

## Positive Aspects of Being Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual in Spain: an Exploratory Study

Jenna Strizzi<sup>1\*</sup>, Inmaculada Fernández-Agís<sup>2</sup>, Tesifón Patrón-Carreño<sup>2</sup> and Raquel Alarcón-Rodríguez<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Roger Williams University, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Almería, Spain

### Abstract

This research aimed to contribute to the task of understanding lesbian, gay and bisexual people's lives in Spain using a positive psychology base. As an exploratory study, the present study sought to examine if the domains and themes identified in Riggle, Whitman, Oslon, Rostosky and Strong could be applied to the Spanish context. The responses from 150 Spanish residents demonstrated that positive aspects not only exist, but some are experienced by an overwhelming percentage of participants. The comparative analyses suggest that the belief in the existence of positive aspects and a sense of belonging to LGB communities may serve as protective factors.

**Keywords:** Gay; Lesbian; Bisexual; Positive psychology; Spain

### Introduction

The psychological consequences of societal heterosexism on people with non-exclusively heterosexual desire orientations are well documented in US populations [1,2]. The results from Hatzenbuehler et al. [3] indicate that living in communities in the United States with high levels of anti-gay prejudice affects individuals on psychological and physiological levels. This increases the risk of detrimental health issues. Understanding these ramifications on individuals' lives is an important part of empathy, therapy, as well as for the work of human rights advocacy groups.

Some factors which have been suggested to improve Lesbian Gay and Bisexual (LGB) experiences and psychological well-being include LGB community membership [4] and family support. Although few studies have been published on this topic, family support has been linked with a reduction emotional distress and sexual minority stress [5,6] as well as positively effecting sexual orientation self-acceptance and positive well-being [6]. These studies were carried out in Israel and in the United States.

There has been considerably less academic research published on minority stress and mediating factors in Spanish non-heterosexual populations. Berg et al. [7] report internalized homophobia in men who have sex with men in 38 European countries, including Spain. They found a correlation between relationship recognition, adoption laws and internalized homonegativity (IH); reporting relatively low IH in Spain [7]. However, studies about lesbian and bisexual people are almost non-existent. There is a void in knowledge about lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) experiences in the Spanish context. It was sought to contribute to task of understanding experiences of people who identify as LGB, but with a shift in focus from the minority stress model to a positive psychology base. Positive psychology is a science which studies positive experiences and personal traits to go beyond the study of disease and disorder [8]. Positive experiences embodied in high-subjective well-being are a core concept of positive psychology [9]. Studying a group solely focusing on the negative further isolates and stigmatizes its members. In order for integration and acceptance on societal and individual levels to occur, measuring and publishing data about positive aspects and experiences is necessary.

Riggle et al. [10] one open-ended question study in a sample of 553 gay men and lesbian women provided qualitative data. These researchers asked participants: "Please tell us below what you think the positive things are about being a (lesbian [or woman-loving-woman]/

gay man [or man-loving-man]). Please describe as many positive aspects as you think are important to your life and in as much detail and with examples if you wish" [10]. In 2013, a research group including Riggle, et al. carried out an almost identical qualitative study in 15 Spanish speaking countries with three of the participants from Spain and they found similar themes to those in Riggle et al. [10,11]. These studies lead these authors to question if these positive aspects could be quantified to give additional empirical data. Such as, what percent a population feels a certain way about a specific positive aspect, in order to know to what extent a particular positive aspect is relevant to LGB communities in Spain.

Building on previous qualitative research by bringing personal accounts to quantitative data in attempt to represent a collective group and how these qualities can be viewed as a positive asset to society may be useful to alleviate the effects of/combat heterosexism. Within psychology, identifying and quantifying these positive aspects can be instrumental to mental healthcare providers while working with LGB people; especially to practitioners working within the resilience framework. Resilience defined as positive adaptation within a context of significant adversity [12].

This can also be considered an interaction between external and internal protective factors that are used by an individual to overcome adversity [13]. To the knowledge of the authors, no studies regarding resilience in LGB populations in Spain have been published.

Cahill et al. [14] assert that community-level interventions and structural-level interventions in the United States working with men who have sex with men can be instrumental in countering heterosexism, affirming healthy formation of LGB *Queer* and transgender/sexual identities and reducing health risks. Strategies may include school based and family interventions, social marketing campaigns and programs which favor community connectedness. The findings from the present study could inform what content would be beneficial in intervention programs in Spain.

\*Corresponding author: Jenna Strizzi, Department of Psychology, Roger Williams University, USA, Tel: 8602377407; E-mail: [jenna.strizzi@gmail.com](mailto:jenna.strizzi@gmail.com)

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The Spanish context is unique and worthy of study, especially considering the legal and social changes in just 27 years, from legal persecution to legal equality and greater social support. To the knowledge of the authors, no research focusing exclusively on the Spanish context and positive LGB experiences has been published to date. This exploratory study sought to understand if the concepts of positive aspects identified in US populations can be generalized to the Spanish context.

## LGB experiences

Balsam and Mohr [15] maintain that there is no “universal” LGB experience as the gender/sexual identity amongst other factors marks one’s personal history and interactions. The intersection of gender and sexual orientation means that non-heterosexual orientations are not interpreted by society equally if a person is male/female or masculine/feminine. Employing the word homosexuality runs the risk of homogenizing a group whose only commonality is to desire members of the same-sex. Thus, it is preferable to speak of homosexualities, heterosexualities or bisexualities, as we cannot speak of sexuality in water-tight compartments; sexuality is malleable and dynamic [16]. Homosexualities and bisexualities are not regarded equally; Weiss [17] asserts biphobia exists both within and outside the LGB and transgender community. Biphobia has been defined as negative attitudes about bisexuality and bisexual individuals [18]. Biphobia may negatively affect the psychological well-being of people with bisexual identities [19,20]. The secondary aim of this study was explore how positive experiences may differ in distinct LGB identities.

## Socio-cultural-historical context of Spain in the late twentieth to the twenty-first century

In order to orient readers who are not familiar with the Spanish context a very brief history of factors which may have influenced in the biographies of the participants is given. While Spain is a primarily Catholic nation, “(it) was the first country to grant full marriage rights and equality in 2005” [21]. Democracy came a third time to the country in the 1980’s after a 40-year-long dictatorship, allowing for the rights which are currently enjoyed.

Non-heterosexuality was explicitly persecuted during the Franco years under the 1954 law of “Lazy and Villainous People” (*Ley de Vagos y Maleantes*) and the posterior 1970 law of “Social Danger and Rehabilitation” (*La Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social*). These unique laws considered same-sex desires as dangerous to society as procurers, drug addiction and alcoholism. A corrective component was added under the later law of “Social Danger”; “treatment/reeducation/rehabilitation” were carried out in normal prisons and in concentration camps for gay men [22]. The law is reported to have been applied to women as well, in isolated cases, in the 1970’s [23].

As with every deemed social minority, there was resistance. *Ambiente*, or loosely translated “atmosphere”, refers to places where people who “understand” (*entiende*) could interact just under the censorship’s radar. In response to the “Social Danger” law, the clandestine publication of the AGHOIS, *Agrupación Homófila para la Igualdad Sexual* (Homophilic Association for Sexual Equality) began. Between 1975 and 1980 LGBTQ (transgender and *Queer*) associations formed in Barcelona, Bilbao and Madrid. Some of these groups were modeled after post-Stonewall North-American movements and their concept of gay communities [24,25] Beginning in 1996, *Chueca* exploded to be known as the reference point for LGBTQ focused social activities and commerce that it is today [26,27].

Legal freedom is not always reflected in daily life. In the Colectivo de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales de Madrid (COGAM)’s [28] study about homophobia, 69% of participants reported at least one homophobic event in their lifetime. However, according to the Pew Research Center’s [29] Global Divide on Homosexuality report, 88% of Spaniards approve of same-sex marriages, leading the 39 participating countries. 90% of participants of younger generations (those between 18 and 29 years of age) asserted that homosexuality should be accepted by society, compared to 85% of those over fifty. In 2007, 82% of Spanish participants affirmed that homosexuality should be accepted by society while in 2011, 91% felt the same.

## Aims of the Study

The primary aim of this exploratory study was to examine whether the positive aspects identified in studies carried out in the United States can be generalized to the Spanish context. Another objective was to subsequently explore how positive experiences can be influenced by the factors of: sexual orientation, belief in positive aspects, family support and belonging to the LGB community. Based on the body of LGB research the authors hypothesize that sexual orientation will impact positive experiences, concretely that people who identify as bisexual will less identify with positive aspects. Those who believe that positive aspects exist, experience more family support and have a sense of belonging to the LGB community will affirmatively answer questions regarding positive aspects more than those who do not share those characteristics.

## Method

### Participants

In this study, 150 people participated, of which 139 answered in Spanish and 11 in English (to allow for non-Spanish speakers residing in Spain to participate). It was believed to be important to understand LGB experiences within the Spanish cultural context regardless of the native language of the participants. The average age was 29.5 years old ( $SD = 10.3$ , range 16-65,  $Mdn = 26$ ). Male participants had an average age of 30.73 ( $SD = 9.77$ ,  $Mdn = 28$ ) and female participants had an averaged 28.77 years of age ( $SD = 10.66$ ,  $Mdn = 24$ ).

Of the participants, 55 identified as men and 95 as women; representing 37% and 63% respectively. 49% of which identified as lesbian, 32% as gay, 16% as bisexual and 2% as heterosexual. Those who identified as heterosexual ( $n = 3$ ) later answered questions regarding having same-sex relationships. In subsequent analyses, the results did not vary when these three participants were included or excluded; therefore the data from these responses were incorporated. As detailed by Edward [30], sexual orientation can be conceptualized from the behavioral view, the self-identification view and the dispositional view; all of which can be problematic in adequately describing sexual orientations. The individuals who choose not to self-identify as LGB but demonstrate “their capacity to love members of the same sex” and/or find relationships with members of the same sex sexually satisfying and/or pleasurable were included.

The majority of the participants had attended higher education institutions (65% had completed a college education); the other 35% had finished secondary school or trade school. 83% live in urban areas while 17% live in towns or rural areas. 57% ( $n = 88$ ) of the study population had a relationship averaging 3.75 years (standard deviation of 4.5 years with a minimum of weeks together relationship for up to 26 years as maximum of relationship). 16 participants are legally married with an average of a 3.63 year long relationship.

## Material and Procedure

### Measures

The scarcity of validated quantitative questionnaires focusing on positive experiences within the LGB community is a limitation in current research, this led the development of this survey by these authors for this study. Riggle et al.'s [10] research reported three domains and eleven themes composing the positive aspects: disclosure and social support, belonging to a community, creating families of choice, having strong connections with others, serving as a positive role model, insight into and empathy for self and others, authentic self and honesty, personal insight and sense of self, increased empathy and compassion for others, social justice and activism, freedom from societal definitions of roles, freedom from gender-specific roles, exploring sexuality and relationships, and egalitarian relationships (for lesbian women).

A 37 question on-line survey was developed simultaneously in Spanish and English by a bilingual researcher with items addressing each of the themes and domains from Riggle et al. [10]. For the domain Disclosure and Social Support some of the questions include: "When I disclosed my sexual orientation to my family I felt: support from them/ rejection from them/ I have not disclosed my sexual orientation to my family"; "I feel as though I belong to the LGB community: yes/no". For the domain Insight Into and Empathy for Self and Others sample questions developed are: "I participate in social activism: yes/no" and "In my sentimental relationships with other men/women, we understand each other better because 'we speak the same language': yes/no". For the final domain of Freedom from Societal Definitions of Roles questions such as: "In coming out of the closet, I enjoy a feeling of wellbeing due to being honest with myself: yes/no" were included. The survey had one question regarding egalitarian relationships this was only presented to women because in the Riggle et al. study only women's answers revealed this construct. The other 36 questions of the survey were identical for male and female participants.

Diverging from Riggle et al.'s [10] research which sampled only gay men and lesbian women, this study also included participants who identify as bisexual to include a wider range of non-exclusively heterosexual desire orientations. One qualitative question was incorporated at the end of the survey requesting that participants write about any positive aspects which were not part of the questionnaire: "If you would like to add something more about what are for you the positive aspects of being gay/lesbian/bisexual, please write them below". Qualitative data were coded based the three domains and eleven themes detailed above.

At the beginning of the survey, a section regarding socio-demographic information was included to collect data about sexual identity (man, woman, or prefer not to answer), sexual orientation (lesbian, bisexual, gay or heterosexual), place of residence (Spanish Autonomous Community), type of municipality (city or town/village), nationality, religion (practicing Catholic, non-practicing Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Agnostic, Atheist, Jewish or other), education level (secondary, university, primary school) and relationship status. The survey showed low internal reliability,  $\alpha = 0.68$ , sub scales for the domains: Disclosure and Social Support  $\alpha = 0.50$ , Insight Into and Empathy for Self and Others  $\alpha = 0.75$ , Freedom from Societal Definitions of Roles  $\alpha = 0.52$ .

### Procedure

Collaboration was requested from every LGBT organization in Spain and a "snowball effect" was employed to recruit more participants. Only *La*

*Fundación Triangulo* from Valladolid, *La Asociación OJALÁ* from Málaga, Dr. Vicent Bataller i Perelló and *COLEGA* Almería actively participated by forwarding emails to their members and/or posting the link on their webpages. The University of Almeria Research Ethics Committee does not require review of online surveys such as this one as there is no physical interpersonal contact with the participants. Google Surveys was used to collect data from January to March, 2010 and SPSS 17 was used for analysis. Informed consent was given after reading the informational message at the beginning of the survey and continuing with its completion.

### Data analysis

Data analysis primarily consisted in Spearman's correlations to test if the factors of sexual orientation, belief in the existence of positive aspects, family support and a sense of belonging to the LGB community are connected with the experiences of other positive aspects. Dancy and Reidy's [31] criteria were used for interpreting correlation strength were 0.1-0.3 are considered weak, 0.4-0.6 moderate and 0.7-0.9 strong. Incomplete surveys ( $n = 23$ , 13%) and people not residing in Spain ( $n = 5$ , 3%) were not included in the sample nor the analysis. No duplicate surveys were identified.

## Results

### Survey results

The most commonly supported positive aspects by these participants were, for lesbian and bisexual women, egalitarian relationships with other women. For the whole sample, the belief that positive aspects exist and that LGB identities permit the creation of new gender and relationship scripts and have the freedom and flexibility to live their relationship as they wish without outside pressure were the most supported. In this study the participants least identified with questions related to themes of openness and appreciating diversity (Table 1).

### Correlations

**Sexual orientation:** In the Spearman's correlation study, sexual orientation identity did not significantly correlate with any other variables.

**Family support:** This factor positively correlated with the creation of families of choice, the sentiment that one better understands their partners due to having the same sexual identity and this means that they "speak the same language". Family support also positively correlated with the feeling of self-sincerity and well-being (Table 2).

**Belonging to a community:** Of all of the variables tested in the analysis, a sense of belonging to the LGB community was one of the most significant. The data demonstrated that for these participants, a sense of belonging influenced positive experiences associated with a LGB identity. 64% feel that they are members of the LGB community and 61% that the community provides them with emotional support. These variables strongly correlated  $r(150) = 0.613$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

LGB community membership weakly correlated with creating families of choice, the belief that friendships with exclusively heterosexual people are enjoyable as they are relationships free of sexual tension, feeling that an advantage of being non-heterosexual is that they better understand their partners due to have the same sexual orientation, along with feeling that an advantage of being non-exclusively heterosexual is that they better understand their partners because they "speak the same language". LGB community membership correlated with the political variables of the belief that living an out life reflects one's political ideals and with participation in social activism.

Domains and Themes	Positive Aspect	Affirmative responses
Disclosure and Social Support	Positive aspects exist	63%
	Out to family	88%
	Family support	72%
Belonging to a Community	Sense of belonging to the LGB community	61%
	LGB community provides emotional support	57%
Creating Families of Choice	Formed families of choice with closest friends	79%
	Family of choice provides: emotional support, love and social support	69%
Having Strong Connections With Others	Friendships with exclusively heterosexual people are enjoyable as they are relationships free of sexual tension	86%
Serving as a Positive Role Model	Serving as a Positive Role Model	69%
<b>Insight Into and Empathy for Self and Others</b>		
Authentic Self and Honesty	Enjoy a sense of wellbeing because of self-sincerity	87%
	By "coming out" one is free to live a unique and satisfactory lifestyle	79%
Personal Insight and Sense of Self	Deeper self knowledge	50%
	LGB identities are a sign of personal strength	28%
	Coming out improves self-esteem	27%
Increased Empathy and Compassion for Others	LGB identities make one more sensitive to people who are different from them	20%
	LGB identities make one a more open person	20%
Social Justice and Activism	Participation in social activism	57%
	Living an "out" life reflects socio-political ideals	55%
	Living an "out" life is a political act	41%
	Non-heterosexual sexual orientations allow a more critical view of society	30%
Freedom From Societal Definitions of Roles	LGB identities means one is free to be the person that they want to be instead of what society expects from them.	73%
<b>Freedom from Gender-specific Roles</b>	LGB identities permit the creation of new gender and relationship scripts and enable the freedom and flexibility to live relationships as one wishes without outside pressure.	91%
Exploring sexuality and relationships	In relationships with other men/women, having the same sexual identity aids in better mutual understanding	68%
	In relationships with other men/women, "speaking the same language" aids in better mutual understanding	66%
Egalitarian Relationships	For lesbian and bisexual women, in relationships with other women gender equality is enjoyed.	93%

**Table 1:** Positive aspects and affirmative response percentages of a Spanish LGB sample (N=150).

This factor also correlated with the view that LGB identities allow for creating new gender scripts (Table 2).

**Positive aspects and positive experiences:** The belief in positive aspects weakly and negatively correlated with LGB community membership. This view positively correlated with the belief that LGB individuals better understand their partners better due to having the same sexual identity and that "Speaking the same language" as their same sex partner is a positive aspect of LGB identities (Table 2).

## Qualitative results

31% of the participants answered the optional qualitative question that was included in the study. 28% of which reflected ideas such as "we are people, there are simply positive and negative aspects"-33 year old person who identifies as a lesbian woman. 22% reflected happiness and wellbeing. "Accepting my sexuality has helped me to appreciate myself more and to be happy; in the end it has improved my self-esteem"-23 year old person who identifies as a lesbian woman.

17% referred to strength in accepting their LGB identities: "to accept that one is homosexual (or bi), when one really overcomes it, it makes you stronger" -25 year old person who identifies as a gay man. 15% wrote of freedom: "being gay or lesbian makes us feel more free" - 25 year old person who identifies as a lesbian woman. 7% expressed LGB identities within a political sphere: "I am a woman by medical diagnosis and a feminist lesbian for political strategy." -25 year old person who identifies as a bisexual woman.

"...For me, being visibly LGBT is to be a direct action 'political' body committed to social change, in favor of diversity and the general acceptance of 'differences'... and our often irritating visible lives, still object to looks, insults and marginalization etc, are grains of sand. Added together to the efforts of other groups with similar fights... we fight for a more just and truly equal world." -33 year old person who identifies as a lesbian woman.

"Living out of the closet as a political act? If political is interpreted in the good sense, I would say yes, that it positively influences in society and politics, and therefore benefits everyone, especially the LGBT community." -50 year old person who identifies as a gay man.

The other 11% of the responses were not code-able, most of which thanked the researchers for carrying out the study. No new themes emerged that were not covered by the three domains and eleven themes of Riggle et al.'s [10] study.

## Discussion

Avoiding heterosexist bias in research is important [32]. It was sought that the present studies were LGB affirmative through a positive psychology viewpoint in the design. The descriptive results in Table 1 suggest that positive aspects are experienced by a majority of the participants. Questions regarding disclosure and social support indicate that a very high percentage of respondents are out to their family and they predominately receive support from them. Those who feel they are members of LGB communities report emotional support from these communities. For the domain of insight into self and empathy for self

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
Sociodemographic variable																											
1. Age																											
2. Sexual identity	-0.140																										
3. Sexual orientation	-0.085	0.445**																									
4. Type of municipality	-0.009	0.077	-0.035																								
5. Religion	-0.013	0.020	0.049	-0.067																							
Positive Aspect																											
6. Positive aspects exist	-0.007	-0.006	0.072	0.116	-0.031																						
7. Coming out is important	.233**	-0.005	0.103	-0.014	0.049	-0.162*																					
8. Outness to family	0.337**	-0.108	0.036	-0.102	0.055	-0.001	0.320**																				
9. Family support	0.074	-0.127	0.031	0.169*	-0.064	-0.075	0.170*	0.235**																			
10. LGB community membership	-0.050	-0.062	0.044	0.014	0.040	0.132	-0.097	0.059	0.175*																		
11. LGB community support	-0.072	0.063	0.019	0.062	0.095	0.165*	-0.219**	0.028	0.120	0.613**																	
12. Formed families of choice with closest friends	-0.104	-0.067	-0.061	0.025	0.082	0.119	-0.145	-0.141	0.176*	0.348**	0.304**																
13. Family of choice provides: emotional support, love and social support	0.009	-0.063	-0.115	-0.160	0.098	0.103	0.052	0.097	-0.124	0.155	0.067	0.426**															
14. Being LGB helps form closer friendships	-0.172*	-0.178*	0.053	-0.073	-0.077	0.043	-0.177*	-0.111	0.102	0.213**	0.236**	0.301**	-0.100														
15. Friendships with exclusively heterosexual people are enjoyable as they are relationships free of sexual tension	-0.102	-0.114	-0.022	0.041	0.001	0.054	-0.129	-0.160	0.054	0.193*	0.203*	0.209*	-0.090	0.228**													
16. In relationships with other men/women, having the same sexual identity aids in better mutual understanding	-0.020	-0.074	0.096	-0.038	-0.104	0.240**	-0.062	-0.075	0.210**	0.309**	0.181*	0.324**	0.004	0.273**	0.195*												
17. In relationships with other men/women, "speaking the same language" aids in better mutual understanding	-0.077	-0.019	0.156	-0.030	-0.004	0.195*	-0.030	-0.036	0.203*	0.329**	0.246**	0.209*	-0.095	0.329**	0.176*	0.730**											
18. Serving as a positive role model	0.016	-0.112	-0.126	-0.049	-0.058	-0.188*	-0.092	-0.136	-0.054	-0.076	-0.047	-0.039	-0.271**	0.052	0.308**	-0.032	0.065										
19. Living an "out" life is a political act	-0.178*	-0.110	-0.161*	0.017	-0.047	-0.042	-0.186*	-0.120	0.124	0.185*	0.238**	0.285**	-0.008	0.170*	0.154	0.118	0.110	0.105									
20. Participation in social activism	0.123	-0.192*	-0.142	0.009	0.112	0.086	-0.176*	0.050	0.145	0.377**	0.386**	0.270**	0.014	0.123	0.195*	0.120	0.184*	0.036	0.337**								
21. Living an "out" life reflects sociopolitical ideals	-0.044	0.106	-0.053	0.156	0.022	0.150	-0.117	-0.180*	-0.001	0.105	0.111	0.191*	-0.100	0.134	0.246**	0.158	0.231**	0.266**	0.167*	0.192*							
22. LGB identities means one is free to be the person that they want to be instead of what society expects from them.	-0.047	-0.062	-0.099	-0.093	-0.064	0.087	-0.045	0.107	0.052	0.003	0.131	-0.006	-0.024	0.136	-0.025	-0.019	0.053	-0.063	0.153	0.102	0.023						
23. Enjoy a sense of wellbeing because of self-sincerity	-0.033	0.013	0.077	0.068	-0.009	-0.041	0.027	-0.086	0.223**	0.155	0.051	0.290**	-0.147	0.110	0.172*	0.244**	0.206*	0.093	0.137	0.117	0.228**	0.071					
24. By "coming out" one is free to live a unique and satisfactory lifestyle	-0.045	0.029	-0.032	0.088	0.063	0.012	-0.063	-0.221**	0.001	0.029	0.130	0.246**	-0.089	0.068	0.184*	0.059	0.031	0.156	0.141	0.253**	0.227**	0.004	0.312**				
25. Create gender scripts	0.075	-0.058	-0.049	0.096	-0.063	0.043	0.011	-0.024	0.138	0.226**	0.222**	0.246**	-0.091	0.134	0.228**	0.170*	0.141	0.159	0.164*	0.225**	0.212**	0.193*	0.314**	0.473**			
26. Create relationship scripts	-0.084	-0.041	-0.136	-0.104	-0.046	-0.023	-0.143	-0.120	0.007	-0.019	0.126	0.122	-0.234**	0.094	0.095	0.122	0.097	0.161*	0.233**	0.195*	0.115	0.386**	0.059	0.320**	0.373**		
27. For lesbian and bisexual women, in relationships with other women gender equality is enjoyed.	0.083	-0.704**	-0.410**	-0.085	0.046	0.010	-0.035	0.071	0.128	0.069	0.022	0.132	0.051	0.096	0.074	0.033	0.026	0.143	0.231**	0.241**	0.013	0.246**	0.047	0.059	0.185*	0.383**	

Note: \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01

Table 2: Spearman's correlations of positive aspects and socio-demographic variables (N = 150).

and others, the question that participants most identified with was enjoying a sense of well-being due to self-sincerity. Some of the other more abstract questions regarding sensitivity to others and openness were less supported, this could be because the participants do not believe that these notions are unique to non-exclusively heterosexual sexual orientations. The item relating to freedom from societal definitions of roles most supported by survey takers was regarding creating new gender and relationship scripts. These data showed that positive aspects not only exist, but are experienced by an overwhelming majority of the participants. The open qualitative question did not reveal any new themes or domains that had not been included in the survey.

### Sexual orientation identities

Contrary to what the authors hypothesized, sexual orientation did not impact positive experiences. Sexual orientation identity did not statistically significantly correlate with any of the positive aspect variables. This could be due to the low number of bisexual participants. Regretfully, the active recruitment of bisexual participants was not sought nor contemplated in the study design. Subsequent studies specifically regarding bisexual experiences in the Spanish context would be of value.

## Family support

Family support was hypothesized to influence positive experiences and this was found to be accurate. Family support positively correlated with forming families of choice, this suggests that those who form families of choice may not be doing so due to a lack of family support. The correlations between this variable and the sentiments of better mutual understanding with same-sex partners could imply that those who felt supported by their families also experienced a stronger sense of connection with their partners who share the same sexual identity. Family support also positively correlated with an overall sense of well-being due to self-sincerity, perhaps indicating that strong interpersonal relationships promote personal well-being.

## LGB communities

The authors believed that belonging to LGB communities would impact experiencing positive aspects. The factor which most influenced positive experiences with non-heterosexual sexual orientations in this survey were those who feel that they belong to the LGB community. These findings reflect research and theories from the United States. Including Fassinger and McCarn's [33] proposal that LGB identity development consists of two parallel processes (Individual Sexual Identity and Group Membership Identity) which are reciprocally catalytic although not necessarily simultaneous [33]. Coleman [4] also discusses the benefits of group membership and community for the development of a positive identity: "research has indicated that commitment to a positive homosexual identity is related to healthy psychological adjustment" [4].

Participants who felt a sense of belonging to LGB communities also felt that these communities provide emotional support and formed families of choice with their closest friends. This implies that LGB communities can be an important source of social support. Community membership also positively correlated with positive aspects regarding partner relationships and the creation of new gender and relationship scripts. These results could indicate that membership to LGB communities can positively influence experiences with partners.

The political ideals of living an "out" life is a political act and participation in social activism positively correlated with LGB community membership. The political sphere seems appreciable in Spanish LGB communities.

## Positive aspects and positive experiences

In a qualitative interview study in Spain, Sala et al. [34] explored lesbian identity development in eight Spanish women, finding that themes of identity invisibility as a source of personal suffering but, that the participants were able to deconstruct stigmatized meanings to find satisfaction and personal empowerment. The authors highlight the need to de-stigmatize lesbian identities and encourage direct contact with other LGB people to enable lesbian women to pluralize their discourse and develop a positive identity. These concepts of deconstructing stigmatized identities, constructing positive LGB identities and encouraging LGB community participation as a way to promote well-being were reflected in the findings of the current study. Participants of the present study who more enjoyed and believed that LGB identities are comprised of positive experiences and aspects where those who, prior to the study, believed that positive aspects exist and felt they belong to the LGB community. Promoting these sentiments with people who are struggling with societal heterosexism may help with improving quality of life. This could be done through encouraging them to reach out to LGB communities in their area or through social media.

No new themes or domains emerged as a result of this study perhaps implying that LGB experiences in Spain are similar to those in the United States, or that LGB identity development as a psychological process is similar in both countries' contexts. This could in part be related to the influence of Post-Stonewall United States LGB movements had on those in Spain [24,25].

## Gender scripts

In the open qualitative question, one male participant added "another positive aspect is that we don't have to live with the burden or pressure of having to bear the obligation of a 'traditional masculinity and its mandates'". O'Neil et al. [35] describes Gender Role Conflict (GRC) as how gender scripts negatively influence interpersonal interactions. Perhaps what is being expressed by male participants is that their sexual orientation allows for them to avoid GRC. The negative aspects of masculine roles can be evaded in the space created where desire orientations and gender intersect. This topic merits further exploration of how these new gender scripts of masculinities have been written, as well as, how or if these can be extrapolated as an asset to a society suffering from sexism.

The topic of gender expression with gay and bisexual identified men appeared to be more important than one might suppose. As gender scripts for men are restrictive in Mediterranean societies and constructs of manliness are important [36], more liberty from these constraints as a positive aspect could be a relevant conversation. If individuality, personal realization and freedom in society, all reported by participants as consequences of creating new gender scripts, questioning restrictive and detrimental masculinities is beneficial both for an individual and for society as a whole.

## Limitations

The principal limitation of this study is the small sample size and the inability to extrapolate the findings to Spanish LGB populations as it is not a representative sample. As an exploratory study, this research sought to examine if the domains and themes revealed by Riggle et al. [10] could be applied in the Spanish context. As well as, through the qualitative question, identify if other themes were relevant to participants which were not included in the survey, which were not found. The instrument was a self-designed survey of straightforward questions based on the study done in the United States by another research group. This instrument was not designed to be validated but, to examine what positive themes are most commonly experienced by LGB people in Spain to open this research line and to determine if this area of study merits continuation. The survey did yield low but not unacceptable internal reliability, notably the Disclosure and Social Support ( $\alpha = 0.50$ ) and Freedom from Societal Definitions of Roles ( $\alpha = 0.52$ ) sub-scales. This could be due problems in item development or due to other factors. Disclosure and Social Support sub-scale deals with relationships with family, friend, partner and community support, these concepts are related but may not be so closely related to result in a high Chronbach's Alpha. An increased sample size might have increased these figures.

A minimal effect sampling bias is present as only people with internet access could participate [37]. A more important sampling bias can be found in that members of LGBTQ associations were asked to participate, who are expected to have already begun LGB identity development. This most likely biased the results to give higher reports of positive experiences than if other sampling methods were employed. However, Positive Psychology seeks to study those who are flourishing to understand their experiences.

The majority of the participants were in their twenties; this could have biased the results. Future studies would focus on recruiting participants with a broader range of ages. In order to explore if and how age influences positive LGB experiences.

The faith of participant's family members was not asked, leaving unanswered questions regarding what, if any, relationship faith and family support of LGB people may have. Regretfully, the question about egalitarian relationships was only directed to women, it would have been advantageous to have been able to see how men felt about egalitarian relationships.

## Research and Intervention Implications

Future research should explore if the belief in positive aspects and a sense of belonging to the LGB community are indeed protective factors within the resilience framework. Together with, if and/or how these concepts could be instrumental in working with those who struggle from societal heterosexism. Intervention programs in Spain could use as a basis the two constructs of the existence of positive aspects and belonging to LGB communities as these most influenced positive experiences in this population. Constructing on the premise that the belief in positive aspects and de-stigmatizing stigmatized identities promote well-being, the domains, themes and positive aspects reported in this study (Table 1) could help with orientating the content for such a program. The authors also put forward for consideration that a community based approach may be effective as the sense of belonging to LGB communities influenced in positive experiences in this population.

## Conclusions

This research shows that positive aspects not only exist but some are experienced by an overwhelming percentage of participants. This leads these authors to believe that there is a rich area for future research about positive LGB experiences, concretely in the area of validation of quantitative instruments in Spanish. The authors tentatively, due to the small sample size and the limitations of this research, propose that the belief in the existence of positive aspects and a sense of belonging to LGB communities may serve as protective factors. The results of this study are not meant to create a model of how one should feel as LGB but, serve as testimony, reference and affirmation of positive experiences and identity.

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