

Conceptualization and Measurement of LGBTQ+Bullying: A Systematic Review of Two Decades of Research

Conceptualización y medida del bullying LGBTQ+: Una revisión sistemática de dos décadas de investigación

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Abstract: Scientific interest in LGBTQ+ bullying, usually named homophobic bullying, has increased exponentially over recent decades. Nevertheless, the proliferation of studies has not yet resulted in an integrated and consistent theoretical framework, finding instead a wide conceptual and operational diversity that has complicated the understanding of the phenomenon. This paper aims to identify common elements in the extant scientific literature, and to go further integrating definitions and parameters to assess this type of bullying. A systematic review was conducted on LGBTQ+ bullying following the PRISMA criteria. After applying several inclusion and exclusion criteria, the search returned a total of 158 articles, which were analyzed in depth. The results showed a predominant view of the phenomenon focused mainly on victimization, in terms of the role analyzed, and on sexual orientation, as a key parameter at a conceptual level. The results highlight the need to adopt a more inclusive outlook on the phenomenon integrating other roles and, above all, other dimensions of sexuality: sex assigned at birth, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. It is essential to clarify and operationally define the phenomenon, taking its psychosocial complexity into consideration and distinguishing it from other related but distinct expressions of peer violence, such as general bullying.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Homophobic Bullying, Gender-based Bullying, Sexual Minority Youth, Systematic Review.

1. Introduction

Homophobic bullying has become a subject of scientific research over recent decades. The first studies focusing on this topic were published during the mid-1990s by authors such as D'Augelli (1998), Rivers (1996) and Robinson and Rivers (1996). These early works, and those that followed over the course of the subsequent decade, focused specifically on violence towards lesbian, gay and bisexual (from here on LGB) youths during the high-school years (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Since that time, scientific interest in the topic has increased as a result of its importance to young people's wellbeing, and indeed, the phenomenon has been recognized by UNESCO (2017, 2018) as a structural problem that needs to be prevented and eradicated in schools throughout the world.

The empirical evidence gathered in those initial studies clearly shows the greater prevalence of bullying aimed at sexual minority youths (e.g., Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020; Toomey & Russell, 2016). However, in spite of the increase in the number of studies analyzing this phenomenon, little progress has yet been made towards developing a clear theoretical framework and conceptualization from which to approach and understand it. Although this may (partly at least) be due to its complexity, it is also a result of the changing nature of social attitudes to sexual diversity. Studies focusing on this issue often differ substantially in terms of key aspects, such as how they conceptualize the phenomenon, whom they view it as being aimed at, and which instruments are used to measure it.

1.1. *Conceptualizations of LGBTQ+¹ Bullying.*

It is difficult to establish the key elements that make LGBTQ+ bullying a specific phenomenon that differs (to a certain degree) from other types of bullying. In general terms, it is viewed as a type of stigma-based bullying; or in other words, a type of bullying that has social structural violence towards a specific group at its core (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Lessard, Watson & Puhl, 2020). In the case of LGBTQ+ youths, this violence is rooted in a well-established system of beliefs and attitudes that legitimizes certain bodies, sexual desires, identities and gender expressions over others, and as such, is often very subtle and difficult to identify. For its part, the term bullying refers to a specific type of violence that occurs at the microsystem level, among peers. Whereas structural violence operates at a more symbolic level and is therefore more difficult to identify, especially in terms of language and the official or customary practices and norms that govern the day-to-day life of schools, violence among students is more evident in interactions between specific classmates. This complexity raises a number of questions regarding the defining characteristics of the phenomenon: should all aggression towards sexual minorities be considered homophobic? Does homophobic aggression always form part of a pattern of homophobic bullying? Does it depend on the characteristics of the victim, the motivation of the perpetrator, or both? The fact that these questions are so difficult to answer highlights the need to delimit and separate the different (albeit undoubtedly interrelated) violent phenomena that occur in schools in relation to the discrimination and stigma associated with sexual diversity. So, one of the main objectives of this review is to offer a clear and comprehensive conceptualization of the phenomenon considering those characteristics identified as key elements in the scientific literature of these two decades.

1. This term refers to the spectrum of sexual and gender diversity: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and any other sexual and gender minorities.

1.2. Who are the Main Targets?

Several authors have argued that this type of bullying is mainly aimed at LGB youths, or those perceived as such, thereby reinforcing the idea that (real or perceived) sexual orientation is the fundamental element on which this type of violence focuses (Berlan et al., 2010; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). However, other studies have found that, in addition to LGB youths, adolescents who are unsure about their sexual orientation, questioning students (Birkett, Espelage & Koenig, 2009; Williams et al., 2003), those with LGBT friends or relatives (Orue & Calvete, 2018), and those perceived as not conforming to existing gender norms and stereotypes (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016) are also targets of this type of bullying. Consequently, the dimensions of sexuality that are considered to be the core target of this particular type of bullying, and which are therefore assessed in studies, often differ.

1.3. Assessment

The difficulty distinguishing between general bullying and LGBTQ+ bullying is also reflected in the way the latter has been assessed in different studies. Some authors focus on homophobic behavior or aggression, such as the use of homophobic insults (e.g., Hatchel et al., 2020; Tucker et al., 2016); others measure general aggression that is directed towards LGB or any other sexual minorities students (e.g., Duong & Bradshaw, 2014; Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020); and yet others analyze perceived motivation, asking victims, perpetrators and/or bystanders about the reasons behind actions against those who are, or are perceived as, being gay or lesbian (e.g., Barnett et al., 2019; Prati, 2012). The conceptual delimitation, assessment and operationalization of LGBTQ+ bullying is therefore a complex task, as it may not be enough to assess only homophobic-specific aggression-victimization, nor indeed to assess only general bullying targeted at LGBTQ+ students.

1.4. The Present Study

The conceptual and operational diversity present in studies to date has significantly hampered attempts to advance our knowledge of this issue. The literature review carried out reveals that, despite growing interest in this phenomenon, studies focusing on it differ substantially in terms of: a) the relevant dimensions related to sexual minorities analyzed: sexual orientations, gender identities; sex assigned at birth; gender expressions; b) the type of violence considered to be homophobic: general vs. specific; and c) the key elements used to distinguish between general and LGBTQ+ bullying. This study aims to offer a comprehensive, clear and precise conceptualization of LGBTQ+ bullying that integrates all those outlooks developed to date. The specific aims are as follows:

- a) To identify the general characteristics of the studies carried out to date on homophobic bullying and/or bullying targeted at LGBTQ+ youths.
- b) To characterize this type of bullying by identifying those elements about which there is a high degree of consensus in the different scientific conceptualizations developed.
- c) To analyze the different measures used to assess this phenomenon.

2. Method

To fulfill the different aims proposed, we carried out a systematic review of the literature published over two decades, 2000 to 2020. The review process was conducted in

accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses; Liberati et al., 2009) criteria and examined studies on homophobic bullying and bullying targeted at sexual minorities.

2.1. Search strategy

An information search was conducted in the principal databases of Psychology and Education, APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, Psychology Database and ERIC, as well as in Scopus, a multidisciplinary database. The search terms were selected to make the search as exhaustive as possible, while still focusing on the topic under study. They were as follows: *bullying AND LGB**; *bullying AND homophobic**; *bullying AND sexual minority*; *bullying AND gender-based*.

The search was conducted between July and October 2020.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The systematic review included all articles that complied with the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined below.

The inclusion criteria were:

- a) Studies focusing on homophobic bullying or peer victimization at school, targeted at sexual minority youth.
- b) Studies that include a definition or conceptualization of homophobic or sexual minority bullying, or some kind of measure of this construct.

The exclusion criteria were:

- a) Duplicate articles.
- b) Studies in which the topic of interest was a violence phenomenon different from bullying, such as stigma or discriminatory attitudes.
- c) Studies focusing on contexts other than school settings.
- d) Documents that were not scientific articles (books, book chapters, technical documents, editorials, doctoral dissertations, etc.).
- e) Studies that were not original: systematic reviews and meta-analyses.
- f) Studies written in a language other than English.
- g) Articles with full text not available.
- h) Studies that used the same sample and the same instrument to assess homophobic bullying: these were considered duplicates and only the article containing the most detailed information was included in the review.

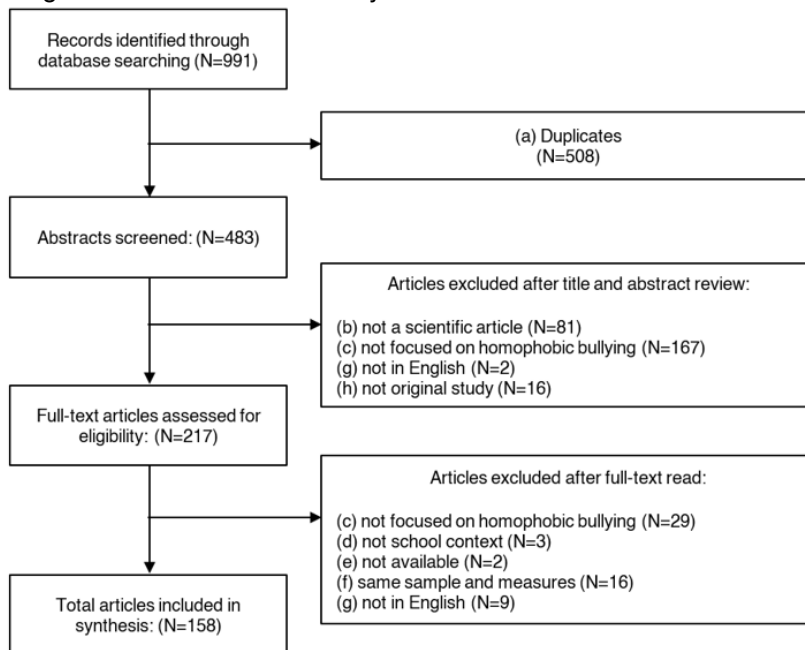
2.3. Data coding and analysis strategy

The coding process was carried out in several stages (see Figure 1). After the initial identification of the records in the databases, the titles were reviewed to identify possible duplicates. Of the 991 initial records found, 483 remained after all duplicates were eliminated. During the second phase, the titles and abstracts were screened to identify records that complied with the inclusion but not the exclusion criteria. The number of articles remaining after this phase was 217. During the third phase, the full texts of the articles were reviewed to determine which complied definitively with the proposed criteria. Finally, 158 articles were included in the review.

Once the articles had been selected, we compiled a content analysis file with all the relevant dimensions, as a prelude to submitting the information gathered to rigorous analysis (see Appendix). We followed a cyclical process in which, after an initial proposal for the category file, three of the authors systematized the information from various articles, working independently from each other, and then compared results in a feedback session during which they discussed those categories around which there was no consensus (inter-rater agreement). This process was repeated in an iterative fashion until the analysis instrument (namely the category file) was completely unambiguous. This version was then taken as the definitive one. The information from all 158 articles was coded using this instrument. Once the articles had been read, we randomly selected 20% of them (32 articles) and asked someone who was not involved in the project and who had not been trained in this specific topic to complete the category file. Next, we calculated the percentage of inter-rater agreement for the principal indicators used: study methodology; sampling method used; context of the sample; roles studied; types of aggression; and types of measurement instruments. Percentages of over 85% were found in all cases.

To describe the general characteristics of the studies, we analyzed the following parameters: year of publication; location or geographical area of origin of the sample; study methodology; sampling method used; context of the sample; informants; and roles analyzed. Also, in those studies in which informants were those involved in cases of bullying, we analyzed their age, the sample size and the sample composition in terms of gender and sexual orientation. To determine how bullying was conceptualized and characterized, we analyzed the terms used to refer to it. Subsequently, we analyzed whether or not a specific definition of the phenomenon was given, and identified the common elements of the characterizations included in the different studies.

Figure 1: Flow Chart of The Systematic Literature Review Process.



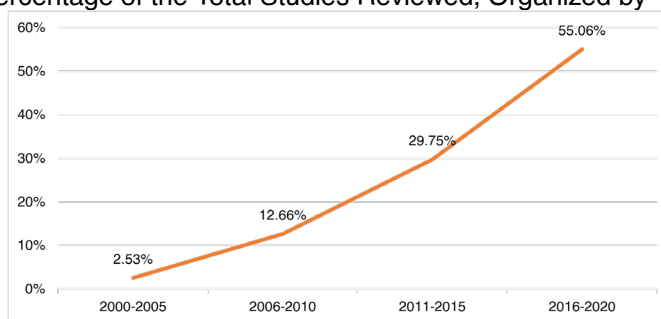
Finally, to explore the measures used in the studies, we analyzed the type of instrument and, in the case of self-report instruments, we recorded the following parameters: type of response, inclusion (or not) of an explicit definition in the instrument itself; the roles assessed; the time period of the aggression; and the content of the items.

3. Results

3.1. General Characteristics of the Studies

The results of the analysis indicate a clear progression in the publication of studies in this field in the two studied decades, with a substantial increase in the number of publications being evident from 2015 onwards. Specifically, over half of all the articles reviewed had been published between 2016 and 2020 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of the Total Studies Reviewed, Organized by Year (N=158).



As shown in Table 1, most of the studies adopted a quantitative approach (e.g., Horn & Schriber, 2020; Poteat, Slaatten & Breivik, 2019), nearly a fifth part, a qualitative approach (e.g., Preston, 2016; Varjas et al., 2006) and few of them used a mixed approach (e.g., O'Donoghue & Guerin, 2017; Reisner et al., 2020). The sampling method most commonly used was incidental or convenience, used in nearly 9 out of 10 studies.

Regarding the geographical origin of the samples, approximately two-thirds of the studies are American (95 from the USA, eight from Canada, one from Mexico, and one from Brazil); one-quarter are European (nine from the UK, eight from Spain, seven from Italy, seven from Ireland, five from Portugal, two from the Netherlands, and one each from Belgium, Cyprus, Finland and Norway); four are from Asia (two from Taiwan, one from China and one from Israel); three of them from Oceania (two from New Zealand and one from Australia); two from Africa (one from South Africa and one from Nigeria); and two transnational (one from the US, Brazil, the UK, Portugal and Canada; and one from Bulgaria, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK).

The most frequent context from which the samples were recruited was the educational one, followed by LGBTQ+ associations and the virtual context. Informants were most frequently students (e.g., Sterzing et al., 2017; Williams, Banks & Blake, 2018) and adults informing about their own students' school years (e.g., Panfil, 2014; Roberts, 2008); followed by educators: teachers, school principals, school staff (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Bradley et al., 2019; Brown & Buthelezi, 2020; Kolbert et al., 2015); families (e.g., Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; O'Higgins-Norman, 2009); and other agents related

to LGBTQ+ community, such as leaders of LGBTQ+ youth non-profit organizations or community-based social services support workers (e.g., Daley et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2018).

In terms of the roles analyzed, most of the studies focused on victims (with 93 analyzing only this role, e.g. Okanlawon, 2017), followed by bystanders (with 24 analyzing only this role, e.g. Warwick & Aggleton, 2014); bullies (with seven analyzing only this role, e.g. Merrin et al., 2018); and bully-victims (with one analyzing this role exclusively, Moran, Chen & Tryon, 2018).

In relation to sample size and participants' age, only studies in which informants were students (current or past) were considered. The mean age of the students in non-retrospective studies (i.e., those focusing on students' current situation) was mid-adolescence; in retrospective studies (i.e., those referring to the past), informants were in their thirties. Given the high degree of disparity in sample size, in an effort to render the results of the review more informative, studies were divided, using quartiles, into four groups: a) small samples (32 studies), with between 10 and 237 participants; b) medium samples (33 studies), with between 245 and 912 participants; c) large samples (32 studies) with between 924 and 5730 participants; and d) very large samples (32 studies), with between 5766 and 4,977,557 participants.

Table 1: Synthesis of Main Characteristics of The Reviewed Studies (N=158)..

Methodology	Qualitative (19.0%)		Quantitative (72.8%)		Mixed (8.2%)
Sampling	Incidental/ Convenience (87.9%)		Random (7.6%)		Both (4.4%)
Origin of the Samples	America (66.5%)	Europe (26.6%)	Oceania (1.9%)	Africa (1.3%)	Asia (2.5%) Transnational (1.3%)
Study Context	Educational centers (70.1%)	LGBTQ+ Associations (13.3%)	Both (2.52%): School and LGBTQ+ associations		Other (13.2%): Online platforms, online and newspaper advertisements, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Amazon's Mechanical Turk turkey...
Informants	Students (81.6%) Current reports (N=118) Retrospective adults report (N=11)		Educators (13.2%): Teachers, school principals, school staff and other educational agents.		Mix (5.1%): Teachers and students; parents, teachers and students; families/families and children; media content; school counselors, attorneys, leaders of a LGBTQ+ youth non-profit organization, community-based social services support workers; school administrators
Roles ^a	Victim (76.6%)	Bully (19.0%)	Bully-victim (2.5%)		Bystander (23.4%)
Age ^b	Current reports: 8 to 31 (M=16.30, SD=1.74)		Retrospective studies: 12 to 80 (M=32.05, SD=9.87)		
Sample Size ^b	Small (M = 95.8, SD= 78.1)	Medium (M = 503.1, SD= 229.0)	Big (M = 2192.0, SD= 1550.3)	Very big (M = 217,080.5, SD= 873,023.0)	
^a Some studies include several roles; results will not add up to 100%					
^b The sample size and age have been calculated just to those studies whose informants were students (N=129).					

In relation to the composition of the samples in terms of gender and sexual orientation, as shown in Table 2, when adolescents or adults reported retrospectively, most studies adopted a traditional binary gender outlook (boys/girls, men/women, male/female), although about 21% also included other categories different to the cisgender one, using

different labels to do so: transgender, trans, gender-fluid, non-binary, etc. In terms of sexual orientation, just over half of the studies included and compared heterosexual with other sexual orientation youngsters, again using different categories; and almost a quarter of the studies focused exclusively on sexual minority youths.

Table 2: Sample Composition, by Gender and Sexual Orientation, of The Reviewed Studies Carried Out with Students or Adults Reporting Retrospectively on Their School Years (N =129).

Sample Composition by Gender		n	%
Male/female; Men/women; Boys/girls		95	73.64
Male/female; Men/Women; AND Transgender/non-binary ^a		13	10.07
Male/female AND Others ^b		3	2.33
Boys/girls; Male/female AND Transgender AND Others ^b		12	9.30
Male; Men		2	1.55
Not informed		4	3.10
Sample Composition by Sexual Orientation			
Heterosexual/Non heterosexual-sexual minorities ^c		73	56.60
Sexual minorities		30	23.3
Heterosexual		1	0.80
Not informed		25	19.40

^a. One study of this category used the label cisgender vs. transgender;
^b Categories used: Gender non-conforming; gender-queer; not quite sure; gender-fluid; non-binary; a-gender, trans-man/transwoman; unsure; intersex;
^c. Labels used: homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, demisexual, asexual, questioning, queer, omnisexual, panromantic, two spirits, bicurious

3.2. Characterization of LGBTQ+ bullying

The terms used to refer to this type of bullying vary widely from one study to another, with over 50 different labels being identified. The most commonly used specific term (found in almost 40% of the studies) was “homophobic bullying”, followed by “homophobic victimization”, present in just over 5% of the articles analyzed. Hardly any of the remaining labels were found in more than one study. Nevertheless, we were able to group the studies in accordance with content (see Table 3).

Table 3: Labels used, in the Reviewed Studies.

	n	%
Homophobic bullying	62	39.24
Homophobic victimization	8	5.06
Terms that include the term bullying specifying to be referred to sexual minority youths (e.g., Bullying among sexual minority youths; LGBTQ bullying; Gender-based bullying; Anti-LGBTQQ bullying; Anti-queer bullying...)	49	31.01
Terms that include victimization referred to sexual minorities (e.g., Anti-LGBT victimization; Gender-based victimization; LGBT victimization; Victimization related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, or expression (SOGI)...))	13	8.23
Terms that include specific harassment (e.g., Gender-based harassment; Homophobic harassment; Harassment to sexual minorities; Sexual and gender-based harassment...)	9	5.70
General terms of bullying and victimization (e.g., Bullying victimization; Peer victimization; School-based victimization...)	25	15.82
Note: Some studies use more than one term; results will not add up to 100%		

As shown in Table 3, most studies combined the term bullying with concepts that allude to sexual diversity: “LGB”, “GLQ”, “LGBT”, “LGBTQ”, “LGBTQQ”, “LGBT+”, “Gender non-conforming”, and “Sexual Minorities”; the next largest group used general terms such as “bullying” and “peer victimization”, although applied to sexual minority youths. As regards the definition of the phenomenon, just under half of the articles reviewed (63; 39.6%) explicitly included a definition whether their own (e.g., D’Urso and Pace (2019), “Homophobic bullying is a set of deliberate actions aimed at denigrating one or more people belonging to a sexual minority or attacking sexual identity, gender, body, behaviors and desires, with verbal [including spreading rumors that someone is gay or lesbian], physical violence/abuse and cyberbullying [e.g., using social media to spread rumors]”), or from other authors (e.g., McCormick and Krieger (2020) used the definition by Rivers (2011), “Homophobic bullying refers to bullying focused on perceived sexual orientation and/or gender expression”). Nevertheless, the results revealed the absence of a commonly-accepted definition.

The elements around which there was a greater degree of consensus in terms of defining this type of bullying were: a) the motivation underlying the aggression; b) those at whom it is directed, i.e., the targets; and c) the type of violence involved. In relation to motivation, almost all studies (156; 98.7%) explicitly mentioned a homophobic motive. In the two studies that did not mention this motivation (Llorent, Ortega-Ruiz & Zych, 2016; Lu et al., 2019), the authors alluded to the greater prevalence of bullying and aggression targeted at sexual minorities, as well as to the vulnerability associated with belonging to a minority group.

In terms of targets (see Table 4), most studies identified sex-gender minorities, although the inclusiveness of the category used varied widely, ranging from the most restrictive studies that only included gays and lesbians (1.3%), to more inclusive ones referred to sexual minorities in the broadest sense of the term (37.3%) or about those who are or appear to be LGB and /or who question or transgress gender norms (31%). As regards the dimensions or forms of violence included in the conceptualization of this type of bullying, around a quarter of the studies analyzed viewed it as involving explicitly homophobic aggression, mainly of a verbal nature. Some also included the act of spreading rumors about the victim’s sexuality. Nevertheless, the majority of the studies analyzed in the review considered this type of bullying to include general aggression (verbal, physical, social, cyberaggression and general sexual aggression), albeit targeted specifically at sexual minorities (see Table 4).

Table 4: Targets and Type of Violence Included to Conceptualize Homophobic Bullying in the Reviewed Studies.

Targets	n	%
Sexual minorities	59	37.3
LG	2	1.3
LGB	30	19.0
LGBT	41	25.9
LGBTQ	21	13.3
Questioning	11	7.0
People who are or seem to be LGB; People whose behavior, dress or appearance transgress gender norms/Gender non-conforming	49	31.0

Anyone	9	5.7
Type of Violence		
Verbal violence: insults, humiliation and mockery, threats...	87	54.7
Homophobic verbal violence: insults and homophobic expressions, humiliation and mockery of appearance, behavior or dress	39	24.5
Physical violence	63	39.6
Social violence: social exclusion, spreading rumors or lies...	28	17.6
Homophobic social violence: Spreading rumors about victims' sexuality	5	3.1
Cyber-aggressions	13	8.2
Sexual violence	9	5.7
Note: Most of studies include several targets and several types of violence; results will not add up to 100%		

3.3. Measures used

The main types of instruments used to assess the phenomenon are outlined in Table 5. Nearly three-quarters of the studies used self-report instruments (e.g., Kurki-Kangas et al., 2019; Peter, Taylor & Chamberland, 2015; Pollitt, Mallory & Fish, 2018), with the next most frequent type being semi-structured interviews (e.g., Marshall & Allison, 2019; Renold, 2002). Other methods were also used, although much less frequently, educators' reports (e.g., Farrelly, O'Higgins Norman & O'Leary, 2016; Meyer, Taylor & Peter, 2015; Nappa et al., 2018); focus groups (e.g., Apostolidou, 2019; Earnshaw et al., 2019); peer nominations (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat et al., 2013b); open interviews (Meyer, 2008); analysis of social media (Paceley & Flynn, 2012); workshops (Pickles, 2019) and school staff reports (Zotti et al., 2018).

Table 5: Type of Measures to Assess Homophobic Bullying.

	n	%
Self-report	116	73.42
Semi-structured interview	27	17.09
Educators' report: teachers and/or school principals	10	6.33
Focus group	4	2.53
Peer nomination	2	1.27
Other: Open interview; Content analysis of social media; Workshop; School staff report	4	2.53
Note: Some studies use several types of instruments; results will not add up to 100%		

Regarding the self-report instruments used to measure the phenomenon, as table 6 shows, the majority of them used a Likert-type response formula, followed by dichotomous options. On the other hand, in relation to definition of the phenomenon assessed, just over 15% explicitly included it. The most commonly assessed role was that of victim and the most frequent time period evaluated were the past year and the past month.

Table 6: Characteristics of The Self-report Instruments Included in The Reviewed Studies (N=116).

Type of Response	N	%
Likert	83	71.55
Dichotomous	18	15.52
Both: Likert and dichotomous	5	4.31
Other: visual analogue scale	1	0.86

Not informed	9	7.76
Explicit Definition of Bullying Included		
Yes	18	15.50
No	98	84.50
Roles assessed ^a		
Victim	98	84.48
Bully	27	23.28
Bystander	12	10.34
Bully-victim	3	2.59
Time Period Assessed		
Last year	31	26.72
Last month	31	26.72
Previous 6 months	4	3.45
Past 3 months	4	3.45
Previous 2 months	5	4.31
Past week	3	2.59
Current year	3	2.59
During school years, high school years or school days	4	3.45
Anytime	10	8.62
Other: Last 2 years; Previous few months	2	1.72
Not included temporary period or not informed	19	16.38
^a Some studies assess several roles; results will not add up to 100%		

As regards the content of the items, as shown in Table 7, many of the studies that opted for self-report questionnaires to assess the phenomenon used instruments that are not specific to this type of bullying, but are rather designed to assess general aggressions and traditional bullying and/or cyberbullying (39.66%). Nevertheless, within this category we observed a large degree of heterogeneity, with four main types of strategy being identified: a) the use of direct items asking respondents whether they have ever been, or how often they have been bullied; b) the use of direct items asking about the frequency of being target of certain types of aggressive behaviors; c) the use of validated general bullying or peer harassment instruments; d) the use of general questionnaires on school climate or young life surveys. Nearly one third of the studies (32.76%) included instruments that specifically refer to homophobic motivation behind the aggression (having been harassed, or harass others, due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or expression), but include general aggression or allude to general bullying. In this sense, apart from direct items, the most commonly used instrument was the one developed by Prati (2012), which is also the only one entitled the “Homophobic Bullying Scale”. It comprises 34 items that measure bullying prompted by the victim being perceived as gay or lesbian, from three perspectives: victim, perpetrator and bystander. Similarly, some authors have adapted general bullying and/or cyberbullying scales including, explicitly, sexual orientation or gender identity (or perceptions of them), as motivations for the aggression (Nappa et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Hidalgo & Hurtado-Mellado, 2019). In addition, around a quarter of the self-report studies (25.86%) included specifically homophobic aggression with the most commonly used instrument being the Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (HCAT) by Poteat and Espelage (2005). This 10-item scale assesses whether someone has used (agent) or been on the receiving end of (target) homophobic language directed at different people. In addition to specifically homophobic aggression, some of the instruments in this category also include homophobic motivation and general aggression or use a combination of instruments of general bullying and homophobic teasing.

Table 7: Self-report Instruments, in The Reviewed Studies, which Assess Homophobic Bullying (N=116).

Authors (date)	Instruments used
General Aggressions (N=46)	
Ash-Houchen and Lo (2018); Austin et al. (2017); Berlan et al. (2010); Burk, Park and Saewyc (2018); Duong and Bradshaw (2014); Goodenow et al. (2016); Huang et al. (2018); Jackman et al. (2020); Kurki-Kangas et al. (2019); Mennicke et al. (2020); Phillips et al. (2017); Proulx et al. (2019); Turpin, Boekeloo and Dyer (2019); Williams et al. (2003); Ybarra et al. (2015); Zou, Andersen and Blosnich (2013).	Direct item/s asking about have been bullied (and/or frequency of have been bullied) in the past (last year, last month...)
Crothers et al. (2017); Hatchel and Marx (2018); Mittleman (2018); Zou and Andersen (2015).	Direct items asking about frequency of bullying victimization behaviors: verbal, physical, relational and/or cyberbullying
Aerts et al. (2014); Aragon et al. (2014); Carrera-Fernández et al. (2013); Elipe, de la Oliva Muñoz and Del Rey (2018); Garaigordobil and Larraín (2020); Hatchel, Merrin and Espelage (2018); Hatzenbuehler, Duncan and Johnson (2015); Johnson et al. (2011); Konishi and Saewyc (2014); Li et al. (2020); Llorent et al. (2016); Lu et al. (2019); Mace, Campbell and Whiteford (2016); Martin-Storey and Crosnoe (2014); Moran et al. (2018); Myers et al. (2017); Poteat, O'Dwyer and Mereish (2012); Rivers and Cowie (2006); Sterzing et al. (2016).	General bullying or peer harassment questionnaires
Ballard, Jameson and Martz (2017); McNamee, Lloyd and Schubotz (2008); Mueller et al. (2015); O'Malley Olsen et al. (2014); Seelman and Walker (2018); Turpin, Rosario and Wang (2020); Webb et al. (2020).	Others instruments such as school or young life surveys
Homophobic Motivation (N=38)	
António and Moleiro (2015); Barnett et al. (2019); Baruch-Dominguez, Infante-Xibille and Saloma-Zuñiga (2016); Beckerman and Auerbach (2014); Blais, Gervais and Hébert (2014); Bouris et al. (2016); Burford, Lucassen and Hamilton (2017); Burton et al. (2013); Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012); Coulter et al. (2017); Day et al. (2019); Day, Snapp and Russell (2016); Drydakis (2018); Fabris et al. (2020); Goldblum et al. (2012); Gower et al. (2017); Greytak, Kosciw and Boesen (2013); Hatzenbuehler et al. (2019); Jomar, Fonseca and Ramos (2020); Jones and Clarke (2008); Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz (2009); Kosciw et al. (2013); Kull et al. (2016); Marx et al. (2019); McConnell et al. (2017); Poteat, DiGiovanni and Scheer (2013a); Poteat et al. (2011); Price-Feeney et al. (2018); Robinson and Espelage (2012); Rodrigues et al. (2016); Rose et al. (2018); Russell et al. (2014)	Direct items: Questions about being teased/bullied (or frequency of being bullied), hit/beaten up, treated unfairly, called bad names or received different forms of aggression (e.g., verbal, physical aggression and via internet posts or blogs) based on their effective or perceived sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and/or gender expression
Nappa et al. (2019); Rodríguez-Hidalgo and Hurtado-Mellado (2019).	Adaptation of general bullying scales or questionnaires including the homophobic motivation of the aggressions ("for being or being perceived LG; due to differences in sexual orientation or gender identity among students")
D'Urso and Pace (2019); Orue and Calvete (2018); Prati (2012); Zotti et al. (2018).	Homophobic Bullying Scale (Prati, 2012) or a version of the scale
Homophobic Aggressions (N=30)	
Camodeca, Baiocco and Posa (2018); Evans and Chapman (2014); Gato et al. (2020); Hillard et al. (2013); Minton (2014); Minton et al. (2008); Parent et al. (2020); Pearlman and Dunn (2016); Peter, Tasker and Horn (2016); Poteat and Vecho (2016); Wernick et al. (2013); Wernick, Kulick and Inglehart (2014).	Direct items: questions about frequency of teasing, jokes or homophobic name-calling, threatening and physically harassing, and/or rumors-spreading because their gender, gender identity or actual or perceived sexual orientation
António, Guerra and Moleiro (2017, 2018).	Direct items: Vignette describing an episode of homophobic bullying (i.e., name-calling)
Collier, Bos and Sandfort (2012); Hatchel et al. (2020); Ingram et al. (2019); Poteat and Espelage (2007); Sánchez-SanSegundo et al. (2019); Tucker et al. (2016); van Beusekom et al. (2015).	Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale, HCAT, (Poteat & Espelage, 2005; 2007) or an adaptation of the scale
Albaladejo-Blázquez et al. (2019); Birkett et al. (2009); Espelage et al. (2015); Espelage et al. (2018); Merrin et al. (2018); Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010); Poteat and Espelage (2005); Poteat and Rivers (2010).	Combination of general bullying assessment and items or instrument to assess homophobic aggressions

The content of the items of two of the studies reviewed, Henrickson (2007) and Jones and Clarke (2008), was not clearly defined, meaning that we did not have enough information to determine whether they included general or specific forms of aggression.

4. Discussion

In this study, we conducted an exhaustive analysis of the extant literature in order to gain a comprehensive overview of LGBTQ+ bullying. Specifically, the study enables us to draw conclusions regarding the three elements explored: a) the characteristics of the studies focusing on this phenomenon; b) its characterization and conceptualization; and c) the assessments carried out.

4.1. *Characteristics of the studies focusing on this phenomenon*

Our review of the literature revealed a gradual increase in the number of studies published on this topic, with the figure rising exponentially from 2016 onwards. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the fact that the vast majority (over two thirds) of the studies reviewed were conducted with samples from the US, with almost all the rest focusing on European samples and only approximately 5% analyzing samples from the rest of the world. Caution should therefore be exercised when generalizing the results reported here and drawing conclusions. This is particularly important in light of the key role played by cultural context in the social consideration of sexual and gender diversity. It should not be forgotten that, according to ILGA World, there are still 69 countries in the world in which consensual sexual activity between people of the same sex is considered a criminal offense, punishable by death in six of them, a fact that serves to highlight the importance of context when dealing with this issue (Ramón et al., 2020).

Most of the studies reviewed were quantitative in nature, with their main limitation being the fact that, in almost nine out of every ten, the samples were incidental, thereby limiting the generalization of the results reported. It is also worth underscoring the low number of studies carried out with informants other than students, such as teachers or family members. Bearing in mind the social-ecological nature of the problem under analysis, it is vital to encourage studies to include a diverse range of informants, in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. In this sense, over three quarters of the studies analyzed focused on victims, which limits our understanding of the phenomenon, fostering a more palliative than preventive outlook. In addition, the lack of attention to perpetrators, bystanders and contextual factors represents a clear limitation on the understanding of the phenomenon, which should be addressed in future studies, which should, as far as possible, strive to integrate the other roles involved in bullying, including that played by the educational context itself.

4.2. *Conceptualization and characterization of the phenomenon*

In relation to the terms used in the articles, the wide variety observed reveals the complex nature of the phenomenon under study, which is in a state of constant flux. Although the most commonly used term was homophobic bullying, due to social changes in the way sexual diversity is perceived, the elements considered to be relevant in relation to aggressors' motivation have become broader, including not only sexual orientation but other aspects such as gender identity and expression also. This highlights the importance

of broadening the way in which we conceptualize the phenomenon, in order to reflect more faithfully the underlying dynamics. Indeed, authors such as Milburn and Palladino (2012) point out that understanding LGBTQ+ bullying as an issue related only to sexual orientation undermines and ignores a significant portion of the research that also takes the importance of the gender component and gender role expression into consideration within this issue. In this sense, and based on the review carried out, we suggest that more inclusive terms, such as sexual diversity bullying or LGBTQ+ bullying, be used in the future, since they reflect the entire spectrum of sexual and gender diversity that may be targeted by this phenomenon.

In relation to conceptualization, it is important to point out that the majority of studies failed to define the phenomenon. This is therefore an aspect that requires improvement. Also, among those studies that do offer a definition, there is practically no consensus at all about any of the dimensions analyzed. The element around which the highest level of consensus was observed was the need to view the phenomenon as a specific type of bullying. This was reflected in many of the definitions given (e.g., "Homophobic bullying is a specific type of bias-based bullying that, as general bullying, happens when a student is frequently and over time exposed to negative actions by one or more aggressors" (António et al., 2018). This implies that the basic elements included in the classic definition of bullying developed by Olweus (1993), namely intent, repetition and power imbalance, must also be present in order for an act of aggression to be considered homophobic bullying. Some studies also use the concept "homophobic harassment" (e.g., Meyer, 2008; Peter et al., 2016), including it within the broader concept of gendered or sexual and gender-based harassment. Meyer (2008) defines gendered harassment as any behavior, verbal, physical, or psychological, that polices the boundaries of traditional heterosexual gender norms and includes (hetero)sexual harassment (or sexual and misogynistic harassment), homophobic harassment, and harassment for gender non-conformity or based on perceived gender identity. Specifically, homophobic harassment, is defined as unwelcome behaviors that can include physical, verbal and non-verbal conduct that denigrate people who are, or are perceived to be, gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer. Harassment for gender non-conformity refers to those targeted due to their gender expression. When harassment is intentional, repeated and directed at a specific person, we talk about bullying. Thus, part of gendered harassment would be gender-based bullying and, more specifically, homophobic bullying and gender non-conforming bullying. For their part, Peter et al. (2016) use the terms homophobic harassment and harassment based on perceived gender identity, as synonyms of bullying. Another related construct used by Goldblum et al. (2012) is gender-based victimization (GBV), a term used to refer to aggression targeted at young people due to their gender expression or identity, and which includes micro-aggressions and other more overt efforts intended to cause discomfort or distress in the targeted individuals. Again, this term is broader than bullying yet, when the aggression is intentional and repeated, it can be considered gender-based bullying. In terms of motivation, although most definitions alluded to a homophobic element, differences were observed in relation to the specific dimension or dimensions of sexuality contemplated. For instance, whereas some authors pointed to the actual or perceived sexual orientation of the victim (e.g., António et al., 2018; Hatchel et al., 2020; Ingram et al., 2019), others also included gender, gender identity or gender expression (e.g., Albaladejo-Blázquez et al., 2019; Brinkman & Manning, 2016; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016), as well as having friends or family who are LGBT (Orue

& Calvete, 2018). Some studies also argue that, in this case, intent or motivation is linked to the maintenance of a certain social hierarchy that attaches greater value to certain bodies, identities, expression and desires (e.g., heterosexual cisgender youngsters with a normative gender expression) than to others that fail to confirm to the predominant canons, and hold that aggression is used as a social control mechanism and a means of establishing status within the hierarchy (e.g., Carrera-Fernández et al., 2013; Collier et al., 2012; Erhard & Ben-Ami, 2015). Authors such as Mahan et al. (2006) highlight the imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim, pointing out that, at school, sexual minority youths rarely, if ever, have a level of power equal to that of their non-sexual minority counterparts, meaning that harassment of sexual minority youths can be construed as bullying.

Other authors distinguish between “heteronormative bullying”, which refers to the underlying heteronormativity present in the school climate, and “bullying based on sexual orientation”, which alludes to aggression against LGB youths (Minton, 2014; Minton et al., 2008; O’Higgins-Norman, 2008). There is also a lack of consensus regarding the specific role played by homophobic verbal violence in LGBTQ+ bullying. Whereas some authors consider it to be an essential part of this type of bullying, arguing that homophobic bullying takes place when general bullying behavior, such as verbal and physical abuse and intimidation, is accompanied by or consists of the use of terms such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “queer” or “lezzie” by perpetrators (Minton, 2014; Minton et al., 2008; Warwick, Aggleton & Douglas, 2001), others view homophobic name-calling or homophobic teasing as an epiphenomenon, strongly overlapping with, but still different from, homophobic bullying (e.g., Espelage et al., 2015; Espelage et al., 2018; Merrin et al., 2018), and yet others consider it homophobic bullying by itself (e.g., Collier et al., 2012; Erhard & Ben-Ami, 2015; Ingram et al., 2019; Sánchez-SanSegundo et al., 2019; Warwick et al., 2001). Indeed, the question of whether this phenomenon forms part of the pattern of bullying or should be considered a specific aspect of it is one of the most controversial issues linked to this topic. The high degree of overlap between traditional bullying and the use of homophobic language or name-calling (e.g., Espelage et al., 2018; Poteat & Espelage, 2005) suggests that the occurrence of both phenomena together may be a sufficient (although not essential) reason to indicate the presence of a pattern of homophobic bullying. Moreover, previous studies have shown how the isolated presence of homophobic name-calling (i.e., not accompanied by any other form of aggression) is extremely unusual, but that when it does occur, it is generally targeted at heterosexual youths and usually has little negative emotional impact, which suggests a pattern different from that of bullying (Elípe et al., 2018), a finding that supports the idea outlined previously in this paragraph.

4.3. Assessment

In terms of assessing homophobic bullying, most of the studies analyzed used self-report measures, although the review also revealed that this term encompassed instruments assessing a range of different aspects (e.g., Coulter et al., 2017; Gato et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Prati, 2012). The instruments used include, in order of frequency from most to least common, general bullying instruments combined with questions about sexual orientation and/or gender identity; instruments in which informants are asked about the motivation behind the aggression, but which also include general bullying; and instruments that include homophobic aggression

and, in some cases, general motivation and aggression also. Although this last type of instrument was the least commonly used, it is nevertheless the most recommended due to its integrating nature, which is necessary given the complexity of the phenomenon under study. Finally, it is important to note that victimization was the most researched area from both a conceptual perspective and in terms of assessment. Nevertheless, given the psychosocial nature of the phenomenon, future studies should strive to include other roles also, particularly that of bystander, since this is an essential part of the dynamics involved in bullying.

4.3. Educational Implications

These findings have direct implications for school-based prevention and intervention. The marked predominance of victim-focused research, together with the limited attention paid to perpetrators, bystanders and especially bully-victims, could lead schools to overlook the relational complexity of LGBTQ+ bullying by focusing primarily on victimization and underestimating the other roles involved, roles that are ultimately crucial for preventing and eradicating this problem. Assessment and reporting procedures would therefore benefit from considering the different roles involved and from capturing both general forms of aggression and their bias-based motivation, linked to actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or non-conformity with heteronormative expectations. Such an inclusive framework may facilitate a more comprehensive identification of LGBTQ+ bullying and help distinguish it from general bullying or isolated instances of homophobic language.

These implications also extend to teacher training and school policy. Teachers and other educational professionals should be equipped to recognize not only explicit homophobic or transphobic insults, but also less visible forms of exclusion, relational aggression and harassment linked to sexual and gender diversity, and to respond consistently across the different roles involved (Nappa et al., 2018; Poteat et al., 2019). Likewise, institutional anti-bullying policies should explicitly incorporate sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, establish clear procedures for detection, reporting and intervention, and promote active bystander responses and supportive school climates (Day et al., 2016; Kull et al., 2016). In this way, a more inclusive conceptualization and measurement framework may help shift school responses from a predominantly reactive and victim-centered approach toward a more preventive and whole-school perspective.

5. Conclusions

In light of the definitions and conceptualizations identified in the studies reviewed, as well as the instruments used to assess this type of bullying, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- a) In relation to terminology, although the most commonly used term to date has been homophobic bullying, this expression is not currently very inclusive, since it fails to encompass part of the motivation behind the phenomenon, which is aimed at reinforcing heteronormative ideas in the broad sense, including gender expression and identity. We therefore recommend the use of more inclusive terms, such as sexual diversity bullying or LGBTQ+ bullying. Unlike other more restrictive expressions, such as gender-based bullying, these terms include harassment targeted at any dimension of sexuality: sex assigned at birth, sexual orientation and gender expression and/

- or identity, thereby encompassing aggression aimed at any person whose body, physique, behavior, relationships, identity and/or appearance differs from the established canons of masculinity and femininity.
- b) As regards the defining elements used, it is important to highlight the word bullying in order to emphasize the relational dynamics of this phenomenon, as opposed to other situations of aggression such as conflicts resolved through violence or even hate crimes. Nevertheless, two of the defining elements of bullying require further clarification in this case: intentionality and power imbalance. In relation to intentionality, several authors coincide in stating that the intent behind this type of aggression is to maintain the hierarchy between different social categories (i.e., between those who conform to the rules of heteronormativity and those who do not) and to demonstrate adherence to them (e.g., Erhard & Ben-Ami, 2015; Meyer, 2008), with this aspect transcending the more specific intention of harming a specific individual. For its part, in this type of bullying, power imbalance is influenced by the heteronormative context which still predominates today in society, meaning that anyone who is the target of violence motivated by the elements outlined above may be considered a victim of LGBTQ+ bullying.
 - c) In terms of the types of aggression included in this phenomenon, there seems to be general agreement regarding the fact that they are not just limited to homophobic aggression, but include other general expressions of aggression also. Nevertheless, a large percentage of the studies reviewed included either general aggression only or specific aggression only, both of which exclude part of the phenomenon.

To summarize, based on the reviewed studies, we can conclude that sexual diversity bullying or LGBTQ+ bullying could be defined as a specific type of stigma-based bullying, whose targets are generally students whose behaviors, gestures, bodies, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or even preferences and friendships challenge, intentionally or otherwise, heteronormativity. In this type of bullying, intentionality is characterized by the non-accidental nature of the aggression, which, on occasions, is used as a social mechanism to reinforce the superiority of heteronormativity over other types of behaviors, expressions, relationships and/or identities. Moreover, this type of aggression frequently (although not always) includes an element aimed at highlighting the category being denigrated. Finally, it is important to emphasize the fact that the power imbalance found in sexual diversity or LGBTQ+ bullying is a result of social heteronormativity, with this social category (more than an individual's status in their school class) being what places victims in a situation of greater vulnerability. Thus, a key distinguishing feature between this type of bullying and general bullying is the power imbalance inherent in the stigma associated with sexual diversity.

In sum, the systematization carried out in the present study reveals the growing trend towards correcting the bias observed in studies on traditional bullying that rarely include the issue of sexual and gender diversity as one of the key variables measured. Nevertheless, the high level of conceptual and terminological variety surrounding this phenomenon, coupled with the absence of consensus-based definitions, the growing complexity of the issue itself due to the fact that it changes in accordance with social attitudes and perceptions, and the broad range of assessment methods used, make it difficult to draw clear conclusions. The definition proposed here encompasses those elements around which the highest level of consensus was observed. According to this conceptualization, anyone who, in the opinion of the group, fails to conform to dominant

heteronormative patterns, may become a victim of this type of bullying, thereby severely limiting their right to develop their own personality.

This study has several limitations, including the lack of access to the full text of some studies, and the fact that, given the wide variety of terms used in this field, the search strings could not encompass the full range of potentially relevant terminology. However, by analyzing and integrating previous studies focusing on sexual diversity or LGBTQ+ bullying, and by identifying the limitations currently affecting the analysis of this problem, we have pointed out the conceptual and measurement keys needed to advance our understanding of the phenomenon and, therefore, to develop more effective prevention strategies, thereby fostering a fairer and more equal society in which every individual has the opportunity to develop themselves, free from coercion.

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Appendix: Work Document used to Categorize the Information in the Studies.

Study Characteristics				
Period of publication	2000-2005 ☐	2006-2010 ☐	2011-2015 ☐	2016-2020 ☐
Sample country of origin				
Study type	Empirical ☐	Theoretical ☐		
Data analyses	Cuantitative ☐	Cualitative ☐	Mixed ☐	
Informants	Students ☐	Educators ☐	Others (specify) _____	
Sample size				
Sample age	From	To	M	SD
Sample composition by gender				
Sample composition by sexual orientation				
Conceptualization of Homophobic Bullying				
Terms used	Homophobic bullying ☐	Homophobic victimization ☐	Homophobic harrasment ☐	Gender-based bullying ☐
	Bullying based on sexual-minority ☐	Others (specify) _____		
Explicit definition	Yes ☐	No ☐		
Targets	Non-heterosexual people ☐	Sexual minorities ☐	People who are or are perceived as LG ☐	Questioning ☐
	LGBT ☐	People whose behavior, dress or appearance don't match to traditional gender roles ☐	People with LGBTQ+ friends or relatives ☐	Others (specify) _____
Definition includes, explicitly, homophobic motivation	Yes ☐	No ☐		
Definition includes homophobic aggressions (e.g., homophobic name-calling)	Yes ☐	No ☐		
Type of aggressions included in definition	Physical ☐	Verbal ☐	Social ☐	Sexual ☐
	Theft or harm to properties ☐	Cyber-aggressions ☐	Others (specify) _____	
Measurement Instruments				
Type of instruments	Self-reported ☐	Semi-structured interview ☐	Open interview ☐	Peer nomination ☐
	Teachers' report ☐	Others (specify) _____		
Type of response	Dichotomous ☐	Likert ☐	Open ☐	Other (specify) _____
Roles assessed	Victim ☐	Bully ☐	Bully-Victim ☐	Bystanders ☐
Others (specify) _____				
Definition included in the instrument	Yes ☐	No ☐		
Time period assessed	Last year ☐	Previous 6 months ☐	Previous 2 months ☐	Anytime ☐
	Other (specify) _____			
Forms of violence included in the items	Physical ☐	Threats ☐	Verbal ☐	Sexual ☐
	Social ☐	Spreading rumors or lies ☐	Theft or harm to properties ☐	Homophobic name-calling ☐
	Spreading rumors about victims'sexuality ☐	Humiliation and mockery of appearance, behavior or dress ☐	Cyber-aggressions ☐	Others (specify) _____