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THE IMPACT OF THE UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ON LGBTIQ+ INCLUSION AND GENDER SEGREGATION IN STEM FIELDS

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Abstract: This study examines the role of Mexican universities in supporting the professional development and emotional well-being of LGBTIQ+ students in STEM fields, focusing on institutional social responsibility. An empirical survey of STEM students from universities in northern and central Mexico explored the relationship between dropout rates, mental health issues, and suicide attempts with the availability of safe spaces for reporting harassment and discrimination. The results revealed a lack of effective reporting mechanisms and indicated that, although over 70% of students had not directly experienced discrimination, many had overheard derogatory comments about the LGBTIQ+ community, suggesting normalization of such behavior. Additionally, LGBTIQ+ students perceived fewer opportunities compared to their non-LGBTIQ+ peers. The findings align with previous research on gender and sexual orientation inequalities, highlighting the need for universities to improve inclusivity and support for all students.

Keywords: social responsibility, discrimination, university, mental health, education.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for equality and the fight for human rights are fundamental challenges in contemporary society. In this context, higher education stands as an essential pillar for the promotion of inclusion and equity. Despite advances in the recognition of rights, such as the constitutional reform of August 2001 that enshrined the right to non-discrimination, in practice, social interactions often fail to live up to this promise (Buenabad & Serrano, 2019). Social norms, which dictate what is “natural” and “moral,” deeply influence the perception of sexuality, largely guided by essentialist and religious beliefs (Bautista, 2017). In this context, homosexuality is seen as a deviation from the heterosexual norm, inviting social pressures, harassment, and violence (Lozano & Rocha, 2015).

According to the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED), almost 40% of Mexicans aged 12-49 believe that sexual orientation contributes to social division, and many feel uncomfortable living with people of diverse orientations (Velasco et al., 2019). This situation highlights the importance of University Social Responsibility (USR), which refers to the ethical commitment of educational institutions to contribute positively to society. This includes teaching, research, and community engagement that promote social, environmental, and economic well-being, reflecting the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in an academic context (Ali et al., 2021). It has been reported that diversity and inclusion in higher education has led to a remarkable reduction of at least 20% in stress and anxiety levels among students. This improvement in emotional well-being not only benefits students’ mental health, but also translates into greater learning and better academic performance, as it fosters a space that allows them to concentrate and actively participate in their education (Madireddy, 2020; Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021).

However, gender segregation in areas such as schools or workplaces limits opportunities and reinforces inequality (Bigler et al., 2016). Universities play a crucial role not only in the dissemination of knowledge, but also in addressing the mental health needs of students and staff, often impacted by heteronormativity. This system positions heterosexuality as superior, legitimizing homophobia and marginalizing sexual minorities (Robinson, 2016). The marginalization of these groups increases mental health disparities, particularly among bisexual women and lesbians, who face a higher risk of depression and suicidal thoughts (Bautista, 2017).

Furthermore, hate crimes exacerbate these mental health challenges, leading to prolonged periods of depression and anxiety. LGBTIQ+ youth in areas with high rates of hate crimes

are especially vulnerable to suicide (Flores et al., 2022; Paterson et al., 2023).

In academia, STEM fields are no strangers to these issues. A study from the University of Exeter and Vanderbilt University found that people in same-sex partnerships are 12% less likely to pursue a STEM degree than their heterosexual peers (Sansone & Carpenter, 2020). Discrimination leads 28% of LGBTQ+ professionals in the physical sciences to consider leaving their careers, and for transgender individuals, the consequences are even more severe, with studies revealing that between 50% and 60% are forced to consider a drastic career change due to the hostile environment (Dyer et al., 2019). Despite progress in LGBTQ+ rights, homophobia and transphobia persist in STEM, where LGBTQ+ faculty often face harassment and social isolation. This slow progress towards diversification undermines both equitable access and scientific innovation, as diverse perspectives are key to solving complex problems (Cech & Waidzunas, 2021; Reggiani et al., 2023). Also, it represents a great challenge for this community, since the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) projects that, by 2030, 80% of jobs will be related to STEM areas (Rodríguez, K. C. A., & Medina, D. E. M., 2018).

For transgender and non-binary individuals face significant harassment and exclusion in educational environments, where compulsory heterosexuality is enforced. Unlike some cisgender lesbian and gay individuals who may hide their identities, transgender individuals frequently experience hostility, stigmatization, and lack of recognition. These conditions make educational institutions uninhabitable spaces for them, full of rejection and violence, which makes it difficult for them to participate in daily life (Bello, 2018).

In this context, it is essential that universities recognize their responsibility in forming an inclusive academic environment that

favors the integral development of all their students. Strategies to promote LGBTIQ+ inclusion in universities have been implemented internationally. In European countries, a commitment to the protection and well-being of this community in the educational field has been reflected. Ireland has developed the National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy and the National LGBTIQ+ Youth Strategy, which aim to create a favourable environment for LGBTIQ+ youth, improve their mental and physical health, as well as better understand their realities through research. Similarly, the Netherlands adopted the School Safety Act, the General Act for the Equality of Persons and the Gender and LGBT Equality Policy Plan 2018-2021. They have also implemented specific initiatives for the prevention of suicide among LGBTIQ+ students and have acquired a mandatory educational plan on sexual diversity (McBrien, J., A. Rutigliano and A. Sticca, 2022).

In the case of America, Canada has implemented measures to manage discrimination situations and create safe spaces, including the creation of non-binary bathrooms and the training of university staff to handle relevant situations. In addition to this, in this country, 44% of universities have Equity Offices to promote an inclusive and respectful environment (Thompson, C., 2024). Specifically in Latin America, countries such as Mexico, Chile and Colombia have signed agreements with UNESCO in 2016 to establish laws that prevent discrimination in academic institutions, being the first in that part of the continent to fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity (UNESCO, 2023).

This study, therefore, aims to explore how educational institutions in Mexico can improve their support for LGBTIQ+ students in STEM fields, addressing not only equal opportunities, but also the emotional well-being of a population that faces multiple challenges in their academic and professional career path.

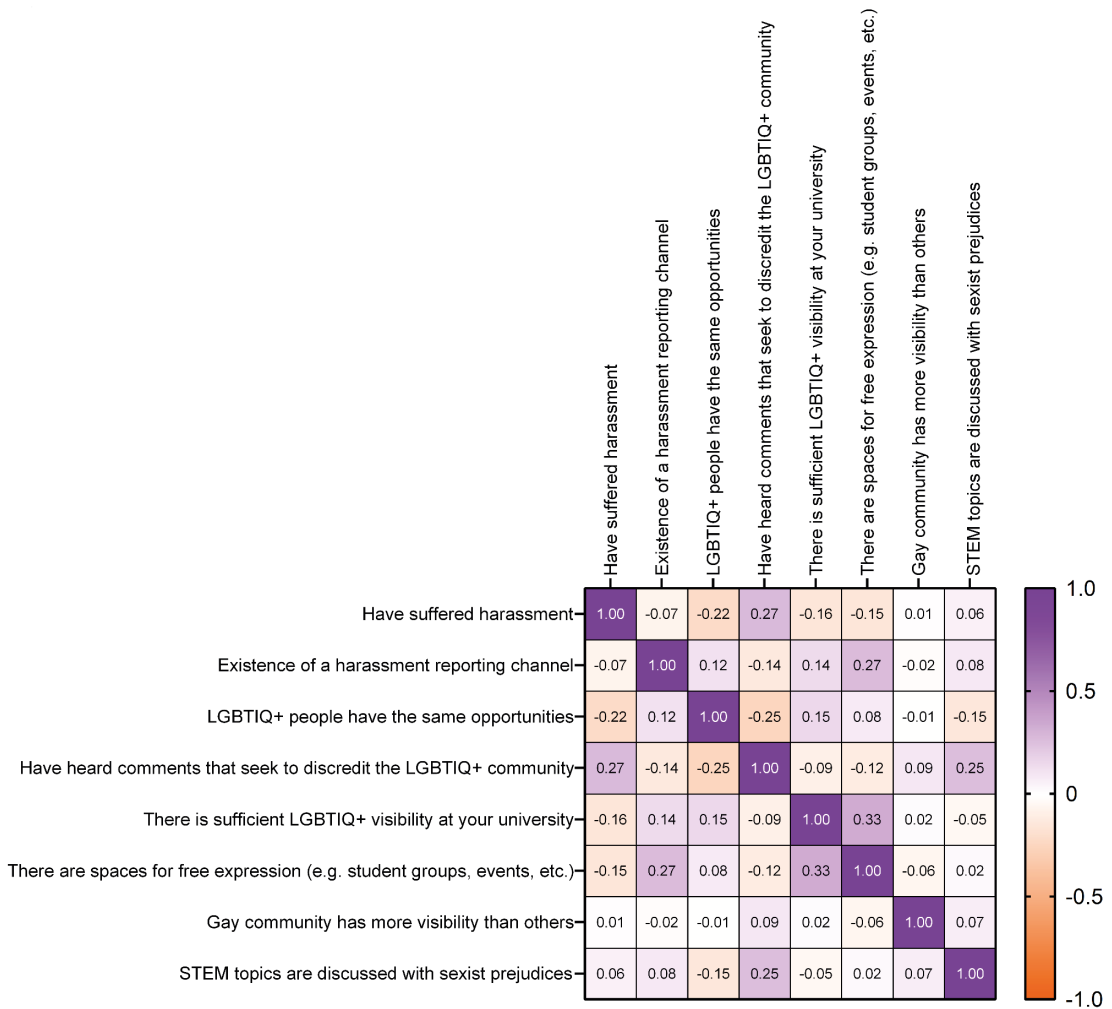


Figure 1. Pearson correlation matrix. Positive (Purple) and negative (Orange) correlations between variables for student’s perspectives on LGBTIQ+ inclusion in Mexican universities.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach through surveys to gather statistical data on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ students in STEM fields at Mexican universities. The non-experimental, cross-sectional design allows for a snapshot of perceptions on discrimination, safety, and visibility within the university environment. A total of 300 undergraduate students from northeastern and central Mexico were surveyed via Google Forms, selected through university groups and social media. The survey included 8 closed-ended questions on harassment, safe spaces, and LGBTIQ+ visibility.

Data collection was conducted digitally, with descriptive statistical analysis used to identify trends, and Pearson correlation to examine relationships between variables such as safety perceptions and harassment experiences. Additionally, based on the Pearson correlations, an analysis of potential approaches to resolve these issues was developed, grounded in the observed patterns. Ethical safeguards ensured participant anonymity, with informed consent obtained prior to participation, guaranteeing confidentiality throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the correlations obtained reflects both progress and challenges in the inclusion of the LGBTIQ+ community in STEM areas at Mexican universities. Among the most significant correlations, positive correlations stand out. First, a moderate correlation was identified between the existence of safe spaces and the visibility of the LGBTIQ+ community ($r = 0.33$), which suggests that institutions that provide environments in which students feel safe tend to promote greater visibility of this community. However, the moderation of this correlation indicates the need to strengthen such initiatives, particularly in the case of transgender students. Despite the increase in the visibility of the community in recent years, institutional policies have not proven to be completely effective in equitably integrating this part of the LGBTIQ+ community into a safe environment (Batista, 2020).

It has been noted that students often do not even consider the creation of inclusivity policies for the LGBTIQ+ community due to the lack of knowledge about LGBTIQ+ students' on campus. This perception leads them to believe that universities won't dedicate resources to this area because of the assumed low presence of LGBTIQ+ individuals (Kuhlemeier *et al.*, 2021). To address this, universities could focus on increasing visibility for this community through awareness campaigns and by providing training for educators, as many still feel unprepared to handle LGBTIQ+ topics in the classroom. This would be helpful as the absence of LGBTIQ+ representation in academic curricula and teaching further contributes to sexual discrimination, mental health struggles, and a higher rate of suicide compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Cembranel *et al.*, 2023). Then students can feel respected and valued to fully develop professionally and personally.

On the other hand, the correlation between hearing discriminatory comments and experiencing harassment ($r = 0.27$) reflects that the hostile environment generated by discriminatory speech tends to translate into concrete acts of harassment at universities. Reports indicate that 83.9% of LGBTIQ+ students in Mexico have reported having suffered discrimination and 35.0% have been victims of physical harassment, evidencing the poor institutional culture in terms of preventing violence towards the community (Galindo, 2020). Accordingly to statistics, LGBTIQ+ people who have experienced discrimination or anti-LGBT violence in the past are more likely to have suicidal thoughts and struggle with substance abuse (Flores *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, the correlation between the existence of safe spaces and the availability of reporting channels ($r = 0.27$) indicates that the existence of these channels is not usually effective, as it has been reported that complaints are often ignored or minimized, discouraging victims from filing their harassment complaints (Tight, 2024).

One of the most important alternatives for solving this problem of harassment is for students to keep in mind that if a situation of harassment occurs, it will be taken into account and a solution will be sought in their favor. It is important to note that for a harassment reporting channel to be effective for the LGBTIQ+ community, policies must explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity and apply to both students and staff. Multiple reporting options should be provided, with trained resource persons able to identify hate crimes. Regular assessment of LGBTIQ+ student concerns and staff training on anti-LGBT discrimination are essential, and anti-bullying campaigns should address homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (Budd, 2019).

Furthermore, the correlation between the discussion of STEM topics with sexist prejudices and exposure to derogatory comments towards the LGBTIQ+ community ($r = 0.25$) reveals a reality where people from this community face a hostile environment in these fields. This discriminatory environment especially affects those who do not conform to heteronormative norms of gender and sexual orientation, which creates barriers to their full participation in STEM professions. Homophobia, as an expression of violence towards any characteristic that is perceived as feminine or linked to the feminine, reinforces these dynamics of exclusion. Thus, the marginalization of diverse identities, both gender and orientation, perpetuates structural discrimination in these academic and professional spaces (García *et al.*, 2021; Naranjo *et al.*, 2023; Verduzco *et al.*, 2011; Torres, 2021).

As for negative correlations, the correlation between hearing derogatory comments and the perception of equal opportunities for LGBTIQ+ people ($r = -0.25$) reflects how the more students in the community are exposed to comments of this type, the less equity there is in terms of opportunities for them. Specifically, in Mexico it has been reported that 14% of LGBTIQ+ people have been denied employment, 10% have been fired, and 20% have been questioned about their sexual orientation or gender identity during job interviews (Hernández *et al.*, 2023). An effective strategy could be the creation of mentoring and professional development programs for LGBTIQ+ individuals in STEM, inspired by successful initiatives like Stonewall's Diversity Champions program in the United Kingdom. These programs, which offer training, support networks, and mentoring, have proven effective in improving retention and professional development in traditionally exclusive fields (Stonewall, 2024).

In academic settings, LGBTIQ+ students are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their identities with faculty or mentors who openly support the community, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive spaces (Cooper *et al.*, 2020). Showing the importance of the development of LGBTIQ+ Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), which are crucial as they offer support and information to both LGBTIQ+ employees and their employers. These groups often focus on advocacy, workplace equality, and social networking. They play a key role in shaping non-discrimination policies, advocating for partner benefits, and promoting diversity through initiatives like "safe space" programs, which create inclusive environments. Creating an environment that clearly communicates zero tolerance for discrimination and demonstrates respect for LGBTIQ+ employees helps LGBTIQ+ workers and potential hires see the company as a safe space for self-expression (Ball State University, 2024). This approach can reveal job opportunities they may not have considered, contributing to the elimination of the feeling that such opportunities are nonexistent.

Likewise, the negative correlation between experiencing harassment and perceiving equal opportunities ($r = -0.22$) reflects that students who have experienced harassment have a pessimistic view about the chances of advancing in their academic or professional career, as it has been shown that LGBTIQ+ people are less likely to have adequate professional resources and opportunities to advance in their careers, and are more likely to have experienced a devaluation of their professional experience (Cech & Waidzunus, 2021). Initiatives such as Out for Undergrad in the United States and Pride in STEM in the United Kingdom address this issue by providing LGBTIQ+ people with representation, support and networking opportunities with professionals in the sector.

The implementation of these types of initiatives in the country would promote their integration and sense of belonging in fields where they have historically been marginalized, being a key element in improving their prospects and advancing their professional careers after university. (Pride in STEM, 2023; Out For Undergrad, 2024).

Lastly, it is important for the LGBTIQ+ community to seek help when needed, including psychological therapy with the aim of enhancing their sense of self-love and self-worth. Efforts are being made to incorporate the three-pillar model of positive psychology (positive subjective experiences, character strengths, positive social institutions) into Meyer's minority stress model for the psychological treatment of the LGBTIQ+ community in graduate psychology programs. While the American Psychological Association (APA) promotes equality and respect in the programs it endorses, it also allows religiously-affiliated institutions to offer preferential treatment to members of their own religious community. Therefore, it is crucial that guidelines explicitly require respect for minorities, including same-sex couples, during the training of future professionals in these programs (Lytle *et al.*, 2014). Recognizing the backgrounds and expectations of LGBTIQ+ adolescents is essential to offer them the best resources, as they will differ from their heterosexual counterparts. To address the inequality and challenges faced by these adolescents, examining available tools and techniques is key (Chan *et al.*, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of University Social Responsibility in the development of LGBTIQ+ students in STEM areas, by demonstrating that discrimination persists despite advances in visibility and acceptance. These limitations impact both their emotional well-being and their academic and employment opportunities, as they aggravate the economic difficulties they face, especially since non-hegemonic perceptions about gender and sexuality continue to restrict access to employment for this community, which makes institutions negligent in not adopting effective policies. Likewise, the findings reflect how femininity continues to be seen as a threat to hegemonic masculinity, which exacerbates violence against gay men, underlining the urgent need for a firm commitment by university women to guarantee equal opportunities for all students in STEM areas.

In terms of perspectives, studies focusing exclusively on the LGBTIQ+ community are expected to allow for a better understanding of their experiences within STEM universities, as well as comparing these perceptions across different geographic locations to identify potential international differences. Furthermore, large-scale studies will allow for a more complete picture of the situation, while differentiating between the perspectives of men and women would offer a more accurate view of the dynamics of discrimination and its specific nuances in each group.

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