
Research article

How do LGBTQ+ adolescents construct safe spaces and support networks? A multi-method participatory approach

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Abstract

This study explores how LGBTQ+ adolescents build their safe spaces and support networks, highlighting the social and emotional dimensions that shape their everyday experiences. Taking a multi-method participatory approach, the research combines 26 photovoice narratives, geolocation mapping and timeline analysis. These various methodologies allowed the co-construction of knowledge with the participants, who actively defined and interpreted the environments they consider safe. The findings show that both digital and physical safe spaces are characterised by interpersonal bonds that foster protection, trust and mutual respect. Social capital formation occurs primarily through small, homogeneous peer networks, particularly within leisure contexts. Formal educational settings are absent from participants' narratives. This study demonstrates the importance of involving LGBTQ+ adolescents and, where appropriate, their families, as co-investigators, allowing institutions to learn from their lived experiences. The

methodological design offers transferable information to create more inclusive and responsive youth-centred spaces in diverse settings.

Keywords LGTBQ+ adolescents; social capital; safe spaces; participatory research; non-formal context; leisure contexts

Introduction

Challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth

Numerous international studies have shown a growing interest in preventing the mental health problems and poor academic performance that affect LGBTQ+ adolescents as a result of experiences of social stigma and discrimination (Ancheta et al., 2021; Frost and Meyer, 2023; Johns et al., 2018). This is due to the persistence of social prejudices, structural discrimination, hate speech, LGBTQ+ phobia, stigmatisation and cultural sanctions against non-normative identities (Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw, 2016).

In this context, the concept of safe spaces has gained relevance as a necessary tool to counteract the negative effects of prevailing heterocisnormativity. These spaces allow LGBTQ+ individuals to develop their identity without having to hide, fear rejection, suppress their emotional or sexual preferences (Dürrbaum and Sattler, 2019; Gonzales et al., 2020) or internalise homonegativity (Martxueta and Etxeberria, 2014). Various studies have linked these experiences of exclusion to indicators such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress symptoms, isolation, substance use, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and suicide (Dürrbaum and Sattler, 2019).

This study was conducted within the non-formal educational context of an LGBTQ+ project in Sabadell, Spain, framed by the potential of social pedagogy to address processes of inclusion and community transformation. Although Spain has been internationally recognised for advances in LGBTQ+ rights and legislation, recent studies continue to report significant experiences of discrimination, bullying and emotional distress among LGBTQ+ adolescents, particularly within educational settings (Feijóo et al., 2021; Generelo, 2016; Pichardo Galán et al., 2009). From this perspective, the project is understood not only as a supportive environment but also as an educational practice that fosters participation, recognition and collective meaning-making. In line with bell hooks (1989), 'diversity is a challenge precisely because it requires us to change old paradigms, allowing complexity' (p. 84). From the perspective of social pedagogy, understood as an educational practice aimed at social transformation in community contexts (Úcar, 2011), this study falls within the framework of supporting young people in situations of emotional and identity vulnerability.

Safe spaces: origins, controversies, educational approaches and characteristics

There is ongoing disagreement about the origins of the concept of *safe space*, due to what is considered its ambiguity (Iversen, 2019), complexity (Djohari et al., 2018) and utopian ideals (Vaccaro et al., 2012). In its historical context, the original aim of the concept was to protect marginalised groups from violations, threats and hatred by providing them with a safe environment (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019). Safe spaces, as defined by Auestad (2015), offer a prejudice-free environment where LGBTQ+ individuals can escape over-generalisation and embrace individual possibilities.

The term has sparked politicised controversy and has been criticised for promising more than it can deliver, as argued by Iversen (2019). In contrast to the concept of safe spaces, Arao and Clemens (2013) introduced the notion of *brave space* as a tool to discuss controversial and sensitive topics related to diversity and social justice. Myers et al. (2019) also supported this term, recognising that many spaces are never entirely safe for those who experience oppression. Moreover, Ahmed (2012) critiqued safe spaces for potentially reinforcing segregation by excluding dominant groups, thereby limiting structural transformation.

Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) argued that the term *safe space* first gained academic prominence as a result of Judith Shulevitz's (2015) essay on such spaces at university campuses, which significantly contributed to political discourse. Due to their relative anonymity and accessibility, digital safe spaces are

seen as a safe space away from the oppressions of the private sphere (Haber, 2016). However, although they offer increased access, they may also intensify feelings of insecurity (Brownlie, 2018).

From an empowering educational perspective (Chin, 2017), successful safe spaces enhance well-being and life opportunities (Nugent and Deacon, 2022), encouraging individuals to both accept and critique individual and collective representations, thereby fostering a sense of community among peers. Huang (2015) argued that this is a unique context because it not only provides a space for young people to explore all elements of their personal and social identities but also facilitates the development of skills necessary to shape their own spaces within family life, local communities and social networks. Rottman (2006) asserted that both teachers and students need to constructively examine how issues of privilege, power and difference are manifested in educational settings and the broader sociopolitical sphere. Similarly, Stengel (2010) posited that an educational space is not unilaterally safe and comfortable, while Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) argued that a learning environment can also reproduce insecurity and fear – poor foundations for learning.

Current research recognises that children and young people not only inhabit but also co-produce and re-signify safe spaces through situated practices and everyday relationships (Djohari et al., 2018). Although the concept of safe space continues to evolve, a review of specialised literature conducted by the authors, has revealed twelve key characteristics that help define what is understood by a safe space in today's context. This systematisation provides a solid foundation for its subsequent empirical exploration:

1. *Intersectional counterspace*: Physical or digital environments that resist dominant cultural norms imposed on intersectional identities (for example, race, gender, sexual orientation). These spaces constitute areas where social networks or interactions emerge (Sapag and Kawachi, 2007), often within contexts where exclusionary hierarchies are reproduced (Collins and Bilge, 2020).
2. *Prejudice-free environment*: A bias-free setting where individuals can present themselves openly and speak freely without fear of censorship or ridicule (Vaccaro et al., 2012). Prejudice is defined as 'a preconceived opinion, usually negative, towards something or someone' (Auestad, 2015).
3. *Spaces for resistance and debate*: Resistance and debate strategies are framed as vital spaces for challenging hegemonic discourses, offering opportunities to create new identities, generate knowledge and advocate for social change (Pérez Aronsson, 2020).
4. *Mutual respect and expression*: Mutual respect enables the expression of ideas and emotions without fear of judgement, interruption or belittlement, fostering recognition of others through empathy (Alvarez and Milner IV, 2018; Teruel, 2018).
5. *Affective atmosphere and emotional containment*: Environments that evoke instinctive responses of care and openness towards others (Anderson, 2021), shaped by sensory qualities such as light, sound, materials and temperature (McPhail et al., 2022), and that combine *content and affect* (Weems, 2019). The classroom space is, therefore, a contested site shaped by historical, cultural and political practices (Kambunga et al., 2023).
6. *Relational connection and self-reflection*: This refers to both a mental state and a conceptualised emotion that informs it (Chico Muñoz, 2021). This process is enhanced when individuals recognise shared experiences, enabling young people to express their emotions and connect with peers, which promotes reflection on their personal experiences (Wernick et al., 2014).
7. *Protection and care*: This involves taking action to prevent someone from being harmed or negatively affected by adverse situations (Alvarez and Milner IV, 2018). It reflects a notion of reciprocal protection, where the principle of taking care of each other is promoted, both in physical and digital spaces (Brownlie, 2018).
8. *Empathetic dialogue and non-violent communication (NVC)*: These are skills for conflict resolution based on dialogue (Huang, 2015). In a safe space, freedom, creativity and joy coexist with the need to respectfully integrate diverse perspectives (Gayle et al., 2013).
9. *Explicit rules and emotional security*: Defined shared rules help ensure that individuals feel emotionally secure without fear of judgment from their peers, encouraging participation in serious, respectful and empathetic dialogue (Palfrey, 2017). Building a safe space requires a balance between mutual respect and emotional protection (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019).
10. *Participatory learning and movement*: Participatory learning acts as a marker of engagement, driven by dialogue and active participation in complex or sensitive topics (Gayle et al., 2013). A safe space requires a continuous balance between safety and vulnerability, individuality and collectivity, as well as agreement and dissent (Gayle et al., 2013; Hunter, 2008).

11. *Community participation and empowerment*: This refers to the connections people form to foster a sense of belonging and community commitment (Nugent and Deacon, 2022). It starts with recognising oneself as capable of collectively shaping both personal and environmental development, having a voice and leading one's initiatives (Bacqué and Biewener, 2013). It leads to greater awareness of rights and a sense of empowerment (Johns et al., 2018). Taking risks from a position of difference involves celebrating diversity and developing personal resilience (Hunter, 2008; Johns et al., 2018). Participation in community programmes has been associated with benefits such as higher academic achievement, lower substance use and better mental health (Fish et al., 2019).
12. *Horizontal community structures*: Community relationships based on mutual respect, supportive interactions, a sense of belonging and positive social norms (London et al., 2010), while minimising hierarchies (Bacqué and Biewener, 2013). Community relations are based on mutual respect, supportive relationships, belonging and positive social norms (London et al., 2010), all of which minimise hierarchies (Bacqué and Biewener, 2013).

Understanding safe spaces requires not only identifying their characteristics but also analysing the social dynamics that sustain them. LGBTQ+ youth construct these spaces through everyday connections, trust and shared meaning. From a social pedagogical perspective, safe spaces can be understood as relational and educational environments that foster participation, recognition and collective support. Within this framework, social capital offers a lens to explore how such networks are generated and reinforced. The following section applies the dimensions of bonding, bridging and linking to analyse how these relationships contribute to the creation and sustainability of safe spaces.

The power of social capital in the construction of safe spaces

Social capital is conceptualised as a dynamic and cyclical process that evolves within communities, embedded in the relationships among individuals and groups, and in a continuous state of transformation (Padró Buixeda and Úcar, 2015). According to Nugent and Deacon (2022), social capital is a key strength in building safe LGBTQ+ communities and has proven to be a valuable resource for LGBTQ+ youth in facing challenges and achieving successful social integration (Cserni and Talmud, 2015).

A key strength of social capital lies also in its ability to mobilise material and financial resources. The different types of social capital (*bonding*, *bridging* and *linking*) provide access to a wider range of resources and facilitate connections with individuals and institutions in positions of power (Barker and Thomson, 2015):

- *Bonding* refers to strong ties within closely connected groups, promoting trust and reciprocity among members with similar backgrounds.
- *Bridging* links individuals across diverse social groups, enabling the exchange of ideas and resources between different communities.
- *Linking* connects individuals and groups to institutions or people in authority, facilitating access to external resources and opportunities.

From the perspective of social pedagogy, according to Valdivia Vizarreta (2017), social capital is understood as a resource that is generated and developed through relationships, networks and cooperation between people. It is fundamental because it fosters community participation, collaboration, collective learning and the empowerment of individuals. Social and community networks facilitate the transfer of knowledge, mutual support and the building of shared values, strengthening inclusive and socio-educational processes. Educational action benefits from social capital, while at the same time helping to reinforce these networks and relationships, closing a cycle of integrated social and pedagogical development.

First, social capital *bonding* can enhance a sense of community, collective efficacy and community capacity and skills (Sapag and Kawachi, 2007), by creating networks that strengthen community bonds, foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual support (Vaccaro et al., 2012) and promote greater inclusion, diversity and LGBTQ+ representation. Through the development of support and solidarity networks, including digital social networks (Cserni and Talmud, 2015), protection and assistance are provided to vulnerable LGBTQ+ individuals.

These connections provide emotional support, information, advice and practical assistance, which can reduce the risk of violence and discrimination (Stengel, 2010; Weems, 2019). Whitehead (2019) showed that in formal contexts social capital enhances both academic and emotional support, strengthens a sense of belonging and fosters authenticity. Support systems outside formal settings, such as virtual and in-person communities, provide respect, a sense of community based on shared identities, counselling, empowerment, representation and mental health support.

Second, social capital *bridging* enhances the civic and political participation of LGBTQ+ individuals by facilitating access to community networks and organisations, while also encouraging their involvement in decision-making processes (Pérez Aronsson, 2020). This engagement is further reinforced through policy development, rights advocacy and the promotion of equal opportunities, ensuring a safe and discrimination-free community (Nugent and Deacon, 2022).

Third, social capital *linking* enhances the visibility and social awareness of LGBTQ+ individuals by fostering connections and enabling collaboration with other groups and community organisations. Joint actions can be undertaken to educate and raise awareness of LGBTQ+ rights, helping to challenge prejudice and dismantle negative stereotypes (London et al., 2010). This contributes to combating discrimination and hatred, fostering a culture of respect and acceptance and establishing a safer, more inclusive environment for all.

Community relationships and networks can be leveraged to access services and resources that enhance the safety of LGBTQ+ individuals (Brownlie, 2018). These may include safe shelters, legal aid, mental health services, training programmes and employment opportunities, among others (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019; Palfrey, 2017). By leveraging social capital, strategic partnerships can be formed with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public institutions and private enterprises. This approach ensures that LGBTQ+ individuals have access to essential resources (Gayle et al., 2013), while also fostering opportunities for belonging and promoting positive social norms (London et al., 2010).

We align with Murphy et al.'s (2023) approach, which aims to understand how the participants in our study have used social capital to overcome challenges and draw on resources from community organisations. This understanding is based on interpreting the participants' own meanings, feelings, beliefs and values, as suggested by Martínez Palacios (2020).

In sum, safe spaces play a crucial role in building social capital by fostering strong connections among individuals with similar interests. They enhance *bonding* within close-knit groups through trust and mutual respect, facilitate *bridging* by connecting diverse individuals for the exchange of ideas and support *linking* by providing access to broader networks and resources. Ultimately, this strengthens community resilience, empowerment and social integration.

Thus, the primary objective of this study is to establish a foundation for understanding the construction of safe space for the LGBTQ+ youth community. The secondary objective is to analyse the implications of social capital in the development and maintenance of such space.

Method

This study was conducted with non-formal education for LGBTQ+ youth aged 14 to 21, associated with the NGO Actuavallès. To avoid an extractivist mindset and ensure an ethical approach, methodologies were selected that encouraged the active participation of young people as co-researchers, recognising their critical thinking and situated knowledge (Kindon et al., 2007; Tilley and Taylor, 2018). This aligns with participatory action research approaches, which, as Wagaman (2015) argued, support processes of empowerment and transformation in LGBTQ+ contexts.

In line with this framework, a multi-method participatory methodology was designed, incorporating photovoice, geolocation and timeline (Sexton and Bauermeister, 2021). These tools foster creative self-expression, collective affirmation and reflection on both individual and shared experiences (Cosgrove et al., 2023), while enabling the exploration of the emotional, territorial and symbolic dimensions of safe spaces (Pain and Francis, 2003). The study sought the active involvement of young people at various stages, including data production, joint analysis and feedback.

This study is grounded in a social pedagogical perspective that views education as a relational, situated and transformative process beyond formal institutions. As Kishani (2024) notes, social pedagogy involves engaging young people in meaningful participation, recognising their beliefs and experiences and co-constructing knowledge through creative and dialogic methods. In this sense, the use of

photovoice is not only a methodological tool but also an educational practice that facilitates reflection, recognition and the emergence of youth agency in specific contexts.

Participants

Participants were recruited through an already existing LGBTQ+ youth group (LGBTQ+ GANG) coordinated by the NGO Actuavallès in Sabadell. The group functioned as a non-formal educational and community-based space for LGBTQ+ adolescents and young people. Ten secondary and high school students were recruited, based on voluntary participation, who were already actively involved in the group's regular activities and dynamics. Table 1 presents their profiles according to age, gender identity, sexual orientation, origin, educational background and level of family involvement.

Table 1. Details of the informants

	<i>n</i> = 10	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Cis boy	2	20
Trans boy	6	60
Trans girl	1	10
Non-binary *	1	10
Sexual orientation		
Gay	2	20
Prefer not to say	8	80
Age		
14–16	5	50
18–21	5	50
City		
Sabadell	8	80
Barberà del Vallès	1	10
Terrassa	1	10
Race		
White	9	90
Black	1	10
Education		
Secondary	5	50
High school	3	30
Professional training	2	20
Neurodivergency		
With diagnosis	3	30
Undiagnosed	7	70
Family participation		
Yes	7	70
No	3	30
Family bond		
Consanguinity	5	50
Chosen family	2	20

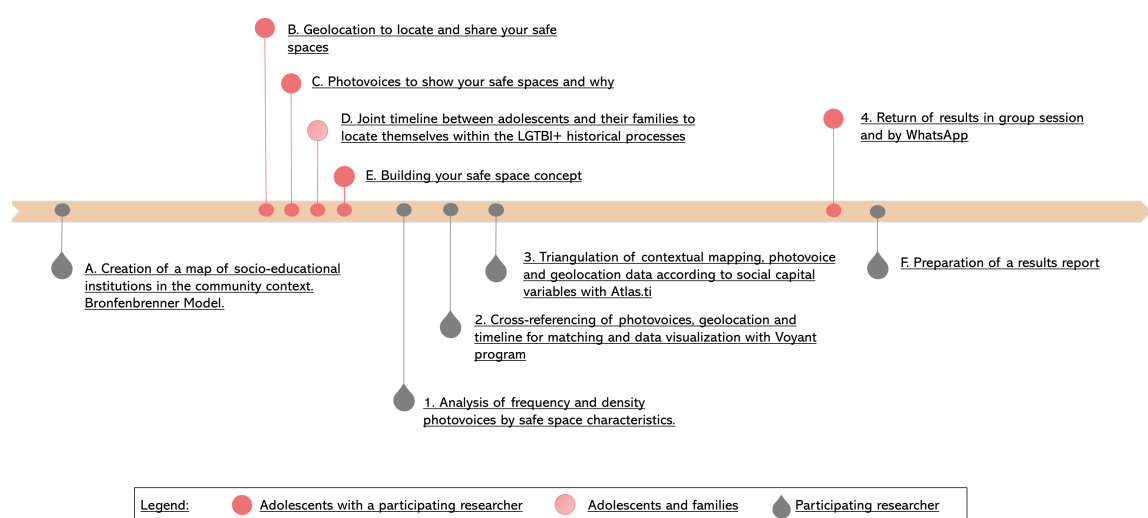
Notes. * 'Non-binary' corresponds to a gender identity that does not fit within the binary categories. Participants decide to be anonymised using the code PXX, where P stands for participant and each of the 11 individuals was assigned a unique number.

Phases of the study

The research process took place between April and June 2022 in Sabadell (Barcelona, Spain). Figure 1 outlines the methodological trajectory of the study, distinguishing the activities carried out by LGBTQ+ young people (above the line), some of them alongside their families, from those conducted by the research team (below the line). The sequence of data collection and analysis is depicted, emphasising the participatory and collaborative nature of the process, in which participants actively contributed to the production, interpretation and feedback of the results.

Figure 1. Shared research itinerary: data production and analysis among LGBTQ+ youth, families and research team

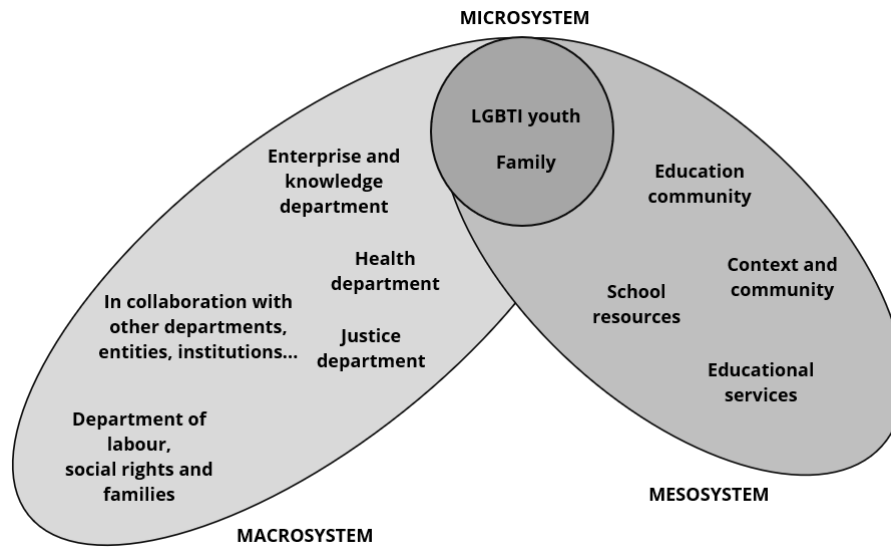
Participating methodology to know how LGBTI adolescents build and relate to each other in their safe spaces



Contextual mapping

As an initial phase, a diagram was developed, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Llena Berñe et al., 2023), to identify educational, social, cultural and protective resources accessible to LGBTQ+ youth within the local area (Figure 2).

This map was designed to identify the key agents surrounding LGBTQ+ youth who may contribute to the construction and maintenance of their safe spaces. It reflects the Catalan context and aims to facilitate inclusive, context-aware analysis.

Figure 2. Socio-educational map based on the bioecological model

Photovoice

Photovoice enables the autonomous production of information based on personal and intimate experiences through photographs, text messages and audio notes (Liebenberg, 2022). It has previously been used successfully within trans* communities (Rhodes et al., 2015). An initial call was held with each participant to explain the objectives and obtain informed consent. Instructions were then sent via WhatsApp, asking participants to capture between two and ten images accompanied by either audio or text notes, reflecting their experiences of safe spaces. Data collection took place over a two-week period, with a mid-point reminder to encourage participation.

Once the images were received, the research team organised the material while ensuring confidentiality. One of the eleven participants chose to withdraw from the study because they were unable to identify a safe space in their environment.

Geolocation

Once all the photovoice contributions had been collected, a group session was held in which participants shared their safe spaces, both physical and digital. These locations were collectively geolocated using Google Earth, which facilitated reflection on the emotions, benefits, accessibility conditions, frequency of use and maintenance strategies associated with each space.

Based on this exchange of perspectives, a collective definition of 'safe space' was developed, integrating the diverse experiences expressed. This definition was transcribed in real time by the research team into a digital document, which was shared and projected during the session to ensure accuracy and consensus in its formulation.

Timeline

In the third phase, participants and their families were invited to create a timeline that integrated both personal milestones and key events from the LGBTQ+ movement in Spain (Figure 3). This activity aimed to strengthen intergenerational bonds, recover collective memory, understand the circumstances in which these safe spaces emerged, and highlight the social role of young people in their construction.

The objective was to restore historical knowledge of the evolution of the LGBTQ+ community, strengthen the participants' sense of belonging within their families, recognise their social contributions to the creation of safe spaces and analyse the impact of these spaces on the young people involved.

Figure 3. Timeline screenshot (source: <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/273336>)

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis was structured into four stages, as outlined in Figure 2:

1. *Frequency and density*: Twelve characteristics identified in the photovoice narratives were analysed, taking into account all expressive formats.
2. *Cross-analysis of geolocation, photovoice and timeline*: Locations were compared with the characteristics mentioned by participants, using textual analysis tools such as Voyant (frequency, concordance and data visualisation).
3. *Social capital*: Data from contextual mapping, photovoice and geolocation were triangulated to identify patterns of social capital (*bonding*, *bridging* and *institutional linking*), using ATLAS.ti software to generate concept maps and code networks.
4. *Return of results*: The findings were presented in a group session and shared via WhatsApp. Participants confirmed that the collective definition and identified characteristics accurately reflected their experiences. A specialist in the anthropology of LGBTQ+ activism contributed to the theoretical and contextual validation of the results.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines approved by the CERec ethics committee of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. All participants and, where applicable, their legal guardians, received detailed information about the objectives and participatory nature of the study before providing informed consent.

Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences. To protect confidentiality and minimise potential risk associated with visibility and disclosure, all participants were anonymised using identification codes (for example, P01). Special care

was taken regarding the use and storage of photographs, audio messages and digital materials shared during the photovoice process.

WhatsApp was used as a communication and data-sharing tool due to its familiarity and accessibility for participants. This platform was already used by the group prior to the research process as part of the regular communication dynamics of the non-formal educational space. For its use within the study, participants were informed about the boundaries of confidentiality and encouraged not to share sensitive information beyond what they felt comfortable disclosing.

Given the participatory and community-based nature of the research, particular attention was paid to power dynamics and researcher positionality. The researcher was already involved in the group as a facilitator of the non-formal educational space prior to the study, which contributed to the establishment of trust and continuity within the research process. Furthermore, the interest in exploring safe spaces emerged from concern and conversations previously shared within the group itself. In this sense, the study sought to minimise extractivist approaches by involving participants in collective reflection, validation and interpretation processes, recognising adolescents as active contributors to knowledge production.

Results

The results are presented in two parts: (1) characteristics of safe spaces; and (2) social capital in the construction and maintenance of these spaces.

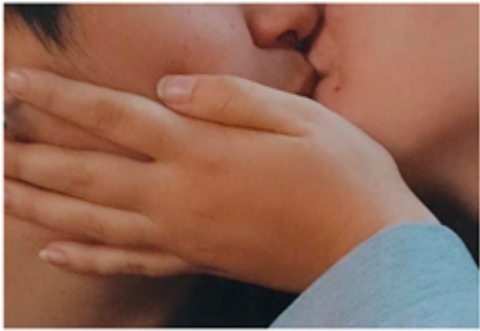
Characteristics of safe spaces

The findings presented below are based on the analysis of 26 photovoice entries, alongside the geolocation mapping exercise. The data were coded using ATLAS.ti software and complemented by a lexical analysis conducted with Voyant Tools. Table 2 summarises the results, organised according to the key characteristics of safe spaces.

The first column indicates the frequency with which each characteristic, previously outlined in the conceptual framework, was identified in the data. The second column links these characteristics with the geolocated spaces identified by the participants. The third column includes a representative photovoice image and caption that illustrates each characteristic.

Table 2. Frequency and characteristics of safe spaces built by LGBTQ+ youth

Frequency	Dimension and Definitions in Photovoice and Geolocation (from Participants)	Selected Photovoice Evidence (from Participants)
63	Intersectional counterspaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natural spaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> La cuesta del rato, la Mola, Torrent de Colobriers, Cova d'en Daina or Torressana forest Private spaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bedroom, home, grandma's house and workspace Digital spaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spotify and Twitch Leisure spaces <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sabadell gardens, LGBT+ meetings, youth centre, gym and climbing wall space 	 <p>'A place where you feel welcome regardless of your state of mind' (Photo and text by P11)</p>

40	Relational connection and self-reflection <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Security• Peace• Calm• Joy• Safety	
		'When I feel bad and when I'm like this ... always kisses me on the forehead and makes me feel much better' (Photo and text by P06)
28	Protection and care <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Care• Learning processes• Safety	
		'... where is love, caring, understanding and above all continuous growth and learning' (Photo and text by P11)
25	Horizontal community structures <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family bonds• Friendships• Sex-affective relations• Online gaming partners• Classmates	
		'I feel safe with the artistic secondary school class group' (Photo and text by P05)

<p>13</p>	<p>Mutual respect and expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 'I can ask for my personal space if I have an anxiety crisis without feeling judged' • Dialogue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 'Joy, if shared is multiplied by two, while sorrows are divided by two' • Understanding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 'Where I can meet people like me and feel understood as part of the LGBTQ+AQ+ community' • Boundaries <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 'In my own bedroom, I can have that moment of disconnection' 	 <p>'I am most comfortable with my boyfriend, and we can show all our love for each other. This photo is one of our most beautiful moments and represents our freedom to show ourselves to the world as we are, giving thanks that this can be possible nowadays' (Photo and text by P07)</p>
<p>13</p>	<p>Prejudice-free environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling under pressure • Feeling judged • Feeling forced 	 <p>'Nature in solitude or with myself gives me security when I am not pressured or being judged and being able to express or being myself ... this is what makes me feel good' (Photo and text by P08)</p>
<p>13</p>	<p>Affective atmosphere and emotional containment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joyful • Grateful • Pleased • Delighted • Vibrant • Confident • Optimistic 	 <p>'A place with my queer friends where I can laugh and have fun days to remember, like when I celebrate my birthday and know that topics can be discussed without awkward situations' (Photo and text by P07)</p>

13 **Participatory learning and movement**

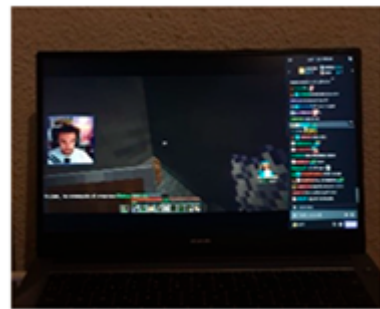
- Peer-to-peer learning
- Non-formal learning



'In the climbing wall, the atmosphere is nice and if I need support to finish a route there is always someone available to teach me and it makes me feel comfortable' (Photo and text by P03)

8 **Explicit rules and emotional security**

- Soft lights
- Comfortable temperature
- No smoking
- Speaking with a gentle tone



'I can claim my space if I need it' (Photo and text by P03)

4 **Spaces for resistance and debate**

- Understanding
- Empathy



'... he feels safe because there is an LGBTQ+ flag in the skating area' (Photo and text by P03)

3 **Empathetic dialogue and NVC**



'... being able to show your vulnerabilities without being judged' (Photo and text by P11)

Most frequent characteristics

The characteristics most frequently mentioned in the experiences shared by participants were:

(1) Intersectional counterspaces (63 references): Identified across natural, private and digital environments. Participants referred to forests, bedrooms, grandparents' homes, platforms such as Spotify and Twitch, and leisure spaces like youth centres and gyms. These were described as refuges from dominant norms, places where participants could be themselves without fear of judgement or suppression.

(6) Relational connection and self-reflection (40 references): These spaces provided a sense of calm, safety and joy, allowing for emotional expression and introspection. Participants described intimate moments, gestures of affection and supportive environments that nurtured reflection and emotional well-being.

(7) Protection and care (28 references): Understood not only as physical safety but also as emotionally supportive spaces in which participants felt loved, understood and encouraged to grow.

(12) Horizontal community structures (25 references): A range of relational networks, family, friends, romantic partners, online gaming peers and classmates, reflected non-hierarchical bonds that promoted belonging and mutual support.

These findings suggest that LGBTQ+ youth primarily construct safe spaces within non-institutional environments, placing emphasis on emotional and relational dynamics. Although school settings were occasionally referenced, the sense of safety was mainly attributed to peer groups rather than to formal educational institutions. This contrasts with the initial contextual mapping, which had anticipated a more significant role for educational centres in the provision of safe spaces.

Moderately frequent characteristics

Other characteristics emerged with moderate frequency (13–15 references):

- (4) Mutual respect and expression
- (2) Prejudice-free environment
- (5) Affective atmosphere and emotional containment
- (10) Participatory learning and movement

These dimensions correspond to intense but less commonly shared experiences, such as expressions of joy, consent or peer-led learning. When present, these elements had a significant emotional impact, suggesting that participants highly valued environments that supported open dialogue, mutual understanding and non-formal learning.

Least frequent or absent characteristics

Some characteristics appeared infrequently or were not explicitly identified:

- (9) Explicit rules and emotional security (8 references)
- (3) Spaces for resistance and debate (4 references)
- (8) Empathetic dialogue and NVC (3 references)
- (11) Community participation and empowerment (0 references).

These features, being more abstract or collectively oriented, may be more difficult to represent through individual narratives or visual materials. Although not frequently named explicitly, traces of these themes may be embedded within more prominent categories such as relational connection or horizontal community structures.

Emerging keywords

A lexical analysis of the photovoice narratives using Voyant Tools revealed that the most frequent keywords were: 'space', 'safety', 'free', 'calm', 'home', 'prejudice' and 'understanding'. These terms underscore an emphasis on emotionally secure environments, where freedom of expression and the absence of judgement are central. During the geolocation exercise, participants mapped out spaces that evoked calm, happiness and openness to dialogue, spatially aligning with their narratives of safety.

The implications of social capital

The findings highlight the role of social capital in the safe spaces identified through the photovoice data and geolocation, emphasising the community factors that foster a sense of belonging. These spaces are primarily located within the microsystem of the bullseye diagram, based on Bronfenbrenner's model.

The most frequently observed characteristics in the data, (1) intersectional counterspace; (6) relational connection and self-reflection; (7) protection and care; (12) horizontal community structures; and (4) mutual respect and expression, underscore the importance of intimate, trust-based environments where young people can express themselves freely and without fear of judgement. These spaces, whether physical or digital, are characterised by mutual care, respect, belonging and the cultivation of horizontal relationships:

I feel safe with the group from my arts class at school. (P13)

A place where you feel welcome no matter your mood. (P01)

This kind of emotional bond reinforces the sense of belonging to horizontal communities that operate outside formal institutions. The analysis conducted using Voyant Tools supports this interpretation, revealing strong associations between safe space and concepts such as community, trust, respect, people and calm.

Bridging social capital, which involves connections between diverse groups, is less prominent. Although some communal environments, such as gyms, youth centres or cultural activities, indicate moments of intergroup connection, these do not develop into sustained mixed or open networks. Characteristics such as (11) community participation and empowerment or (3) spaces for resistance and debate showed very low or no frequency, suggesting limited bridging dynamics in the implications of social capital in the construction and maintenance of this space.

The findings reveal the role of social capital in the safe spaces identified through the photovoice data, emphasising the community factors that enhance a sense of belonging. These spaces are mainly located within the microsystem of the bullseye diagram based on Bronfenbrenner's model:

In my mum's house I feel safe because there are people I love, I feel protected and it's a place where everything seems easier to me. (P05 text)

Civic and political participation was one of the least represented aspects in the photovoice narratives. However, one notable example emerged in a workplace explicitly identified as an LGBTQ+-affirming space, where a young person reported feeling free to participate and be themselves.

In the workspace I can be myself without being judged because it's a bar that people call 'the lesbian bar' and I can feel welcome. (P11 text)

The configuration of the spaces was found to be relatively homogeneous, involving groups of individuals with similar social, cultural or demographic backgrounds. None of the narratives referred to collaboration with other collectives or community organisations. Consequently, there was limited evidence of efforts to promote the visibility and social awareness of LGBTQ+ people within broader society:

To me, a safe space would not be just a physical space but a person you feel good with, where you can be yourself, etc. If it's through the internet or not face-to-face, like a phone call. (Geolocation Dynamics)

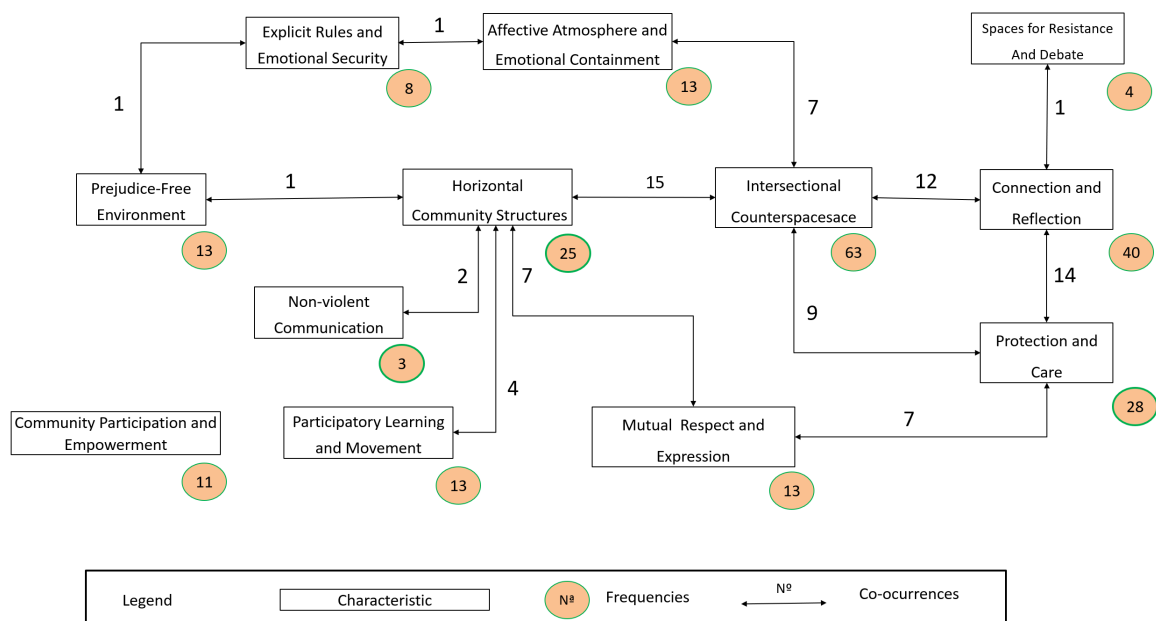
The findings suggest that the safe spaces identified by participants were primarily built through close and emotionally significant relationships among individuals with shared experiences and identities. While these strong bonding dynamics appeared to foster trust, protection and belonging, opportunities for broader intergroup interaction, institutional connection or civic participation were less visible in the data. This pattern reflects a predominance of bonding social capital over bridging or linking forms of connection within the spaces described by participants.

Finally, in terms of the type of social bond, bonding was the most observed across the various areas identified by the group, confirming the prevalence of close family and friendship ties. Bridging was present in only a few spaces, while linking appeared less frequently:

A safe space for me are the meetings we have with the LGBTQ+ group GANG at the Estruch on Saturday afternoons. (Geolocation Dynamics)

We conducted a co-occurrence analysis using Voyant Tools, an open-source application for visualising textual data (Figure 4). The transcript from the geolocation group discussion was analysed to identify word associations, with a focus on social capital, particularly the bonds formed within and between communities.

Figure 4. Degree of co-occurrence of safe space features. The numeric annotations in the figure represent absolute frequency counts. Values placed beside the characteristics indicate the total number of times each characteristic was identified independently, while values placed on the connecting links indicate the co-occurrence frequency for each pair of characteristics



The most significant aspect is the relationship between safe spaces and horizontal communities. Specifically, adolescents in the LGBTQ+ GANG group in Sabadell create safer spaces that foster social capital through interpersonal relationships, where participants experience a sense of belonging to a horizontal community. This perception arises from the strong, homogeneous bonds between a small number of individuals, as identified in the photovoice data.

Second, regarding the strong connection between safe space and the ability to express one's emotions within it, participants highlighted feelings of protection, safety, freedom and calm. A clear co-occurrence between emotions and protection emerges, defining the need to feel joyful, grateful, pleased, delighted, confident, optimistic and loved in these spaces. Mutual respect is another significant characteristic, especially when support is rooted in empathy and understanding.

In summary, the safe spaces experienced by LGBTQ+ youth are rooted in trust, mutual care and horizontal relationships, with dense affective ties in closed networks. The minimal presence of bridging

and near absence of linking reveal limited connection with broader collectives or institutions. This highlights the need to foster more inclusive public and structural environments, while acknowledging the agency and self-organisation of LGBTQ+ youth.

Discussion

This section is structured around three key themes: the characteristics of safe spaces, the role of social capital and the potential of the participatory multi-method approach employed.

Characteristics of safe spaces

Safe spaces were depicted through images and narratives set in natural, private, digital and community environments. This diversity confirms that safety is not bound to a single type of setting but can emerge across a range of contexts, including digital, informal and collective environments, as shown in previous studies on youth and spaces of resistance (Cserni and Talmud, 2015; Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019). Rather than being spatially fixed, safety is linked to affective, relational and symbolic conditions that foster calm, freedom and belonging. Rather than being spatially fixed, safety is linked to affective, relational and symbolic conditions that foster calm, freedom and belonging.

This centrality of relational processes highlights the need for educational perspectives that value everyday connections and informal learning spaces. The value of social pedagogy lies in its ability to recognise informal and community-based relationships as meaningful educational processes. From this perspective, the forms of trust, care and mutual recognition expressed by participants are not external to education, but central to it. As Morgan (2013) highlighted, these dynamics can support young people's development and agency beyond institutional frameworks, reinforcing the importance of educational approaches grounded in relational and contextual support.

Leisure and nature-based settings were especially valued as emotional refuges, particularly among younger participants. The most frequent terms in participants' narratives – 'space', 'safety', 'people', 'free' and 'understanding' – underscore the centrality of emotional well-being (Brownlie, 2018; Dürbaum and Sattler, 2019). From a social pedagogical perspective, these findings highlight the importance of informal and community-based environments as spaces for emotional support, identity affirmation and relationship-building among LGBTQ+ youth. They also suggest that leisure and nature-orientated activities may constitute valuable educational settings for fostering participation, well-being and trust beyond formal institutional structures.

Learning also emerged as a defining feature of safe spaces, particularly through peer-led learning, non-formal education and personal development, adding a crucial pedagogical dimension to these environments (Della Cioppa et al., 2015). Although mentioned less frequently, themes such as NVC, resistance and awareness of cultural violence were also present. Their lower visibility may reflect their complexity when expressed through everyday experience, yet they represent significant dimensions for critical reflection. These findings reinforce the relevance of peer-based and participatory learning approaches within social pedagogy, particularly in relation to non-formal educational contexts where young people can collectively construct supportive and affirming environments.

The participants further highlight the importance of horizontal community structures, built on trust within families, friendships and affective-sexual relationships, all of which contribute to a shared sense of belonging. Formal education settings were rarely described as safe spaces. When referenced, safety was attributed to peer groups rather than institutional structures. This aligns with prior research on the persistence of LGBTQ+-phobia in formal educational contexts (Iversen, 2019; Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw, 2016). Within the field of social pedagogy, this underlines the importance of relational and less hierarchical approaches that promote shared decision-making, mutual recognition and active participation among young people, particularly in contexts involving vulnerability and identity negotiation.

Implications of social capital

From a social capital perspective, the data indicate that safe spaces are primarily associated with *bonding* capital, comprising close networks of friends, family or peer groups. These relationships provide emotional support and reinforce the sense of belonging, as observed in the LGBTQ+ GANG group in

Sabadell. One of the most significant findings was the strong co-occurrence between *safe space* and *horizontal community* (Kwon et al., 2013; Vaccaro et al., 2012).

Bridging capital appeared less frequently, mainly in relation to work environments or specific social settings. *Linking* capital, which facilitates connections with institutions, was almost entirely absent. This finding aligns with Ahmed (2012) and Bacqué and Biewener (2013), who warned that some safe spaces may unintentionally reproduce forms of separation by operating primarily through shared vulnerability and homogeneity. The findings of the study do not suggest that these spaces discourage inclusion intentionally; rather, they highlight the complexity of balancing emotional safety and belonging with broader processes of visibility, participation and structural inclusion (Fish et al., 2019).

From a bio-ecological perspective, the predominance of bonding social capital identified in the findings appears to be closely connected to the microsystem, where emotionally significant relationships with peers, friends and close community networks play a central role in the construction of safe spaces. In contrast, the limited presence of bridging and linking social capital suggests weaker connections with broader institutional and structural environments, such as schools or public services. This interpretation reinforces the relevance of analysing safe spaces not only as interpersonal environments but also as phenomena shaped by the interaction between relational and institutional systems.

Interestingly, some digital environments initially perceived as safe were later identified as spaces of exclusion or tension, due to algorithmic bias or involuntary exposure. This duality underscores the need for a critical lens on digital safety.

The analysis further reveals that most relationships are rooted in homogeneous, close-knit settings, while opportunities for civic engagement, collaboration with external groups or institutional visibility remain limited. The absence of linking social capital points to a structural disconnect that compromises the long-term sustainability and broader projection of these spaces.

These findings should also be interpreted in light of broader critiques of Putnam's approach to social capital, particularly those questioning its tendency to frame social cohesion and community participation as inherently positive processes, without fully addressing underlying power relations, social inequalities or dynamics of exclusion. In the context of LGBTQ+ youth, the construction of safe spaces cannot be understood solely through the presence of social ties, but should also be apprehended through the need to negotiate vulnerability, recognition and protection within heterocisnormative context. From this perspective, the findings suggest that social capital operates within complex relational and structural conditions that shape both possibilities for belonging and limitations for broader inclusion.

Methodological contributions and other considerations

A central contribution of this study lies in its use of participatory methodologies, whose effectiveness in research with LGBTQ+ youth has been well documented due to their capacity to generate trust and collective empowerment (Cárdenas Castro et al., 2021; Wilson and Cariola, 2020). This approach enabled participants to collaboratively define what constitutes a safe space, identify its key characteristics and validate the findings through individual and group feedback (Djohari et al., 2018; Kindon et al., 2007; Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Wang and Burris, 1997). It also supported the recognition of young people's lived experiences, encouraging self-expression and agency. Furthermore, it amplified the voices of participants who are often marginalised in formal contexts, making their interpretive mindsets and everyday strategies for creating safety more visible.

From a social pedagogical perspective, the methodological design illustrates how research can also operate as an educational practice in itself: a process of co-construction that strengthens relational bonds, fosters critical reflection and recognises participants as active agents in their communities (Morgan, 2013; Úcar, 2011). This aligns with the idea of social pedagogy as a field that integrates care, learning and participation, emphasising that the generation of knowledge is inseparable from the cultivation of supportive and inclusive environments.

Limitations of the study include a reduced number of participants due to school commitments, the absence of systematic classification by type of space (physical, digital, symbolic) and the exclusion of individuals who did not identify any safe spaces. In addition, abstract dimensions such as resistance or NVC were less apparent, highlighting the need to develop tools better suited to capturing these aspects. These considerations suggest new directions for research focused on experiences of exclusion and the intersection between safety and political agency (Pérez Aronsson, 2020; Teruel, 2018).

Overall, the findings suggest that safe spaces are not merely refuges but also settings where learning, emotional connection and a collective sense of identity are cultivated. However, their transformative potential depends on their ability to connect with broader networks. This requires institutional recognition, inclusive public policies, access to economic and training resources, and a commitment from community actors to build intersectoral alliances that acknowledge the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth. Crucially, such spaces must be supported by institutional frameworks that recognise and sustain these forms of safety through a lens of diversity and social justice (Rodway et al., 2022; Skelton and Valentine, 2003).

Conclusion

This study reveals that the LGBTQ+ youth involved identify safe spaces as intimate, homogeneous environments rooted in close social relationships, free from judgement and characterised by mutual respect. These spaces, whether physical, digital or relational, emerge through shared leisure experiences and collective negotiation, with formal educational settings largely absent from their narratives. The construction of these spaces highlights the significance of environments that foster identity and a sense of belonging through trust and equality. Additionally, the 12 characteristics detailed in the theoretical framework offer a strong tool for recognising safe spaces in other contexts.

From a social capital perspective, the findings highlight the dominance of bonding social capital, marked by strong emotional ties that foster mutual support and resilience. In contrast, the limited presence of bridging and linking social capital constrains connections to wider networks and institutional frameworks, thereby reducing opportunities for systemic inclusion. Digital platforms appeared as complex spaces, providing both affirmation and exclusion, further illustrating the challenges of ensuring safety in youth environments.

The participatory design of this study was crucial in enabling young people to articulate and validate their understandings of safety. These insights reflect a specific socio-educational context and are not universally generalisable. Nonetheless, participatory methods prove not only ethically appropriate but also essential for capturing the situated and diverse experiences of LGBTQ+ youth.

Based on these findings, there is a clear need to promote more inclusive safe spaces within formal education. This includes revisiting institutional policies and pedagogical approaches to integrate characteristics observed in community-based safe spaces, such as horizontal relationships, active student participation in decision-making and trust-building practices. Future research should explore ways to strengthen bridging and linking social capital, adopt intersectional frameworks and use longitudinal designs to examine how safe spaces evolve.

Author contributions

Conceptualisation, R.P.-L. and P.V.-V.; methodology, R.P.-L.; validation, R.P.-L. and P.V.-V.; formal analysis, R.P.-L. and P.V.-V.; investigation, R.P.-L.; resources, R.P.-L. and P.V.-V.; data curation, R.P.-L. and P.V.-V.; writing – original draft, R.P.-L. and P.V.-V.; writing – review and editing, P.V.-V.; visualisation, R.P.-L.; supervision, P.V.-V.; project administration, P.V.-V.; funding acquisition, R.P.-L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the CERec ethics committee of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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