

## Research Article

# 'Physical Education demands a lot of your gender identity because you show yourself in motion'- The construction of (gendered) body in physical education from the perspective of trans\* students

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One characteristic of Physical Education [PE] is its body-relatedness. A binary gender logic is pervasive in PE, shaping the perceptions, thoughts, and behaviours of both students and teachers. From a cis- and heteronormative perspective, this binarity goes along with inequality and discrimination. PE can be an especially sensitive context for trans\* persons, whose gender and body identity differs from the sex assigned at birth. The body is seen as a medium, in which the consequences of a gender binary and heteronormative system is visible, represented and produced through performativity. Simultaneously, socially constructed bodies influence subjective experiences and practices. This interview study provides insight into trans\* students' perspectives regarding their embodied experiences and their construction of their (gendered) body in PE. Semi-structured interviews with five trans\* women and seven trans\* men were conducted. The interviews included topics related to their gender biography and their experiences in school, PE and extracurricular sports. The data analysis is based on Grounded Theory. The inseparable interplay of gender and body, which affects the trans\* students' gender identity, was highlighted in the perception and construction of PE and the body. The trans\* body in PE is construed in a functional, symbolic and aesthetic dimension. These bodily experiences and constructions cannot be separated from incorporated gender and body norms which are actualised through performativity. The intersection of gender, body and identity paints a complex picture of trans\* students' bodily experiences in PE, where affirmation, but also self-doubt and degradation of one's gender identity occur. Based on the results, pedagogical and didactic considerations for more trans\* inclusive PE can be derived.

Keywords: Body; Gender diversity; Heteronormativity; LGBTQ+; Physical education; Transgender

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## 1. Introduction

One characteristic of Physical Education [PE] is its body-relatedness, so the body and the individual physicality are the focus in the PE context (Armour, 1999). The body is not only more clearly visible, but the tasks in PE must also be physically mastered. However, bodies are not only moved in PE, but also made and socially constructed through discourses and social practices (e.g. Armour, 1999; Kirk, 2002; Shilling, 1993). Gender is also a crucial and significant social construct (in PE) that is directly and inseparably linked to the body. Therefore, the question of the

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construction of gender cannot be answered without body and corporeality (Butler, 1993). For instance, (gendered) behavioural expectations and physical practices are anchored in every individual body. A binary differentiation of male and female does not apply either on a biological level (cf. inter persons) or on that of gender identities (cf. trans\*, fluid, non-binary). Although modern societies increasingly show greater awareness and more egalitarian attitudes towards gender diversity, gender binary thinking is dominant in everyday life and (institutional) practice (Johnson & Repta, 2012). In line with the organised sport system, PE is permeated by 'masculine values', which are intertwined with resistant heteronormative discourses (Larsson et al., 2011). These norms are also mirrored in PE practice, where (in-service) PE teachers may reproduce gender stereotypical expectations and values (Preece & Bullingham, 2022).

Since the body, physical development and gender are deeply significant to personal identity, trans\* students form a particularly relevant target group, as their gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. At the same time, trans\* persons feel a discrepancy with their body and physicality, especially when physical changes during puberty have begun (Boskey, 2014). For students who identify themselves beyond heteronormative assumptions, experiences within PE are often affected by discrimination, marginalisation, rejection and exclusion (e.g. for trans\* students: Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; for homosexual students: Hortigüela-Alcala et al., 2022). Embodied subjects in an institutional context are not simply recipients of external socio-cultural discourses, but also active producers from practice and reality (Shilling, 2010). Therefore, individuals have the possibility to resist and subvert dominant norms by performing alternative gender and sexual identities with their bodies (Butler, 1993). This paper aims to analyse the meaning and construction of the (gendered) body and bodily practices in PE from trans\* students' perspective. Based on the results, practical and pedagogical consequences for PE can be derived.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

Although gender is understood as a spectrum, the social construction of gender binarism (woman-man) must be seen as one of the most fundamental structuring elements that shapes all facets of human social life (Risman, 2018). Post-feminist and queer studies have analysed gender binarism and its consequences in the construction and reconstruction of gender and sexual identities. When Warner (1991) popularised the term heteronormativity, he conceptualised heterosexuality as an unquestioned norm in society, which produces a social order with a 'totalizing tendency' (p. 8). The dominant heterosexual culture in society (re)produces privileges for heterosexuality. These power relations permeate all essential social and cultural spheres and affect individuals at a personal level. Warner (1991) focused especially on sexuality, but the meaning and use of the concept have extended with considerations of other hierarchical categories related to gender and sexuality (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Therefore, inequalities, hierarchies and privileges derived from the dualistic gender logic (as a premise for homo- and heterosexuality) are also focused on the concept of heteronormativity. Gender binary assumptions are also salient in the concept of cisnormativity, supposing that all individuals are cis - meaning that their gender identity matches the sex ascribed at birth. This presumption privileges cis persons as the social norm, while marginalising trans\* persons as inferior (Shelton & Dodd, 2020). Cisnormativity also shapes the entire social context, and it has the potential for the analysis of the lack of trans\* inclusive conditions from the micro level of interactions to macro levels of institutional structures that produce, maintain and reinforce the marginalisation of trans\* persons (Shelton & Dodd, 2020). Gender binary and (cis-)heteronormative orders are present not only in everyday life, but also in educational and sport systems (Larsson et al., 2011). When school climates support and privilege (unconsciously) the normalisation of, for example, cisgender, heterosexist and gender-normative beliefs, it consequently leads to (structural) marginalisation and discrimination (Miller, 2016).

Overall, social constructivist views on the body 'provide important insights into how bodies may be affected by power relations, how the body enters into social definition of the self, and how

the body can function as a social symbol. They also highlight how the body can be used to legitimize social inequalities' (Shilling, 1993, p. 99). In the concept of (cis-)heteronormativity, the body becomes essential as it articulates the personal and social dimensions. The body can be seen as a medium, in which the consequences of a gender binary and heteronormative system are visible, represented and produced through repetitive performative bodily and speech acts (Butler, 1990). The heteronormative system is inscribed within bodies, while heteronormative social values and expectations are projected through bodies. Therefore, the (gendered) body is not only a physical and material entity but also a social construct that is shaped by cultural norms, expectations and power relations (Butler, 1993). In a society ubiquitously permeated by a gender binary, the dominant culture renders certain gender expressions as deviant. For instance, gender performances that differ from hegemonic masculinity and idealised femininity are considered as abnormal under the norm-constructing patriarchy (Butler, 1990). Deviations from cultural signs and interpretations of female and male bodies as well as their expressions lead to a (visible) disruption of hierarchical discourse binaries and can trigger insecurity, unease and abjection. Gender diversity means that multiple binaries are potentially disrupted at the same time as the linear associations between body, gender identities and sexuality are disrupted. For example, sexed bodies are not rigidly binary, gender identity is not necessarily tied to assigned sex at birth and the binary of sexuality is disrupted by queer sexual orientations (James, 2021).

As all societies and cultures have established norms and expectations which form the understanding of bodies, an abbreviation of the contextualised 'idealised' body may be experienced. Nevertheless, a dynamic and non-dichotomous notion of body is central. Bodies are simultaneously agents in and objects of social practice, so the body is not a passive recipient of gendered inscriptions but plays an active role in constantly shaping, interpreting, negotiating and constructing gender identities (Butler, 1990). Thus, there is the possibility for resistance, subversion and transformation of dominant heteronormative discourses through performative bodily acts (Butler, 1993). With this in mind, the trans\* body is a 'mash-up where a self can be made and remade, always in perceptual construction and deconstruction' (Miller, 2016, p. 4).

### 3. State of Research

Research with trans\* persons have often been labelled under the umbrella of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* and queer). Although LGBTQ+ people still have not received much attention in sport pedagogical research, there has recently been an increase in research activities with LGBTQ+ themes in the context of PE (Landi et al., 2020). Three recently published reviews have focused on the research conducted in this field (Herrick & Duncan, 2022; Landi et al., 2020; Müller & Böhlke, 2021). The systematic reviews of Herrick and Duncan (2022) and Müller and Böhlke (2021) examined and summarised LGBTQ+ students' experiences in PE.

Overall, it can be stated that the heteronormative organisation of PE especially becomes a 'neuralgic point' (Müller & Böhlke, 2021, p. 10) for trans\* and intersex students, as self-assignment to a gender is required and therefore strongly determines the experiences of trans\* students within PE. Changing rooms seem to be a recurrent problematic context for trans\* students (Berg & Kokkonen, 2022; Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Landi, 2019; Neary & McBride, 2021; Sykes, 2011). Moreover, gender segregation practices in PE occur in team formation or when dividing the class due to heteronormative assumed preferences in sport abilities and inclinations (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Landi 2019; Neary & McBride, 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2021; Williamson & Sandford, 2018). When gender identity has not been disclosed during school years, these constant gender segregations in PE lead to 'hindering desired gender' (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018, p. 109). Trans\* students, especially those not performing gender-conforming practices, also report negative social interactions with their classmates resulting in verbal teasing, bullying and harassment (Caudwell, 2014; Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; López-Cañada et al., 2021). PE has been identified as a crucial context for homophobia and transphobia,

where trans\* students suffer more than lesbian, gay and bisexual students (Drury et al., 2017). Overall, research suggests that PE is associated with many negative experiences from the perspective of trans\* students (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Williamson & Sandford, 2018), which also influence trans\* person's attitudes towards physical activity and sports (López-Cañada et al., 2021). PE teachers have relatively little knowledge about the needs and issues of trans\* students – this especially concerns PE (Drury et al., 2022). In the study of Williamson and Sandford (2018), trans\* students seldom perceive PE teachers as role models who address transphobic comments. Nevertheless, a qualitative case study shows how the trusting relationships between the PE teacher, the school, and the trans\* student enhance a trans\*-friendly school and PE by openly addressing queerness (Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2022).

Besides relevant situations for trans\* students, the construction and meaning of the body as an objective and subjective medium of experience has not been examined in detail. Investigations with girls and boys provide evidence that dominant social discourses about the (gendered and racialised) body are institutionalised in school and PE and affect adolescents' perceptions of the idealised body, experiences of their body, their learning about gender-appropriate physical activity and participation in PE (e.g. Azzarito, 2009; Garrett, 2004; Wright, 1996). For example, Wright (1996) points out that girls and boys are constructed as complementary resulting in boys' superiority concerning competence, engagement, toughness and abilities. Discourses of gender in PE position boys as strong, competitive and vigorous, whereas girls are construed as less interested and engaged, mainly concerned with interpersonal relationships and preoccupied with their appearance (Burrows, 2000). In total, PE seems to be a 'bastion of masculine values' (Larsson et al., 2011, p. 68), in which PE teachers reinforce heteronormative practices by favouring PE contents that provide more opportunities for boys to participate or by paying more tribute to masculine associated behaviour.

Although there is a 'rising tide' of research focusing LGBTQ+ in PE, there is still a 'critical lack of research with LGBTQ persons, and especially transgender youth' (Landi et al., 2020, p. 268). Some of the trans\* students' perspectives date back decades from their school days (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Hargie et al., 2017). Moreover, there are just a few studies with students who had socially disclosed their gender identity during their school years (Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2022; Landi, 2019). The findings of most studies in PE with trans\* students report significant situations and experiences in a heteronormative PE. The focus of this study lies in the analysis of bodily practice and the actualisation, (de-)construction and meaning of the trans\* body in PE from the perspective of trans\* students who are still in school or who have recently left school.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Participants**

In total, 12 interviews with trans\* persons from Germany, more specifically with five trans\* women and seven trans\* men, were conducted. Notably, all participants identified themselves clearly and exclusively as either men or women. The average age of the interviewees was 21.08 years (range from 17 to 29 years). Five persons are still in school, and the remainder have just left school. Many of the participants report the first conscious signs regarding their gender identity during childhood, but all participants were self-conscious of their gender identity at least during secondary school. Eight participants disclosed their gender identity during school years, and four persons started their hormone-based and/or operative transition during their school days. More comprehensive information on the participants and the interview data is provided in Table I.

### **4.1 Procedure**

This research was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Paderborn University. An interview guide was construed in a team with a trans\* person and tested beforehand. The recruitment of study participants took place by contacting genderqueer organisations. In an initial

email, information about the project and its aims was provided, and it was requested that correspondents forward an attached information flyer to members. At the same time, interview partners were recruited through personal contacts. The length of the interviews was, on average, approximately 1 hour 25 minutes (range from 42 to 117 minutes). The interviews first dealt with participants' gender biography followed by their experiences at school, in PE and in extracurricular sports. In the case of minors, a declaration of consent was obtained from their legal guardians.

Table 1

*Main characteristics of the sample and interview length*

	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender Identity</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Age of gender identity disclose (during schooling; yes/no)</i>	<i>Interview length in minutes</i>
1	Anton	Man	25	24 (no)	117
2	Benjamin	Man	18	16 (yes)	90
3	Carl	Man	19	14 (yes)*	52
4	Diana	Woman	20	20 (no)	84
5	Erik	Man	17	16 (yes)	56
6	Fred	Man	19	16 (yes)*	57
7	Georg	Man	22	17 (yes)*	107
8	Helin	Woman	21	19 (yes)	108
9	Ines	Woman	29	21 (no)	88
10	Jana	Woman	21	18 (yes)	84
11	Kati	Woman	17	16 (yes)*	93
12	Lukas	Man	25	18 (no)	42

*Note.* \* Initiated hormonal gender transition during school years.

### 4.3. Data Analysis

The research design and analysis are based on Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 2006) with the aim of gaining a systematically more comprehensive understanding of trans\* students' experiences in body-focused PE. Initial research questions were broad in nature, which allowed the data collection and analysis processes to generate information based on the participants' sharing of their experiences and to 'enter into the world of participants' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 16).

The analysis is executed according to the Straussian approach, which offers a structured coding process and allows the appropriate use of literature to increase theoretical sensitivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The iterative process of data-gathering and analysis can be seen as one of the characteristics of Grounded Theory to sequentially focus on the most significant issues in the field of research (Creswell, 2007). The first data were openly coded and thoroughly reviewed through memo-writing in the whole analysis process. The next iterations involved axial and selective coding processes, in which significant, synoptic codes were extracted and similar concepts were grouped and related to each other through constant comparison of individual cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). Analyses were regularly presented in research colloquia to obtain other possible interpretations. Finally, three primary categories were formulated to present the findings of the study: 'functional dimension', 'symbolic dimension' and 'aesthetic dimension' of the trans\* body in PE.

Considerations of certain sampling strategies (e.g. recruiting trans\* women after about half of the interviews to gather rich data on their experiences) attempted to achieve theoretical saturation. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the results are mostly valid for those students from a specific part of Germany (especially North Rhine-Westphalia), who, for instance, experienced single-sex PE only rarely. Therefore, further differentiations and dimensions may become apparent in this category in the future.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The interviewed trans\* persons see PE as a highly gender-binary and especially body-related subject. The inseparable interplay of gender and body, which affect their gender identity, is highlighted in the perception and construction of PE. Not only '*Gender roles are very, very clearly defined in Physical Education*' (Diana, 20f<sup>2</sup>), but PE also '*demand[s] a lot of your gender identity because you show yourself in motion*' (Helin, 21f). The body relatedness of PE interacts with the dualistic view of gender, which strongly (re-)constructs cis- and heteronormative views and practices in PE (Neary & McBride, 2021).

In concrete PE practice, internalized views of socially constructed (gendered) body norms become apparent and bodily experiences unfold. Students construe different perceptions of their body in PE, ranging from negative to positive experiences. The following aspects are presented analytically in discrete categories, but they are also interrelated.

### 5.1. Functional Dimension of Body

The main construction of the body in PE lies in a high-functional view: The purpose of the body in PE is to achieve the best possible sport motor performance. Performance and efficiency are the valued attributes for the body (Kirk, 2002), as PE is '*so purely focused on physical performance*' (Helin, 21f). Through a high level of physical performance, gender might become irrelevant and the body can be a source of self-efficacy, social recognition and acceptance:

I was always a pretty self-confident person in Physical Education. I had something that I could do much better than the others. That gave me a form of recognition at school. [...] Sport is like my therapy. It is always there. I'm good at it. I feel safe. [...] I don't care about gender either. I don't pay attention to it anymore, because my mind is just on the physical activity. (Anton, 25m)

The few and briefly reported positive experiences of trans\* students in other studies are also described in terms of positive competence experiences (e.g. Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Sykes, 2011). Müller and Böhlke (2022) state that these positive competence experiences are '*largely detached from heteronormativity in PE*' (p. 8). This cannot be fully supported here, as physical performance is sometimes classified and interpreted by gender and the internalised assumption that boys perform better: '*Even though I was a girl, I felt good in PE because I could do it better than the rest of the class*' (Anton, 25m), as well as '*And suddenly I was the last girl in the exercise, and I beat up half the guys*' (Georg, 22m). In the choice of language ('even though') and in the constant comparison of physical abilities with those of boys, the assumed boys' superiority in terms of motor skills is emphasised and persistently (re-)produced. If the trans\* body corresponds to the central idea of an efficient and functioning body, gender in sport activities recedes into the background or is even positively associated. This might at least be the case for trans\* men, because physical performance corresponds to the socially defined '*masculine*' idea of a fast, strong and athletic body (e.g. Azzarito, 2009) and is more likely to be valued positively by peers and PE teachers (Larsson et al, 2011; López-Cañada et al., 2021). The comparison with this construction of the hegemonically masculine body might also be problematic for trans\* men as

I have the feeling that I'm not masculine enough. Because I'm not strong enough or sporty enough or something else. And you always associate it with your gender and not with your abilities and you immediately worry about it. (Erik, 17m)

The culturally anchored and internalized constructions of the strong and capable body as a male body are represented by this quotation. Especially when PE constantly focuses performance and competitions, heteronormative discourses resulting in male dominance are promoted (Larsson et al., 2011). As the interviewed students transgress gender and body norms, PE might be an uncomfortable context when they do not (fully) correspond to self-idealised conceptions of an efficient body. As also Landi (2019) has shown in his study, queer students perceive PE as 'all

<sup>2</sup> The pseudonym is followed by the age and the self-defined gender identity; abbreviated as *f* for female or *m* for male.

physical, no education' (p. 105), where a biomedical and functional view of the body is dominant. Heteronormative assumptions of the gendered body also lead to an essentialist attribution and construction of different physical capacities resulting in boys' superiority (e.g. Preece & Bullingham, 2022): *'It was always boys-girls and so on. This division and always: "Boys are faster, boys are better". I never liked that'* (Lukas, 25m). The social associations of masculinity and femininity were not only related to better physical skills, but also to PE teachers' stereotypical assumptions of gendered interests and contents in sports (*'Girls did gymnastics and dance and boys football'*; Anton, 25m). An essentialist view on 'naturally' given gender differences in physical performance is also assumed and construed in assessment situations (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018; Safron & Landi, 2022), where gender-segregated grading tables are used:

It is very strongly assessed according to boys and girls and less according to physical characteristics. So, let's put the stamp on it and that's why you must be rated that way. (Diana, 20f)

The binary thinking of how and what the gendered body is supposed to do in PE disregards intraindividual differences and limits gender expressions in PE (Landi, 2019). This can lead to experienced marginalisation and hindered identification processes, often causing negative feelings and potentially resulting in an avoidance of PE.

## 5.2. Symbolic Dimension of Body

The symbolic dimension of the body means that the body is always a carrier of cultural signs and a 'bearer of symbolic value' (Shilling, 1993, p. 3). In the sense of bodily inscription, individuals internalise how to present their bodies socially 'adequately' in terms of dressing, talking, gesticulating and posturing in PE. As bodies exist in culture and nature simultaneously (Kirk, 2002), they are also read and interpreted by others. The symbolic dimension of body as the simultaneous own bodily representation and interpretation by third parties is presented in the following sections of *self-presentation* and *external presentation*.

### 5.2.1. Self-presentation

The interviewees see the body and its appearance as a medium for self-presentation. The discourse and construction of the body based on a gender binary is illustrated in the interviews, showing which idealised, gender-related body images prevail. This also has an impact on dominant body images in (school) sport, which are associated with physical characteristics and sport contents:

A slim, attractive girl who can run great and is extremely good at athletics and a hulk of a man with his height and weight in football or something. These typical images are somehow conveyed. (Diana, 20f)

This idealised gendered body images of female slenderness and male muscularity are also confirmed in other studies (e.g. Azzarito, 2009). Although most of the interviewed trans\* students recognized and reflected on these stereotypical assumptions as socially constructed and problematic, they still identified them as their ideal body image.

The physical exposure, as a constitutive characteristic of PE, leads to a public display of the body that can be fraught for some trans\* students – especially when the lightly covered body must be presented. This is particularly the case in changing rooms and during swimming lessons, where the intertwined construction of gender and body resulting in heteronormative assumption becomes particularly visible. The bodily exposure of others and especially of oneself is the most uncomfortable rationale for trans\* students (*'I always felt weird changing with the girls. That was always super uncomfortable for me'*, Benjamin, 18m) Changing rooms are described as the 'most traumatic' (Sykes, 2011, p. 45) and 'most problematic' (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018, p. 113) spaces for trans\* students in other studies as well. The same extent of affective reactions is shown when talking about swimming lessons: *'Swimming lessons were absolute hell, definitely (...). I only had these swimming trunks. And then, I was practically forced to deal with my body'* (Ines, 29f). The constant mental preoccupation with the presentation of the trans\* body especially

relates to specific body parts, which becomes more obviously visible through swimwear (*'And somehow, there's now something dangling quite visibly'*, Helin, 21f).

For all interviewed trans\* students, it is important to conceal biological physical characteristics. Therefore, binders for the female breast are a useful garment for masking 'female' characteristics of the body (cf. López-Cañada et al., 2021). The technique of tucking is sometimes used to hide the penis and testicles. Exercises were also carefully selected in terms of physical exposure, *'so you don't do an exercise where you lie on your back and everything is so, so visible'* (Kati, 17f). Moreover, individuals also often actively removed themselves from uncomfortable situations where their trans\* body might be on public display in PE.

On the other hand, PE can be seen as a stage for the conscious physical presentation of one's gendered body identity, as *'bodies tell a story about the person they embody'* (Kirk, 2002, p. 82). Whereas Neary and McBride (2021) report mostly negative associations with sportswear for trans\* students, it might also be seen as a chance for trans\* students to display gender identity in PE. Physical attributes like *'leg hair'* as well as sportswear like *'loose long sleeves'* and *'low-slung shorts'* (Fred, 19m) or *'figure- and tight-fitting clothes'* (Helin, 21f) can highlight internalised gender-conforming appearance, so *'that it is ok to show, who I am'* (Carl, 19m). The bodily inscriptions as socially constructed performances might also be evident in specific modes of behaviour and movement like *'wide-legged sitting'* (Erik, 17m). But this self-presentation – which is closely linked to external perception – is more difficult for those who have not disclosed their gender during school time as *'You can't wear crop tops and hot pants as a boy in a boys' class'* (Jana, 21f). The possibility and chance to resist and subvert dominant norms by performing alternative gender and sexual identities through their bodies (Butler, 1993) is rarely taken among the students who have not openly disclosed their gender as they were concerned about insults and humiliation (see next chapter).

### 5.2.2. External perception

The external perception of one's own body by others, like peers and PE teachers, also differs from positive to negative experiences. Social dysphoria is the distress of being misgendered, respectively the *'distress at the incongruency between their gender and the content of other people's perceptions of them as gendered beings'* (Walsh & Einstein, 2020, p. 57). The body offers a target for abjection, discrimination and insults because of deviations from the norm (Caudwell, 2014; Devis-Devis, Pereira-García, López-Cañada et al., 2018). The external perception of the body is highly intertwined with sexuality, as described by Butler (1990). When classmates saw ballet clothes on Diana, she remembers the following significant experience in PE:

I could just listen to some things again for the next three weeks. [...] Bitch, faggot, faggot again. [...] I was pushed around and hit, because I am different and small and you can just do it then. (Diana, 20f)

Not only classmates, but also PE teachers might read and interpret the trans\* body as deviating from the norm and show trans\*-hostile behaviour:

I had an injury and all she [the PE teacher; author] said was: "Well, with your history you can't have any body awareness, and that's why the injury happened!" [...] Do I have to take that from a PE teacher who tells me that I can't be good at sports because I am trans\*? (Georg, 22m)

In this particular case the PE teacher interpret the trans\* body as a deviant body and, among other things, denies its physical capacity. This goes align with the construction of the trans\* body as a *'pathological binary'* (Landi, 2019, p. 108) by assuming that a healthy body with a healthy body awareness is not possible and necessarily leads to injuries.

The positive side of the external perceptions includes situations in which trans\* individuals were recognized in their self-identified gender, thereby receiving social recognition: *'We played boys against girls and the boys said immediately: "Yeah, Carl, come to us! Come! You are a boy! Come to us!"'* (Carl, 19m). The male classmates recognise him as their equal by addressing it through their usage of language. Nevertheless, the recognition is only possible because of the gender binary teaching instruction and the disclosed gender identity. On the other hand, gender identity disclosure also



provides a basis for conscious trans\*-hostile behaviour, such as conscious misgendering or dead-naming with the 'old' name, which is also stated by Phipps and Blackall (2021).

### 5.3. Aesthetic Dimension of Body

The aesthetic dimension means that the own body is perceived and experienced subjectively in an affective way. The students pay attention to the sensory processes and feelings of their bodies. Positive embodied experiences include the conscious perception of physical and mental reactions to movement and sporting activities.

I can burn off energy, forget my frustration for five minutes and just let it go, get physically tired because somehow everything feels better afterwards when I've really been able to exhaust myself completely physically. (Ines, 29f)

These positive aesthetic experiences and construction of the physically active body seem detached from the gendered body. The focus is put on a mindful engagement with oneself, the body and the individual effects of movement and sport.

Negative body experiences include situations in which the students are sensually confronted with their sex assigned at birth. Shilling (1993) defines the body 'as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits' (p. 13). These limits are aesthetically perceived by trans\* students when experiencing their bodies as a biological fact. This experience can be described as bodily dysphoria, a distress triggered by the incongruent perception of bodily traits and features with one's desired gender-congruent embodiment (Walsh & Einstein, 2020). As also reported by López-Cañada et al. (2021), the conscious perception of special body parts, like the bosom, during physical activities can lead to emotional distress:

We did workouts and there was rope skipping. And at some point, when you jump and sweat, the binder doesn't bind properly. [...] And that's, that's really, that triggered me so badly that I was picked up from school; it didn't work anymore for me. I really had a breakdown. (Carl, 19m)

The embodied experience of biological reactions such as menstruation or the sensory perception of their voice can also lead to discomfort and bodily dysphoria: *'PE and also in general was especially awful when I had my menstrual period'* (Fred, 19m). The unwanted perception of hormonal reactions and certain body parts might be experienced more intensively in PE than in the classroom due to the moving body and the lesson formats which are mainly social and interactive.

Overall, the perceived gender binary and body-related context of PE falls between affirmation and degradation for trans\* students. Gender and body and their interrelatedness are permanently activated in PE, and the interpretation of the self is embedded in socio-cultural perceptions of an idealised gender-constructed body in PE and are actualized through performative acts. The gendered physicality of 'ideal' bodies relates to a range of underlying inequalities concerning men's 'natural' strength and prowess, and women's 'natural' agility and daintiness (Coffey, 2013). Nevertheless, when trans\* individuals are able to present themselves according to socially embedded norms of the 'male' and 'female' body and its attributes, they may receive positive affirmation both internally and externally. Such affirmation can strengthen their gender identity, as social recognition reinforces their self-identified gender. In this gender binary, students can shape, create and refine their gender. On the other hand, there is the danger of a constant preoccupation with oneself as well as being humiliated because of the externally perceived divergence in physical appearance, ways of moving and expression.

## 6. Conclusions and Perspectives

The interviewed trans\* students conceptualised PE as a subject in which a cis- and heteronormative gender binary is omnipresent and in which simultaneously the material body is in focus and the source of embodied experiences. The results on the construction of the (gendered) body show the extent to which gender, body and identity are intersected in PE. The stability and persistence of (cis) heteronormative system resulting in gender binary is revealed in each dimension of the construction of body and performative bodily practices. Body-based PE provides

trans\* individuals with numerous opportunities to (re-)produce self-identified gender through performativity, though this may reinforce traditional binary gender images.

The hegemonic masculinity in PE is especially mirrored in the functional construction of the body and reveals the intertwining of performance and gender orders. When PE is stuck in the traditional patterns of gendered expectations combined with performance orientation, possibilities to transgress gender norm remain closed (Landi, 2019). In total, the perceived deviation from idealised (gendered) bodies provides a projection for self-doubt and is a vulnerable target for humiliation, degradation and marginalisation. Gender is often used as a binary structural category when comparing performances in PE. This gender-binary perspective can also be reflected in gender-segregated performance and grading tables. This not only excludes other gender identities, but also neglects (intra-)individual differences. Accordingly, individual learning requirements and progress can be taken into account when assessing performance. In addition to the functional-motor dimension of physical performance, it is also possible to focus more on personal and social evaluation aspects (Möhwald, 2024).

Struggling processes with gender identity become especially visible in the symbolic dimension of the body, in which own bodily representations and interpretation by third parties occur simultaneously. In addition, trans\* students might be confronted with their sex assigned at birth through bodily experiences on aesthetic and sensory processes to a higher extent in PE. In order to elude uncomfortable situations in which one questions oneself or is questioned by others, the (partially) avoidance of PE is a common strategy among trans\* students. Consequently, trans\* students might miss valuable learning opportunities by not taking part in PE. At the same time, they are also unable to use their agency to resist the prevailing cultural norms, to subvert them and to change existing PE practices (Landi, 2019).

Situations of physical visibility and exposure in PE are not only experienced ambivalently by trans\* students (Åsebø et al., 2022) and cannot be avoided in general in PE. However, it is helpful for PE teachers to know which situations can be problematic for trans\* students in order to find individual solutions together. In addition, teachers can reflect on methods and measures to reduce body-centredness. For swimming lessons, for example, clothing such as swim tops or a bathrobe or towel for outside the water can be helpful. In the pool, physical exposure is relativised so that as much lesson time as possible should be spent in the water as quickly as possible (Möhwald, 2024).

The fundamental human motivation and need for recognition, acceptance and belonging (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995) to their self-identified gender is essential for trans\* students. Therefore, important resources for the self-determined expression of one's gender and for transforming gender expectations in PE are respectful relationships with peers and educators. Teachers are particularly important agents for creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ students and providing a trans\*-inclusive PE environment (Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2022; Martino et al., 2022). This requires the education of all stakeholders on issues of equity and inclusion in school and PE by involving and centralising the voices of trans\* students (Drury et al., 2022). In a climate of recognition and appreciation, that takes students' fears and concerns seriously, it seems more likely that all students can flourish, experience pleasure and be successful (Landi, 2018).

Clearly communicated and binding rules of behaviour, agreed upon with the whole class, represent a pedagogical principle. This fosters an appreciative learning environment and makes clear that discriminatory behaviour will not be tolerated. It is also important to define consequences for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and to intervene consistently if the rules are disregarded. When trans\*-hostile or sexually connoted comments, insults and behaviours are ignored by the PE teacher, it can create the impression that such conduct is acceptable. This, in turn, can perpetuate discriminatory language and actions (Möhwald, 2024).

Although Western societies show greater awareness of the diversity of individuals and ways of living, it seems that the concrete practice of PE is barely developing in terms of gender and body discourses. It is shown that it remains in the patterns of performance orientation in favour of boys. For example, gender-segregating practices in PE lessons can generally be reflected upon and

avoided by the PE teacher. If several lessons are offered, these should be chosen according to individual interests and regardless of gender.

As Armour (1999) stated over 20 years ago, a new, body-focused rationale is particularly needed in PE. A focus on how various bodies are in terms of shape, size and colour, which discourses on bodies are dominant in today's societies, where these incorporated assumptions come from and what impact these discourses have on individuals, could be part of the educational material in PE. Moreover, the deconstruction of the gendered body can be addressed by critically reflecting on gender stereotypical assumptions in the objective and performative body. By performing alternative gender expressions in PE, transforming processes to subvert prevailing norms and discourses might be feasible. However, this requires the commitment of PE teachers, who recognise and reflect a gender-equitable sports practice. If trans\* students should be directly involved in trans\*-inclusive processes, it requires deep consultation and consent to avoid othering processes (Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2022).

Overall, in addition to in-service PE teacher training, appropriate methods to convey and transfer academic knowledge in meaningful ways in tertiary education are needed (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, Fuentes-Miguel et al., 2018; Pérez-Samaniego et al., 2016).

This study interviewed only trans\* students who exclusively identify as either women or men ('At the end, we are a colourful bunch that is nevertheless black and white', Kati, 17). Therefore, seeking the insights and perceptions of non-binary students, who do not (exclusively) identify at the binary pole of men-women, would be important to get a comprehensive picture of gender diverse students' experiences in a cis- and heteronormative structured PE.

Moreover, previous studies have generally been conducted in Western societies, so further research with gender diverse persons in more patriarchal cultures would be fruitful. Finally, the statement by Sykes (2011) that the 'implications of intersex, transgender and transsexual subjectivities have not been seriously considered within physical education' (p. 35) is still contemporary based on the interviewed persons and their perceptions and experiences in body-related PE and needs to be addressed in further school (sport) development processes and research.

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**Data availability:** Raw data for dataset are not publicly available to preserve individuals' privacy.

**Ethical declaration:** All studies performed were in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case. The local ethics committee approved the study on 24 November 2021. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. If participants were minors, legal guardians additionally gave their consent.

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