

Diversity through adversity: Adjustment profiles and protective factors of sexual and gender minority students in Portuguese schools

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ABSTRACT

Negative school experiences, such as bullying, compromise the well-being and mental health of adolescents, particularly those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+). The aim of the current study was to identify different profiles of psychological adjustment among students according to their exposure to risk (higher levels of bullying victimization) and evidence of psychological adjustment (lower levels of anxiety), as well as to compare these profiles in relation to (i) participants' age and sexual and gender identity, and (ii) internal and external protective resources. The study used data collected by the FREE research project in Portugal through an online questionnaire among 1,169 students, with a mean age of 16.2 years ($SD = 1.20$), of which 47.1 % identified as LGBTQ+. Four adjustment profiles were identified: unchallenged, resilient, distressed, and at-risk. Sexual and gender minority students, particularly those who identify as trans and non-binary, were overrepresented in the maladjusted profiles (at-risk and distressed) and underrepresented in the normative profile (unchallenged). Furthermore, internal resources such as a higher self-esteem and lower levels of sexual identity concealment seemed to have a protective effect. Students' acceptance of LGBTQ+ students and perception that school was safe for LGBTQ+ students revealed a protective effect for all students, whereas teachers' acceptance and access to school information and support for LGBTQ+ issues revealed a protective effect for sexual and gender minority students only. Implications for the improvement of school climate and intervention with students and teachers are discussed.

1. Introduction

Adolescents' well-being and mental health are often compromised by negative school experiences, such as bullying victimization (De Camargo, Rice, Thorsteinsson, & Rice, 2022; Moore et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) students are in a disadvantaged position compared to their cisgender heterosexual (cis heterosexual) peers, as they are preferential targets of school violence, including general and bias-based bullying (Coulter, Herrick, Friedman, & Stall, 2016; Martín-Castillo, Jiménez-Barbero, del Pastor-Bravo, & M., Sánchez-Muñoz, M., Fernández-Espín, M. E., & García-Arenas, J. J., 2020; Toomey & Russell, 2016; UNESCO, 2019). In addition, among LGBTQ+ individuals, those who are trans and gender diverse or who identify with a plurisexual sexual orientation face specific challenges which add vulnerability to their personal development, including macro and microaggressions, transphobic bullying and institutionalized

cisnormativity (McBride, 2021; Pompili et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2017; Salway et al., 2019; Scandurra, Mezza, Maldonado, & Bottone, 2019). Research has also highlighted that students who have a nonconforming gender expression are preferential targets of bullying victimization (2018; Gordon, Conron, Calzo, Reisner, & Austin, 2016), with negative impacts on their mental health (Lowry et al., 2018). Besides compromising academic achievement and school belonging, and promoting truancy (Moyano, del Sánchez-Fuentes, & M., 2020), negative school climates have been associated with higher levels of substance use, emotional distress, anxiety or suicidality among sexual and gender minority students (Camargo, 2022; Gower et al., 2018; Peter et al., 2016; Tracey et al., 2016).

According to the minority stress model (Meyer, 1995, 2003), the wellbeing of sexual and gender minorities is undermined by a spectrum of stressors that range from the distal level (through homophobic and transphobic events) to the proximal level (through the internalization of prejudice, the expectation of rejection, and the concealment of identity).

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Both risk and protective factors play a role in these experiences, by aggravating or buffering the impact of bias and discrimination (Meyer, 2003, 2015). The minority stress model has proven useful in investigating LGBTQ + youth's experiences and coping responses (Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020). Concurrently, research on resilience has revealed that, despite adversity, some youths can develop a positive adjustment and thrive (Hillier, Kroehle, Edwards, & Graves, 2020; Meyer, 2015). This last body of research has focused on the role that protective factors and strategies can play in fostering resilience and positive development among LGBTQ + youths (Damon, 2004; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009), such as inclusive school policies (Day, Ioverno, & Russell, 2019; Sousa & Gato, 2023), support from teachers and colleagues (Leonard, 2022; Mintz et al., 2021; Price, Hill, Liang, & Perella, 2019), or individual coping strategies (McGowan, Wright, & Sargeant, 2022; Poteat, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2018).

The main purpose of this study was to identify different psychological adjustment profiles among LGBTQ + and cis heterosexual youths in the school context, as well as analyzing differences across profiles according to sexual and gender identity dimensions and internal and external protective factors. The study focuses on specific experiences and mental health outcomes of sexual and gender minority students when compared to their cis heterosexual peers, by identifying distinct adjustment patterns to risk. The procedure involved a cluster analysis that took into account exposure to bullying and anxiety levels. Following the person-centered resilience model, it further aimed at validating the conceptual scheme distribution of individuals into distressed, vulnerable or at-risk, normative or unchallenged and resilient (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Freitas et al., 2017a; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Shramko, Toomey, & Anhalt, 2018; Vázquez et al., 2023), in a sample of LGBTQ + and non-LGBTQ + students.

A subsequent analysis of the distribution of participants across clusters according to their age and sexual and gender identity as well as differences among clusters regarding internal and external protective factors allowed to assess the specific role played by each of the considered factors in buffering the effect of adversity and promoting resilience.

The study uses data collected in Portugal by The FREE Project – Fostering the Right to Education in Europe, a research project led by University of Ghent that gathered data from thirteen European countries. The current study first and last authors were responsible for data collection in Portugal.

1.1. The Portuguese context for LGBTQ + students in schools

In Portugal, where the present study was conducted, significant efforts have been made over the last two decades both by civil society sectors and successive governments to recognize and protect LGBTQ + people's rights ((Fernandes, Alves, Ioverno, & Gato, 2022); Saleiro, Ramalho, de Menezes, & Gato, 2022). Important landmarks are the inclusion of the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (1976) (1976, Amended 2005), same-sex couples' right to marriage (Law n. 9/2010) and adoption (Law n. 2/2016), recognition of gender identity self-determination for trans persons (Law no. 7/2011 Law n. 38/2018), as well as protection against discrimination in the access to goods and services, placing Portugal among the European and worldwide countries with the higher inclusion rates in the law (Europe, 2023). Changes in the law also aimed at tackling homophobia and transphobia in the school context and protect sexual and gender minority students, including protection against bias (Law 51/2012), LGBTQ + inclusive sex education (Law 60/2009) and criteria for trans youths self-determination and use of social name (Law n. 28/2018). Portugal has also signed several international agreements with the aim of tackling homophobia and transphobia in the school context (e.g., UNESCO's Call for Action). Simultaneously, non-governmental organizations have been implementing initiatives to improve school climate, on occasion with the support of public funding (Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de

Género e Direção Geral da Educação, 2023).

A recent thread of research also started to examine the experiences of LGBTQ + youths in the Portuguese school context (Freitas, D'Augelli, Coimbra, & Fontaine, 2016; Gato et al., 2020a; Santos and Esteves, 2023; Santos et al., 2023 (Fernandes, Santos, & Gato, 2022)) and homophobic bullying in particular (António, Guerra, & Moleiro, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2016; Santos, Silva, & Menezes, 2018). A study on school climate ($N = 663$) revealed that almost two thirds of these students heard homophobic remarks regularly, and in more than half the situations the school staff did not intervene, which resulted in 36.8 % reporting feeling unsafe and skipping classes (Pizmony-Levy, Freeman, Fernandes, Gato, Moleiro, Leal, & Nunes, 2018). Conversely, a more recent study revealed that more than two thirds of sexual and gender minority students feel that at least some or the majority of their classmates are supportive and feel comfortable to be open about their identity around them (Fernandes, Santos, & Gato, 2022). In a different study using the same sample, LGBTQ + students reported seeing less evidence of inclusive policies and displayed worse wellbeing than their cis heterosexual peers (Sousa & Gato, 2023). Still, a more in-depth knowledge of the experiences of these youths in schools that enables the design and implementation of inclusive policies customized to fit their specific needs is missing (LGBTQI Inclusive Education Report, 2022). The current study aimed at filling this research gap, by building knowledge on a country from an understudied region that has undergone such significant changes in the recognition and protection of LGBTQ + peoples' lives (Gato, 2022). Additionally, knowledge about different experiences within the LGBTQ + spectrum, as well as the role that other intersectional identities may play in these people's experiences are still lacking (Crenshaw, 1997; Nogueira, 2013).

1.2. Beyond stigma: A resilience approach to the study of psychological adjustment

Recent research with youths from vulnerable groups has focused not only on the impact of stressors deriving from discrimination and bias, but also on how different protection mechanisms and resources can buffer their effect and promote a positive adjustment (Bujorean, 2023; Espelage et al., 2019; (Fernandes, Alves, & Gato, 2023); Freitas, Coimbra, & Fontaine, 2017b). According to the minority stress model, individuals' coping efforts play a role in the adaptation to stressful events, but the path towards successful adaptation, or resilience, also relies on the challenges and opportunities at display in the social environment, which may include aspects such as legal protection of minorities or community resources (Meyer, 2015). Likewise, the social ecological definition of resilience stresses the role of the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem in the activation of individuals' capacities to face risk, through a process of navigation and negotiation of resources that pursues positive development (2012; Ungar, 2011). In the case of oppressed populations, resilience can also result from community efforts to reinforce a shared identity (Kirmayer, Dandaneau, Marshall, Kahenttonni Phillips, & Williamson, 2021). Contrary to the classical studies that focused on negative outcomes and challenges faced by at risk minority populations, the concept of resilience, in its variety of uses and conceptualizations, has highlighted other dimensions and provided a new frame for research on psychological well-being (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). This thread of research identified extensive evidence of positive outcomes despite adverse contexts and the presence of risk factors. It relies on the identification of resources or mechanisms that can be external, such as cultural or social dynamics, family or other community support, but also internal assets such as psychological skills and coping strategies (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). These resources or assets can help positively adjust to negative situations by buffering negative psychological outcomes and when fostered, in the case of adolescents, can promote positive youth development (Curran & Wexler, 2017; Lerner et al., 2009). In the case of LGBTQ + youths, these protective factors can operate on an external

level, including, for example, school-inclusive policies and social support from school staff or students' peers, or on an internal level, including psychosocial characteristics, as well as the ability to disclose one's identity, break sexual and gender norms and even personal agency (for a review see (Fernandes, Alves, & Gato, 2023)).

1.2.1. Internal protective factors

To analyze the role of individual level features, we asked all participants to assess their self-esteem. Internalized homophobia and concealment of sexual orientation in school were also evaluated in the case of LGBTQ + participants. These were our chosen internal protective factors.

Self-esteem is an important dimension in youth's development. It is a self-regulatory process that has been identified in literature as an individual level protective factor, associated with resilience in youths of lower income families (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003) and with better mental health outcomes among sexual minority youths (Parmar, Tabler, Okumura, & Nagata, 2022). Additionally, self-esteem has also been identified as a predictor of life satisfaction for adolescents who are victims of bullying (Lázaro-Visa, Palomera, Briones, Fernández-Fuertes, & Fernández-Rouco, 2019).

Due to experiences of discrimination and its anticipation, many sexual and gender minority youths are compelled to conceal their identity (Meyer, 2003; Pachankis, Mahon, Jackson, Fetzner, & Bränström, 2020), with negative consequences to their wellbeing and mental health (Riggle et al., 2016). Conversely, the capacity to disclose one's minority identity and being open to others can have a positive effect on child and adolescent development (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014) and act as a protective factor against bias and discrimination (Feldman & Wright, 2013; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; McGowan et al., 2022). The distinction between concealment behaviour and nondisclosure as two distinct stigma management processes, and the specific effects of concealment in individuals' psychological well-being was considered (Jackson & Mohr, 2016). For this study, we proposed that higher levels of identity concealment behaviour indicate maladjustment whereas lower levels indicate a more positive adjustment.

Besides identity concealment, the internalization of stigma is another proximal stressor identified in the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003, 2015), with negative consequences for personal development and mental health (Flood, McLaughlin, & Prentice, 2013; Solomon, McAbee, Åsberg, & McGee, 2015). Conversely, lower levels of internalized stigma have been associated with higher self-acceptance and sense of pride and therefore identified as a protective factor against adversity (Higa et al., 2014).

1.2.2. External protective factors

To understand the role of external protective factors within the school context, we chose to evaluate participants perception of students' and teachers' acceptance of LGBTQ + students, as well as the level of safety for these students, and the access to information and support on sexual and gender minority issues. Support from teachers contributes to foster positive experiences of LGBTQ + youths in school (Coulter et al., 2016; Leonard, 2022; Parmar et al., 2022; Price et al., 2019). In the Portuguese context, support from teachers was found to be associated with lower levels of truancy and a higher sense of school belonging (Gato et al., 2020a; Pizmony-Levy et al., 2018).

Literature has also highlighted the protective role of acceptance and support from school peers towards LGBTQ + students (Evans & Rawlings, 2021; Mintz et al., 2021). While contributing to improve school climate, it also reduces mental health risks such as suicidal thoughts (Russell & Toomey, 2013).

For many sexual and gender minority youths, the perception of a safe school climate has been associated to more positive school experiences (Day et al., 2019) as well as to lower chance of self-harm behaviours (Taliaferro, McMorris, & Eisenberg, 2018) and suicidal ideation (Whitaker, Shapiro, & Shields, 2016). Perception of safety can also contribute

to higher confidence in adults' support, truancy prevention and improved academic outcomes among trans and gender diverse students (Russell, Anderson, Riggs, Ullman, & Higgins, 2020).

The important role played by inclusive school policies and interventions regarding bullying has been highlighted by some authors (e.g., Hall, 2017). Schools that provide LGBTQ + inclusive policies are perceived as safer and more supportive, and are associated with more positive experiences and better school environments among LGBTQ + students (Day et al., 2019). In particular, school policies and resources that address the experiences of trans students seem to have a positive effect in their overall school experience (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013b).

2. The current study

Previous studies that aimed at exploring resilience processes among adolescents used a classification process to interpret differences between groups, according to their level of exposure to risk and adversity (e.g., high, medium/mixed or low) and psychological adjustment profiles (e.g. good, medium/mixed or poor, concerning a specific outcome) (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Freitas et al., 2017a). Cluster analysis has been used to identify different patterns of adjustment and to understand the role of protective factors in different contexts with LGBTQ + youths (Freitas et al., 2017a; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Shramko et al., 2018). More recently, this research strategy was used to identify how sexual and gender minority youths and young adults coped with the adversities generated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Vázquez et al., 2023). In these studies, four main adaptative or maladaptive profiles have been identified: (i) individuals who have low exposure to risk, but nevertheless display low levels of psychological adjustment; (ii) people with low levels of risk exposure and high levels of adjustment; (iii) individuals who face strong adversity but who also present high levels of adjustment; (iv) people who are at risk and also present evidence of poor psychological adjustment. From these classifications, individuals can be labelled as (i) Distressed or vulnerable, (ii) Normative or unchallenged, (iii) Resilient, and (iv) At-risk (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Freitas et al., 2017a; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Shramko et al., 2018).

The objectives of the current study were (i) to identify psychological adjustment profiles among LGBTQ + and cis heterosexual youths in school context, (ii) to analyze differences between adjustment profiles according to age and sexual and gender identity dimensions, and (iii) to inspect differences in students' distribution across adjustment profiles according to internal and external protective factors. To respond to these objectives, bullying was used as the adversity variable and anxiety as the adjustment variable. Besides age, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex assigned at birth and gender expression were used as participants' characterization variables. Self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and concealment of sexual identity were selected as internal protective factors. Teachers' and student's acceptance of LGBTQ + students, perception of school safety, and LGBTQ + school information and support were selected as external protective factors.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Our convenience sample was composed of students attending Portuguese schools between 14 and 19 years old ($M = 16.2$; $SD = 1.24$). Two-thousand and eighty-three entries were initially registered in the survey platform. After examining the data, we excluded 47 participants who failed to provide their consent for the use of the information, 34 participants that did not fit the required age interval, 452 participants that had only completed the initial sociodemographic questions, and 30 participants who proved to not take the survey seriously by responding to a trap question. We also considered as a requirement the completion of the instruments measuring the variables used in this study. Thus, we

eliminated six participants who did not provide information regarding their sexual orientation, 50 participants that responded to less than six out of seven items in the instrument used to measure the risk variable (bullying) and 310 participants that did not respond to one of the items on the anxiety scale (comprising two items in total). After the elimination of these participants, a total of 1,169 questionnaires were considered valid. In terms of participants' sexual orientation, 53.3 % ($n = 623$) identified as heterosexual and 46.7 % ($n = 546$) as non-heterosexual. Among non-heterosexual participants, 16.7 % ($n = 195$) identified as bisexual, 9.2 % ($n = 107$) as gay or lesbian, 8.2 % ($n = 96$) as questioning, 6.3 % ($n = 74$) as pansexual, 2.5 % ($n = 29$) as queer, 2.4 % ($n = 28$) as "other" sexual orientation, and 1.5 % ($n = 17$) as asexual. Regarding their gender identity, 89.9 % ($n = 1,046$) identified as cisgender, of which 66.2 % ($n = 774$) identified as cisgender women and 23.3 % ($n = 272$) as cisgender men. Approximately one in 10 participants ($n = 123$; 10.5 %) identified as non-cisgender, of which 4.1 % ($n = 48$) identified as non-binary, 3.1 % ($n = 36$) as questioning, 1.4 % ($n = 16$) as trans men, 1.2 % ($n = 14$) as "other" gender identity, 0.4 % ($n = 5$) as trans women, and 0.3 % ($n = 4$) as intersex. All participants attended schools located in the Portuguese territory, comprising the mainland and the Autonomous Regions of Madeira and Azores.

Education in Portugal is free and compulsory until students reach the age of 18. The education system is structured around three different key stages. The first one consists of pre-school education, from the age of three. The second stage is basic education and is divided into three cycles: the first cycle from the 1st to the 4th year, the second cycle from the 5th to the 6th year and the third cycle from the 7th to the 9th year. The third key stage consists of secondary education, from the 10th to the 12th year. Since data collection was targeted at youths from 14 to 19 years old, it comprised students from the third cycle of basic education and students from the secondary level. Only 12 % ($n = 122$) of the participants attended the 3rd cycle of studies (7th to 9th grade) and 88 % ($n = 1,039$) attended the secondary cycle of studies (10th to 12th grade). The majority of participants belonged to the high affluence (53.3 %), and middle affluence (41.6 %) socioeconomic status, with only 5.1 % situated in the low affluence status Boudreau and Poulin, 2009. Most of the participants reported being born in Portugal, with a minority reporting being born ($n = 57$; 4.9 %) or having lived ($n = 40$; 3.4 %) in another country most of their lives. A little more than half ($n = 536$; 50.8 %) reported being either atheist or agnostic, and four out of ten ($n = 425$; 40.2 %) identified as Catholics.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Sociodemographic characteristics

The questionnaire included questions about participants' age, religion, country of birth, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex assigned at birth, and gender expression. Participants were asked which terms best described their current sexual orientation (heterosexual, lesbian or gay, bisexual, queer, questioning/not sure, asexual, pansexual, or other). Additionally, a composite variable distinguishing monosexual (gay and lesbian) from plurisexual (bisexual, queer, questioning, and pansexual) identities was created (0 = monosexual and 1 = plurisexual). Participants were also asked to select which term best described their gender identity (woman, man, trans woman, trans man, non-binary/gender queer, questioning, or other). A new variable labelled gender was computed, with three options: (1) woman, comprising cis and trans female participants, (2) man, comprising cis and trans male participants, and (3) other, comprising non-binary, questioning and other non-binary identities. Furthermore, participants were asked to identify which was their sex assigned at birth (male or female). Regarding gender expression, two items tapped into how other people looked at participants' mannerisms and appearance (e.g., "How do you think people would describe your appearance, style or way of dressing?"). Response options for both items ranged on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (*very feminine*) to 7 (*very masculine*) (Wylie, Corliss,

Boulanger, Prokop, & Austin, 2010). The scale presented excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.92$). We averaged the two items and compared this result with the information provided on sex assigned at birth. If the gender expression was very feminine (1 to 3) and the sex was female, the result was labelled as conforming. If the gender expression was very feminine (5–7) and the sex assigned at birth was masculine, the result would be non-conforming. The intermediate score (4) was labelled as androgynous. These options were converted into a new composite variable with three categories: (0 = Non-conforming, 1 = Androgynous, and 2 = Conforming).

3.2.2. Risk factor

Considering previous research focusing on how a negative school climate affects more vulnerable students, in particular sexual and gender minority youths (Coulter et al., 2016; Martín-Castillo et al., 2020; Toomey & Russell, 2016), bullying was the chosen risk factor. To tap into this experience, the California Bullying Victimization Scale (Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, & Tanigawa, 2011) was used. The scale comprises seven items referring to different forms of bullying and requires the participants to identify the frequency in which they had been subjected in the previous month of on-site school attendance (e.g., being teased or called names by another student). Participants rated the items through a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*several times per week*). Higher scores indicate a higher frequency of bullying victimization. The scale reliability, as measured by the Cronbach's alpha, was deemed good ($\alpha = 0.79$). The adaptation of all instruments for the present study comprised the following steps: translation, back translation, and testing of items' facial validity through a process of thinking aloud by four adolescents.

3.2.3. Internal protective factors

Self-esteem was one of the chosen internal protective factors. Its role as a protective factor had been previously identified in a systematic review of updated literature focusing on LGBTQ + students in the school context (Fernandes, Alves, & Gato, 2023). Other internal protective factors identified in literature include self-acceptance (Higa et al., 2014), ignoring and downplaying stigma (van Bergen & Spiegel, 2014; Freitas et al., 2017b) and outness (Kosciw et al., 2015; Msibi, 2012), which have justified the use of internalized stigma and sexual orientation concealment, two of the available measures in the FREE research project protocol.

To assess youths' self-esteem, a 4-item version of the Self-esteem Rosenberg Inventory (Rosenberg, 1989; adapted by Santos & Maia, 2003) was used (e.g., "I am generally satisfied with myself"). Participants rated their agreement with the items on a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 4 (*totally agree*). Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The scale reliability was deemed very good ($\alpha = 0.87$).

To investigate sexual minority participants' (LGBQ; $n = 526$) negative attitudes toward their own sexual orientation (e.g., "I feel that being LGBQ is a personal shortcoming for me"), a short version of the Internalized homophobia Scale (I; Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009) was used. Participants rated their agreement with the items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of internalized homophobia. The scale reliability was considered good ($\alpha = 0.72$).

The Sexual Orientation Concealment Scale (Jackson & Mohr, 2016) comprises six items assessing the degree of concealment behaviours of sexual orientation in the past 12 months, among the subsample of LGBQ students (e.g., *I concealed my sexual orientation by telling someone that I was straight or denying that I was LGBQ*). Response options varied from 0 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*All the time*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of sexual orientation concealment. The scale reliability was deemed good ($\alpha = 0.81$).

3.2.4. External protective factors

Literature has also highlighted the protective role of teacher and

students' support, as well as inclusive policies in schools and perception of safety (Fernandes, Alves, & Gato, 2023). To investigate the presence of these external protective factors, we assessed participants' (i) perception of school safety for LGBTQ + students, (ii) teachers' and students' acceptance of LGBTQ + students, and (iii) access to information and support about LGBTQ + issues in school. To assess teachers' acceptance, participants were asked the following question: "To what extent teachers in your school accept", followed by four items (e.g., "boys who are not as 'masculine' as other boys"). To assess students' acceptance, participants were asked "To what extent students in your school accept", followed by the same four items. To assess school safety, participants were asked "is your school a safe place for", followed by the same four items. Response options for teachers' acceptance, students' acceptance and school safety varied from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (Cohen, McCabe, & Michelli, 2009). The scales' reliability was deemed very good ($\alpha = 0.97$ for teachers' acceptance, 0.94 for students' acceptance and 0.94 for school safety).

To assess the presence of inclusive school policies, we assessed the level of perceived access to information about LGBTQ + issues in school. Participants were asked where they would go to get information and support concerning sexual orientation, gender identity and other LGBTQ + issues. The following response options were available: *no, I don't know where to go; a school counsellor; a teacher; someone from the school board; other adults in school (school staff); a friend from school; other*. A variable was computed with two answer options: (0) *no, I don't know where to go*, and (1) corresponding to all the other options. Instruments assessing external protective factors were answered by all participants, regardless of how they self-identified in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, but to enable comparisons separate analysis were conducted for students who identified as cis heterosexual or LGBTQ +.

3.2.5. Adjustment indicator

The choice of anxiety as an adjustment variable was based on previous research that highlighted the direct impact of bullying on adolescents' mental health, including anxiety (Moore et al., 2017) and how different levels of anxiety could be interpreted as an adjustment to risk (Miranda & Storms, 1989; Parra, Bell, Benibgui, Helm, & Hastings, 2018). One question with two items from the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-2; Plummer, Manea, Trepel, & McMillan, 2016) was used to assess students' anxiety symptoms. Using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*almost every day*), students were asked to assess the frequency of the following feelings of anxiety in the past two weeks: *feeling nervous, anxious, or very tense; not being able to stop or control worrisome thoughts*. The instrument's reliability was deemed good ($\alpha = 0.83$).

3.3. Procedure

This study used secondary data analysis from a larger study, the FREE Project – Fostering the Right to Education in Europe. The main goal of the study was to evaluate the inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in European schools. Originally conceived in English language, this cross-national study was conducted in thirteen countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The FREE project was initially funded by the Research Foundation – Flanders (Grant number 12V8120N).

In Portugal the survey was placed in an online server of the host institution between September of 2020 to July of 2021, the duration of a school year. Participants were informed about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and it took on average 15 to 30 min to complete the survey. Contact details of the research team and LGBTQ + support services were displayed at the end of the survey. There was no financial compensation for participating. The study was advertised on social media, with specific accounts created on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Advertised content (posts, reels, carousels, lives,

short videos) to scout participants within the age range and interests of the study or directed at their legal guardians or education professionals were created and listed on these social media platforms. Non-governmental LGBTQ + organizations and community groups, selected social media influencers, and 55 student unions were invited to disseminate the survey. The invitation was also emailed to education professional organizations, regional and national public education federations, youth associations' federations, school psychologists' associations, and directly to 673 public school boards. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the host institutions. The approval covered the possibility for youths under the age of 18 to participate in the study without the consent of their legal guardians. This waiver was deemed necessary since requiring parental authorization could inhibit participation and, in some cases, expose participants to the risk of negative reactions.

3.4. Data analysis

To analyze the patterns of adjustment to risk factors, a cluster analysis was conducted to identify different profiles of adaptation. An exploratory hierarchical cluster analysis was initially performed, using the Between-groups linkage method and Euclidean-squared distance metric. Considering the suitable number of clusters in accordance with conventions (Everitt, 2011; Hair et al., 2010), the statistic gap was analyzed to interpret the cluster options. Finally, in order to signal the number of clusters that resulted from the hierarchical analysis, a non-hierarchical k-means cluster analysis was conducted. A Welch ANOVA was used to analyze differences between clusters in the grouping variables bullying and anxiety. To analyze the distribution of participants throughout the clusters according to age, sexual and gender identity dimensions, and internal and external protective factors, Chi Square and ANOVA tests were conducted. Cramer's V (ϕ_c), eta squared (η^2), and omega squared (ω^2) were used to measure effect sizes. Magnitude thresholds ranged from small ($\phi_c = 0.01$; $\eta^2 = 0.01$; $\omega^2 = 0.01$), moderate ($\phi_c = 0.11$; $\eta^2 = 0.06$; $\omega^2 = 0.06$), and large ($\phi_c = 0.31$; $\eta^2 = 0.14$; $\omega^2 = 0.14$) (Cohen, 2013). Version 29th of IBM SPSS Statistical Package was used to conduct all the analyses.

4. Results

First, Pearson correlations were analyzed, revealing a positive correlation between the risk variable 'bullying' and the adjustment variable 'anxiety' (Table 1).

A preliminary analysis revealed that 16 participants were outliers and were excluded. A range of 2 to 6 options for cluster solutions was initially assessed through the hierarchical cluster analysis. The four-cluster solution was deemed the most suitable. The final option explained 72 % of the variance, and the univariate effects analysis suggested that there were significant differences on the variables, which enabled the identification of four unique adjustment profiles. A graphical representation of the interaction between levels of adversity and adjustment can be seen in Fig. 1.

4.1. Characterization of psychological adjustment profiles

As can be seen in Table 2, the cluster with the highest number of participants showed the lowest levels of bullying (adversity) and the lowest levels of anxiety (adjustment) and was labelled Unchallenged. The second most populated cluster was labelled Distressed and featured high levels of anxiety despite low levels of bullying. The third one showed high levels of bullying, as well as the highest levels of anxiety and was therefore labelled as the At-risk cluster. Lastly, the group with the lowest number of participants displayed low levels of anxiety despite high levels of bullying, and for that reason was labelled as Resilient.

Table 1
Correlations between Adversity and Adaptation Variables.

	<i>N</i>	Min.	Max.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sk</i>	<i>Ku</i>	<i>r</i>
1. Bullying	1136	1.00	3.71	1.54	0.54	1.15	1.19	0.29***
2. Anxiety	1137	1.00	4.00	2.52	1.01	0.13	−1.22	

Note.*** $p < .001$.

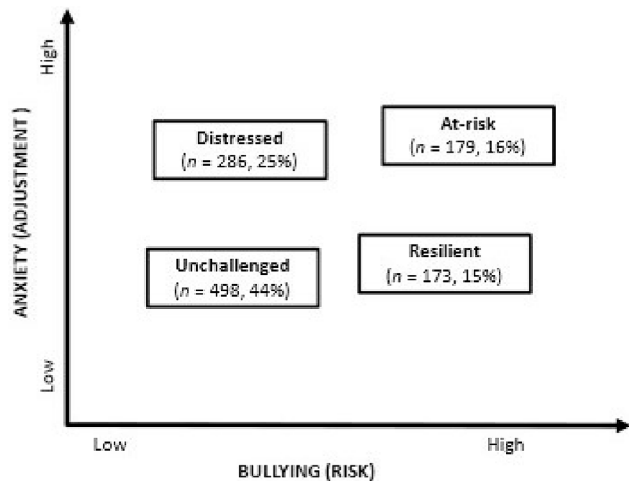


Fig. 1. Schematic positioning of the four patterns of adjustment to the psychosocial effect of bullying.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Bullying and Anxiety.

Measure	At-risk (<i>n</i> = 179)	Resilient (<i>n</i> = 173)	Unchallenged (<i>n</i> = 498)	Distressed (<i>n</i> = 286)	Significance test
Bullying	2.29 (0.44) ^a	2.10 (0.40) ^b	1.21 (0.22) ^d	1.32 (0.27) ^c	$F(3, 405) = 539^{***}$, $\omega^2 = 0.68$
Anxiety	3.64 (0.44) ^a	1.94 (0.44) ^b	1.73 (0.53) ^c	3.54 (0.43) ^a	$F(3, 482) = 1369^{***}$, $\omega^2 = 0.78$

Note. Groups sharing the same superscript are similar. Groups with different superscripts differ at $p < .05$ or less; *** $p < .001$.

4.2. Characterization of profiles as a function of age and sexual and gender identity dimensions

As shown in Table 3, we inspected how participants were distributed across profiles, considering their age, sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTQ + vs. cis heterosexual). Age was not associated with the distribution of participants. The at-risk and distressed profiles were mostly populated by LGBTQ + participants, while cis heterosexual participants were more represented in the unchallenged and resilient profiles.

We also inspected differences in the distribution of LGBTQ + participants across the four profiles taking into consideration their sexual orientation, gender identity, sex assigned at birth and gender expression. For gender identity a variable was computed dividing the LGBTQ + subsample into cisgender (cisgender women and men) and non-cisgender participants (trans women, trans men, non-binary, questioning, and other). For sexual orientation, the same procedure was followed, dividing the LGBTQ + subsample into monosexual (lesbian women and gay men and plurisexual (bisexual, pansexual, and queer persons). Results showed that sexual orientation was not associated with the distribution of participants across the four profiles. Cisgender

participants were overrepresented in the unchallenged profile and underrepresented in the at-risk profile. Conversely, non-cisgender participants were underrepresented in the unchallenged profile and overrepresented in the at-risk profile. Regarding gender, participants who identified as women and 'other' identity were overrepresented in the at-risk profile and those who identified as men were overrepresented in the unchallenged profile. Similarly, participants assigned females at birth were overrepresented in the at-risk and distressed profiles and underrepresented in the unchallenged and resilient profiles. As for gender expression, non-conforming and androgynous participants were overrepresented in the at-risk profile and gender conforming were overrepresented in the unchallenged profile.

4.3. Profiles and protective factors

Next, we analyzed differences among participants from different profiles regarding internal and external protective factors. Internal protective factors included (i) self-esteem, (ii) concealment of sexual orientation, and (iii) internalized homophobia. External protective factors included (i) students' acceptance of LGBTQ + students, (ii) teachers' acceptance of LGBTQ + students, (iii) perception of safety at school for LGBTQ + students, and (iv) access to school information and support about LGBTQ + issues. Differences were inspected separately for cis heterosexual and LGBTQ + participants, except in the case of internalized homophobia and concealment of sexual orientation (only for LGBTQ + participants). Descriptive statistics for internal and protective factors can be found in Table 4.

As can be seen in Table 5, significant differences were found for self-esteem. Cis heterosexual participants in the unchallenged profile presented the highest levels of self-esteem, followed by resilient participants and those in the at-risk and distressed profiles. Regarding LGBTQ + participants, a similar pattern was observed. No significant differences among profiles were detected for internalized homophobia. However, significantly higher levels of sexual orientation concealment were found in the at-risk profile and lower levels in the unchallenged profile.

Regarding external protective factors (Table 6), cis heterosexual participants in the unchallenged profile rated students' acceptance of LGBTQ + students as higher than their peers in the at-risk profile. LGBTQ + participants from the distressed and unchallenged groups rated student's acceptance of LGBTQ + students as higher than the ones in the resilient and at-risk profiles. Concerning teachers' acceptance of LGBTQ + students, no differences were found for cis heterosexual participants. However, differences were observed among LGBTQ + participants: those in the unchallenged and distressed profiles rated teachers' acceptance as higher than those at the at-risk and resilient profiles. Regarding perception of school safety for LGBTQ + students, the highest score was attributed by cis heterosexual participants from the unchallenged cluster, differing significantly from the resilient cluster. For LGBTQ + participants, the safety ratings were the lowest for the at-risk and resilient groups, differing from the safety ratings in the unchallenged and distressed groups (highest values). When asked if they knew where or who to reach to seek support or get information on LGBTQ + issues no differences were found among cis heterosexual students across profiles. LGBTQ + participants who answered in a positive way were overrepresented in the unchallenged profile, and those who answered in a negative way were overrepresented in the at-risk profile. All results for external protective factors can be seen on Table 6.

Table 3

Characterization of Profiles as a function of age and sexual and gender identity dimensions.

Age and sexual and gender identity dimensions	Unchallenged (n = 418)	At-risk (n = 179)	Resilient (n = 173)	Distressed (n = 286)	Total	Significance test
Age	16.2 (1.27)	16.3 (1.29)	16.2 (1.23)	16.3 (1.16)	1117	$F(3, 1113) = 0.92; p = .43$
SOGI^a						
Cis heterosexual	306 ¹	74 ⁰	96	135 ⁰	611	² (3) = 28.1***, $\varphi_c = 0.16$
LGBTQ+	192 ⁰	105 ¹	77	151 ¹	525	
Sexual orientation						
Monosexual	39	20	24	25	108	² (3) = 6.80
Plurisexual	93	67	39	91	290	
Gender identity						² (3) = 8.07*, $\varphi_c = 0.12$
Cisgender	162 ¹	75 ⁰	62	114	413	
Non-cisgender	30 ⁰	30 ¹	15	37	112	
Gender						
Woman	332	132 ¹	104 ⁰	192	760	² (6) = 29.1***, $\varphi_c = 0.11$
Man	140 ¹	26 ⁰	55 ¹	62 ⁰	283	
Other	24 ⁰	21 ¹	14	31 ¹	90	
Sex assigned at birth						
Female	355 ⁰	156 ¹	117 ⁰	228 ¹	856	χ^2 (3) = 26.3***, $\varphi_c = 0.15$
Male	143 ¹	23 ⁰	56 ¹	58 ⁰	280	
Gender Expression						
Non-conforming	32 ⁰	28 ¹	16	31	107	= 40.2***, $\varphi_c = 0.15$
Androgynous	22 ⁰	23 ¹	19	28	92	
Conforming	344 ¹	84 ⁰	99	177	704	

Notes. ^a SOGI = Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity; 0, 1—Significant association (chi-square statistics): 0 = lower frequency of cases observed/expected; 1 = higher frequency of cases observed/expected; *** $p < .001$; $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$.*

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Internal and External Protective Factors.

	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sk</i>	<i>Ku</i>
Self-esteem	1130	1	4	2.41	0.77	−0.18	0.07
Concealment of sexual orientation	369	1	5	2.03	0.85	0.80	0.15
Internalized homophobia	376	1	5	1.84	0.80	1.01	0.53
Students acceptance	952	1	7	5.28	1.59	−0.09	−0.73
Teachers' acceptance	947	1	8	6.00	1.60	−0.44	0.08
School safety	1094	1	7	4.99	1.64	−0.53	−0.68

5. Discussion

Through a cluster analysis and using bullying as a risk factor and anxiety as an adjustment outcome, this study identified four types of adjustment profiles for LGBTQ + and cis heterosexual students: unchallenged, resilient, distressed, and at-risk. This result validates the resilience model classification identified in previous research. As expected, LGBTQ + students, and in particular trans and non-binary students, but also non-conforming students in terms of their gender expression, were overrepresented in the at-risk and distressed profiles

and underrepresented in the unchallenged profile. The study also assessed the role of different resources previously identified in the literature as protective for sexual and gender minority students' well-being. Regarding internal resources, higher self-esteem and lower concealment of one's sexual orientation had a protective effect. As for external factors, students' acceptance of LGBTQ + students and school safety for LGBTQ + students had a protective effect for all students, and teachers' acceptance of LGBTQ + students and school information and support for LGBTQ + students were protective for LGBTQ + students only.

5.1. Composition of psychological adjustment profiles: How do students navigate adversity?

The distribution of participants among the four adjustment profiles was not independent of their sexual orientation, gender identity, their sex assigned at birth and gender expression. Students who identified as cisgender, heterosexual, assigned male at birth and whose gender expression was conforming composed the most significant portion of the unchallenged profile, whereas LGBTQ + students and assigned female at birth were less likely to form part of this group but were overrepresented in the at-risk and the distressed profiles. These results concur with previous findings highlighting higher rates of bullying victimization for

Table 5

Internal protective factors distribution for each cluster.

Measure	Unchallenged	At-risk	Resilient	Distressed	Difference test
Self-esteem (cis hetero)	2.89 (0.68) ^a	1.92 (0.60) ^c	2.44 (0.64) ^b	2.16 (0.71) ^c	$F(3, 603) = 62.4***, \eta^2 = 0.24$
Self-esteem (LGBTQ +)	2.61 (0.67) ^a	1.84 (0.59) ^b	2.66 (0.64) ^a	1.91 (0.62) ^b	$F(3, 518) = 58.7***, \eta^2 = 0.25$
Internalized homophobia	1.73 (0.75)	1.95 (0.84)	1.91 (0.87)	1.83 (0.78)	$F(3, 371) = 1.53$
Concealment of SO	1.90 (0.81) ^b	2.26 (0.91) ^a	2.01 (0.82) ^{a, b}	2.04 (0.83) ^{a, b}	$F(3, 364) = 2.97*, \eta^2 = 0.024$

Notes. *** $p < .001$; Different letters represent statistically significant different values and are ordered to show the increase/decrease of values.

Table 6

External protective factors distribution for each cluster.

Measure	Unchallenged	At-risk	Resilient	Distressed	Difference test
Students' acceptance(cis heterosexual)	5.23 (1.41) ^a	4.57 (1.56) ^b	4.74 (1.31) ^{ab}	5.04 (1.53) ^{ab}	$F(3,466) = 4.36^{**}$, $\eta^2 = 0.027$
Students' acceptance (LGBTQ +)	5.41 (1.43) ^a	4.80 (1.60) ^b	4.72 (1.43) ^b	5.42 (1.46) ^a	$F(3,421) = 6.20^{***}$, $\eta^2 = 0.042$
Teachers' acceptance(cis heterosexual)	5.70 (1.22)	5.26 (1.29)	5.40 (1.16)	5.58 (1.34)	$F(3,372) = 1.97$
Teachers' acceptance (LGBTQ +)	5.38 (1.33) ^a	4.95 (1.42) ^b	4.83 (1.30) ^b	5.43 (1.39) ^a	$F(3,349) = 3.68^{*}$, $\eta^2 = 0.031$
School safety(cis heterosexual)	5.09 (1.50) ^a	4.69 (1.57) ^{ab}	4.57 (1.50) ^b	5.05 (1.55) ^{ab}	$F(3,581) = 3.68^{*}$, $\eta^2 = 0.019$
School safety (LGBTQ +)	5.32 (1.66) ^a	4.33 (1.98) ^b	4.30 (1.63) ^b	5.42 (1.60) ^a	$F(3,222) = 11.4^{***}$, $\omega^2 = 0.063$
Access to information(cis heterosexual)					$\chi^2(3) = 3.18$
Know	156	36	52	57	
Does not know	77	23	30	43	
Access to information (LGBTQ +)					
Know	108 ¹	49 ⁰	29	78	$\chi^2(3) = 9.25^{*}$, $\phi_c = 0.10$
Does not know	39 ⁰	40 ¹	20	42	

Notes. Different letters represent statistically significant different values ($p < .05$) and are ordered to show the increase/decrease of values; 0, 1 – Significant association (chi-square statistics): 0 = lower frequency of cases observed/expected; 1 = higher frequency of cases observed/expected; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

LGBTQ + adolescents (Myers, Turanovic, Lloyd, & Pratt, 2020; Toomey & Russell, 2016), as well as higher levels of negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety (De Camargo et al., 2022; D'Augelli, 2002; Wilson & Cariola, 2020).

The fact that LGBTQ + students were overrepresented in the distressed profile (low levels of bullying and high levels of anxiety) suggests that even when bullying is ruled out as a risk factor, other adversity factors may play a role in the maladjustment of sexual and gender minority youths, which might include experiences of isolation, abuse, parental rejection or violent reactions in the community (Hall, 2018). These findings also suggest that interventions aimed only at bullying prevention might not be effective in bringing LGBTQ + students' to similar levels of mental health outcomes as their cis heterosexual peers (Robinson & Espelage, 2013).

When analysing differences between monosexual and plurisexual participants from the sexual minority subsample, no differences were found across the adjustment profiles in this study. A possible explanation for this result could reside in the fact that most studies on plurisexual identities focused on adult individuals, whereas our young participants could have not yet had the opportunity to openly explore their sexual/relational orientation and thus avoid the specific adversity challenges previously identified in the literature. Conversely, the results could concur with today's increasing acceptance and youths' identification with plurisexual identities (Jones, 2022).

When taking into consideration participants' gender identity, students who identified as non-cisgender (trans, non-binary, genderqueer, questioning, or other) were overrepresented at the at-risk group. This finding confirms the added vulnerability that non-cisgender youths experience due to specific challenges resulting from transphobic bias and discrimination (Martín-Castillo et al., 2020), which often include institutionalized cisnormativity in educational settings (McBride, 2021). Literature has also highlighted the added vulnerability faced by youths with non-binary identities (non-binary, genderqueer, and others), expressed in negative mental health outcomes such as higher levels of substance abuse, anxiety and depression, more barriers in the access to gender identity related health services, lower levels of self-esteem (Scandurra et al., 2019), and experiences of invalidation of their identities (Johnson, LeBlanc, Deardorff, & Bockting, 2020). The results also concur with literature emphasizing the role of non-conforming gender expression in the added vulnerability to risk and associated negative mental health outcomes (2018; Gordon et al., 2016; Lowry et al., 2018).

5.2. Psychological adjustment profiles and internal and external protective factors: Which resources protect against adversity?

Associations between potential internal (self-esteem, sexual orientation concealment, and internalized homophobia) and external

(teachers' and students' acceptance of LGBTQ + students, perception of school safety for LGBTQ + students, and access to school information and support on LGBTQ + issues) protective factors and the four adjustment profiles were explored for cis heterosexual and LGBTQ + students. Regarding internal protective factors, cis heterosexual students' levels of self-esteem differed across all four profiles, with the unchallenged profile featuring the highest and the at-risk profile the lowest levels of self-esteem. In the LGBTQ + group, a similar pattern was observed. These findings concur with previous literature that signals self-esteem both as a protective factor and a predictor of resilience and life satisfaction for adolescents and young adults (Buckner et al., 2003; Lázaro-Visa et al., 2019; Parmar et al., 2022).

Internalized stigma is one of the proximal stressors identified in the minority stress model and its negative impact on mental health has been widely documented (Meyer, 2003; Yolaç & Meriç, 2020). Conversely, lower levels of internalized stigma have been signalled as a protective factor for sexual and gender minority populations (Higa et al., 2014). In our sample, levels of internalized homophobia did not differ among sexual minority students from different profiles. In fact, the mean score for all the respondents was relatively low ($M = 1.84$), which may indicate that sexual minority students with higher levels of internalized stigma might not feel comfortable to participate in a study that required them to self-identify in terms of their sexual orientation and gender identity and explore their thoughts on sexual and gender diversity in the school context. The study used a convenience sample with a selected sample of participants from middle to high affluence status. This might suggest a more protective environment, and as a result a lower variability in internalized stigma.

The protective effect of openness about sexual identity has been reported in literature. Openness has been associated to a more positive sense of identity, validation and connection with peers, as well as to lower levels of depression among LGBTQ + youths facing discrimination (Feldman & Wright, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2015; McGowan et al., 2022). We have hypothesized that low levels of identity concealment behaviour could correspond to a protective effect. Concurring with this hypothesis, our results showed that LGBTQ + students in the unchallenged group were the least likely to conceal their sexual orientation when compared to all the other groups.

Regarding external protective factors, both LGBTQ + and cis heterosexual participants in the unchallenged and the distressed profiles rated students' acceptance of LGBTQ + peers significantly higher than the ones in the at-risk and resilient cluster. This result concurs with the hypothesis that students' support is a protective factor not only for sexual and gender minority youths (Evans & Rawlings, 2021; Mintz et al., 2021) but for the whole students' community. It's also important to note that students from these clusters (unchallenged and distressed) were the ones who reported lower levels of bullying victimization, and

thus might lack the same awareness of teachers' responses to students' adversity as their peers in the at-risk and resilient clusters.

Perception of teachers' acceptance of LGBTQ + students did not differ across profiles among cis heterosexual students. Conversely, differences were found among the LGBTQ + sample, with the participants in the resilient profile scoring lower than participants in all the other profiles regarding perception of teacher's acceptance. These results concur with previous findings that have highlighted the importance credited to supportive teachers' in fostering a positive school climate, in particular for sexual and gender minority students (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Leonard, 2022; Mintz et al., 2021; Price et al., 2019).

Significant differences were also found between adjustment profiles regarding the perception of school safety for LGBTQ + students. Cis heterosexual students from the unchallenged profile rated school safety significantly higher than those belonging to the distressed profile. LGBTQ + students in the unchallenged and the distressed profiles perceived school as safer than those in the at-risk and resilient profiles. Once again, these findings suggest that, independent of their sexual orientation and gender identity status, those students who are less exposed to bullying tend to evaluate school as a safer environment. Nevertheless, the results partially corroborate previous findings that found an association between school safety and well-being among sexual and gender minority adolescents (Russell et al., 2020; Taliaferro et al., 2018; Whitaker et al., 2016).

Students were asked if they knew who they could reach for information and support on LGBTQ + issues. No differences were found between profiles regarding this variable among the cis heterosexual sample. Instead, LGBTQ + students who answered yes to this question were overrepresented in the unchallenged profile and those who answered no were overrepresented in the at-risk profile. These results confirm the protective effect of LGBTQ + inclusive school practices for LGBTQ + students (Day et al., 2019; Greytak et al., 2013a; Hall, 2017; Sousa, 2022).

5.3. Limitations and future directions

The study is not without limitations. First, data collection occurred during a school year affected by the Pandemic COVID19, which may have posed additional challenges to LGBTQ + youths compounding their vulnerability in contexts of global uncertainty (Platero & López-Sáez, 2020; Vázquez et al., 2023). In fact, research has highlighted that the experience of social isolation due to lockdown measures has contributed to increased levels of anxiety and increased sensitivity to stress among sexual and gender minority youth (Cerqueira-Santos, de Ramos, & Gato, 2021; Gato et al., 2020a; Hastings & Hodge, 2023; Malmquist et al., 2023a; Malmquist et al., 2023b). However, the effect of these measures might have been mitigated by the fact that participants were asked to reflect on the past period (week, month or school year) of on-site school attendance.

Additionally, due to the length of the survey, some of the measures had a lower rate of responses since they were placed further at the end. In our LGBTQ + sample, levels of internalized homophobia were relatively low, which might indicate a potential bias that excluded students more affected by stigma from participation in the study. As mentioned before, the study used sexual orientation concealment as predictor of positive variables, even though that effect has not been previously identified in literature (Jackson & Mohr, 2016). Data collection through LGBTQ + associations and informal community groups affected the sample composition in terms of an overrepresentation of LGBTQ + identities. Furthermore, the sample mainly comprised white Portuguese middle and high affluence individuals, thus potentially neglecting the experiences of other sociodemographic profiles. This is relevant especially when considering the role of intersectional identities in the experiences of adolescents (Crenshaw, 1997; Nogueira, 2013). Also, the sample's gender imbalance prevented some of the analysis due to insufficient number of participants who identified as male. As such, a

more representative sample of Portuguese youth should be collected in future studies.

This is a correlational study and therefore no causal assumptions should be made. In this sense, qualitative methodologies could enable a more in-depth analyses and depict a more complete portrait of challenges face by these youths in the school context. Although it was not the aim of the study, the impact of recent inclusive legislation and the effectiveness of school policies tackling homophobic and transphobic bias should motivate further and cross-sectional and longitudinal research. Finally, further efforts should be invested in scouting youths with different adjustment patterns, to identify sources of protection and tailor interventions to their specific needs.

6. Conclusions

To understand adversity in school context, in particular negative events such as bullying, it is important to understand the differentiated impact that it has on youths. This study confirms previous knowledge on the experiences of LGBTQ + youths in school context, highlighting their added vulnerability when facing adversity and how their well-being and mental health can be compromised. Additionally, extending previous findings, the study brings new evidence of positive outcomes despite adversity. Different internal and external protective factors can play an important role in preventing negative outcomes, promoting resilience, and enabling positive mental health among all students, and particularly those who identify as LGBTQ +. This knowledge is particularly important in the face of current and future potential threats on LGBTQ + rights (Godzisz & Viggiani, 2019). Interventions should take in consideration the role of these protective factors in fostering a more positive school climate, and endeavours should be made to promote students' self-esteem, guarantee school safety for the whole school community, enable safe spaces for LGBTQ + outness and visibility, as well as invest in LGBTQ + specific resources, including training for school staff and students' awareness and capacitation.

Author contributions

1st author: sample collection, literature review, statistical analysis, data interpretation, writing of the manuscript; 2nd author: statistical analysis, data interpretation, revision of the final manuscript; last author: research design, implementation of the study, sample collection, revision of the final manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

8. Institutional review board statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the host institution.

Informed consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The datasets for this article are not publicly available to protect the participants' confidentiality. Requests for datasets should be sent to the corresponding author.

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