing sensitive issues that could disrupt group cohesion. As Manalastas and

Torre (2016) explains, LGBTQ+ experiences in the Philippines are shaped by a complex interplay of tolerance and silence, where visibility may be socially accepted, but deeper discussions remain constrained.

This cultural emphasis on harmony may help explain why participants reported identity concealment and reluctance to speak out. Research on Filipino LGBTQ+ narratives highlights that coming out is often carefully negotiated to avoid family or community conflict (Domingo & Escobido, 2024). Similarly, Libiran et al. (2024) note that strong religious ties in Filipino communities can further complicate self-expression, reinforcing caution in environments perceived as morally evaluative, such as schools. Even in urban settings like Manila, LGBTQ+ mobility and expression are shaped by norms of respectability and implicit boundaries (Collins, 2009).

Within educational spaces, these dynamics may translate into what participants described as “instructor silence” — not necessarily overt hostility, but a reluctance to intervene when discriminatory remarks are made or to affirm gender diversity openly. This aligns with findings by Tang and Poudel (2018), who reported that Filipino LGBTQ+ students often experience subtle exclusion rather than explicit institutional opposition. Marciano et al. (2024) similarly found that lesbian students in underdeveloped contexts navigate participation through strategic self-regulation to maintain social acceptance.

Thus, identity concealment among participants may not solely reflect fear of discrimination, but also a culturally embedded strategy for preserving belonging within collectivist and religiously influenced environments. Understanding these sociocultural factors deepens the analysis of why institutional silence persists and why self-expression in PE remains constrained.

While these studies highlight structural and interpersonal barriers in PE, they predominantly reflect Western contexts. In contrast, research situated within the Philippine cultural and societal landscape points to additional layers shaping LGBTQ+ experiences, particularly in educational settings. The Philippines is a predominantly collectivist society where social norms emphasise *pakikisama* — the maintenance of smooth interpersonal relationships and the avoidance of conflict. This cultural orientation can discourage overt self-expression that deviates from group expectations, prompting individuals to suppress personal identities to preserve social harmony (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). In the Filipino LGBTQ+ context, this can manifest as identity concealment and self-monitoring, even in spaces perceived as relatively tolerant.

Empirical evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals in the Philippines navigate complex sociocultural pressures, including familial obligations, religious moral frameworks, and community expectations (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). The Philippines, despite being ranked as socially accepting in regional surveys, lacks national anti-discrimination legislation (e.g., the SOGIE Equality Bill), which hampers legal protections for sexual and gender minorities and contributes to institutional ambivalence in addressing bias (Time, 2023). Moreover, Filipino LGBTQ+ coming-out narratives are often negotiated carefully to avoid disrupting interpersonal harmony or provoking moral judgment from significant others (Domingo & Escobido, 2024).

Studies documenting Filipino LGBTQ+ identities also highlight the influence of religious affiliations — with Catholic dominance shaping social attitudes and perpetuating stigma, thus reinforcing silence around sexual minority issues (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). Research on Filipino bisexual and lesbian experiences further underscores how discrimination and social pressures compel

individuals to hide their identities or limit self-expression in educational and community contexts (Bolilan et al., 2021).

Research across Southeast Asia suggests that while visible LGBTQ+ communities exist in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, formal institutional protections remain inconsistent, and educational inclusion often lags behind social visibility (UNDP & USAID, 2014). In many Asian societies, collectivist cultural values emphasise conformity, familial obligation, and social harmony, which can influence how gender and sexuality are negotiated in public institutions, including schools (Hofstede, 2001).

Studies examining LGBTQ+ students in Asian educational contexts reveal patterns of subtle marginalisation rather than overt exclusion. For instance, Tang and Poudel (2018) found that Filipino LGBTQ+ students experienced indirect discrimination, characterised by avoidance, silence, and lack of policy support. Similarly, research in other Southeast Asian contexts suggests that institutional inaction and reliance on traditional gender binaries are common features of school environments (UNDP, 2019).

These regional dynamics are particularly relevant to Physical Education, a discipline deeply embedded in embodied performance, gendered categorisation, and visibility. Within Southeast Asia, PE often remains structured around binary divisions that reflect broader cultural norms about masculinity and femininity. Consequently, LGBTQ+ students may experience tension between social acceptance at the community level and structural exclusion within formal educational systems.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of cisgender women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (LBQ women students) in Physical Education classes in the Philippines. Specifically, it seeks to (1) describe their experiences in PE, (2) identify the challenges they encounter, and (3) present

their suggested solutions for creating more inclusive PE environments. The findings are expected to inform educators, administrators, and policymakers in developing inclusive curricula, safe physical spaces, and supportive institutional cultures, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, SDG 4: Quality Education, and SDG 5: Gender Equality).

Methods and Materials

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of LBQ women students in college Physical Education (PE). Descriptive phenomenology was selected because the study sought to capture the essence of participants' experiences as they were perceived and described, without imposing external theoretical frameworks. Unlike grounded theory, which aims to generate explanatory models, or narrative inquiry, which centres on life stories over time, descriptive phenomenology focuses on identifying shared structures of experience across participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Colaizzi, 1978).

This approach was particularly well-suited to the study's objective: to understand how LBQ women students experience PE in specific institutional and cultural contexts. Phenomenology allows researchers to examine how meaning is constructed in embodied and relational spaces — highly relevant in PE, where participation is both physical and socially visible.

To enhance transparency and potential replication, the study followed Colaizzi's (1978) structured analytic framework, which provides systematic steps for extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and developing an exhaustive description. By clearly documenting these stages, the research design ensures procedural clarity for future researchers examining similar contexts.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (a) self-identification as women on the LGBTQ+ spectrum and (b) having completed at least one PE subject. Overall, seven (7) self-identified cisgender women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer met the criteria and voluntarily participated in the study. Recruitment was supported by snowball sampling, which enabled participants to refer peers who fit the inclusion criteria.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol reviewed by experts in qualitative research and gender studies for clarity and sensitivity. Interviews were conducted in private, safe settings, either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participants' preferences. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with informed consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues.

A total of seven self-identified LBQ women students participated in this study. For confidentiality purposes, participant identifiers (e.g., P1–P7) were reassigned during data presentation and do not reflect the order of recruitment. While modest in size, this sample is consistent with phenomenological research, which prioritises depth of inquiry over breadth of representation. Data collection was discontinued when thematic saturation was reached, after which additional interviews did not reveal new themes or insights relevant to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This study was classified as minimal-risk educational research based on the institutional guidelines applicable to the participating university, which allow classroom-based qualitative studies involving voluntary participation and anonymised reporting of student experiences to proceed without formal review by an institutional ethics committee.

As no publicly accessible or named institutional policy document is available, the classification was determined by the researchers in consultation with the university's research office, following standard criteria for minimal-risk research involving non-interventional, interview-based data collection.

The study adhered to recognised ethical standards for research involving human participants, including the principles outlined in The Belmont Report (2006) and the *Declaration of Helsinki* (World Medical Association, 2013), particularly respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Participation was strictly voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, removal of identifying information, and secure storage of digital data accessible only to the primary researcher.

It is acknowledged that discussions of sexual orientation and experiences of discrimination involve inherently sensitive personal information. However, under the applicable institutional guidelines, the study remained within the scope of minimal-risk research because disclosures were entirely voluntary, no identifying information was recorded, and interviews were conducted in private or secure environments to minimise potential psychological or social risk. These safeguards were implemented to ensure participant well-being throughout the research process.

The participants in this study self-identified as cisgender women with diverse sexual orientations, specifically lesbian, bisexual, or queer. In this manuscript, these participants are referred to as LBQ women students to denote their sexual orientation while distinguishing it from gender identity. The study did not include transgender women or non-binary participants; therefore, the analysis focuses specifically on sexual orientation rather than gender identity. Although LGBTQ+ individuals

are recognised as a socially marginalised population, vulnerability in this context refers to structural marginalisation rather than procedural research risk. The study did not involve experimental interventions, medical procedures, or the collection of highly sensitive personal data beyond participants' voluntary disclosure of educational experiences. Interviews focused on classroom participation and were conducted in confidential settings. Under institutional guidelines, such procedures fall within minimal-risk educational research. Nevertheless, enhanced safeguards were implemented, given the sensitivity of identity-related discussions.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. After transcription, each transcript was read repeatedly to gain holistic familiarity. Significant statements directly related to participants' lived experiences in Physical Education were extracted and coded. Meanings were then formulated from these statements while remaining grounded in the participants' own words. These meanings were clustered into thematic categories through iterative comparison across transcripts, ensuring both convergence and divergence of experiences were examined.

Themes were refined through constant return to the original narratives to maintain phenomenological fidelity. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development was maintained to enhance transparency. Reflexive memos were written throughout the analysis to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and to minimise interpretive bias. Where ambiguities emerged, transcripts were re-examined to ensure interpretive consistency. This systematic approach strengthened analytical rigour and credibility.

Results

Experiences of LBQ Women Students in Physical Education Classes

Theme 1: Emotional Discomfort

Participants reported experiencing both enjoyment and discomfort in PE, reflecting an ambivalent engagement with the subject. This finding aligns with previous research showing that LBQ women students often participate in PE while simultaneously managing stigma and identity surveillance (Greenspan et al., 2019; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). However, the present findings suggest that this ambivalence is not simply a matter of personal insecurity but reflects the structural organisation of PE itself. Because PE requires bodily visibility and public performance, it can intensify scrutiny and heighten awareness of difference. In this sense, PE becomes a socially regulated space where gender norms are performed and monitored. Within the Philippine context, where social harmony and conformity are highly valued, participants' cautious self-presentation may represent a strategy for maintaining a sense of belonging while avoiding social conflict.

- *"I do my best to enjoy PE like others, but sometimes I feel like I'm not my full self."*-P3.
- *"There were times I laughed and had fun, but deep inside I was still cautious."* P2
- *"It depends on the teacher and the classmates, some classes felt fine, others felt isolating."*-P4.

Theme 2: Gender Role Pressure and Stereotyping

Pressure to conform to binary gender expectations emerged as a central theme in participants' narratives. Students described feeling constrained by stereotypes linking femininity or masculinity with specific athletic abilities. While similar patterns have been reported in studies from Western contexts (Landi et al., 2023; Peterson et al., 2025), this study highlights how these norms are reproduced through institutional practices, such as gender-segregated activities and assessment standards. In the Philippine setting, where gender norms remain deeply embedded in educational and sporting structures, these expectations can

limit how students express their identities in physical spaces. Thus, the findings suggest that PE not only reflects broader social norms but also actively reinforces them through routine pedagogical practices.

- “They assume I should act girly or athletic, anything in the middle confuses them.”- P2
- “Even in how we’re grouped, there’s this idea of what girls should do.”-P5
- “Sometimes I think people expect I’m good at basketball because I don’t look feminine.”-P6

Theme 3: Identity Monitoring and Concealment

Participants’ accounts of identity monitoring and concealment illustrate how Physical Education becomes a space of heightened self-surveillance. Because PE involves visible bodily performance and social interaction, students reported carefully regulating how they speak, move, and disclose personal information. Similar patterns have been documented in international research, where LBQ women students describe managing identity disclosure to avoid stigma in gendered physical activity environments (Greenspan et al., 2019; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). However, within the Philippine context, identity concealment may also reflect broader sociocultural dynamics that emphasise social harmony and the avoidance of conflict. Scholars have noted that collectivist norms and relational expectations in Filipino society can encourage individuals to minimise behaviours that might disrupt group cohesion (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). Thus, participants’ self-monitoring may represent both a response to potential discrimination and a culturally embedded strategy for maintaining social belonging. This finding extends existing literature by highlighting how identity management in PE is shaped not only by heteronormative institutional structures but also by cultural norms

surrounding conformity and relational harmony.

- “I had to hide being queer just to avoid uncomfortable stares or questions.”-P2
- “I’m always calculating, should I talk about my partner? Should I act more ‘normal’?”-P7
- “Even how I walk or move, I think about it more in PE than any other class.”-P1.

Theme 4: Yearning for Affirming Environments

Participants expressed a strong desire for Physical Education environments that actively affirm gender diversity and acknowledge the presence of LBQ women students. Their accounts suggest that inclusion is not limited to the absence of discrimination but involves the presence of visible support, recognition, and respect within the learning environment. Previous studies have shown that affirming educational climates—where instructors acknowledge gender diversity and intervene against exclusionary behaviour—significantly improve the well-being and participation of LBQ women students in physical activity contexts (Greenspan et al., 2019; Neary & McBride, 2021). The findings of this study extend this scholarship by highlighting the importance of small but meaningful acts of recognition, such as using correct pronouns or explicitly acknowledging LGBTQ+ identities, in fostering a sense of belonging in PE settings. In the Philippine context, where discussions of sexuality and gender diversity may be constrained by cultural norms emphasising social harmony and religious values, such acts of affirmation become particularly significant. These practices signal that diversity is not merely tolerated but valued within the educational environment, helping to transform PE from a space of cautious participation into one where students can engage more authentically and confidently.

- “A teacher who makes space for us, just even acknowledging we exist—means so much.”-P5.
- “When a classmate used the right pronouns for someone, I felt hopeful.”-P6.
- “I wish we had more PE classes that didn’t make me feel out of place.”-P7.

Challenges Encountered by LBQ Women Students in Physical Education Theme 1: Anxiety About Discrimination and Visibility

Participants described anxiety associated with being visibly identified as scrutiny where gender conformity is implicitly evaluated (Jones et al., 2016; Müller & Böhlke, 2021). In PE specifically, the visibility of the body and the performative nature of sport can amplify concerns about judgment or exclusion.

The findings of this study suggest that anxiety is not solely related to individual insecurity but reflects structural conditions embedded in PE environments, such as gender-segregated facilities and peer surveillance. Within the Philippine context, where institutional protections for sexual minorities remain limited, these anxieties may be intensified by uncertainty about how peers and instructors might respond to expressions of sexual identity. Consequently, the findings highlight the importance of examining PE not only as a site of physical development but also as a social environment where identity negotiation and belonging are continuously negotiated.

- “I always changed as fast as I could. I never felt safe in the locker room.”-P1.
- “Just being seen can feel risky, like people are watching and wondering about you.”-P5.
- “There’s this quiet pressure. No one says anything, but you feel different.”-P6.

Theme 2: Lack of Representation or Inclusion in Curriculum

Participants noted the absence of LGBTQ+ topics, role models, and inclusive language

within PE curricula. This absence contributed to feelings of invisibility and reinforced the perception that sexual minority students were not recognised within educational spaces. Research in sport and physical education has long argued that curricular omission is not neutral but actively reproduces marginalisation by rendering certain identities invisible (Drury et al., 2022; Neary & McBride, 2021).

The findings of the present study support this argument while extending it to the Philippine higher education context, where discussions of gender and sexuality remain limited within formal curricula. In this setting, the absence of representation may reinforce the assumption that PE spaces are designed primarily for heterosexual and gender-conforming students. By highlighting students’ desire for inclusive content, the findings emphasise that representation in curricula can play a crucial role in fostering belonging and validating diverse identities within educational environments.

- “There’s nothing about us in the lessons. It’s like we’re not even considered.”-P3.
- “It hurts when the curriculum skips over students like me, how do we fit in?”-P1.
- “No mention of LGBTQ+ athletes or even respectful language.”-P6

Theme 3: Instructors’ Passive Bias or Unawareness

Participants frequently described instructors as silent or passive when issues related to gender diversity emerged in PE classes. Although explicit discrimination was rarely reported, this perceived silence was interpreted as a lack of recognition or support. Scholars have argued that institutional silence can function as a subtle form of marginalisation because it signals that diversity-related concerns are not legitimate topics for discussion (Drury et al., 2022). In PE contexts, where instructors often control participation structures and classroom climate, their responses—or lack

thereof—can significantly shape students’ experiences of inclusion.

Within the Philippine cultural context, where educators may avoid discussing sensitive topics to maintain harmony, such silence may not be intentional but can nonetheless reinforce heteronormative norms. The findings, therefore, highlight the importance of proactive pedagogical practices, suggesting that inclusive PE requires educators to actively acknowledge and address issues of gender diversity rather than remain neutral.

- *“Our teacher didn’t say anything wrong but also didn’t say anything right.”-P3.*
- *“Silence can be just as painful, like they don’t see us at all.”-P7*
- *“We’re here, and they act like we are not.”-P6*

Theme 4: Rigid Gender Structures in Activities

Rigid gender divisions in PE activities emerged as a major barrier for participants, particularly when teams, uniforms, and roles were organised strictly along binary categories of “male” and “female.” This structural arrangement reflects long-standing traditions in sport that associate physical ability with gendered expectations (Landi et al., 2023). However, such practices can marginalise students whose identities or expressions do not conform to these categories. Studies across sport and education have shown that gender-segregated activities often reinforce heteronormative assumptions and limit participation for LGBTQ+ individuals (Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024). The present findings suggest that these structures not only restrict participation but also shape how students perceive their legitimacy within PE environments. In the Philippine context, where institutional practices in sport remain strongly gendered, rethinking how activities are organised may be essential to creating more inclusive educational spaces.

- *“Every time we had to split by boys and girls, I didn’t know where to go.”-P3.*
- *“Even the uniforms made me uncomfortable. They weren’t for me.”-P4*
- *“I wish we weren’t always divided by gender.”-P5*

Suggested Solutions from LBQ women students to Address Challenges in PE

Theme 1: Strengthen Gender-Inclusive Curriculum and Teacher Training

Participants emphasised the need for gender-inclusive curricula and educator training as key strategies for improving PE environments. These recommendations align with international scholarship advocating for inclusive pedagogical approaches that acknowledge diverse gender identities and sexual orientations within sport education (Herrick & Duncan, 2018).

Teacher training is particularly important because educators play a central role in shaping classroom norms, responding to discriminatory behaviour, and modelling inclusive attitudes. In contexts where LGBTQ+ issues have historically received limited attention in teacher education programs, professional development can help instructors develop the knowledge and confidence needed to support diverse learners. The findings, therefore, suggest that inclusive PE requires both structural changes to curricula and professional development initiatives that equip educators to address diversity in meaningful ways.

- *“Just one class about gender would go a long way.”-P1*
- *“Teachers should know how to talk about these things and support students.”-P7*
- *“Make it part of the syllabus, not just a one-time thing.”-P3*

Theme 2: Establish Gender-Neutral and Safer Physical Spaces

Participants also highlighted the importance of creating safer and more inclusive physical environments, including

private changing areas and flexible participation policies. Research on transgender and LGBTQ+ participation in sport has consistently identified gendered facilities such as locker rooms as significant barriers to participation (Jones et al., 2016; Holder et al., 2022).

By advocating for gender-neutral or private spaces, participants emphasised the importance of physical infrastructure in shaping students' sense of safety and belonging. The findings suggest that inclusive education is not limited to curriculum and pedagogy but must also consider how school spatial arrangements influence participation. In this sense, the design of physical spaces becomes a critical dimension of inclusive practice in PE.

- *“A private changing area could help students like me feel less anxious.”-P7.*
- *“Let us choose how we participate, don't assign based on gender.”-P4*
- *“Make room for people who don't fit in the boxes.”-P5.*

Theme 3: Supportive and Responsive School Culture

Beyond structural reforms, participants emphasised the need for supportive school cultures where teachers and peers actively challenge discriminatory behaviour. Previous research has shown that inclusive school climates significantly influence the well-being and participation of LBQ women students in educational and athletic settings (Greenspan et al., 2019). When educators intervene in instances of bullying or harassment, they signal that diversity is valued and protected within the institution. The findings of this study reinforce the importance of institutional culture in shaping students' experiences of inclusion. In the Philippine context, where policies addressing sexual diversity remain uneven across educational institutions, cultivating supportive peer and teacher relationships may be a crucial step toward creating safer environments for LBQ women students.

- *“Teachers need to step in when they hear something offensive.”-P2*
- *“Don't just ignore the bullying, set rules and follow through.”-P4*
- *“Even one ally makes a difference.”-P3*

Theme 4: Create Channels for Anonymous Feedback

Participants suggested that anonymous feedback mechanisms could allow students to express concerns about discrimination without fear of retaliation. This recommendation reflects broader discussions in educational research about the importance of safe reporting systems for addressing sensitive issues such as harassment or exclusion. Anonymous feedback channels can empower students who may otherwise feel reluctant to speak openly about their experiences, particularly in environments where discussing sexuality or gender identity remains socially sensitive. Implementing such mechanisms may therefore provide institutions with valuable insights into student experiences while simultaneously fostering a sense of psychological safety among marginalised groups.

- *“We need a way to give feedback anonymously.”-P4*
- *“Not everyone's ready to speak up face-to-face.”-P2*
- *“If we had a safe feedback box, we'd use it.”-P3*

Theme 5: Redesign PE Practices for Flexibility and Comfort

Finally, participants recommended redesigning PE practices to allow greater flexibility in uniforms, participation structures, and group organisation. These suggestions challenge traditional assumptions that PE must be structured around rigid gender categories. Scholars have argued that flexible and student-centred approaches to sport education can promote greater engagement and inclusion by recognising diverse identities and abilities (Neary & McBride, 2021). In the context of

this study, flexible practices such as allowing students to choose uniforms or participate in mixed groups were seen as simple but meaningful steps toward reducing discomfort and enhancing participation. Such changes illustrate how inclusive practices in PE can be implemented not only through large policy reforms but also through everyday pedagogical adjustments.

- *“Let people wear what makes them comfortable.”-P7*
- *“Stop splitting us into boy-girl groups, there are other ways.”-P1*
- *“Give us options. Let us choose.”-P5.*

Discussion

Physical Education (PE) in the Philippine higher education context operates as a regulatory social space where participation is shaped by gender norms, institutional silence, and cultural expectations surrounding conformity and relational harmony.

The findings of this study demonstrate that for LBQ women students, PE is not merely a site of physical activity but a space where identity is negotiated, managed, and, at times, constrained. While similar tensions have been documented in Western contexts, the present study extends this scholarship by showing how these dynamics are intensified within a Southeast Asian setting influenced by collectivist values and limited institutional protections for sexual minorities. As such, the study contributes to a culturally grounded understanding of how gender and sexuality are experienced within PE in Philippine higher education.

The present findings should be interpreted within multi-layered scholarship spanning global, Asian, Southeast Asian, and Philippine contexts. At the same time, research conducted in the United States (Frederick et al., 2020; Wattenberg et al., 2022), Canada (Herrick & Duncan, 2018), and Europe (Müller & Böhlke, 2021; Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024) documents similar tensions in PE. Southeast Asian

research highlights how collectivist norms and institutional silence further shape identity negotiation (UNDP & USAID, 2014; Tang & Poudel, 2018). The Philippine context adds a distinct dimension wherein relational harmony and religious influences intersect with institutional inertia. This underscores the need to understand inclusion in PE not only as a policy issue but as a lived, culturally embedded experience shaped by everyday interactions and institutional practices.

The coexistence of enjoyment and discomfort in PE highlights how participation for LBQ women students is shaped by continuous identity negotiation within socially regulated environments. Rather than reflecting individual uncertainty, this ambivalence reveals how PE functions as a space where gender norms are both performed and monitored, requiring students to manage their self-presentation actively.

This finding aligns with previous research indicating that LGBTQ+ individuals engage in physical activity while simultaneously navigating stigma and visibility (Greenspan et al., 2019; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). Within the Philippine context, this negotiation is further influenced by cultural expectations of social harmony, which may encourage students to minimise differences in order to maintain group belonging. Concurrently, Addatu-Cambri (2024) noted the same context in their work with local LBQ women students, reporting anxiety in physical activity as a result of potential peer assessment.

General pressure to conform to binary gender expectations became a significant challenge. Participants expressed feeling restricted by stereotypes associating femininity or masculinity with sporting capability. This phenomenon mirrors the focus of Peterson et al. (2025) and Landi et al. (2023), who highlighted heteronormative practices in PE. In a study, Sáenz-Macana et al. (2024) also found that trans and non-binary students across contexts

face difficulties within restrictive categories of gender. This trend identified in the study is echoed in studies in the Philippines, where Gamutin et al. (2022) reported that gender-specific sports at HEIs created exclusions for LGBTQIA+ athletes, thereby reproducing structural exclusions.

The lack of LGBTQ+ representation in curricula and the silence on the part of instructors was understood to contribute to exclusion. Drury et al. (2022) and Neary and McBride (2021) argue that curricular omission is not neutral but instead reinforces invisibility. The Philippine research echoes this, showing limited institutional mechanisms to protect or affirm LBQ women students (Pocan, 2022). Participants in the present study highlighted that even small acts of recognition, such as using correct pronouns, significantly improved their sense of belonging.

Locker rooms and gender-based grouping were recurring sources of anxiety. This aligns with Holder et al.'s (2022) and Jones et al.'s (2016) findings that gendered facilities pose barriers for transgender and LBQ women students. Similar challenges were reported in the Philippine contexts: Moncal et al. (2024) described how gay and lesbian athletes coped with exclusion by concealing identity or avoiding unsafe spaces. These findings underscore how physical environments can either reproduce exclusion or become sites of transformation through inclusive design.

Importantly, participants proposed actionable solutions: gender-inclusive curricula, teacher training, safer physical spaces, anonymous feedback mechanisms, and flexible uniform and grouping policies. These echo global recommendations for LGBTQ+ inclusion in education and sport (Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Neary & McBride, 2021; Sáenz-Macana et al., 2024). Locally, studies also suggest institutional inclusive sports plans and anti-discrimination policies as critical steps (Addatu-Cambri, 2024; Gamutin et al., 2022). The convergence of international

and Philippine findings demonstrates both the universality of challenges and the urgent need for context-specific interventions in higher education.

The findings also resonate with broader research on empowerment in sports education. Pestaño et al. (2024) demonstrated that participative coaching fosters self-confidence and self-efficacy among student-athletes, highlighting how inclusive and collaborative teaching practices can sustain motivation and resilience. Similarly, Lobo et al. (2023) emphasised that students' engagement in PE is deeply linked to their individual interests and affective investment. When PE activities align with learners' identities and goals, engagement and persistence increase, thereby strengthening the argument that fostering affirming, student-centred, and participative practices in PE is essential not only for LGBTQ+ inclusion but also for the holistic development of all learners.

Implications

The findings of this study provide important practical insights for improving inclusive practices in Physical Education within Philippine higher education institutions. Because PE involves bodily visibility, group interaction, and gendered activity structures, inclusive practices must extend beyond policy statements to everyday teaching strategies and classroom environments. The experiences of LBQ women students highlight the need for educators and institutions to actively recognise diverse sexual identities and address exclusionary practices embedded in traditional PE structures. The results suggest the following implications:

1. Integrating discussions of gender diversity, LGBTQ+ athletes, and respectful language into PE curricula can help address participants' reported invisibility and promote greater awareness of diversity in sport and physical activity contexts.

2. Faculty development programs should equip PE instructors with inclusive teaching strategies, including addressing gender stereotyping in physical activity settings, responding to discriminatory remarks, and facilitating respectful discussions about gender diversity.
3. Gender-neutral changing rooms, flexible uniforms, and non-binary team structures should be considered.
4. Establishing feedback mechanisms and enforcing anti-bullying policies can create safer environments for LBQ women students.

These recommendations are consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 5: Gender Equality).

By centring LBQ women students' voices in Philippine PE classes, this study helps bridge the gap between global and Southeast Asian research. While global studies document similar issues, this research highlights how collectivist norms, limited policies, and institutional silence uniquely shape local experiences. Future research should explore (a) the perspectives of teachers and administrators, (b) the experiences of transgender men and non-binary students, and (c) the effectiveness of inclusive interventions once implemented.

Limitations of the Study

While the descriptive phenomenological design was appropriate for capturing the lived and subjective experiences of LBQ women students in college Physical Education, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, phenomenological research prioritises depth over breadth. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all LBQ women students in the Philippines. Rather, they provide context-specific, in-depth insights that may be transferable to similar higher education environments sharing comparable sociocultural conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Second, the study involved a relatively small sample drawn from a limited institutional context. Although this aligns with phenomenological methodology, it limits the representativeness of experiences across diverse regions, institutional types, and socioeconomic backgrounds in the Philippines.

Third, participants' narratives relied on retrospective accounts of their experiences in Physical Education. As with all recall-based qualitative data, these accounts may be influenced by memory reconstruction, reinterpretation over time, and current perspectives. However, phenomenological inquiry recognises that meaning-making itself is central to lived experience, and thus such reflective interpretation remains analytically valuable.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the researcher's positionality may have influenced the interpretation of participants' narratives and the development of themes. The researcher's perspectives, experiences, and familiarity with the educational context may have shaped analytic decisions. To mitigate this influence, reflexive strategies were employed throughout the study, including reflexive memos, continuous engagement with the data, and efforts to remain grounded in participants' accounts. Nonetheless, the findings should be understood as interpretive representations rather than objective accounts of reality.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of cisgender women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or queer in Physical Education (PE) classes in the Philippines. Findings revealed that while PE can provide enjoyment and social connection, it often remains a site of discomfort, identity concealment, gender role pressure, and exclusionary practices. Rigid gender structures, the absence of LGBTQ+ representation in the curriculum, and instructors' silence reinforced these challenges.

Participants also identified concrete solutions, including integrating gender-inclusive content into PE, providing teacher training, ensuring safer, more flexible facilities, and fostering supportive institutional cultures. These recommendations highlight pathways for higher education institutions to make PE more affirming and equitable.

The study contributes to the limited body of literature on LBQ women students in Southeast Asian PE contexts, addressing a critical gap in both global and Philippine research. By centring the voices of marginalised students, the findings reinforce the importance of inclusive education practices aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being, SDG 4: Quality Education, and SDG 5: Gender Equality).

Future research should expand to include the experiences of other LGBTQ+ subgroups and evaluate the effectiveness of institutional reforms, ensuring that PE becomes a space where all students can thrive authentically.

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Disclosure statement

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly to improve language clarity, grammar, and phrasing. The authors carefully reviewed and revised the output to ensure accuracy and take full responsibility for the content of the final manuscript.

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