

TRABALHOS DE PESQUISA

(IN)VISIBLE STORIES ON STAGES AND MAT: SEXUALITY-RELATED STIGMAS AND CHALLENGES IN BODIES THAT FIGHT AND DANCE

HISTÓRIAS (IN)VISÍVEIS NOS PALCOS E TATAMES: ESTIGMAS E DESAFIOS DA SEXUALIDADE EM CORPOS QUE LUTAM E DANÇAM

HISTÓRIAS (IN)VISIBLES EN LOS ESCENARIOS Y TATAMIS: ESTIGMAS Y DESAFIOS DE LA SEXUALIDAD EN CUERPOS QUE LUCHAN E BAILAN

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Abstract: The study aimed to understand how practitioners of dance and combat sports perceive and experience challenges related to sexuality in their practice environments. Using a quantitative and qualitative approach, 41 practitioners responded to an online questionnaire (Google Forms) with both objective and open-ended questions about sexual diversity observed and experienced in their practice settings. Among the respondents, 60.5% were combat sports practitioners and 39.5% dancers. Predominant sexual orientations were Heterosexuality (53.5%), Bisexuality (27.9%), and Homosexuality (14%). Approximately 14% reported having experienced prejudice, including verbal aggression and psychological violence, while 34.9% witnessed cases of discrimination. Regarding the perception of their environments, 53.5% consider them inclusive, 30.2% neutral, and 16.3% exclusive. In terms of comfort in disclosing their sexual orientation, 20.9% feel “sometimes” comfortable, citing fear as a barrier. In dance, the main challenges are prejudice, psychological violence, and verbal aggression. In combat sports, key challenges include conservatism, prejudice, sexuality-based stigma, psychological violence, and verbal aggression. It was concluded that, despite progress, prejudice and discrimination regarding sexuality still persist in dance and combat sports environments.

Keywords: Sexuality; Martial arts; Dance; Diversity; Body practices.

Resumo: A pesquisa teve como objetivo compreender como praticantes de dança e lutas percebem e vivenciam desafios relacionados à sexualidade em seus ambientes de prática. Utilizando abordagem quantitativa e qualitativa, 41 praticantes responderam a um questionário *on-line* (Google Forms) com questões objetivas e discursivas sobre diversidade sexual observados e vivenciados nos seus ambientes de prática. Entre os respondentes, 60,5% eram de lutas e 39,5% de dança. As orientações sexuais predominantes foram Heterossexualidade (53,5%), Bissexualidade (27,9%) e Homossexualidade (14%). Cerca de 14% relataram ter vivenciado preconceito, incluindo agressões verbais e violência psicológica, enquanto 34,9% presenciaram casos de discriminação. Quanto à percepção dos ambientes, 53,5% consideram-nos inclusivos, 30,2% neutros e 16,3% excludentes. Em relação ao conforto para revelar sua orientação sexual, 20,9% sentem-se, “às vezes”, confortáveis, apontando o medo como obstáculo. Na dança, os principais desafios são preconceito, violência psicológica e agressões verbais. Nas lutas, destacam-se conservadorismo, preconceito, estigma baseado na sexualidade, violência psicológica e agressões verbais. Conclui-se que, apesar de avanços, ainda há preconceito e discriminação nos ambientes de dança e lutas em relação à sexualidade.

Palavras-chave: Sexualidade; Artes marciais; Dança; Diversidade; Práticas corporais.



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Resumen: La investigación tuvo como objetivo comprender cómo los practicantes de danza y luchas perciben y viven los desafíos relacionados con la sexualidad en sus entornos de práctica. Utilizando un enfoque cuantitativo y cualitativo, 41 practicantes respondieron un cuestionario en línea (Google Forms) con preguntas objetivas y abiertas sobre la diversidad sexual observada y vivida en sus entornos de práctica. Entre los encuestados, el 60,5% eran practicantes de luchas y el 39,5% de danza. Las orientaciones sexuales predominantes fueron Heterosexualidad (53,5%), Bisexualidad (27,9%) y Homosexualidad (14%). Alrededor del 14% informó haber vivido prejuicio, incluyendo agresiones verbales y violencia psicológica, mientras que el 34,9% presenció casos de discriminación. En cuanto a la percepción de los entornos, el 53,5% los considera inclusivos, el 30,2% neutrales y el 16,3% excluyentes. Respecto a la comodidad para revelar su orientación sexual, el 20,9% se siente “a veces” cómodo, citando el miedo como obstáculo. En danza, los principales desafíos son el prejuicio, la violencia psicológica y las agresiones verbales. En luchas, destacan el conservadurismo, el prejuicio, el estigma basado en la sexualidad, la violencia psicológica y las agresiones verbales. Se concluye que, a pesar de los avances, todavía persisten el prejuicio y la discriminación en los entornos de danza y luchas en relación con la sexualidad.

Palabras clave: Sexualidad; Artes marciales; Danza; Diversidad; Prácticas corporales.

Introduction

Gender and sexuality issues have consistently played a significant role in the sporting domain, and, increasingly, sport has become a context for the expression of non-traditional and diverse masculinities and femininities that challenge and destabilize the homogeneous, traditional structures and models of these categories (Chaves, 2015). However, the stigmatization of homosexuality is frequently emphasized as a potential problem for any athlete (Channon & Matthews, 2015), given that sport is widely recognized as an institution that privileges heterosexuality to the detriment of homosexuality (Anderson, 2011). Carvalho *et al.* (2017) demonstrated that tactical and technical criteria are unlikely to be considered the primary factors in athlete selection when individuals express identities and roles that diverge from heteronormative standards. Moreover, athletes who openly express their sexual orientations are often required to continually “manage” or “regulate” them in order to avoid negative consequences for their sporting careers.

Just as it is essential to analyze how sport and physical education have historically contributed to the construction of masculinities, it is also imperative to reflect on how the sporting environment has become consolidated as a predominantly homophobic space (Silveira & Quitzau, 2019), given that the low participation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Non-binary, and other (LGBTQIAPN+) populations suggests the existence of specific barriers that limit their engagement (Denison *et al.*, 2021). According to Borrillo (2015), homophobia can be conceptualized as a broad form of hostility, of both psychological and social nature, directed toward those who are presumed to experience attraction to or engage in sexual practices with individuals of the same sex. In the study conducted by Hartmann-Tews, Menzel, and Braumüller (2022), 12.9% of the athletes surveyed reported having experienced negative situations related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in sport, including insults, structural discrimination, referring to unequal and unjust treatment, exclusion, verbal threats, intimidation, and online harassment (cyberbullying). For Louro (2000), individuals who recognize themselves as having interests or desires that diverge from heteronormative expectations are left with limited options: silence, concealment, or segregation, since the construction of heterosexuality occurs in tandem with the rejection of homosexuality.

Discrimination in sport reflects a broader context of social exclusion faced by LGBTQIAPN+ populations. The The Trevor Project 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQIAPN+ Youth, which surveyed 18,000 individuals aged 13 to 24, revealed that in the previous year 39% of respondents had seriously considered attempting suicide and 15% reported experiencing discrimination, with living in non-affirming communities being associated with increased suicide attempts. The survey also indicated that 66% of

LGBTQIAPN+ youth experience anxiety and 53% experience depression. In the Brazilian context, the Observatório de Mortes e Violências LGBTI+ reported that in 2023 there were 230 violent deaths of LGBTQIAPN+ individuals, including 18 suicides influenced by LGBTphobia. Homosexual individuals, as well as all those who deviate from heteronormative standards, often face social exclusion related to their sexual orientation in isolation, frequently without support from their surrounding environment and, in many cases, within equally hostile family contexts (Borrillo, 2015).

This impact is not limited to mental health; it also permeates the ways in which social constructions associated with gender influence engagement in physical and sporting activities. Although we are well into the twenty-first century, the social construction that associates masculinity with practices such as combat sports and femininity with practices such as dance remains prevalent (Gonçalves, 2014). This occurs because the concept of “being masculine” has been historically constructed upon cultural assumptions that value physical capacity and moral rigidity as fundamental attributes for the affirmation of masculinity (Lima, Brito, & Neto, 2024). Thus, sports and practices that are typified as masculine or feminine, when performed by individuals of the opposite gender, tend to generate discomfort and reinforce stereotypes. For example, a modality socially understood as masculine, one that demands strength, aggressiveness, and rationality, when practiced by women who display such traits, often leads to their being labeled as “masculine women,” reflecting societal prejudice and intolerance (Melo *et al.*, 2015; Assis & Saraiva, 2013).

In various social contexts, behavioral and bodily standards are established through coercive power relations that determine what is considered appropriate or inappropriate according to a given gender. Within the domain of combat sports, martial arts, and fighting practices, these standards have been maintained and reinforced within their cultural frameworks, leading them to be stereotyped as some of the most traditionally masculine sports (Lima, Brito, & Neto, 2024; Rodríguez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2023). According to Dowling (2000), in the early development of combat practices, femininity was not accepted, as women were expected to maintain delicate bodies, grounded in the myth of fragility and delicacy. Mariante and Wenzel (2022) argue that participation in a sport culturally understood as masculine can affect a woman’s life by, for instance, placing her sexuality under suspicion. This supports the notion that the social construction of combat sports has historically fostered a resistance to femininity within these practices. Conversely, dance, another element of bodily culture, is often regarded by some as an exclusively feminine manifestation. Due to a socially constructed discourse developed throughout history and persisting to the present day, boys who show interest in this practice are likely to become targets of discriminatory behavior, whether direct, such as verbal and physical aggression, or indirect, such as jokes, laughter, and surveillance-like gazes (Cunha Júnior & Melo, 1996; Lima, Pessoa, & Pereira, 2022). This occurs in light of the fact that homophobia expresses hostility not only toward homosexual individuals but also toward anyone perceived as deviating from normative sexual standards (Borrillo, 2015).

According to a 2022 study conducted by NIX Diversidade e Economia Social, of the 1,037 LGBTQIAPN+ respondents, 658 reported having been discriminated against for practicing certain sports or having witnessed cases of discrimination for the same reason. Additionally, 708 stated that they had either experienced or observed discrimination in sporting environments. Unable to openly exclude gay athletes from sport, heterosexual practitioners have instead resisted their presence through the construction of a culture of silence surrounding gay identities (Anderson, 2011). All the evidence presented above indicates that we live in a society permeated by intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, and violence against identities and categories perceived as deviating from heteronormativity. This reality is also reflected in sport, where discussions regarding the place, or lack thereof, of identities considered outside the binary norm remain largely silenced and underexplored (Peres & Prado, 2023).

Therefore, given the scarcity of studies that comparatively investigate perceptions related to sexuality in contexts as contrasting and stigmatized as combat sports and dance, this study aims to understand how practitioners of both forms of bodily practice perceive and experience challenges related to sexuality within their respective practice environments.

Method

This study is characterized as a cross-sectional investigation with a descriptive and analytical design, adopting both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal do Ceará (CAAE: 83517624.8.0000.5054).

The sample consisted of 41 participants, comprising practitioners of combat sports or dance from the city of Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará. The inclusion criteria established for the study were: being a practitioner of any combat sport modality or dance style for at least one year, and being 18 years of age or older. The exclusion criteria were: being under 18 years of age and not having signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF).

Procedures

Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed on the Google Forms platform. The decision to use a questionnaire as the primary instrument was based on its demonstrated effectiveness in recruiting research participants and its ability to generate initial insights into the topic under investigation (Sousa & Santos, 2020). The choice of Google Forms was also justified by its potential to reach a broader range of practitioners from different combat sports and dance settings. The questionnaire was made available between December 2023 and April 2024.

The instrument was developed by the authors of the study in accordance with the guidelines proposed by Maia (2020) and aimed to assess participants' perceptions of the challenges related to sexual diversity observed and experienced within their practice environments. The questionnaire included items regarding participants' general characteristics, such as type of physical practice, age, length of practice, gender identity, and sexual orientation, as well as six objective and open-ended questions addressing their perceptions and experiences concerning sexual diversity in their respective practice contexts.

Data analysis

For the analysis of the open-ended questions, Bardin (2016) content analysis technique was employed, which comprises three stages.

- 1) Pre-analysis – the initial phase of organization, aimed at systematizing and rendering the preliminary ideas operational, structured into four stages:
 - a) Floating reading – establishing familiarity with the documents in order to analyze and understand the text.
 - b) Selection of documents – the scope of the documents to be analyzed is previously defined.
 - c) Formulation of objectives and hypotheses.
 - d) Indexing and creation of indicators – when texts are considered as manifestations containing indicators to be examined in the analysis, the preparatory work consists of selecting these indicators.
- 2) Material exploration – consists primarily of coding procedures, classification, or enumeration, based on previously established rules.
- 3) Treatment of results, inference, and interpretation – raw results are processed in such a way as to become meaningful and valid (Bardin, 2016).

The Vengage platform (<https://pt.venngage.com/>) was used to generate the word cloud based on the identified codes, such that codes with higher frequencies appeared in larger font sizes within the cloud.

For the closed-ended questions, the data were transferred to a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel, and calculations of absolute and relative frequencies were performed. Variables such as age and length of practice were analyzed using the calculation of the arithmetic mean and standard deviation.

Results

The general characteristics of the participants indicated that, among the 41 respondents, 60.5% were practitioners of combat sports and 39.5% of dance. The mean duration of practice was 81 ± 67.3 months for combat sports practitioners and 92.5 ± 68.5 months for dance practitioners. Regarding age, combat sports practitioners presented a mean of 21.6 ± 3.2 years, whereas dance practitioners had a mean age of 27.3 ± 8.8 years. Concerning gender identity, 55.8% of respondents identified as cisgender men, 41.9% as cisgender women, and 2.3% as non-binary. With respect to sexual orientation, 53.5% identified as heterosexual, 27.9% as bisexual, 14% as homosexual, 2.3% as demisexual, and 2.3% reported being unsure.

Table 1 presents the results obtained from the closed-ended questions included in the questionnaire administered in this study.

Table 1 - Results from Objective Questions Included in the Research Questionnaire

Objective questions of the form		
Question	Alternatives	%
Have you ever experienced any form of discrimination or prejudice related to your sexual orientation in the context of combat sports/dance?	Yes	14%
	No	74,4%
	I'm not sure	11,6%
Have you ever witnessed any form of discrimination based on sexuality (sexual orientation) in the context of combat sports/dance?	Yes	34,9%
	No	58,1%
	I'm not sure	7%
In your opinion, how inclusive are the environments of combat sports/dance concerning sexual orientation diversity?	Inclusive	53,5%
	Neutral	30,2%
	Exclusive	16,3%
Do you feel comfortable revealing your sexual orientation in sports contexts such as combat sports/dance?	Yes	76,7%
	No	2,3%
	Sometimes	20,9%

Source: Prepared by the research authors (2026).

Table 2 presents the results related to the categorization and frequency of the responses provided by the participants. These data were organized in order to highlight the main emerging categories and the significant codes identified.

Table 2 - Coding and categorization of participants' reports

Practitioners' Reports		
Categories	Codes	Number of Mentions
Experienced Prejudice	Verbal Assaults	2
	Psychological Violence	1
Witnessed Prejudice	Verbal Assaults	4
	Psychological Violence	4
	Stigmas about Practitioners	4
Feelings when Revealing Sexual Orientation	Fear	6

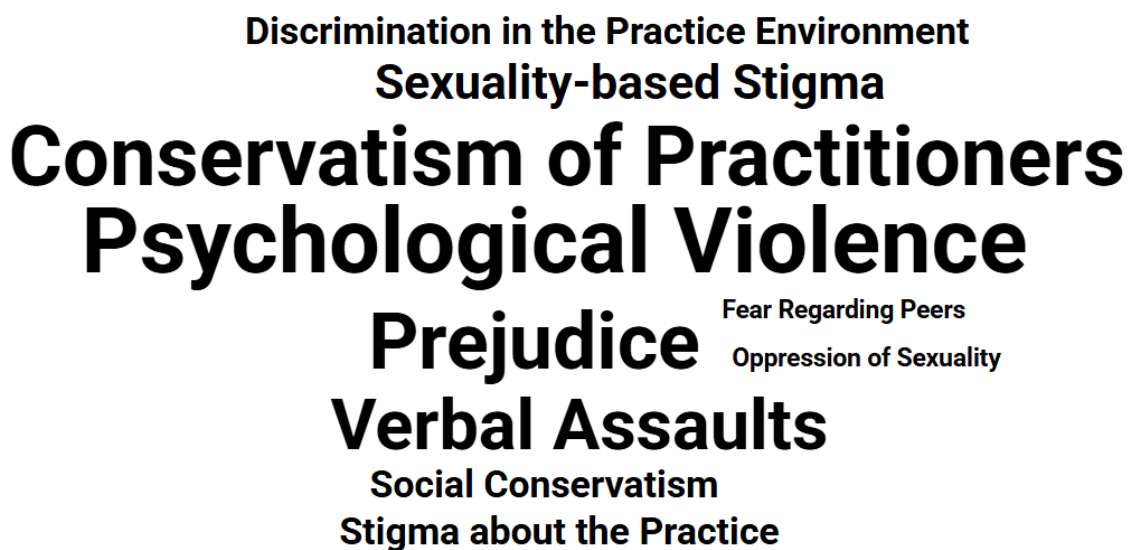
Source: Prepared by the research authors (2026).

Table 3 presents the results related to the coding of participants' reports regarding the main challenges faced by individuals with diverse sexual orientations within their physical activity/sport practice environments. Figure 1 displays a word cloud illustrating the primary challenges reported across both types of bodily practices.

Table 3 - Challenges reported by practitioners in the Combat Sports and dance environment

Main issues faced according to practitioners' reports		
Categories	Codes	Number of Mentions
Dance	Verbal Assaults	3
	Psychological Violence	3
	Prejudice	4
	Social Conservatism	1
	Discrimination in the Practice Environment	1
	Stigma about the Practice	1
Combat Sports	Conservatism of Practitioners	8
	Psychological Violence	6
	Verbal Assaults	3
	Sexuality-based Stigma	3
	Prejudice	3
	Fear Regarding Peers	1
	Oppression of Sexuality	1
	Discrimination in the Practice Environment	1
	Social Conservatism	1
Stigma about the Practice	1	

Source: Prepared by the research authors (2026).

Figure 1 - Word cloud created from the participants' responses.

Source: Prepared by the research authors (2026).

Discussion

The present study sought to understand how practitioners of dance and combat sports perceive and experience challenges related to sexuality within their practice environments. As previously noted, the study included a total of 41 respondents, with a higher proportion of combat sports practitioners. Most dance practitioners identified as women, whereas in combat sports there was a more balanced distribution between men and women. According to Andreoli (2019), the absence of men in dance is often driven by prevailing social discourses that suggest men should engage in more “masculine” activities and women in more “feminine” ones. These cultural narratives continue to persist and reproduce the notion that certain practices are inherently appropriate for each sex.

Experienced prejudice

The experience of prejudice-related episodes was reported by a significant proportion of participants, with accounts including verbal aggression and psychological violence. Additionally, some respondents indicated uncertainty as to whether they had experienced such situations, suggesting difficulties in recognizing discriminatory behaviors. Participants reported the following:

“I went to help a training partner stretch, and a more advanced male practitioner made a suggestive joke that made us extremely uncomfortable” (Participant 3).

“I have been practicing Brazilian jiu-jitsu for nine years, and the most common thing I still hear is ‘you pay to roll around with men.’ Nowadays, thanks to classes and training, my self-esteem has improved and I no longer care about such comments, but imagine hearing that as a child at the beginning?” (Participant 30).

Masculinities are cultural constructions; it is through culture that individuals are constituted as gendered subjects, and it is from the notion of gender that we can reflect on the multiple ways in which masculinities are constructed (Bandeira & Seffner, 2013). In societal terms, the “real man” is expected to engage in activities perceived as “masculine,” such as virile sports like football. In line with gender norms that dictate which practices are considered appropriate, volleyball, for example, is often described as a feminine activity, and men who engage in it may have their sexuality called into question (Anjos, 2015). This stigma extends to various other sports and bodily practices. From stigma arises prejudice, and from prejudice emerge instances of violence, such as the case reported by A Tribuna (2024), which described how dancer Flávio Arcangeletti was the victim of homophobia and physical assault by approximately six men while working at a bar in São Vicente, in the city of São Paulo. At the scene, the aggressors reportedly stated that it was not a place for a “gay man to be dancing,” before proceeding to physically attack him with punches, kicks, elbows, and bottles. Incidents such as this occur because men often valorize rigid and extreme representations of masculinity, adopting strongly homophobic attitudes as a means of (re)affirming their heterosexuality (Anderson, 2011).

Reports such as the one described above point to the persistent reinforcement of a virile habitus for men’s practices and a feminine habitus for women’s practices (Bourdieu, 2003). Sports and the forms of physicality typically associated with them directly influence the construction of beliefs about sexuality in societies characterized by homohysterical structures (Rodríguez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2023). Any individual who deviates from these norms becomes a target of stigma (Goffman, 1963) and insult (Eribon, 2008), resulting in prejudice and the exclusion of multiple forms of gender expression manifested in society (Lima, Brito, & Neto, 2024). The outcome of this process is the emergence of various forms of control rooted in homophobia, historically grounded in the perception of non-normative sexual behaviors as crime, sin, and disease (Borrillo, 2015). This, in turn, may lead individuals to withdraw from practices that place them in positions of visibility, thereby reinforcing cycles of prejudice and discrimination.

Witnessed prejudice

Cases of prejudice witnessed in practice settings were reported by slightly more than one-third of the participants, with accounts including verbal aggression, psychological violence, and stigmatization of practitioners. A smaller proportion indicated that they were unsure whether they had witnessed such situations. Statements from some participants also identified certain instructors as agents of prejudice:

“A student who is homosexual was assigned to train (in this case, combat practice) with the girls, as the instructor believed he was not capable of training with the boys solely because of his sexual orientation” (Participant 4).

“The homophobic instructor treated male students much more harshly and stated that she did not want men dancing in a feminine manner. They were dancers, but they had to dance ‘like men’” (Participant 9).

The narratives indicate that some Physical Education professionals, whether coaches or instructors, often contribute to the construction of prejudice and discrimination, reinforcing existing stereotypes through their discourse (Silva, Caminha, & Fernandes, 2021) and perpetuating an unconscious process of coercion aimed at reproducing socially expected behaviors (Silva, 2020). Moreover, this dynamic can become a demotivating factor for continued participation, as the instructor, who should be responsible for fostering inclusion

and student engagement, may instead act as a primary agent in the dissemination of prejudice. Regarding homophobic behaviors among peers, participants reported:

“I have witnessed comments about training partners using LGBTphobic terms in a joking manner, as well as people stating that homosexual individuals should not practice combat sports” (Participant 1).

“A situation involving a heterosexual man who did not want to train the grappling component of Muay Thai, known as the clinch, with homosexual men” (Participant 13).

Statements such as that of Participant 13 highlight how intense physical contact between male bodies on the mat, touching, gripping, holding, and immobilizing one another, can generate discomfort and fear of proximity, particularly when rigid norms of masculinity are internalized. In this sense, the participant’s account illustrates the “specter” of homosexuality: an apprehension that does not need to materialize in order to produce an effect (Teixeira, 2012). Indeed, the sporting environment, especially within combat sports, has historically been marked by the valorization of hegemonic masculinity, constructed around the image of the strong, aggressive, and virile man, while expressions that deviate from these assumptions are often regarded as inferior and inappropriate (Carvalho *et al.*, 2017; Lima, Brito, & Neto, 2024).

According to the study by Natarelli *et al.* (2015), homophobia has a significant impact on adolescents’ health, particularly with regard to mental health, as it contributes to the emergence of depressive behaviors, anxiety, excessive fears, and suicidal ideation and attempts, conditions that indicate psychological distress stemming from experiences of violence. This reveals one of the most harmful effects of homophobia: the process of internalization of violence. According to Louro (2000), for individuals who identify with this position, “coming out” as homosexual or bisexual constitutes a political act and, under current circumstances, may entail a high personal cost due to stigmatization.

Level of comfort in revealing sexual orientation

With regard to participants’ level of comfort in disclosing a sexual orientation different from heterosexuality within their practice contexts, a substantial proportion reported feeling only “sometimes” comfortable, with “fear” identified as the primary barrier. Participants reported the following:

“The way people behave can change negatively when I talk about my sexuality” (Participant 1)

“It depends on the type of people I observe in the environment, as I would not feel confident simply talking about something so personal. People can behave in completely unpredictable ways and may become aggressive over very little, and sexuality is still a taboo. Therefore, I do not see the need to make it explicit that I do not have a defined sexual orientation, as not everyone would understand” (Participant 9).

According to the study conducted by Denison, Bevan, and Jeanes (2021), 46.6% of team sport athletes who disclosed their sexual orientation to some of their teammates reported experiencing homophobic behaviors, while 40.4% of participants who had not disclosed their orientation to anyone also reported being targets of such behaviors. It is important to recognize that homophobia manifests in various forms, including jokes, teasing, and comments, among others, and such attitudes can perpetuate a persistent sense of inferiority among homosexual individuals in relation to heterosexuals. Gay men and lesbians often experience discomfort in the presence of heterosexual men, who are frequently identified as primary or likely aggressors, which may consequently lead to the withdrawal of homosexual youth from sporting activities (Silva, Caminha, & Fernandes, 2021; Goellner, 2010). As argued by Foucault (1988), there is a form of social control over individuals’ behaviors and practices aimed at ensuring that established norms are adhered to by all members of society.

Main challenges in dance and combat sports

From the perspective of the participants interviewed, the main difficulties faced by individuals with diverse sexual orientations in the dance environment include “prejudice,” followed by “psychological violence” and “verbal aggression.” One participant reported:

“Dance, for many years, has been perceived as something ‘feminine,’ or as an activity meant

for women. For men, incentives are limited, in my view, mainly due to societal pressures outside the dance environment, which affect their emotions, particularly through verbal aggression. Furthermore, from my perspective, the issue becomes even more sensitive when we consider children, boys who are still discovering themselves and understanding their role in society. Words intended to belittle or mock them may drive away great potential in dance” (Participant 31).

Actions that may appear trivial, such as teaching students that there are more “masculine” or more “feminine” dance movements, contribute to the reinforcement of gender-based limitations, which restrict boys’ and girls’ participation in activities they might otherwise wish to explore (Andreoli, 2019; Goellner, 2010). Within the context of combat sports, according to the findings of Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. (2023), practitioners of martial arts and combat sports demonstrate significantly higher levels of respect for sexual diversity compared to individuals involved in other sports modalities. Nevertheless, issues such as “practitioners’ conservatism,” “psychological violence,” “prejudice,” “sexuality-based stigma,” and “verbal aggression” were still reported as challenges within this context.

“The difficulty lies in people understanding that an individual’s sexual orientation does not interfere with their performance in training nor influence the sexual orientation of others” (Participant 15).

“Prejudice, primarily originating from heterosexual men toward homosexual men, manifests in a reluctance to train together, due to the belief that they may become the target of jokes among peers, as well as through making jokes and demeaning homosexual men, based on the argument that they would not be able to withstand physical impact” (Participant 36).

The various forms of masculinity present within combat sports are hierarchically organized and subordinated to a hegemonic masculine standard grounded in heteronormativity (Lima; Brito; Neto, 2024). Individuals who do not conform, in their behaviors and attitudes, to the codes of traditional masculinity, exhibiting certain elements or signs associated with femininity, whether physical or symbolic, become targets of marginalization and are devalued in terms of their performance and competence in sports (Chaves; Araújo, 2015). According to Costa *et al.* (2013), although sexual orientation and gender expression are clearly distinct constructs, in the manifestation of prejudice they are closely intertwined; that is, it is not possible to discuss violence against non-heterosexual orientations without also considering prejudice against gender expressions that deviate from heteronormativity. Thus, deviations from virile and heterosexual masculinity for men, or from delicate femininity for women, whether in clothing, ways of walking and speaking, hobbies, and so forth, are sufficient grounds for stigmatizing an individual as homosexual (Bourdieu, 2003).

Both stigma and prejudice are initially defined as negative attitudes that some individuals hold toward specific values of others. Discrimination, in turn, is understood as a behavioral response resulting from these negative attitudes or, as frequently described in the literature, a concrete manifestation of stigma or prejudice. In more colloquial terms, stigma and prejudice may be understood as the theoretical dimension, whereas discrimination is regarded as the practical expression (Monteiro; Villela, 2013).

The causal relationship between sex and gender identity, which extends into issues of sexuality, creates expectations that must be met in order for individuals to avoid various forms of reprisal (Devide, 2024). One of the participants’ statements effectively synthesizes the central issue of this study:

“The stigma associated with the statements ‘combat sports are for men’ and ‘dance is for women.’ These are viewpoints that poorly reflect the depth of both practices and ultimately stereotype their practitioners” (Participant 39).

According to Monteiro and Villela (2013), both prejudice and stigma are related to processes of categorization, labeling, stereotyping, and social rejection. Just as stigma and prejudice may lead to discrimination, their underlying processes are quite similar. It is essential to recognize that practices which label, confine, limit, and stigmatize individuals only reinforce discrimination and exclusion. Instead, efforts should be directed toward expanding possibilities for inclusion, enabling individuals, through bodily practices and sports, to exercise their citizenship and freedom, thereby constituting themselves as social subjects (Goellner, 2010).

This study indicates that, in both combat sports and dance, issues related to sexuality may constitute grounds for discrimination and prejudice. This underscores the importance of fostering environments that are more welcoming and respectful of sexual diversity. The findings reveal that, despite a general perception

of inclusion, reports of verbal aggression, psychological violence, and stigmatization remain frequent, particularly in contexts associated with more rigid heteronormative gender norms.

Conclusion

The data collected suggest that both combat sports and dance encompass a diversity of sexual orientations. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of reports indicate experiences or observations of prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, variations are observed in the perceived inclusiveness of these practice environments, with the majority of respondents considering them to be either inclusive or neutral. The main challenges faced by practitioners of combat sports and dance with non-heteronormative sexual orientations include psychological violence, prejudice, and verbal aggression, in addition to context-specific difficulties present in both settings.

Despite advances over the years toward greater acceptance of sexual diversity, bodily practices such as dance and combat sports still preserve outdated attitudes and ideas that merely reinforce the persistence of stigma and prejudice in society. This indicates that, for genuine change to occur, a continuous effort in education and awareness is required both within and beyond the environments in which these practices take place.

As a fundamental proposal for addressing this scenario, it is essential to incorporate ongoing discussions into the education and training of teachers and professionals who work with bodily practices, not limited to dance and combat sports. The primary focus should be on undergraduate programs (both teaching degrees and bachelor's degrees) in Physical Education, Dance, and Pedagogy, given that these bodily practices are not confined solely to the field of Physical Education. Such discussions may take place particularly within required coursework, but also through elective courses and research groups, in addition to continuing professional development for educators and graduates from these programs.

It is also important to highlight the relevance of this topic in schools, clubs, sports teams, and artistic groups. These settings can promote greater awareness through training initiatives and lectures, fostering the understanding that bodily practices do not define individuals' gender and/or sexuality, thereby contributing to the reduction of prejudice and stigma related to diversity.

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Recebido em: 17/11/2025
Aprovado em: 07/02/2026