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Closeted Curricula: LGB+ Perceptions of Sexuality Education in the Iberian Context

Tânia Soares Ferreira

Master's in Community Psychology and Protection of Children and Youth at Risk

Supervisor:
David Filipe Lourenço Rodrigues, Assistant Researcher with Habilitation at ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Co-Supervisor:
Jorge Júlio de Carvalho Valadas Gato, Assistant Professor and Researcher at Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto

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Department of Psychology

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It feels unreal writing this. The last section of this work, after so many hours of labour, so many years of emotional preparation, and too many years unlearning self-deprecating behaviours. If it wasn't for my therapist and my psychiatrist, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't even be *here*, walking on Earth. Who would guess that after two burnouts and within a year of my ultimate suicide attempt I would be handing in this scrap of digital footprint, daring to hope it may one day be published, daring to see it as a doorway to another beginning, one that finally pulls me away from corporate life. It also took Cabrita and Azul to sustain this mind and body, with their intellectual food and their endless cuddling. It took bits of my partner's strength to fill me with joy, and to share with me the financial weight of this strange, exhausting thing called adulthood. It took the mentorship and patience of my advisors, Professor David Rodrigues and Professor Jorge Gato, who looked away from their crowded schedules long enough to share their wisdom with a pupil who had been away from the Academy for five years. Mom and Dad, you will not read this, and maybe you will never really understand what I am fighting for. But still, I want to believe that somehow, somewhere, you will be proud.

Abstract

This dissertation explores how adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or any other gender and sexually diverse label (LGB+) and heterosexual in Portugal and Spain perceive the influence of different sexuality education (SE) sources on their current attitudes and behaviours in sex. We considered eight topics – sexual and reproductive health, sexual and reproductive rights, sexual knowledge, sexual pleasure and difficulties, sexual diversity and sexual orientation, emotional aspects of sexuality, gender violence, and sexual abuse – and three main sources of SE – traditional formal (school-based), traditional informal (family, peers, partners, and teachers), and modern informal (digital platforms and media). This research consisted of a secondary analysis of a dataset with 595 participants (56.1% women, 11.3% bisexual, 4% lesbian/gay; *M* = 32.49; *SD* = 7.04; for details see Rodrigues et al., 2024). We ran independent samples *t*-tests for each SE source across the eight topics. While the results showed no significant differences in the perceived influence of formal traditional SE, significant differences arose in informal SE, with LGB+ participants perceiving greater influence by the topics of 'sexual diversity and orientation' and 'gender violence'. Similarly, for modern informal SE, LGB+ participants perceived greater influence by the topic of 'sexual diversity and orientation,' suggesting the role of both peers and family, and of online platforms and social media in providing identity-affirming content. This evidence highlights the chronic gaps in formal SE concerning the inclusion of sexually diverse content in school curricula, and underscores the duality of informal sources as both empowering and unregulated. Using a Community Psychology lens, the dissertation seeks to emphasize the need for participatory, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches that validate lived experiences and promote sexual wellbeing for all.

Key words: sexuality education, sexual orientation, queer, LGB+, Community Psychology, Iberian

PsycInfo Classification Categories and Codes:

2900 Social Processes & Social Issues

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3300 Health & Mental Health Treatment & Prevention

3373 Community & Social Services

Resumo

Esta dissertação explora a forma como adultos que se identificam como lésbicas, gays, bissexuais ou com quaisquer outros rótulos de diversidade sexual e de género (LGB+) e heterossexuais, em Portugal e Espanha, percecionam a influência de diferentes fontes de Educação Sexual (ES) nas suas atitudes e comportamentos sexuais atuais. Foram considerados oito tópicos – saúde sexual e reprodutiva, direitos sexuais e reprodutivos, conhecimento sexual, prazer e dificuldades sexuais, diversidade e orientação sexual, aspetos emocionais da sexualidade, violência de género e abuso sexual – e três principais fontes de ES – tradicional formal (escolar), tradicional informal (família, pares, pessoas parceiras e docentes) e moderna informal (plataformas digitais e media). Esta pesquisa corresponde a uma análise secundária de uma base de dados com 595 participantes (56.1% mulheres, 11.3% bissexuais, 4% lésbicas/gays; *M* = 32.49; *DP* = 7.04; para mais detalhes ver Rodrigues et al., 2024). Foram realizados testes *t* para amostras independentes para cada fonte de ES nos oito tópicos. Embora os resultados não tenham revelado diferenças significativas relativamente à influência percebida da ES tradicional formal, surgiram diferenças significativas na ES informal, com participantes LGB+ a reportarem maior influência nos tópicos de 'diversidade e orientação sexual' e 'violência de género'. De forma semelhante, na ES informal moderna, participantes LGB+ percecionaram maior influência no tópico 'diversidade e orientação sexual', sugerindo o papel tanto de pares e familiares como de plataformas online e redes sociais na disponibilização de conteúdos afirmativos da identidade. Estas evidências destacam lacunas crónicas na ES formal relativamente à inclusão de conteúdos de diversidade sexual nos currículos escolares, e sublinham a dualidade das fontes informais enquanto espaços simultaneamente de empoderamento e não regulados. A partir da lente da Psicologia Comunitária, a dissertação procura enfatizar a necessidade de abordagens participativas, inclusivas e sensíveis ao contexto, que validem as experiências vividas e promovam o bem-estar sexual de todas as pessoas.

Palavras-chave: educação sexual, orientação sexual, *queer*, LGB+, Psicologia Comunitária, Ibérico

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Introduction

Sexuality is a fundamental part of human development and wellbeing, encompassing not only biological functions but also emotional, relational, and social dimensions (Kim et al., 2023). How individuals learn about sexuality, from early childhood through adulthood, has strong implications on how they understand themselves, relate to others, and navigate experiences of pleasure, intimacy, and risk (Lefkowitz & Vasilenko, 2014). As such, sexuality education (SE) plays a central role in equipping people with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to make informed, respectful, and autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives (Kim et al., 2023).

Over the past decades, international institutions, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), have advocated for the implementation of Comprehensive SE (CSE), which integrates scientific evidence with a strong weight on human rights and agency, gender equality, and the recognition of sexual and gender diversity (WHO, 2023). Yet, although support for this model has increased, numerous school systems persist with a narrow, biomedical, and risk-centred approach, focusing mainly on reproduction, contraception, and disease prevention (Boonmongkon et al., 2019; Schalet et al., 2014). Emotional, affective, and pleasure-related aspects of sexuality are often neglected (Fedele et al., 2024; Kantor & Lindberg, 2019), and the experiences of lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), queer and questioning (Q), intersex (I), aromantic and asexual (A), and other sexually and gender-diverse individuals (+), remain largely excluded and pathologized (Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2014).

These limitations are not only institutional but also cultural and ideological. In countries like Portugal and Spain, there has been progressive legal frameworks, such as the obligation of SE throughout the mandatory schooling in Portugal (Law No. 60/2009, 2009) and the integration of affective-sexual education across subjects (Organic Law 3/2020, 2020). However, the implementation of inclusive and CSE remains fragmented, inconsistent, and highly dependent on individual educators, regional policies, and social acceptance (Cassar, 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

Without consistent and supportive formal CSE, many students end up acquiring sexuality related contents through other routes: conversations at home, exchanges with peers, what they see in media or pornography, and what they find online for themselves (Cheney et al., 2017; Ehsan et al., 2019 Lesta et al., 2008; Secor-Turner et al., 2011; Strouse & Fabes, 1985). These experiences constitute important spaces of sexual exploration and identity construction (Strouse & Fabes, 1985), despite rarely finding their way into the centre of academic and policy conversations. Nevertheless, they also carry the risk of reproducing normative scripts, misinformation, and unequal power dynamics (Collins et al., 2017; Morison et al., 2021; Pathmendra et al., 2023).

This dissertation aims to explore how adults in Portugal and Spain perceive the influence of different types sources of SE on their current attitudes and behaviours in sex across eight key topics: sexual and reproductive health; sexual knowledge; sexual pleasure and difficulties; sexual diversity and orientation; sexual and reproductive rights; emotional aspects of sexuality; gender violence; and sexual abuse (IPPF, 2011). Specifically, it investigates how LGB+ and heterosexual adults reflect on the perceived impact of traditional formal education (school-based), traditional informal education (family and peers), and modern informal education (media and digital platforms) in influencing their attitudes and sexual behaviours.

Embedded on the principles of Community Psychology, this dissertation recognizes sexuality not as a private or purely biological matter, but as a socially and politically contextualised field (Fine, 1988; Kelly, 2006; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). While adopting a quantitative methodology, the study is informed by a critical perspective that aims to frame individuals' experiences within broader sociocultural dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and resilience. This research is aligning with D'Augelli's (2003) idea that Community Psychology should take an active, liberating stance, especially one that confronts how LGB+ people have been historically excluded or marginalised. In that spirit, the research treats CSE not just as something personal (i.e., about individual experiences), but also as deeply political (i.e., connected to power, representation, and rights). Furthermore, as scholars within the field have shown (e.g., Blackburn & Todd, 2022), Community Psychology is uniquely positioned to understand LGB+ health disparities and promote wellness through its long-standing commitment to ecological models of wellbeing, community empowerment, the creation of third and counter spaces for wellbeing, systems-level change, and community-engaged practice.

By examining perceived differences between adults who identify as LGB+ and adults who identify as heterosexual in how they experienced and internalized various forms of CSE, this dissertation contributes to ongoing efforts to promote sexual citizenship, health equity, and educational justice. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to potentially inform future interventions, educational strategies, and policies that embrace a more inclusive, transformative, and community-oriented approach to SE, one that acknowledges the complexity of lived experiences and affirms sexuality as a space of rights, agency, autonomy and belonging.

Literature Review

Sexuality and SE

The WHO defines human sexuality as a central, multidimensional aspect of human existence, encompassing sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction (WHO, 2006). Sexuality is experienced through thoughts, fantasies, behaviours, and relationships, regulating how individuals interact with themselves and others. Within this framework, SE is a critical tool to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values they need to safeguard their health, develop respectful and fulfilling social and sexual relationships, make responsible decisions, and stand up for their rights and the rights of others (WHO, 2023). The WHO (2023) advocates for CSE that provides accurate, age-appropriate information about sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. The primary goal of such education is to empower students to make informed choices that consider both their wellbeing and that of others (Kim et al., 2023).

CSE is increasingly recognised as essential for enhancing young people's sexual and reproductive wellbeing (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). Nonetheless, and despite growing international and empirical support, significant implementation gaps remain. Research shows that SE often retains a strong emphasis on biological and hygienic aspects, as well as undesirable outcomes, such as the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and unwanted pregnancies, while neglecting critical dimensions like human rights, gender equality, and sexual and gender diversity (Boonmongkon et al., 2019). Additionally, teaching methods tend to be lecture-based and didactic, which can result in uncomfortable or disengaging learning environments for students (Boonmongkon et al., 2019). In the United States, for example, the effectiveness and scope of SE are further influenced by inconsistent state policies and variations in delivery across different school (Hawkins, 2023). These range from abstinence-only programs, which promote sexual abstinence while omitting or downplaying information about contraception and STI prevention, to “abstinence-plus” programs, which includes information about the latter topics but still centre abstinence as the primary goal (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018; Hawkins, 2023). Until 2010, federal funding was set on the implementation of abstinence-focused curricula, reinforcing a limited and often moralising approach to SE at the national level (Hawkins, 2023).

Recent evidence suggests that CSE programs integrating gender dynamics, power imbalances, and a human rights perspective are significantly more effective in promoting positive sexual health outcomes, including reductions in unintended pregnancies and STIs (Haberland & Rogow, 2015), delayed sex initiation (Ramírez-Villalobos et al., 2021), and safer sex behaviours (Kim et al, 2023). As such, leading scholars advocate for an empowerment/rights-based approach to SE, one that promotes

gender equity, emphasises rights, and uses interactive, participatory pedagogies to foster student engagement and critical thinking (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020).

Despite these advances in theory and policy, the implementation of CSE remains fragmented and uneven across educational systems. In practice, many individuals receive information about sexuality not only through formal school-based programs, but also via family conversations (Turnbull et al., 2008; Walker, 2004), peer interactions (Macintyre et al., 2015), media (Lesta et al., 2008), and, more recently, digital platforms (Oosterhoff et al., 2017). This diversity of sources highlights that SE is not a singular or uniform process, but rather a socially built experience that unfolds across multiple contexts (formal and informal) and relationships (e.g., familiar, scholar, romantic).

To better understand the scope and impact of these learning experiences, it is important to distinguish between three main types of SE (Rodrigues et al., 2024):

- Formal traditional – delivered in school settings through structured curricula;
- Informal traditional – acquired through parents, family, and peer interactions;
- Informal modern – accessed through social media, pornography, digital influencers, and online educational content.

These categories differ not only in content and delivery but also in their potential to either, on one side, reproduce dominant sexual norms or, on the other side, promote more inclusive, affirming, and critical perspectives on sexuality. The next section outlines these typologies and explores their relevance in building adult perceptions of SE.

Typologies and Sources of SE

Traditional Formal SE

Traditional formal SE refers to institutionalised, curriculum-based instruction, typically delivered in schools. In the European context, this form of education has historically prioritised biological and risk-prevention content, with an attention on reproductive health, HIV/STI prevention, and unintended pregnancy (Marquardt, 2022). Despite increasing integration of SE into national curricula, significant gaps remain in addressing broader themes such as gender equality, sexual diversity, and human rights (Marquardt, 2022).

Looking at school-based programs across Europe, a systematic review showed that most interventions worked mainly on attitudes toward sexual health, leaving broader literacy and relational skills largely in the background (Abrams et al., 2023). For example, research on SE in the Czech Republic

identified a prevailing tendency toward normativity, biologisation, and risk-oriented discourse, keeping emotional, cultural, and identity-related dimensions of sexuality aside (Benešovská et al., 2024). Similar patterns emerge in the Iberian context: a recent study found that 98.2% of participants recalled learning about sexual and reproductive health during formal SE and 85.2% reported having discussed themes related to sexual and reproductive rights (e.g., puberty, menstruation, sexuality and reproduction), hinting an essentially biological and developmental framing (Rodrigues et al., 2024). Collectively, this data stress the true gap between the objectives of CSE and its implementation, particularly when it comes to addressing sexuality as a multidimensional and socially situated experience.

Even though school-based SE is still severely focused on a moralistic and biological approach, a growing body of evidence advocates for CSE, which expands beyond biological knowledge to include topics such as sexual diversity, media literacy, healthier relationships, and consent (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020). This integrated approach aligns with international standards (e.g., WHO, UNESCO) that recognise the interactive, developmental, and contextual nature of adolescent sexuality, that is, CSE should be taught in ways that consider how sexuality develops over time, is influenced by social and cultural context, and is shaped by young people's interactions with the world around them (Benešovská et al., 2024). However, the practical implementation of such standards across Europe – and particularly in countries like Portugal and Spain (Rodrigues et al, 2024), remains inconsistent, mostly due to strong influences of religion and culture, with moralistic approaches and resistance to inclusive policies dominating SE; political controversy and decentralised governance, by allowing regional and local schools autonomy over the content and approach of SE; lack of teacher training and resources, with a general lack of confidence to engage with sensitive or controversial issues; and the fragmentation within countries, with the content taught depending on the type of educational institution (Cassar, 2022). Furthermore, LGBTQI+ perspectives stay often underrepresented or excluded entirely (Cassar, 2022; Sousa & Gato, 2024).

Informal Traditional SE

Informal traditional SE often occurs in family settings, where parents, caregivers, siblings, or extended relatives act as key sources of knowledge. Research has shown that parental involvement in SE can have significant protective effects: adolescents who engage in open communication with their parents about sexual matters are less likely to participate in risky sexual behaviours and more likely to report positive sexual health outcomes (Crosby et al., 2009). Research also found that children and adolescents frequently express a preference for learning about sexuality from their parents (Turnbull et al., 2008). Yet, many parents report not feeling prepared or comfortable addressing these topics,

often due to a lack of knowledge or cultural taboos (Turnbull et al., 2008). This highlights the importance of programs that support parent involvement in SE (Walker, 2004), while also underlining the limitations of relying solely on familial sources.

In addition to the family, peers represent a central source of SE during adolescence. Research consistently indicates that young people often cite friends and romantic partners as one of the main sources of sexual information (Powell, 2008). Peer norms and perceptions of friends' sexual behaviour have a strong influence on adolescents' intentions and timing of sexual initiation (Miranda-Díaz & Corcoran, 2012; Sieving et al., 2006). The existent shared group dynamics and values contribute to the social learning processes that determine sexual decision-making. Still, concerns about misinformation are often raised, as the information exchanged within peer groups is not always reliable. Kusumaningrum et al. (2022) found that sexual knowledge shared among peers is often neither credible nor comprehensive, with a tendency to focus on negative or sensationalised content, particularly pornography. This peer-conveyed information is frequently fragmented, lacking a supportive or advisory dimension, and often omits discussions on the consequences of risky behaviours or preventive strategies (Kusumaningrum et al., 2022), which can increase misinterpretations and enactment of riskier sexual behaviours.

Importantly, the influence of peers does not operate in isolation. As Bleakley et al. (2018) argue, the interaction between peers, parents, and media forms a complex ecosystem of informal SE. These influences are conditioned by multiple factors, including gender, race, and social context (Bleakley et al., 2018). While peer influence is strong, studies continue to show that parental communication remains a vital protective factor, positively associated with outcomes such as condom use and delayed sexual activity (Bleakley et al., 2018).

Modern Informal SE

Digital media and online platforms have become an increasingly influence on how individuals access and engage with sexual health information. These technologies frequently complement (or even substitute) traditional sources of SE, offering on-demand, autonomous, anonymous, and highly accessible channels for learning. Interactive digital interventions, such as web-based programs, mobile applications, and social media platforms, have shown positive impacts on sexual health knowledge and behaviours, including increased contraceptive use and safer sex practices (Bailey et al., 2015; Guse et al., 2012; Stevens et al., 2017).

Research indicates that many young people turn to various forms of media, including pornography and adult-themed content, as a means of compensating for the lack of formal CSE (Ehsan et al., 2019; Cheney et al., 2017). While pornography is most consumed for entertainment or arousal,

studies suggest that adolescents also use it to explore sexual norms, techniques, and behaviours (Simon et al., 2015). This dual role – as both entertainment and informal education, illustrates the complex and often ambivalent relationship between media and sexual learning (Simon et al., 2015).

A particularly salient issue is the internalization of sexual scripts presented in pornographic content. Pathmendra et al. (2023) highlight that, in some cultural contexts, adolescents adopt behaviours and relational expectations derived from pornography, which can greatly affect their developing understanding of sexuality. Furthermore, young people themselves express concern about the potential negative impact of excessive pornography consumption on their self-perception and sexual identity formation (Cheney et al., 2017).

In addition, the rise of social media has introduced new opportunities for exposure to sexual health content, with platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok frequently serving as informal sources of information. In fact, research by Fowler et al. (2021) highlights how TikTok, especially, has emerged as a platform where adolescents and young adults engage with sexual health topics in accessible and peer-driven formats. A recent content analysis of SE-focused videos on TikTok identified six dominant themes: anatomy (with a particular focus on female anatomy), sexual pleasure (including discussions of orgasm and arousal), contraception, general SE (often presented through critique or satire of traditional approaches), sexual health (such as STI prevention and access to healthcare), and communication (addressing topics like parent-teen dialogue, consent, and safe sex practices; Fowler et al., 2022). These themes reflect areas that are often underrepresented in school-based or family-based SE, suggesting that social media may fill important informational gaps for youth (Fowler et al., 2022). Despite its informal nature, exposure to sexual health messages on these platforms has been associated with positive behavioural outcomes, such as increased condom and contraceptive use (Stevens et al., 2017). However, the accuracy of online content varies considerably, raising concerns about quality control, consistency, and the potential for misinformation (Fowler et al., 2021).

The outcomes accentuate the urgency of developing more robust and inclusive CSE programs, that not only fill the void left by formal schooling but also engage critically with the media landscapes young people already inhabit. In this context, digital media emerges as a core component of modern informal SE, demanding sustained attention from both educators and researchers.

SE and LGBTQIA+ Experiences

Formal SE: Traditional Sources

SE in school contexts has historically reflected the dominant cultural, moral, and institutional values of the societies in which it operates. These values have tended to privilege cisgender, heterosexual, monogamous, and reproductive norms of sexuality, often to the exclusion of other identities and experiences (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). Gayle Rubin's (1993, as cited in Elia & Eliason, 2010) conceptualised the "hierarchical system of sexual value" as the social pyramid in which marital and reproductive heterosexuality is placed at the top, whereas other forms of sexual expression are subordinated. This system remains a relevant lens through which to examine the development and delivery of SE. In this context, school curricula have tended to silence or problematise sexual and gender diverse individuals, sustaining a narrow and normative idea of what counts as valid sexual knowledge and behaviour (Elia & Eliason, 2010).

Numerous studies have highlighted how traditional school-based SE often perpetuates cisnormativity and heteronormativity (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; MacAulay et al., 2022; McNeill, 2013). These curricula likely assume that students are heterosexual and cisgender, implicitly reinforcing a narrow set of cultural norms aligned with whiteness, middle-class respectability, and nuclear family structures (Elia & Eliason, 2010). Such assumptions not only render LGBTQIA+ individuals invisible within educational settings but also limit the capacity of SE to serve as a tool for equity and inclusion.

Gowen and Winges-Yanez (2014) identify three key mechanisms through which LGBTQ+ youth are marginalised in school-based SE: silencing, heterocentricity, and pathologisation. Silencing may occur through the omission of LGBTQ+ topics or by discouraging questions from students who identify outside of cis-heteronormative frameworks. Heterocentricity is embedded in abstinence-based approaches that frame heterosexual marriage as the sole legitimate context for sexual expression. Pathologization, meanwhile, arises when LGBTQ+ identities are only discussed in the context of health risks, such as HIV/AIDS, reinforcing stigmatizing associations. The cumulative effect of these dynamics is an educational environment in which non-normative identities are either ignored or problematised, rather than affirmed. This is reflected in recent Iberian data (Rodrigues et al., 2024), which shows that only 58.8% of participants recalled addressing the topic of 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation' in traditional formal SE. Notably, these themes were more frequently encountered in informal sources – over 90% in traditional informal sources and more than 75% in modern informal ones, highlighting a persistent gap in formal curricula when it comes to inclusive representation.

These dynamics are not without consequence. Research has shown that LGBTQ+ students often experience formal SE as irrelevant, uncomfortable, or actively alienating (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Hobaica et al., 2024). In some cases, this exclusion leads students to disengage from health education altogether (Grant & Nash, 2018). Elia and Eliason (2010) argue that whereas heterosexual students are often reprimanded for their sexual behaviour, LGBTQ students are made to feel deviant simply for existing. This distinction underlines how current models of SE not only fail to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students but also risk contributing to environments of stigma and psychological distress (Sousa & Gato, 2024).

Recent empirical work continues to reinforce these concerns. In a U.S.-based study by Hobaica et al. (2024), with LGBTQ+ youth aged 13 to 17, the majority of the participants reported having received SE. Yet, many felt that their learning had been incomplete or inadequate. Participants expressed a desire for more information on topics such as gender-affirming care, gender identity, diverse relationship structures, communication skills, and sexual orientation. These areas were especially relevant to transgender and gender-diverse youth, who were often absent from the formal curriculum. Notably, many students reported seeking additional information through online platforms or peers, with few turning to parents or educators. This reliance on informal sources highlights a persistent deficiency in how formal education systems address the complexities of contemporary sexual and gender diversity.

Informal SE: Traditional and Modern Sources

Considering these limitations, many LGBTQIA+ individuals turn to informal forms of SE, specifically modern digital platforms. These sources can serve both as a complement and as a substitute for school-based instruction, offering access to peer-generated, identity-affirming, and experiential knowledge (Martino et al., 2024). Notwithstanding, the quality, depth, and framing of this information vary widely (Fowler et al., 2022).

One prominent informal source of sexual knowledge is pornography. In contexts where SE is limited or exclusionary, many young people, especially those who identify as LGBTQIA+, turn to pornographic media to learn about sex and relationships. Several studies point to its formative role in identity development and exploration among gender and sexually diverse youth. For instance, Flory and Shor (2024) found that pornography often helped LGBTQ+ individuals shape their sexual and gender identities, offering not only a practical guide to the technical aspects of non-heterosexual sex but also a space where non-normative orientations and practices could be seen as valid and normalised. Along those lines, research has found that pornography had educational benefits for

young men with plurisexual sexual orientations, helping them navigate their desires, explore emerging sexual identities, and develop new sexual techniques (McCormack & Wignall, 2016).

Similarly, Arrington-Sanders et al. (2015), in a study focused specifically on Black same-sex-attracted youth, noted that sexually explicit content often played a central role in sexual development, even though such content often lacked cultural relevance or critical nuance. These findings underscore the importance of acknowledging how intersecting identities shape the ways in which people engage with and are impacted by pornography.

At the same time, the limitations of mainstream pornography are well-documented. LGBTQ students in Harvey's (2020) study reported that the heteronormative nature of most available content contributed to unrealistic expectations about sex and had a negative impact on their self-esteem and self-concept. Many participants expressed a desire for CSE that not only acknowledges the existence of pornography but also incorporates critical discussions about it into the curriculum. While they recognised pornography as a meaningful, albeit imperfect, resource, their concerns were less about pornography itself and more about how people and practices were represented within it. Students in this study also emphasised the importance of diversifying mainstream pornographic visuals to better reflect LGBTQ experiences and identities, which they viewed as a necessary step toward reducing potential harm and improving the relevance of such content.

Ultimately, these findings reinforce the importance of integrating conversations about pornography into SE not as an external threat to be avoided, but as a cultural artefact to be critically engaged with. When young people are given space to unpack these images, to ask questions, to reflect, they are more likely to develop respectful, safe and fulfilling relationships (Zen et al., 2025). For LGBTQIA+ communities, in particular, this shift could mean moving from invisibility to recognition.

In addition to pornography, social media platforms have emerged as key spaces where young people, particularly those who are LGBTQIA+, seek information, support, and representation. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram allow users to share personal experiences, provide peer-led education, and disseminate inclusive sexual health messages. Martino et al. (2024) researched how Tumblr, in particular, functioned as a dynamic source of informal SE for two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and diverse gender and sexual identifying youth, offering content that both resonated with lived experience and fostered a sense of belonging. This is especially important for youth who may feel isolated or unsupported in their immediate environments (Higa et al., 2014; Juul et al., 2023).

This digital learning is not without challenges. The quality of online sexual health information varies considerably, and adolescents often lack the media literacy skills necessary to distinguish

credible content from misinformation (Collins et al., 2017). Furthermore, the risk of cyberbullying and harassment, particularly targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals, can undermine the potential benefits of these platforms (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). These risks highlight the importance of equipping young queer people with critical tools to navigate digital spaces safely and effectively.

Despite these difficulties, the value of modern informal sources cannot be dismissed. Studies consistently show that LGBTQIA+ youth turn to the internet and social media to fill the gaps left by traditional curricula (Mitchell et al., 2014; Mustanski et al., 2014). These platforms allow for the exploration of identity, connection with peers, and access to tailored resources, which can enhance both sexual knowledge and emotional wellbeing.

SE in Portugal

SE has undergone significant transformations in Portugal, reflecting broader social, political, and educational shifts. Initially guided by conservative and religious values, the concept of formal SE has evolved from a marginalized and taboo subject into a legally mandated component of the school curriculum (Cassar, 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Despite progressive legislative changes, the implementation of SE has faced, and continues to face, systemic challenges, resistance from conservative sectors, and inconsistencies in its application (Ferreira et al., 2023; Rocha et al., 2016).

The early discourse surrounding SE in Portugal was deeply influenced by medical and moralistic perspectives, with an emphasis on hygiene, disease prevention, and social control (Rodrigues et al., 2024). The Estado Novo dictatorship (1926 – 1974) reinforced a conservative and Catholic doctrine, suppressing discussions on sexuality and limiting SE to moral and religious teachings (Sousa, 2012). Schools promoted gender-specific roles, stressing on female modesty and male responsibility, leaving little room for scientific or inclusive discussions on sexuality (Cassar, 2022).

The 1974 Carnation Revolution was a critical moment, leading to the introduction of progressive policies in education, including early efforts toward SE. The 1984 Law 3/84 represented the first legal recognition of SE as a fundamental right, albeit with limited implementation (Ferreira et al., 2022; Sousa, 2012). The 1990s saw increased advocacy for a structured approach, driven by concerns over teenage pregnancy, STIs, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Rocha et al., 2016). These concerns culminated in Law 120/99, which strengthened the legal foundation for SE and expanded its curriculum to include contraceptive education and sexual health awareness (Sousa, 2012).

A major milestone in Portuguese SE was the approval of Law 60/2009, which made SE mandatory across all educational levels. The law established minimum instructional hours dedicated to SE and incorporated themes such as gender equality, reproductive health, contraception, and the

prevention of sexual violence (Rodrigues et al., 2024; Sousa, 2012). Additionally, the legislation mandated the creation of Gabinetes de Informação e Apoio ao Aluno (Student Support Offices), intended to provide continuous guidance on sexual and emotional health (Sousa, 2012).

Comparative studies between Portugal and other Southern European countries further emphasize the impact of policy variations on SE delivery. Whereas Spain provides greater regional autonomy, allowing some areas to implement CSE, Portugal's centralized approach ensures national uniformity but lacks depth in addressing topics such as sexual rights and LGBTQIA+ inclusion (Cassar, 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Research suggests that Portuguese SE remains more biologically and risk-focused, whereas some Spanish regions have integrated progressive discussions on pleasure, consent, and emotional literacy – with programs such as *SEXUMUXU* (Basque Government, 2018) and *Coeduca't* (Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament d'Educació, 2019).

Although SE in Portugal is legally mandated, its integration into the school curriculum remains deficient. The predominant method of delivery occurs through Natural Sciences (basic education) and Biology (secondary education), resulting in a narrow reproductive-health-focused perspective (Ferreira et al., 2022). The reduction of non-disciplinary curricular areas further limits the ability of schools to allocate dedicated time for CSE (Rodrigues et al., 2024).

One of the most persistent challenges found in the Portuguese context is the lack of specialized teacher training. Many educators feel unprepared and uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and consent, leading to inconsistent program delivery (Rocha et al., 2016). Sousa (2012) stresses that despite policy mandates, many teachers lack adequate pedagogical tools to approach SE in a way that fosters critical thinking, inclusivity, and student engagement.

Parental and societal resistance also play a heavy role in conditioning the context of SE in Portugal. Conservative cultural and religious influences continue to fuel public debates, with Catholic and right-wing political groups opposing more progressive curricula (Cassar, 2022). Sousa (2012) also noted that parental involvement in SE remains low, with many parents either unaware of school programs or actively opposing them. This lack of engagement limits opportunities for reinforcing SE messages at home and enhancing students' understanding of sexual wellbeing beyond the classroom.

The evolution of SE in Portugal reflects broader societal and political transformations, transitioning from religious and moralistic suppression to legally mandated educational policies. Regardless of the significant legislative progress, SE remains inconsistently implemented, with overemphasis on biological aspects and risk prevention. Challenges such as insufficient teacher

training, parental resistance, and societal conservatism continue to hinder the effectiveness and inclusivity of SE (Cassar, 2022).

SE in Spain

SE in Spain has followed a fractured and often incoherent path, shaped by alternating political ideologies and the decentralized structure of the state. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 established the "right to the full development of the human personality" (Jiménez-Ríos et al., 2023, p. 2) and the "right to the protection of health" (Jiménez-Ríos et al., 2023, p. 2), creating the legal basis for SE as part of a broader educational and health right. As in Portugal, the legacy of dictatorship and the influence of Catholic morality marked the early years of democratic transition, restricting sexuality to moral or biological contexts and generating resistance to more comprehensive approaches (Cassar, 2022).

The trajectory of SE in Spain has been marked by successive advances and setbacks, largely conditioned by the political ideology of governing parties. As Cunha-Oliveira et al. (2021) explain, the first inclusion of SE in the 1990 LOGSE (Organic Law of General Order of the Educational System of Spain) was followed by attempted rollbacks such as the 2002 LOCE (Organic Law of Education Quality), more progressive reforms like the 2006 LOE (Organic Law of Education) and the 2010 law on sexual and reproductive health, and finally the 2013 LOMCE (Organic Law for Quality Improvement of Education), which removed SE from the national curriculum and left its implementation to the autonomy of the schools. The more progressive programs explicitly incorporated gender equality, coeducation, and respect for sexual diversity, opening space for the recognition of LGBTQIA+ students in the classroom. However, these contents were often inconsistently delivered, easily sidelined under conservative reforms, and vulnerable to societal resistance rooted in Catholic and right-wing opposition (Cassar, 2022; Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2021).

In the absence of strong national directives, some Autonomous Communities used their competencies to expand SE, creating initiatives such as *SKOLAE* in Navarra and the 2018 law in Castilla-La Mancha that introduced mandatory affective-sexual education across the curriculum (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2021). The most recent reform, the LOMLOE (Organic Law of Modification of the LOE), which came into force in 2021, strengthened the commitment to affective-sexual education (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2021). It explicitly linked SE to gender equality, coeducation, and diversity, establishing it as a transversal theme across both primary and secondary education (Jiménez-Ríos et al., 2023).

Despite these developments, the practical implementation of SE remains limited. Studies show that in many schools it continues to be confined to Biology, Health Education, or short-term workshops led by external professionals, reproducing a biological-hygienist and risk-prevention model rather than

a comprehensive one (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2021). Research examining 216 SE resources made available by Autonomous Communities found that, although the materials displayed thematic diversity, they were largely standardized in format and continued to prioritize the prevention of disease and pregnancy, with insufficient emphasis on broader dimensions such as sexual rights, relationships, or pleasure (González et al., 2023). An illustrative example is the *COMPAS* program (Competencies for adolescents with a healthy sexuality), the only rigorously evaluated school-based intervention in Spain. Grounded in social learning theory and the Information–Motivation–Behavioural Skills model, it showed short-term efficacy comparable to evidence-based programs in improving HIV/STI knowledge, condom attitudes, and delaying sexual initiation (Morales et al., 2015). Nonetheless, it reflects the prevailing risk-prevention orientation rather than a comprehensive approach.

Teacher training is one of the most persistent obstacles: a survey of nearly 3,700 teachers revealed that, although the majority expressed positive attitudes toward SE, almost half lacked specific training and therefore did not teach it (Martínez et al., 2014). Moreover, statistical analysis showed that both favourable attitudes and prior training were the strongest predictors of whether teachers addressed SE in the classroom (Martínez et al., 2014). A systematic review of literature on affective-sexual and gender diversity in Spanish education confirmed these findings, highlighting the invisibility of the topic in curricula and the lack of teacher preparation as central barriers (Ortega-Sánchez et al., 2025). The review also emphasized the urgency of integrating these issues to promote democratic citizenship and combat violence and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals (Ortega-Sánchez et al., 2025).

Regional diversity and political polarization further complicate the landscape. In progressive regions such as the Basque Country and Catalonia, comprehensive initiatives like *SEXUMUXU* (Basque Government, 2018) and *Coeduca't* (Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament d'Educació, 2019) have been developed, whereas more conservative regions tend to restrict SE to extracurricular workshops or external providers (Rodrigues et al., 2024). Controversies such as the so-called *parental veto* reflect broader societal debates, with conservative and Catholic groups often opposing curricula that explicitly address gender identity, sexual diversity, or consent (Cassar, 2022).

Overall, the history of SE in Spain is marked by legislative advances that often fall short in practice. Despite the recognition of affective-sexual education as a right in the LOMLOE, implementation remains uneven, dominated by biological and risk-prevention approaches, hindered by insufficient teacher training, and undermined by strong societal and political resistance (Cassar, 2022). At the same time, progressive regional programs and growing attention to sexual rights suggest

gradual cultural change, even if comprehensive sexuality education is still far from being a consistent national reality.

Building on the theoretical and empirical foundations presented above, the present study seeks to explore how adults in Portugal and Spain perceive the influence of different sources of SE – namely, traditional formal (school-based), traditional informal (family and peers), and modern informal (digital platforms and media) – across eight topics: sexual and reproductive health, sexual and reproductive rights, sexual knowledge, sexual pleasure and difficulties, sexual diversity and orientation, emotional aspects of sexuality, gender violence, and sexual abuse. Given the limited research comparing these perceptions across sexual orientations and national contexts, this is an exploratory study with no predefined hypotheses. The aim is to identify perceived differences between LGB+ and heterosexual participants in how SE was experienced and internalised, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how sexuality literacy is developed over time and across contexts. This approach also allows for the identification of potential gaps, needs, and areas of improvement for more inclusive, comprehensive, and affirming SE practices. The following chapter details the methodological procedures used in this investigation.

Method

Participants

This sample included 595 participants (of whom 56.1% identified themselves as women), with an average age of 33 years. Most participants identified as White and were living in metropolitan areas. A substantial portion held a university degree or a postgraduate qualification. The majority were working full- or part-time. Regarding perceived financial status, nearly half reported coping on their current income. In terms of sexual orientation, the majority identified as heterosexual (82.5%), followed by bisexual (11.3%) and lesbian or gay (4.0%). A smaller proportion identified as pansexual (1.0%), queer (0.2%), or asexual (0.5%), while 0.5% preferred not to answer. Most participants indicated having previously engaged in oral sex, vaginal sex, and anal sex (for details, see Table 1).

Group comparisons based on sexual orientation revealed significant differences in age, $p < .001$, gender, $p = .001$, ethnic background, $p = .027$, education, $p = .035$, and occupation, $p = .043$. More specifically, LGB+ participants were significantly younger, and a higher proportion identified as women or non-binary, had a university or post-graduate degree, and were students or unemployed. Heterosexual participants included a higher proportion who identified as men, were working full-time, and presented similar distributions across ethnic backgrounds to the LGB+ participants, though with a trend toward a higher proportion of Black and Latinx participants. No significant group differences were found in residence, $p = .405$, or perceived socioeconomic status, $p = .877$.

Group comparisons also revealed statistically significant differences in anal and vaginal sexual experience. Specifically, a higher proportion of LGB+ participants reported having had anal sex compared to heterosexual participants, whereas heterosexual participants were more likely to report vaginal sex experience than LGB+ individuals. No significant group differences were found in oral sex experience, $p = .578$.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics and Group Comparisons

	Total (*N* = 595)	**LGB+ (*n* = 103)**	**Heterosexual (*n* = 491)**	**Group comparisons**
	M (*SD*) or *n* %	*M* (*SD*) or *n* %	*M* (*SD*) or *n* %	*t* (*d*) or χ^2 (*V*)
***Age* (min = 18, max = 45)**	32.49 (7.04)	30.18 (6.99)	32.97(6.97)	-3.69*** (-0.40)
Gender				13.61*** (0.15)
Man	259 (43.6)	35 (34.0)	224 (45.6)	
Non-binary	2 (0.3)	2 (1.9)	0 (0.0)	
Woman	333 (56.1)	66 (64.1)	267 (54.4)	

Ethnicity				14.24* (0.16)
Arab	3(0.5)	0(0.0)	3(0.6)	
Asian	1(0.2)	1(1.0)	0(0.0)	
Black	17(2.9)	2(1.9)	15(3.1)	
Latinx	78(13.1)	11(10.7)	67(13.6)	
Mixed	4(0.7)	1(1.0)	3(0.6)	
White	484(81.5)	84(81.6)	400(81.5)	
Prefer not to answer	7(1.2)	4(3.9)	3(0.6)	
Education				10.34* (0.13)
Primary or secondary school	16(2.7)	1(1.0)	15(3.1)	
High school	193(32.5)	25(24.3)	168(34.2)	
University degree	228(38.4)	45(43.7)	183(37.3)	
Post-graduate (Master's; Ph.D.)	156(26.3)	31(30.1)	125(25.5)	
Prefer not to answer	1(0.2)	1(1.0)	0(0.0)	
Residence				2.91 (0.07)
Metropolitan area	344(57.9)	67(65.0)	277(56.4)	
Rural area	87(14.6)	13(12.6)	74(15.1)	
Suburban area	161(27.1)	23(22.3)	138(28.1)	
Prefer not to answer	2(0.3)	0(0.0)	2(0.4)	
Occupation				11.46* (0.14)
Retired	1(0.2)	1(1.0)	0(0.0)	
Stay-at-home parent	16(2.7)	1(1.0)	15(3.1)	
Student (part or full time)	135(22.7)	31(30.1)	104(21.2)	
Unemployed	43(7.2)	7(6.8)	36(7.3)	
Working (part or full time)	397(66.8)	62(60.2)	335(68.2)	
Prefer not to answer	2(0.3)	1(1.0)	1(0.2)	
Socioeconomic status				0.69 (0.03)
Difficult with current income	147(24.7)	28(27.2)	119(24.2)	
Coping with current income	270(45.5)	45(43.7)	225(45.8)	
Comfortable with current income	154(25.9)	27(26.2)	127(25.9)	

Prefer not to answer	23(3.9)	3(2.9)	20(4.1)	
Previous history of vaginal sex				34.68*** (0.24)
No	27(4.5)	16(15.5)	11(2.2)	
Yes	567(95.5)	87(84.5)	480(97.8)	
Previous history of oral sex				0.31 (0.02)
No	18(3.0)	4(3.9)	14(2.9)	
Yes	576(97.0)	99(96.1)	477(97.1)	
Previous history of anal sex				6.61** (0.11)
No	228(38.4)	28(27.2)	200(40.7)	
Yes	366(61.6)	75(72.8)	291(59.3)	

***$p \leq .001$, **$p \leq .010$, *$p \leq .050$.

Measures

Sources of SE

To assess exposure to SE, three distinct sources were considered.

Traditional formal sources. Participants were asked whether they had received SE classes during their mandatory school years (1 = No; 2 = Yes) through the following questions: “During the 1st to 4th years?”, “During the 5th or 6th years?”, “During the 7th to 9th years?”, and “During the 10th to 12th years?”. Participants were categorized as having received traditional formal SE if they answered “Yes” to at least one of these items.

Traditional informal sources. Participants were also asked: “Throughout your life, have you had conversations about sexuality with any of the following people?”, with the options: “Your parents”, “Friends”, “Romantic partners”, “Casual partners”, and “Teachers” (1 = No; 2 = Yes). Participants were classified as having received traditional informal SE if they responded “Yes” to at least one of these sources.

Modern informal sources. Finally, participants were asked: “Throughout your life, have you looked for or accessed information about sexuality from any of the following sources?”, with the options: “Movies or TV shows”, “Pornography”, “Websites (please specify)”, and “Social media (please specify)” (1 = No; 2 = Yes). Participants were considered to have received modern informal SE if they responded “Yes” to at least one of these sources.

SE topics

Each time participants answered “Yes” to the above questions, they were presented with a list of eight topics adapted from the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, 2011): (1) Sexual and

reproductive health (e.g., use and access to contraceptives); (2) Sexual knowledge (e.g., ways to explore sex and your body); (3) Sexual pleasure and difficulties (e.g., how to achieve sexual pleasure or overcome difficulties); (4) Sexual diversity and sexual orientation (e.g., the meaning of gender identity); (5) Sexual and reproductive rights (e.g., issues related to puberty, menstruation, sexuality, and reproduction); (6) Emotions and feelings in sexuality (e.g., feelings and emotions as integral parts of sexual experience); (7) Gender violence (e.g., physical violence against women); (8) Sexual abuse (e.g., non-consensual sexual activity). For each SE source mentioned, participants indicated which topics they remember addressing and the extent to which each topic influenced their current beliefs and sexual behaviours. Responses were recorded on an 8-point scale (0 = *Not applicable, this topic was not addressed*; to 7 = *Topic was addressed and had a strong influence*). After evaluating all SE sources, participants were once again presented with the list of eight topics and asked to rate the perceived importance of each one for high-quality, CSE, using a rating scale ranging from 1 = *Not at all important* to 7 = *Extremely important*.

Sexual behaviours

Participants who indicated having experience with sexual activity were then prompted to reflect on their behaviour over the previous six months. Specifically, participants were asked to report the frequency of engaging in vaginal, anal, and oral sex without using condoms, using a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 = *Never* to 7 = *Always without condoms*. Each item was analysed independently, with higher scores reflecting a greater frequency of condomless sexual activity.

Procedure

This dissertation consists in a secondary analysis of previously collected data (for details see Rodrigues et al., 2024; database available at https://osf.io/2ahpe/). The initial study received ethical approval from the Ethics Council at ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (Reference: 70/2021). Broadly, participants were recruited through the Clickworker platform and invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire focused on SE and sexual behaviours.

To participate, individuals had to meet specific inclusion criteria: be between 18 and 45 years old (to reflect contemporary sociopolitical contexts surrounding SE), reside in either Portugal or Spain, and have had at least one experience of oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Informed consent was required prior to participation. Those who did not meet these criteria were redirected to the end of the survey and excluded from the dataset. Eligible participants received a €3 compensation upon completion.

The survey began with screening questions related to eligibility, followed by standard sociodemographic items (e.g., gender identity, sexual orientation, educational background). Participants were then provided with a definition of SE based on the European Union framework

(Picken, 2020): “According to the European Commission, information about sexuality is essential in health education. Aiming for a healthy life in society, people should acquire knowledge and develop attitudes and behaviours in this area. Sexual education has as its main objectives to contribute to the improvement of sexual and relational life, reduce possible problems arising from sexual behaviours, improve sexual education, and promote more informed decision-making.” After reading the definition, participants were presented with the main measures.

Two attention-check items were embedded within the questionnaire (e.g., “Please select ‘Extremely’ for this item”), along with a final self-assessment of attentiveness (rated from 1 = No attention to 4 = Very close attention). At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether they wished to retain or withdraw their responses. Responses were excluded if participants failed at least one attention check, indicated low attentiveness (≤ 2), or requested to remove their data.

The survey concluded with a thank-you message, a debriefing explaining the purpose of the study, educational resources related to SE, and contact details for the research team.

Analytic Plan

A secondary analysis of a previously collected dataset was conducted focusing on the perceived influences of SE among LGB+ and heterosexual participants. While some of the descriptive and demographic data have been reported earlier (Rodrigues et al., 2024), the current analysis explores new research perspectives concerning the perceived impact of formal and informal SE sources on attitudes and sexual behaviours, considering the eight topics mentioned before.

We initiated with a descriptive analysis of the demographic characteristics and previous sexual behaviour and then we proceeded with group comparisons based on sexual orientation by running Chi-Square tests.

Independent samples t-tests were then conducted to examine differences in the perceived influence of formal traditional, informal traditional, and modern informal SE between LGB+ and heterosexual participants across eight topics. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were assessed. Where Levene’s test indicated unequal variances, Welch’s t-test was applied. Effect sizes (Cohen’s d) and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for all comparisons.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics. No corrections for multiple comparisons were applied; however, effect sizes were included to support the interpretation of results.

Results

Comparing the groups on the perceived influence of Formal Traditional Sources of SE, the results showed no significant differences for any of the topics assessed according to sexual orientation, p = .333, suggesting that both groups perceived a similar influence of this type of SE on areas such as 'sexual and reproductive health', 'sexual knowledge', 'sexual pleasure and difficulties', 'sexual diversity and orientation', 'sexual and reproductive rights', 'feelings and emotions in sex', 'gender violence', and 'sexual abuse' (see Table 2).

Table 2

Group Comparisons for the Perceived Influence of Formal Traditional Sources of SE

	LGB+	Heterosexual		
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*t*	Cohen's *d*
Sexual and reproductive health	4.39 (1.95)	4.6 (1.76)	-0.88	-0.12
Sexual knowledge	3.70 (2.07)	3.80 (1.82)	-0.32	-0.06
Pleasure and sexual difficulties	3.95 (2.07)	3.72 (1.73)	0.57	0.13
Sexual diversity and sexual orientation	4.08 (2.15)	3.93 (1.81)	0.41	0.08
Sexual and reproductive rights	4.74 (1.87)	4.56 (1.66)	0.70	0.11
Feelings and emotions in sex	4.32 (1.91)	3.93 (1.82)	0.97	0.21
Gender violence	4.52 (2.09)	4.72 (1.78)	-0.67	-0.11
Sexual abuse	4.60 (2.26)	4.72 (1.83)	-0.35	-0.06

$^{***}p \leq .001$, $^{**}p \leq .010$, $^{*}p \leq .050$.

When looking at the results of perceived influence of informal traditional sources of SE, significant group differences were observed for two topics: 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation', p = .023, and 'gender violence', p = .003, such that LGB+ participants reported higher perceived influence in these areas compared to heterosexual participants. No significant differences were found for the remaining topics, p = .109 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Group Comparisons for the Perceived Influence of *Inf*ormal Traditional Sources of SE

	LGB+	Heterosexual		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	*t*	Cohen's *d*
Sexual and reproductive health	4.98 (1.53)	4.95 (1.53)	0.19	0.02
Sexual knowledge	5.20 (1.49)	4.94 (1.45)	1.61	0.18
Pleasure and sexual difficulties	5.06 (1.60)	4.91 (1.40)	0.91	0.10
Sexual diversity and sexual orientation	4.59 (1.63)	4.16 (1.71)	2.29*	0.26

Sexual and reproductive rights	4.72 (1.71)	4.51 (1.54)	1.16	0.13
Feelings and emotions in sex	5.03 (1.49)	4.78 (1.46)	1.47	0.17
Gender violence	5.10 (1.64)	4.56 (1.61)	2.95**	0.33
Sexual abuse	4.88 (1.68)	4.59 (1.67)	1.52	0.17

***$p \leq .001$, **$p \leq .010$, *$p \leq .050$.

Finally, when comparing both groups in their perceived influence of informal modern sources of SE, a significant difference was found for 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation', $p < .001$, with LGB+ participants perceiving a greater influence of this topic. No significant differences were observed for the remaining topics, $p = .052$ (see Table 4).

Table 4

Group Comparisons for the Perceived Influence of *Inf*ormal *Modern* Sources of SE

	LGB+	Heterosexual		
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*t*	Cohen's *d*
Sexual and reproductive health	4.29 (1.91)	4.09 (1.85)	0.87	0.11
Sexual knowledge	4.68 (1.75)	4.60 (1.61)	0.43	0.05
Pleasure and sexual difficulties	4.46 (1.77)	4.36 (1.63)	0.53	0.06
Sexual diversity and sexual orientation	4.91 (1.73)	4.15 (1.82)	3.53***	0.42
Sexual and reproductive rights	4.56 (1.77)	4.14 (1.77)	1.95	0.24
Feelings and emotions in sex	4.47 (1.80)	4.78 (1.46)	1.51	0.18
Gender violence	4.67 (1.93)	4.50 (1.80)	0.76	0.09
Sexual abuse	4.59 (1.90)	4.49 (1.82)	0.42	0.05

***$p \leq .001$, **$p \leq .010$, *$p \leq .050$.

Discussion

This dissertation aimed to explore perceived differences in the influence of various sources of SE – traditional formal, traditional informal, and modern informal – on different attitudes and behaviours regarding sex among LGB+ and heterosexual adults in Portugal and Spain, considering eight topics. Quantitative analyses compared the perceived influence of each type of educational source across eight sexuality-related topics, providing insight into how different sources are perceived to influence which areas of sexual knowledge, what they reveal about their accessibility and how relevant they are for the different groups, according to sexual orientation.

Employing a Community Psychology approach, the research sought to understand not only how the perceived influence of these sources was evaluated by participants, but also how they may reflect broader dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and agency in navigating sexual knowledge. The discussion that follows interprets the evidence through a critical and contextual lens, highlighting the implications for both educational policy and community-based interventions, particularly in relation to the sexual citizenship of LGB+ populations.

Whereas no statistically significant differences were found regarding the perceived impact of traditional formal SE between the two groups, relevant distinctions emerged in relation to informal sources – both traditional and modern.

Regarding formal traditional SE, the absence of statistically significant differences may reflect on one hand, the limited inclusion of sexually diverse content in school curricula in Portugal and Spain, as previously noted by Rocha et al. (2016) and Andújar and Gómez (2019). On the other hand, it may suggest that, when present, formal SE often follows a cisheteronormative approach, as documented in the literature (Elia & Eliason, 2010; McNeill, 2013; Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; MacAulay et al., 2022), reducing its perceived impact across sexual orientations, comparatively. These dynamics are worrisome, considering the recent developments in Portugal, such as the reduction or removal of content related to sexuality from the “Educação para a Cidadania e Desenvolvimento” curriculum (Bastos, 2025). Although the data in this dissertation reflect perceptions prior to this policy shift, the lack of perceived impact already suggests a gap in inclusivity and relevance. The risk is that such curricular regressions may worsen existent inequalities, disproportionately harming LGB+ youth by eliminating content related to sexual and gender diversity, often targeted under the rhetoric of “gender ideology”. The implications of such exclusion in formal SE can include higher rates of suicide and mental illness related to homophobia, higher consumption of substances, or engagement in unsafe sex in comparison with their heterosexual peers, as well as a hostile climate in school (Burdge, 2019). From a Community Psychology perspective, these omissions undermine initiatives to advance

sexual rights and deepen the marginalisation of non-normative identities within educational systems, pushing LGB+ individuals toward alternative and informal sources of learning (Currin et al., 2017).

In contrast, the data revealed significant differences in the perceived influence of informal SE among LGB+ participants. In the case of traditional informal education, LGB+ participants reported higher levels of perceived influence in the topics 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation' and 'gender violence'. This information suggests that informal yet socially embedded agents – such as parents, peers, romantic partners, and teachers – can provide more contextually relevant and identity-affirming knowledge, particularly in the absence of inclusive formal education.

The prominence of 'gender violence' as an influential topic in traditional informal SE for LGB+ participants may be especially relevant. Gender-based violence is defined as violence enacted based on sex, gender identity, or perceived deviation from gender norms (Decker et al., 2022) and disproportionately affects LGBTQIA+ populations (Bolam & Bates; 2016; Yan et al., 2024). Heightened risks of intimate partner violence, identity-based abuse, and outing threats (Blondeel et al., 2017; Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016; Messinger & Roark, 2018) are often compounded by limited access to support systems and social stigma, either it being internalised or external. Participants reporting acquiring knowledge about gender violence through interpersonal sources reflects both the urgency of the issue and a gap in institutional SE. It also emphasizes how themes related to safety, vulnerability, and identity often become part of shared, community-based knowledge, passed through experience rather than curricula.

Concerning modern informal SE, LGB+ participants reported significantly higher levels of perceived influence in the topic of 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation'. This aligns with existing research showing that LGB+ individuals increasingly turn to online platforms, social media, and digital communities to access information that reflects their identities and lived realities (Balén et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2021; Juul et al., 2023). This can be understood as a proactive response to prior experiences of invisibility or exclusion in formal SE settings (Burton & Avilla, 2021). Faced with erasure in school curricula, LGB+ individuals often rely on non-institutional sources such as social media, pornography, or peer-created content. While often more inclusive, these sources are rarely regulated or critically contextualised, raising questions about the quality, accessibility, and long-term effects of the information they convey.

Despite their relatability and ease of access, informal sources present notable limitations. As Fowler et al. (2022) argue, platforms like TikTok lack fact-checking mechanisms and rely on passive video consumption, limiting opportunities for critical engagement and access to verified information. Personalised algorithms may further narrow the diversity of content encountered, reinforcing biases

rather than expanding understanding (Fowler et al., 2022). Likewise, Lesta et al. (2008) found that information received through peers or popular media is often vague, general, or sensationalised – especially regarding contraception, abortion, and sexual diversity. In more conservative sociocultural contexts, where sexuality remains taboo, these dynamics are compounded by silence and stigma, leaving youth with inadequate or distorted knowledge (Lesta et al., 2008). These observations underline the urgent need to complement informal learning with inclusive, reliable, and critically grounded SE guidelines. As digital sources become increasingly central in building young people's sexual knowledge, educational programs must equip youth with the tools to critically analyse and interpret sexual media (Balliet & Ford, 2025). This includes fostering the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, recognise potentially harmful representations, and engage with content related to consent and healthy relationships in a reflective and relational way (Balliet & Ford, 2025).

The greater influence attributed by LGB+ participants to informal SE on the topic of 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation' can also be interpreted through a Community Psychology lens as an expression of both resistance and resilience. These individuals demonstrate agency by avoiding exclusionary systems and co-constructing knowledge within more accessible and identity-affirming spaces. Reliance on informal sources is thus not merely compensatory, but also a political and relational strategy that reclaims voice and belonging. From this perspective, informal SE settings can function as spaces of collective meaning-making, where participants develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), empowerment (Rappaport, 1987), and a deeper sense of relational wellbeing.

Taken together, these results reinforce the need for CSE policies that are inclusive, rights-based, and attuned to the diverse realities of sexually minoritised populations. Educational reform must go beyond mere content inclusion to embrace pedagogies that validate plural identities, foster critical engagement, and centre community participation. Only then can formal CSE reclaim its relevance as a legitimate and empowering source of knowledge for all.

With its focus on contextual understanding, social justice and collective empowerment, Community Psychology offers the opportunity to design practical alternative responses, ones that question deeper the systemic forces that shape the access to knowledge, while also supporting the development of participatory, community-led strategies to promote sexual health and wellbeing (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Jason et al., 2019; Rappaport, 1987). In settings where institutional structures fail to meet the needs of LGB+ individuals, it can support the co-creation of inclusive, culturally grounded interventions that validate lived experience, strengthen social support networks, and foster resilience in the face of marginalisation.

One promising example of how Community Psychology can advocate for SE is the *Teach Love* project (Degen, 2023), which integrates critical reflection, emotional resilience, and pedagogical innovation to support educators in navigating normatively charged or polarising topics. Rather than focusing solely on knowledge transmission, the program encourages educators to engage with their own values and positionalities, fostering a more dialogical, inclusive, and humanistic approach to SE (Degen, 2023). By cultivating confidence, peer support, and openness to complexity, this model exemplifies how a community-rooted pedagogy can create safer and more responsive learning environments. Besides that, its digital and participatory format demonstrates the potential of hybrid interventions to reach educators across different settings and equip them to meet the evolving needs of their students.

While the *Teach Love* program offers a compelling approach to professional training, it does not explicitly define what constitutes inclusive CSE content. Building on this gap, Hobaica et al. (2024) provide concrete recommendations grounded in the feedback of LGBTQ+ youth. These include addressing topics such as gender-affirming healthcare, pronouns, non-monogamous relationship models, and same-sex sexual practices. CSE should also incorporate LGBTQ+ examples of healthy relationships, consent, communication, and emotional safety. Given the prevalence of bullying and discriminatory language in school environments (Snapp et al., 2015), it is essential to create supportive and visibly affirming spaces (Hobaica et al., 2024). This includes establishing anti-discrimination policies, enforcing the use of correct names and pronouns, and providing symbolic and material signals of LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Moreover, given that many queer youth access information via pornography or social media (Sill, 2022), CSE must also address digital literacy, online safety, and the emotional dimensions of sexual desire and attraction (Hobaica et al., 2024).

Another program that could be a starting point is the *SEXUMUXU* program (Basque Government, 2018), which offers a valuable example of a school-based CSE initiative that extends participation beyond the classroom. Aimed at third- and fourth-year secondary students, it combines interactive digital tools with printed resources for students, teachers, and parents/tutors. Although not explicitly framed within a Community Psychology perspective, the program reflects a commitment to working collaboratively across environments to support affective and sexual development during adolescence.

An ideal CSE program, however, would integrate the participatory character of *Teach Love* with the whole-community approach exemplified by *SEXUMUXU* (Basque Government, 2018), forming a comprehensive and inclusive framework grounded in both critical pedagogy and collective responsibility. From a Community Psychology standpoint, this means co-constructing content with

LGBTQIA+ youth, validating their lived experiences, and involving the broader network of families, peers, health professionals, and educators. Such a model would actively work to demystify sexuality, reduce stigma, and foster relational environments where young people feel supported in exploring and affirming their sexual identities. A truly school-based CSE model must extend beyond the classroom to involve all actors in a coordinated effort, cultivating safe, inclusive, and empowering spaces that support holistic wellbeing and sexual citizenship.

This dissertation is relevant precisely because it engages with this vision of what SE could and should be. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of LGB+ individuals, it exposes the persistent gaps left by formal education systems and emphasizes the need for approaches that are not only inclusive in content but transformative in structure, that is, that not only include inclusive content to the existing curricula, but also rethink the entire way CSE is designed, delivered, and experienced. This can be achieved by involving students in co-creating curricula, moving away from didactic, top down lectures; recognizing that knowledge doesn't just come only from textbooks or teachers; encouraging learners to question societal norms, stereotypes, and systems of oppression related to gender, sexuality, race, and power; and creating institutional frameworks that protect students from discrimination while also providing training educators to be culturally competent and affirming.

In articulating how informal sources can serve both as sites of empowerment and spaces of fragility, the study situates CSE within a broader ecology of learning that extends across digital, interpersonal, and institutional contexts. From a Community Psychology perspective, this work reinforces the urgency of participatory, intersectional, and context-sensitive strategies that do not merely integrate sexual diversity as content, but as a foundational principle for how knowledge is co-created and shared. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a growing field of practice and research committed to fostering safer, more affirming environments where all individuals – regardless of sexual orientation – can engage in the development of their sexual subjectivity with agency, dignity, and support. Therefore, this dissertation, besides tackling urgent concerns in SE, also contributes to expanding the scope of Community Psychology itself. Historically, LGBTQIA+ topics have been underrepresented in the field, despite its commitment to equity and inclusion. As Harper and Schneider (2003) argue, overlooking LGBTQ+ communities is a missed opportunity to engage with vibrant, resilient, and politically active populations that embody the very essence of community-based action and transformative knowledge.

Limitations and Recommendations

While the present study offers meaningful insights into the perceived influence of SE sources across sexual orientations in Portugal and Spain, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of

a convenience sample recruited primarily through online platforms may have introduced sampling bias, potentially overrepresenting individuals who are more digitally literate, politically engaged, or already invested in conversations around sexuality. Additionally, most participants identified as women and held higher education degrees, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to more diverse or less formally educated populations. It could also be argued that the LGB+ sample size was relatively limited, which may affect the robustness and generalisability of subgroup comparisons.

Beyond sampling concerns, it is also important to consider the limitations of the data collection method itself. As the study relied on self-report measures, the results are subject to potential recall bias and social desirability effects (Krumpal, 2011), particularly given the sensitive and often stigmatized nature of sexuality-related topics. These factors may have influenced the way participants evaluated past experiences or described their sources of knowledge, possibly distorting the accuracy of the responses.

The study's cross-sectional and quantitative nature also limits the depth of interpretation. While we can identify associations (e.g., LGB+ participants reported higher perceived influence from informal SE in the topic 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation'), we cannot infer causality (i.e., that LGB+ participants reported higher impact of informal SE sources on their knowledge of 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation' or that informal SE sources lead to better knowledge of 'sexual diversity and sexual orientation'). Besides that, the quantitative nature of the study prevented us from further examining how or why participants found certain resources more influential, as well as the emotional, cultural, or situational meanings behind their answers. Future research could benefit from adopting a mixed-methods (that gives both measurable patterns and deeper personal meaning) or longitudinal design, one that could not only explore the perceived influence of SE sources, but also the processes through which knowledge is internalised, rejected, questioned, and transformed. A qualitative approach could shed more light into how and why these sources matter and what roles they play in forging identity, confidence and wellbeing of LGB+ youth in a cisheteronormative context.

Another limitation of this dissertation is the insufficient representation of non-binary participants, as well as the absence of options for participants to indicate whether they identified as transgender or intersex. This would allow to explore specific barriers faced by gender-diverse and intersex individuals in both formal and informal SE sources (Bradford et al., 2018); better understand the experiences of SE that may differ from those of cisgender LGB+ people (Hobaica et al., 2019); investigate the specific needs of knowledge (Haley et al., 2019); explain the role of SE in identity formation and sexual wellbeing (Manduley et al., 2018); and overall paint a better picture of how SE intersects with gender and sex characteristics. Finally, comparative studies across Portugal and Spain,

as well as other countries or regions with differing political and cultural climates, could offer useful insight into the contextual conditions that support or hinder inclusive and affirming SE.

Conclusion

This dissertation examined the perceived influence of traditional formal, traditional informal, and modern informal sources of SE on dimensions of sexual subjectivity and wellbeing among LGB+ and heterosexual adults in Portugal and Spain. Although differences between groups were not consistently significant, the results highlight how various educational sources are differently valued and incorporated into adult experiences of sexuality. Formal school-based education emerged as limited in its inclusivity and perceived impact, whereas informal contexts, such as peers, family, and digital platforms, proved central in structuring sexual learning across populations.

The results obtained in this dissertation contribute to a deeper comprehension of how LGB+ and heterosexual adults in Iberian contexts perceive the influence of different SE sources. These insights invite us to critically reflect on the limitations of current scholar curricula and the role of alternative pathways in building sexual knowledge regarding themselves, how to take control of their lives and make choices, and how they experience emotional and sexual wellbeing, particularly among sexually diverse populations.

From a Community Psychology perspective, these findings reinforce the importance of looking beyond institutionalized models of SE to consider the role of everyday contexts and relationships. By integrating empowerment and critical consciousness, the study underscores the need for participatory, inclusive, and contextually grounded approaches that validate diverse lived experiences while fostering collective wellbeing.

Ultimately, this thesis is relevant because it brings attention to the persistent gaps and opportunities in SE within the Iberian context. By demonstrating the interplay between formal and informal sources, it advocates for educational strategies that are holistic, community-based, and responsive to the realities of those historically excluded. In doing so, it contributes to the development of more inclusive frameworks capable of supporting sexual wellbeing and promoting equity.

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