



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Anthropology Senior Theses

Department of Anthropology

Spring 4-27-2022

Playing With Pride: LGBTQ Identities In Athletic Spaces

Joseph H. Lohmann

University of Pennsylvania, jlohbro@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lohmann, Joseph H., "Playing With Pride: LGBTQ Identities In Athletic Spaces" (2022). *Anthropology Senior Theses*. Paper 218.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses/218
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Playing With Pride: LGBTQ Identities In Athletic Spaces

Abstract

Historically, individuals identifying as LGBTQ have experienced higher levels of discrimination, stigmatization, and harassment compared to their non-LGBTQ peers. This holds especially true in the world of sports, where increased levels of competition, stress, and conformity often leave queer athletes feeling hopeless, isolated, and separate from their teammates, coaches, and training personnel. However, little scholarship regarding the intersection of LGBTQ identities and experiences in athletic spaces exists. The primary objective of this study is to explore the positive, negative, and neutral narratives of LGBTQ collegiate athletes in an attempt to decipher the true experience of performing at the highest level while supporting the socioemotional needs of an evolving queer identity. Forty-nine participants were recruited from 48 undergraduate and/or graduate academic institutions across the United States and represented more than 15 different sport types. Participants were allowed to report more than one affiliated institution and more than one sport type. Through the use of a qualitative survey and ethnographic interviews, this research adds to an increasingly growing understanding of LGBTQ individuals in sporting spaces and what it means to play with pride. Results from these methodologies identified several key elements that contribute to a culture of ostracization and exclusion for queer athletes, including homophobic language use and humor, the stigmatization of LGBTQ people in sports culture, and a lack of programming and structural support for members of this marginalized community on teams and in athletic departments. Furthermore, analysis of both the survey and interviews identified several factors crucial to LGBTQ athlete comfortability, safety, and security, including the presence of fellow queer teammates and coaches, team participation in conversations and educational opportunities related to visibility and representation of sexual minorities, and active allyship by non-LGBTQ peers and mentors. The implications of this research can have far-reaching influence on queer athlete programming, advocacy, and representation in collegiate athletic departments across the nation and better inform non-LGBTQ allies on how to support and serve their queer friends, family, and peers.

Keywords

LGBTQ, identity formation, athletics, queer advocacy, ethnography

Disciplines

Anthropology

PLAYING WITH PRIDE: LGBTQ IDENTITIES IN ATHLETIC SPACES

By

Joseph Lohmann

In

Anthropology

Submitted to the

Department of Anthropology

University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor(s): Dr. Morgan Hoke & Dr. Katherine Moore

2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	pg. 3
INTRODUCTION.....	pg. 4
BACKGROUND.....	pg. 5
STUDY DESIGN.....	pg. 10
METHODS.....	pg. 13
RESULTS.....	pg. 15
DISCUSSION.....	pg. 30
CONCLUSION.....	pg. 37
APPENDIX.....	pg. 39
REFERENCE LIST.....	pg. 42

TABLES

TABLE 1: Survey and Interview Collection and Completion Totals.....pg. 15

TABLE 2: Sexual Identity Demographics Information.....pg. 16

TABLE 3: Gender Identity Demographics Information.....pg. 17

TABLE 4: Agree/Disagree Scales.....pg. 19-20

TABLE 5: Frequency of Verbal Harassment and Microaggressions.....pg. 21

TABLE 6: Interlocutor Sport Profiles.....pg. 23

FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Openly ‘out’ when joining your most recent involvement?.....pg. 17

FIGURE 2: Sharing your sexual identity with your earliest sports team?.....pg. 18

FIGURE 3: Sharing your sexual identity with your most recent sports team?.....pg. 18

FIGURE 4: How generally supported did you feel by your coaches?.....pg. 22

ABSTRACT

Historically, individuals identifying as LGBTQ have experienced higher levels of discrimination, stigmatization, and harassment compared to their non-LGBTQ peers. This holds especially true in the world of sports, where increased levels of competition, stress, and conformity often leave queer athletes feeling hopeless, isolated, and separate from their teammates, coaches, and training personnel. However, little scholarship regarding the intersection of LGBTQ identities and experiences in athletic spaces exists. The primary objective of this study is to explore the positive, negative, and neutral narratives of LGBTQ collegiate athletes in an attempt to decipher the true experience of performing at the highest level while supporting the socioemotional needs of an evolving queer identity. Forty-nine participants were recruited from 48 undergraduate and/or graduate academic institutions across the United States and represented more than 15 different sport types. Participants were allowed to report more than one affiliated institution and more than one sport type. Through the use of a qualitative survey and ethnographic interviews, this research adds to an increasingly growing understanding of LGBTQ individuals in sporting spaces and what it means to play with pride. Results from these methodologies identified several key elements that contribute to a culture of ostracization and exclusion for queer athletes, including homophobic language use and humor, the stigmatization of LGBTQ people in sports culture, and a lack of programming and structural support for members of this marginalized community on teams and in athletic departments. Furthermore, analysis of both the survey and interviews identified several factors crucial to LGBTQ athlete comfortability, safety, and security, including the presence of fellow queer teammates and coaches, team participation in conversations and educational opportunities related to visibility and representation of sexual minorities, and active allyship by non-LGBTQ peers and mentors.

The implications of this research can have far-reaching influence on queer athlete programming, advocacy, and representation in collegiate athletic departments across the nation and better inform non-LGBTQ allies on how to support and serve their queer friends, family, and peers.

I. INTRODUCTION

While organized sports and varsity athletics can foster personal growth, build friendship, and provide a physical outlet from the pressure of academic and professional pursuits, it may not be such a welcoming space for all athletes, especially for members of the LGBTQ community. A year-long study published in 2013 revealed that 52.8% of LGBTQ students were bullied because of their sexual orientation, while 50.9% were discriminated against because of their gender expression (GLSEN 2013). These findings show that LGBTQ athletes live, practice, and participate in what are very likely to be heteronormative athletic environments, where they are often socially isolated given the small proportion of peers with a similar identity.

The goal of this study is to examine the experiences of young LGBTQ athletes to better understand how they navigate the unique dynamics and challenges of exclusion in a space meant to connect people through comradery and collective energy. Through the use of a survey and semi-structured follow-up interviews, this research study hopes to answer the following questions: How does the transition from high school to college affect one's positionality as an LGBTQ individual within athletics? What are the positive and negative interpersonal interactions of LGBTQ individuals when facing opponents, congregating in locker rooms, and in discussions with teammates and coaching staff? How do these interactions influence an LGBTQ individual's sense of identity, performance, and out-ness?

This study sheds light on the complexities of what it is like to perform in sporting spaces for young LGBTQ individuals. It showcases the positive, neutral, and negative aspects of

confronting one's identity in an athletic environment that is prone to ostracization and stigmatization of LGBTQ individuals by examining the dynamics of interactions with opponents, teammates, coaches, and other athletic personnel. This study will ultimately provide information, stories, and conclusions that may inform sports programming and institutions across the US offering insights on how to better advocate for their LGBTQ members.

This thesis will first provide a background review on identity formation through athletic involvement, queer marginalization, and the lack of representation for LGBTQ individuals within the sports world. Following this briefing, the study design, methods, and participant population will be covered in detail with respect to the timeline of research, survey and interview logistics, and the demographics of the athletes involved in this research. This will lead into an analysis of the collected data, provision of both quantitative and qualitative results, and a conclusive discussion section exploring the limitations and implications of the study findings.

II. BACKGROUND

Sports Involvement for Youth and Adolescents

Current research on the experiences of adolescents performing in an athletic environment or engaging in consistent physical activity has illustrated mixed responses with regards to socioemotional well-being, healthy behaviors, and identity formation. In terms of positive benefits, participation in organized sports has been shown to contribute to healthy habit development, improved academic performance, and socialization among peers of the same age group and phase of life. A cross-sectional data analysis from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determined that participation in sports led to increases in nutritional awareness, such as student athletes being more intentional about including vegetables and fruit during meal and snacking periods (Pate et al. 2000). In addition, through a qualitative risk behavior survey, it was

discovered that these same participants were not as likely to participate in heavy drug use or smoking and maintained a positive outlook on weight loss versus their non-athlete peers.

Another cross-sectional study concluded that “those who were engaged in organized sports were more likely to achieve physical activity guidelines,” demonstrating the connection between routine exercise and positive health outcomes among younger populations (Marques, Ekelund, & Sardinha 2016, 154). Organized sports provide structured time and space for physical activity, which integrates exercise, bodily movement, and social interaction into one’s schedule so that maintaining this regiment becomes second-nature. A Turkish study on obese children who were subject to sports in after-school programming further confirms this benefit, finding that involvement in consistent athletic experiences for these children resulted in optimal impacts on BMI and reductions in hip and waist measurements, which are factors related to cardiovascular disease susceptibility later in life (Din & Arslan 2021).

For children and adolescents, who are in crucial periods of physical and socioemotional development, sports involvement can also result in “positive influences on concentration, memory, and classroom behavior” in academic settings and help to stimulate independence, a sense of accomplishment, and connectedness in other spaces (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008, 2). Current scholarship stresses the universal impact of physical activity on mental health during a period of life in which uncertainty and questioning of identity can threaten to derail student-athletes. A study of over 50,000 public high school students and their responses to an anonymous survey on extracurricular involvement demonstrated that those who participate in activities involving physical activity showed “significantly lower odds for emotional distress, suicidal behavior, family substance abuse, and physical and sexual abuse victimization” (Harrison & Narayan 2009, 113). Additionally, the sports arena provides students an outlet from

academic and professional stressors as one of the best spaces to express intense emotions, reduce negative thoughts, and eliminate self-destructive behaviors. Review of the literature has highlighted the significance of this betterment specifically on children with physical disabilities, who gain a sense of normalcy through athletic involvement. A series of qualitative interviews involving discussions about an adapted sports program in 2001 showed that sports allowed youth with disabilities to “be social, active, aggressive, [and] proud,” serving as an outlet for the development of competency and self-esteem (Groff & Kleiber 2001, 325). It is clear that sports can have a positive impact in many facets of a young person’s life.

As much as athletic involvement can improve quality of life for student-athletes, it can also contribute to negative experiences through intense competition and violence, magnification of stress and anxiety, and progression of identity foreclosure in younger populations. Each of these outcomes will be discussed in turn. With a heavy emphasis on ideals of victory, achievement, and self-growth, sports participation can sometimes create a culture of aggression and opposition. A comprehensive review of over 7,000 research studies regarding collegiate athletic involvement identified several core contributors, such as “masculinity, violent social identity, and anti-social norms connected to certain sports” as exerting a large degree of influence on the correlation between violent behavior and sports participation among student-athletes (Sonderlund et al. 2014, 2). These risk factors can negatively impact athlete mental health as the desire to beat the enemy in all competitions begins to damage psychological wellness. The athletic arena thus becomes a “highly pressurized environment in which an athlete’s psychological needs could be easily thwarted in pursuit of performance-related goals” (Bartholomew et al. 2011, 81). In focusing effort, time, and attention on one’s respective athletic involvement, other developmental sectors of one’s young life may be left unexplored and

disregarded. This is a phenomenon known as *identity foreclosure*, which is defined as “the premature commitment to an identity [that] occurs without exploring its value or contemplating alternative roles that might be more appropriate for him or her” (American Psychological Association n.d.). Current scholarship on this concept in sports contexts has revealed that the assumption of the athlete identity closes off individuals from other opportunities for self-reflection and results in stagnancy of alternative identity development. A 1993 study found that there was a significant positive correlation between the frequency of identity foreclosure and the degree of sports involvement (Brewer & Petitpas 2017, 118). In this way, collegiate athletes and professional athletes, at the highest level of athletic participation, are the most susceptible to a lifestyle in which other parts of their personal and social identity are left unexplored. One specific study of 20 African-American athletes at the Division 1 level revealed that when prompted to provide a percentage associated with the degree to which sports defined them as individuals, “the vast majority of respondents assigned a very high percentage to athletics in their self-definition” with “exclusive athletic identities that negatively affect their transition out of athletics as they struggle to redefine their identities” (Beamon 2012, 199). It has been shown that when one’s athletic career is over, there seems to be a period in which confusion and dissociation occupy a former athlete’s brain space.

Marginalization of LGBTQ Youth

In 2020, UCLA published research using national statistics from the United States Census, which revealed that only 9.54% of America’s youth identify as LGBTQ (Conron 2020). As such a small yet significant proportion of the population, queer youth struggle to find a sense of belonging in many communities and are often ostracized for their sexual identity. In classrooms and across campuses, LGBTQ students report low academic, professional, and social

self-esteem due to stigmatization and societal stress. A 2014 survey of over 11,000 high school students found that from their own perspective, LGBTQ students saw themselves receiving lower scores, lowered expectations of success and achievement, and reduced aspirations to go to college (Aragon et al. 2014). This lack of self-confidence and security in identity, paired with the stresses and messaging against the queer community in social media, popular culture, and family belief structures has led to psychological distress and disorder among LGBTQ youth. A culture of heteronormativity neglects the importance of actively recognizing and fighting against homophobia. Current scholarship posits that the discriminatory social surroundings reinforced by stigma damages LGBTQ wellness and psychological status (Aragon et al. 2014). Furthermore, as discovered in a 2021 study using data collected from a LGBTQ suicide prevention organization, symptoms of hopelessness were the main indicator of the association between minority stress and suicidal thoughts (Fulginiti et al. 2020). In addition to risks to mental well-being, LGBTQ youth are also subject to physical and verbal harassment. A 2013 surveillance study determined that 52.8% of LGBTQ students were harassed or bullied because of their sexual orientation, and 50.9% were discriminated against because of their gender expression (GLSEN 2013).

LGBTQ Individuals in Athletic Spaces

While scholarship on the impact of athletic involvement and research on LGBTQ youth is plentiful, very few studies have analyzed the intersection of the two and taken care to examine the distinctions between LGBTQ athletes in different sporting environments. The reduced degree of participation in athletics among queer youth is evident in review of recent research. A 2015 study analyzing 22 high schools in Wisconsin determined that “compared with heterosexual females, sexual minority females were less likely to participate in team sports...and more likely to be overweight” and “sexual minority males were less likely than heterosexual males to be

physically active or to participate in team sports” (Mereish & Poteat 2015, 1842). This resistance to join teams, engage in sporting spaces, and build routines of physical activity drives a type of avoidance that is hard to overcome. LGBTQ athletes also face direct verbal and physical violence, experience depression and anxiety at higher rates than their peers, and sometimes lack supportive family environments that could potentially offer a safe space (Greenspan, Griffith, & Murtagh 2017). A great deal of progress has been made and identifying as LGBTQ has become increasingly socially acceptable in comparison to several decades ago. However, despite the glamour of “coming out” on social media, several studies have found that homophobic language and prejudices still propel rampant stereotyping, discrimination, and continuous exclusion in athletics (Pariera, Brody, & Scott 2019). While it is clear that barriers exist to comfortability for LGBTQ athletes, it is unclear how those distinct barriers are experienced by queer athletes themselves and how it affects their self-concept, identity, and positionality in both their respective sport and the sports world at large. This study works to elucidate those nuanced perspectives and employ inquiries related to interactions with coaches, teammates, and training personnel to understand how microaggressions are received and their impact on player performance and pride. Furthermore, this research will elicit the best ways that athletic institutions, departments, and programs can advocate for and support their LGBTQ members and hear from queer athletes themselves, who possess the lived experiences to spread an incredibly meaningful message of justice, inclusivity, and acceptance.

III. STUDY DESIGN & METHODS

Study Design

This study consisted of a mixed-methods approach with both qualitative and quantitative design elements through the administration of a baseline survey and ethnographic interviews.

The study proposal was submitted for IRB approval via the Human Subjects Electronic Research Application and approved with exempt status by the Office of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania. The survey was built using Qualtrics software and the interviews proceeded over Zoom. Data collection took place over two separate 2-week time periods. The participant samples formed in these time periods are described as “Cohort 1” and “Cohort 2” in the Results section. The survey question set and interview scripts remained the same in both collection periods, with the exception of a few questions added to the survey for Cohort 2 reflecting on the effects of the pandemic and concrete pathways for advocacy.

The Qualtrics survey was administered over two 2-week periods, with interviews taking place after the first week of collection in rolling fashion. Survey completion took approximately 15-20 minutes and included 87 (Cohort 1) or 93 (Cohort 2) questions divided into several sections: introduction, individual identity, coach experiences, teammate experiences, and fan/spectator experiences. Participants were assigned a study ID after completion of the survey, which served as the only link between two separate Excel files to maintain privacy. This protocol was followed for both phases. Some survey responses were removed from the study sample because these submissions were not fully complete. These respondents only filled out the background information and then exited, or simply clicked upon the survey link and exited. All sections of the survey needed to be filled out in order to achieve validation for analysis.

Upon validation of the survey, only the last question inquiring about interview interest was reviewed, and a small cohort of participants were sent a follow-up email that provided the assignment of their study ID number and an Excel sheet link for scheduling. Once scheduled, the participant was sent a Zoom link and during their specific time slot, logged on to the Zoom meeting room. Verbal consent was required to proceed with the interview and allow for

recording. All interviews lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes in duration and were semi-structured with 10 guiding questions. Questions are included in the Appendix (pg. 40-41).

This study was specifically designed to collect individual narratives, since there is a gap in scholarship related to the nuanced perspectives of queer collegiate athletes and their own understanding of self-concept, identity formation, and positionality within their respective athletic spaces. Furthermore, the ethnographic interviews provided participants with the opportunity to reflect deeply on their sports career and offer more detailed accounts of the most prominent transformations they have experienced in their young lives as queer student-athletes.

Study Population and Recruitment

Athletes were required to have been publicly “out” or openly LGBTQ-identifying during their most recent athletic involvement as a prerequisite for study eligibility. Participants were also required to identify as LGBTQ athletes and fit into one of three categories: (1) undergraduate students who play for or represent their respective university’s athletic program in some capacity, (2) 1-5 year postgraduate students who played for or represented their respective undergraduate institution’s athletic program in some capacity, or (3) undergraduate students who played for or represented their high school or secondary institution’s athletic program at the varsity level. Additionally, participants were required to have resided in the United States during their athletic involvements and be at least 18 years of age at the time of enrollment.

Recruitment and data collection took place in two phases, with the first occurring from October through November of 2021, and the second occurring from February through March 2022. In the first phase, prior to survey launch, flyers and other necessary promotional materials were developed using the online Canva design platform and distributed across campus to several sites. Emails to recruit participants were sent to national LGBTQ athletic advocacy organizations

on social media, including *OutSports* and the *Sports Equality Foundation*. Campus organizations, including the Penn LGBTQ Center, were contacted to find and recruit prospective respondents. A template of the recruitment email is provided in the Appendix (pg. 39-40).

The second phase followed the same timeline, but included some minor modifications. Email messages were sent directly to athletes featured on *OutSports* “Coming Out Stories” platform to diversify responses. Male-identifying, contact sport athletes and non-binary athletes were prioritized in this process due to low representation in the first phase. Furthermore, athlete advocacy website *Athlete Ally* was contacted and a promotional post was published on the Penn LGBTQ student group on Facebook. In the distribution of these materials, a QR code was created for quick access to the consent form, guidelines, and baseline survey. A photo of the promotional flyer with the QR code and an email draft is provided in the Appendix (pg. 39).

Methods

This ethnographic, qualitative study employed the use of a baseline survey and semi-structured individual interviews. The baseline survey was administered through the secure Qualtrics platform and consisted of 87 questions for Cohort 1 and 93 questions for Cohort 2. The six question differential contained inquiries related to LGBTQ athlete representation in popular culture, the effects of the pandemic on community and closeness within athletic spaces, and more concrete pathways for LGBTQ athlete programming and advocacy. The survey was split up into six different sequential sections: “introduction”, “individual identity”, “agree/disagree”, “coach experiences”, “teammate experiences”, and “fan/spectator experiences.” Only some questions required a response given the variation in experience and perspective. The data was anonymized post-entry and participants were de-identified from their information through the use of a unique study ID number that was assigned during consent and enrollment.

The first phase administered the survey with a total of 87 questions, while the second phase featured 6 additional questions to bring the baseline survey to a total of 93 questions. The second phase included additional inquiries related to LGBTQ athlete representation in popular culture, the effects of the pandemic on community and closeness within athletic spaces, and more concrete pathways for LGBTQ athlete programming and advocacy.

For both phases, a smaller subset of interviews then took place with participants who filled out the survey and were willing to share more about their individual experience. Interviews of those willing to participate ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in duration. These conversations took place over Zoom and were video-recorded with consent from the participant. Provided in the Appendix (pg. 40) are a few examples of questions included on the baseline survey as well as guiding questions from the Zoom interview script.

Data Analysis

After recruitment and enrollment reached completion, the survey responses were opened from Box Drive and analyzed by the researcher. Questions with multiple choice or rating scales were analyzed and inputted into graphs and charts to measure frequency and range of responses through quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Open-ended responses were read over and marked to identify similar trends and commonalities using thematic analysis techniques.

In the first phase, the interview files were then extracted from Box Drive and run through *TranscribeMe*, an online transcription platform. In the second phase, the interview files were extracted from Box Drive and run through *Dragon Software*, a similar online transcription platform with greater accuracy. In both phases, these transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify similar trends and commonalities through qualitative content analysis, narrative analysis, and thematic analysis techniques to identify shared experiences and perspectives among

participants. Content analysis involves deciphering language to “quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts,” (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health n.d.). This process consists of identifying a level of analysis, setting up certain categories for qualitative coding, and sorting phrases and statements into certain pools of common sentiment and perspective. Narrative analysis, similar to content analysis, focuses on examining the functionality and structure of linguistic patterns that “have a storied form” (Figgou & Pavlopoulos 2015, 546). Lastly, thematic analysis marks themes across data and requires continuous data review to build familiarity (Chaiechi 2020). All three of these techniques contributed to the final report on the findings and conclusions of this study.

IV. RESULTS

Overview

Overall, there were 73 attempted responses to the survey and after screening for completion, 49 responses were validated for further analysis from both collection periods as can be observed in **Table 1** below. As stated in the Methods section, full completion of every survey component section qualified a submission for validation. The overwhelming majority of disqualified respondents only filled out the background section and then exited the survey, or simply clicked on the link and then exited.

TABLE 1: Survey and Interview Collection and Completion Totals

Instrumentation	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total Overall
Baseline Survey Attempted	31	42	73
Baseline Survey Completed & Verified	21	28	49
Ethnographic Interviews Completed	4	7	11

The sample demographics information is visually presented in **Tables 2 and 3** below as well. The most common sexual identity reported by participants was “gay” (n=22), and the following as “lesbian” (n=12), “bisexual” (n=6), “queer/other” (n=5), “pansexual” (n=2), and the least common sexual identity reported was “homosexual” (n=1) and “straight” (n=1). In regards to gender identity, there was a larger representation of female-identifying participants (n=24) compared to male-identifying participants (n=20), with a much smaller sample of non-binary/third gender-identifying participants (n=5). This participant pool ranged in age from 18 to 37 years old and spanned across 15 different sport types, including cross country, track and field, wrestling, lacrosse, basketball, diving, swimming, rugby, hockey, football, softball, soccer, tennis, volleyball, and waterpolo. In total, 48 different undergraduate and/or graduate institutions were represented in this sample. Participants were allowed to report more than one affiliated institution and more than one athletic affiliation.

TABLE 2: Sexual Identity Demographics Information

Sexual Identity	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total Overall
“Gay”	7	15	22
“Homosexual”	1	0	1
“Lesbian”	7	5	12
“Bisexual”	4	2	6
“Pansexual”	1	1	2
“Straight”	0	1	1
“Queer”/Other	1	4	5

TABLE 3: Gender Identity Demographics Information

Gender Identity	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total Overall
Male	6	14	20
Female	14	10	24
Non-binary/third gender	1	4	5

Survey Results

The survey was split into six sections: “introduction”, “individual identity”, “agree/disagree”, “coach experiences”, “teammate experiences”, and “spectator experiences”. In the “introduction” section, basic information on demographics, sport involvement, sexual identity, and gender identity was collected. The next section, “individual identity,” included questions related to the coming-out process among multiple social groups and the openness of student-athletes from their earliest athletic involvement to their most recent, as displayed in **Figures 1-3**. There is a distinction in that LGBTQ athletes feel more open in revealing their sexual identity in their most recent involvement compared to their earliest in athletics.

FIGURE 1: Were you openly ‘out’ to your teammates/coaches/parents when joining your most recent primary athletic involvement?

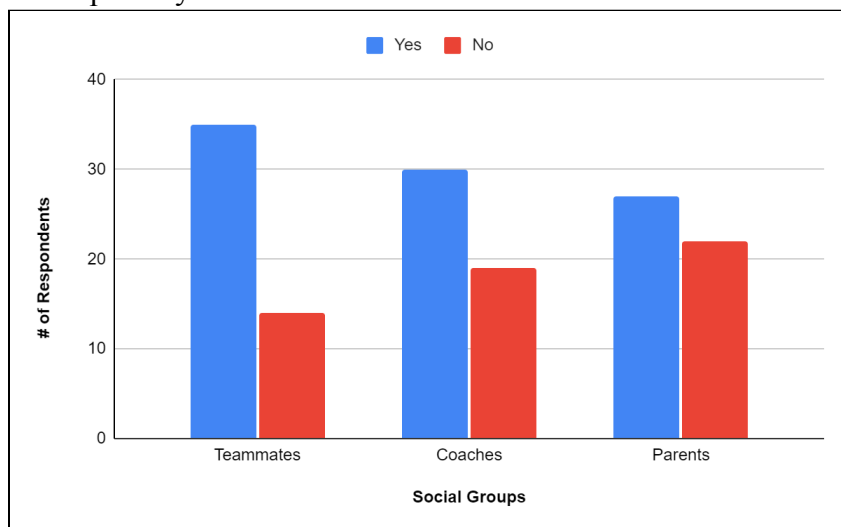


FIGURE 2: How comfortable were you in sharing your sexual identity with your earliest sports team?

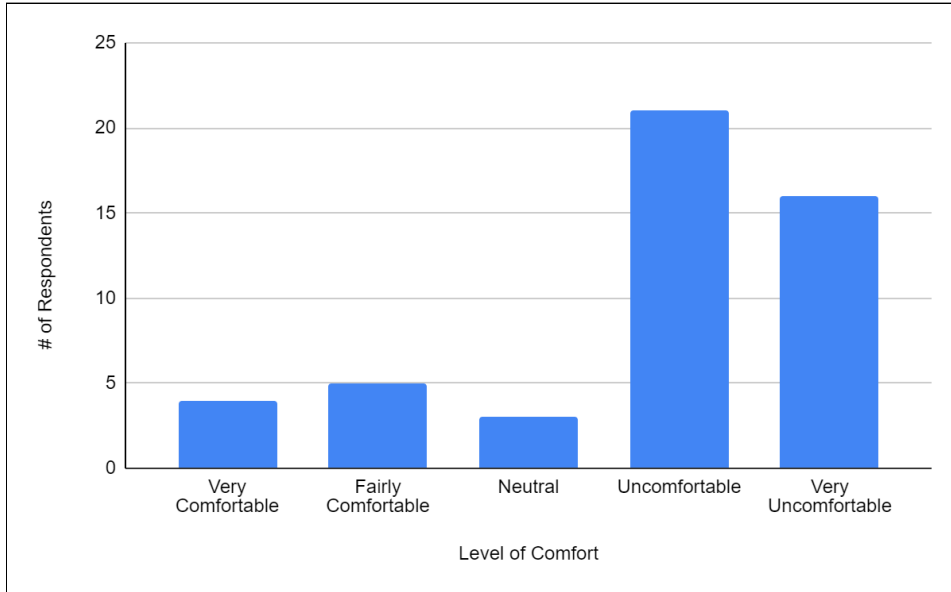
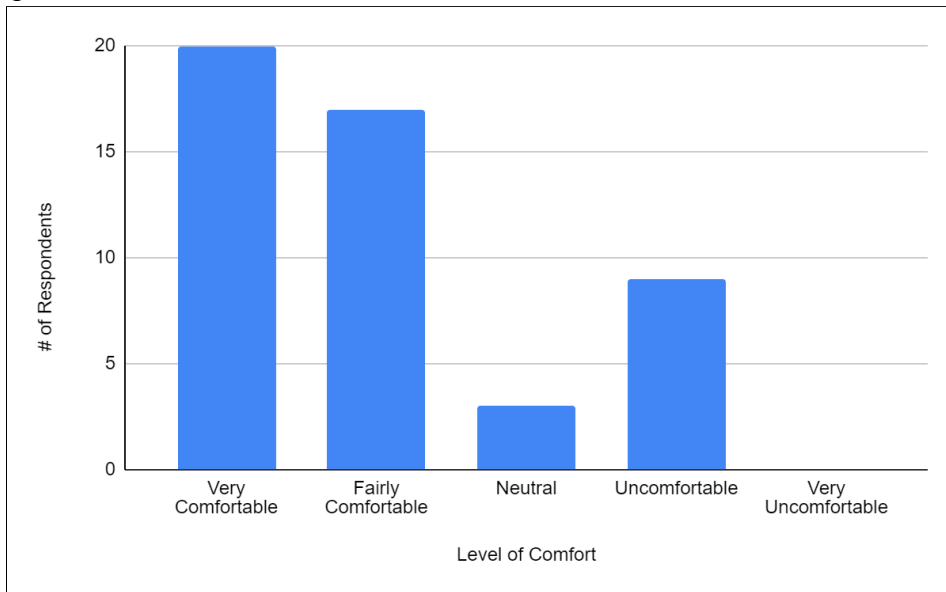


FIGURE 3: How comfortable were you in sharing your sexual identity with your most recent sports team?



The third section, “agree/disagree,” included a series of agree/disagree scale prompts, in which the total scale values can be observed in **Table 4** below. Specific examples of deviation from common agreement are evident in the prompts related to comfortability in sharing sexual identity with different figures in the athletic space, including “I feel comfortable sharing my

sexual identity with teammates”, “I feel comfortable sharing my sexual identity with coaches/mentors”, and “I feel comfortable sharing my sexual identity with training personnel.” While 79.6% (39/49) of respondents noted “strongly agree” or “agree” in their comfort of sharing their sexual identity with teammates, this percentage slightly drops when it comes to coaches, 73.4% (36/39), and training personnel, 71.4% (35/49). The difference is most prominent in the “disagree” and “strongly disagree” categories for these prompts, which for teammates, coaches, and training personnel are 4.1% (2/49), 16.3% (8/49), and 12.2% (6/49), respectively.

Additionally, the prompts with the highest “agree” or “strongly agree” ratings were “I am proud to be an LGBTQ athlete”, “Being LGBTQ does not hinder my athletic performance”, “I feel socially accepted as an LGBTQ athlete within my team” and “I feel comfortable in my sexuality when facing opponents”, while the prompts with the highest “disagree” or “strongly disagree” ratings were “My team takes strides towards promoting and celebrating diversity of sexual orientation”, “My coach takes strides towards promoting and celebrating diversity of sexual orientation”, and “Coming out to my team was not a difficult process.”

TABLE 4: Agree/Disagree Scales

Prompt	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
“I am proud to be an LGBTQ athlete”	35	10	0	4	0
“I feel like my sport is receptive to LGBTQ athletes”	19	17	8	3	2
“My sport is generally heteronormative”	10	14	17	7	1
“I feel comfortable in my sexual identity in locker room spaces”	20	17	4	7	0
“I feel comfortable in my sexuality when facing opponents”	24	17	5	1	0

“I feel comfortable sharing my sexual identity with teammates”	24	15	8	1	1
“I feel comfortable sharing my sexual identity with coaches/mentors”	15	21	5	8	0
“I feel comfortable sharing my sexual identity with training personnel”	16	19	8	5	1
“I feel socially accepted as an LGBTQ athlete within my team”	20	21	7	1	0
“I feel well-respected and cared for as an LGBTQ athlete”	14	19	10	6	0
“I do not feel excluded as an LGBTQ athlete”	13	23	5	8	0
“My team takes strides towards promoting and celebrating diversity of sexual orientation”	10	13	11	7	8
“My coach takes strides towards promoting and celebrating diversity of sexual orientation”	11	11	12	8	7
“Being LGBTQ does not hinder my athletic performance”	31	15	2	1	0
“Coming out to my team was not a difficult process”	15	12	10	9	3
“Coming out to my team was not met with resistance/criticism”	17	21	6	3	2
“There is a general push towards more involvement in sports for the LGBTQ community”	13	16	13	4	2
“Being openly LGBTQ in organized sports has become more normalized over the past decade, but there is still lots of work that needs to be done.”	20	7	0	1	0
only prompted to Cohort 2					

In the third section, experiences living and socializing with teammates were elicited.

Table 5 below exhibits the frequency at which direct verbal discrimination and microaggressions were experienced by respondents. General microaggressions included hypersexualization, jokes related to sexual identity, ignorant language, and stereotypical assumptions of one’s values based on sexual orientation.

TABLE 5: Frequency of Verbal Harassment and Microaggressions

Actions Experienced	Yes	No
Verbal Discrimination	12	37
General Microaggressions	23	25

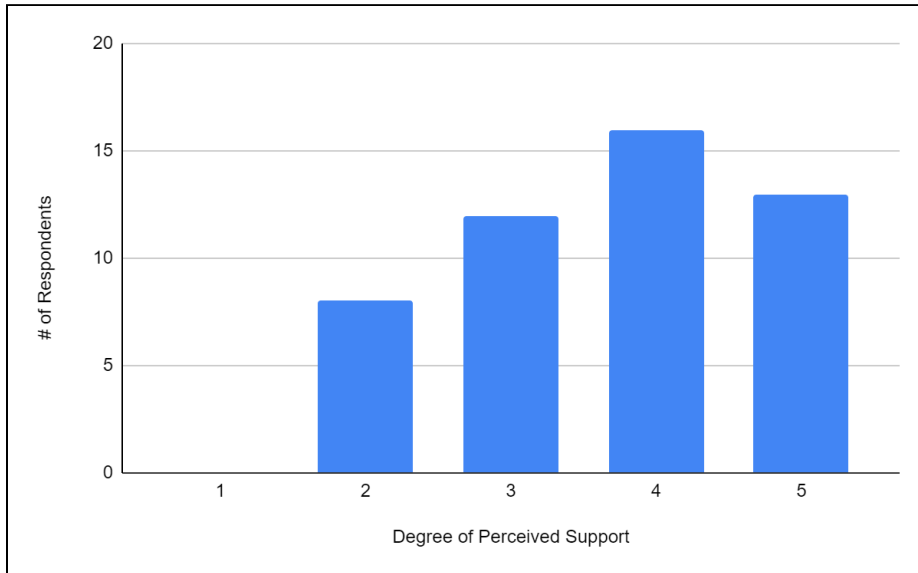
In describing how teammates could provide better support, respondents listed actions such as “educate themselves”, “asking questions”, “be accepting and understanding”, “showing love and compassion”, “treating people the same regardless of sexuality”, “being vocal against insults”, “stopping the use of slurs in criticism”, and “making an active effort to be inclusive when discussing if someone has a boyfriend/girlfriend/partner around queer teammates.”

In the fourth section, “coach experiences”, several inquiries probed respondents for their interactions with team leadership and mentors, who are in a position of power and authority in sporting environments. **Figure 4** below illustrates the level of support felt by LGBTQ athletes from their coaches and mentors. Although this level of support was variable, it skewed towards a higher rating, and was reflected in responses to several of the inquiries in this section. For instance, when prompted with the question “were you ever harassed by coaches of your team?”, only 3 respondents reported “yes” and 46 respondents reported “no”. Even with low reports of coach harassment, only 6 out of 49 respondents reported that their coaches were active in efforts to increase inclusivity in hosting “workshops, presentations, or discussions related to supporting

LGBTQ athletes or sexual identity”, demonstrating the lack of collective action in team education from leadership figures.

Results from the section analyzing fan and spectator harassment yielded little to no instances in reporting. Only 1 responded “yes” when asked if they “were ever harassed by fans/spectators of [their] team”, while 48 participants responded “no”. The spectators in these sporting spaces did not appear to have an influence on the LGBTQ athlete experience.

FIGURE 4: On a scale of 1-5, how generally supported did you feel by your coaches? (1 being not supported at all, 5 being extremely well supported)



In regards to LGBTQ initiatives and resources, 45 out of 49 respondents answered “no” when asked if their “primary athletic team ever hosted a game dedicated to celebrating LGBTQ pride.” Additionally, 51.02% (25/49) of respondents reported that they were not provided with a team counselor or individual dedicated to mental health and wellness on any of their athletic teams. Accessibility to these resources, when provided, was extremely variable.

When inquired if any of their coaches recognized Pride Month in any capacity, 22.45% (11/49) of respondents reported “yes”, providing examples of coaches “sharing on social media”, “walking the pride parade with players”, and “wearing pride flags”. Furthermore, only 4 out of

49 respondents reported that their team hosted a distinguished Pride game, providing examples of the events including “wearing rainbow laces”, “pre-match ceremonies”, and “flying a Pride flag at the field”. Team leadership also generally did not establish intra-team dating restrictions on co-ed or single gender teams, with 85.71% (42/49) of respondents reporting that none of these limitations were put in place in their respective athletic environments.

Interview Results

Eleven ethnographic interviews were conducted with respondents who reported that they were willing to participate in a 15-30 minute Zoom conversation on the initial baseline survey. These interviews were semi-structured and accompanied by a list of guiding questions, which are provided in the Appendix (pg. 40-41). **Table 6** below shows the athletic sport type of each interlocutor and a provided pseudonym to contextualize the variety of their responses.

TABLE 6: Interlocutor Sport Profiles

Interlocutor ID #	Interlocutor Pseudonym	Sexual Identity	Athletic Involvement
Interlocutor 104	“Sally”	Pansexual	Softball
Interlocutor 115	“Jack”	Gay	Swimming
Interviewee 116	“Mark”	Gay	Diving
Interlocutor 117	“Tony”	Gay	Swimming
Interlocutor 127	“Jake”	Gay	Soccer
Interlocutor 128	“Steven”	Gay	Lacrosse
Interlocutor 134	“Paul”	Gay	Tennis
Interlocutor 135	“Brendan”	Gay	Soccer, Track & Field
Interlocutor 138	“Liam”	Gay	Lacrosse
Interlocutor 148	“Samuel”	Queer	Swimming
Interlocutor 149	“Patrick”	Gay	Diving

The interviews investigated experiences with respect to the transition between high school and college, positive and negative teammate interactions, positionality within a specific sport niche and the sports world as a whole, and the best forms of advocacy and awareness.

Major Themes

Through conversations with interlocutors and qualitative analysis of their narratives, several main themes emerged, including a positive outlook and sense of pride in regards to their positionality within their sport, a culture of homophobia translated through ignorant language and jokes, sport-specific distinctions that propagated stereotypes of gender and sexuality, and a trend in the comfortability with identity that emerged in the transition from high school to college. Furthermore, these interviews demonstrated how the lack of organizational support and resources for LGBTQ athletes within collegiate programs demands for increased conversation, visibility, educational opportunities, and active allyship that starts with team leadership. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

Pride Amidst Prejudice

Several interlocutors expressed their feelings of accomplishment and purpose in holding their own in athletic environments. They reported recognizing their own resilience in uplifting and encouraging the next generation of queer athletes and finding passion through performance.

Sally, a pansexual softball player, in describing this pride, stated:

Being an athlete in general just gives you a sense of ownership and team belonging and stuff. But being an LGBTQ athlete is even more so. It's because then you have a smaller community that you're also playing for at the same time.

Her sentiment stresses how she is not only representing herself, but a larger community, which pushes her to perform at the highest level and make a name for queer athletes everywhere.

Resilience was also captured in many of the athletes' statements, such as Tony, a gay collegiate swimmer, who noted:

So to be able to persist, I'm proud of myself for being able to do that because it takes an extra level of dedication that a lot of people don't have to even consider.

For Tony, the sacrifice and grit required are two-fold, in working at his craft while also standing strong in his identity, which makes it even more rewarding to be able to showcase his talent.

This collective pride expressed by many interlocutors, however, was in response to a culture of homophobia propagated by discriminatory insults, insensitive humor related to sexuality, and a stereotyped portrayal of the LGBTQ community in social media and popular culture, which was also put best by Tony, who noted:

Sports are definitely a very stigmatized area. I feel like there's definitely a lot of internal homophobia, misogyny, a lot of different things that take place in sports and they're kind of passed off as like, that's just how it is like, that's just how sports are.

Tony emphasizes the ubiquitous nature of this intolerance of queer people as it relates specifically to sports, highlighting the disheartening recognition that “that’s just how sports are”. This stagnancy of acceptance in which LGBTQ athletes find themselves is worsened by personal experiences with homophobic encounters. Several interlocutors depicted experiences feeling isolated and targeted by stigmatization of their sexual orientation, which forced them to hide their true identities in certain social situations or silence their concerns. Steven, a gay lacrosse player, described this reality in the lockerrooms before games:

And so I remember there would be comments that I would hear. And at that time, I would kind of just have a panic attack because in my eyes it was like, if I say something, would I get support from anyone else in here? Or would I be looked down on even more?

This statement captures Steven’s fear of both exposing his identity and the projected retaliatory behavior of teammates and other athletes who he should be able to trust. The environment

becomes unsafe as homophobic language is used to criticize someone's appearance or performance on the field. Paul, a gay soccer and track star, provided an example of his teammate verbally assaulting him on a team trip, stating:

Across the aisle, my teammate says, "oh my God. That's so disgusting". He's like, "that's so disgusting. This is why you're gonna sleep on the floor. Like the dog that you are".

This moment is indicative of a culture in which being LGBTQ means being lesser than human, an abnormality so grotesque that it deserves maltreatment. In addition to the discrimination faced by individuals like Paul, it was affirmed that this culture even spreads to interpersonal relationships and affects team dynamics. Sally, a pansexual softball player whose intra-team relationship was outed by a teammate, stated that:

She made me stop studying for finals and go to each person's room to talk to them about my relationship and tell them what was going on. It was the weirdest thing ever. And I was so upset and there was so much stuff going on. This is the last thing I wanted to worry about.

As described by Sally, the athletic space becomes an arena in which skepticism and criticism of identity and sexuality threaten to tarnish an experience meant to serve as an escape from other conflicts. An environment designed for self-expression ultimately turns into a trigger for discomfort and anxiety, as best depicted by Liam, a gay lacrosse player:

Sports were both a source of joy and discomfort and part of the discomfort stems from the fact that I didn't wanna lose the privileges and enjoyments that I felt within sports... I didn't want to not be able to play anymore or to not feel part of the team anymore, or part of my group of friends, who were mostly athletes.

Sports-Specific Narratives

Given the variety of sport types represented in this study, it became clear that each sport has its own distinct stereotypes, customs, and expectations. Whether on land or in the pool, co-ed or single gender, team-oriented or individual, each interlocutor provided a unique perspective on

how they have wrestled with their identity as queer members of predominantly heteronormative sporting environments. For example, Patrick described the circumstances of being a gay diver:

Diving has a reputation for being a really gay sport as is. When I tell other people that I'm a diver or that I'm a diving coach, a lot of times it's met with "oh yeah, of course you are". That's kind of annoying because people view it as such a homoerotic sport. It can have an influence on some of the people in diving who either are not openly gay or are actually straight, making them more defensive about their identities.

Patrick alludes to the conceptions of gender and sexuality that are intertwined within diving, which forms a stereotype that ultimately associates femininity with subordination. This makes it less likely for LGBTQ athletes to swim proudly in the pool and weakens the potential in which allies feel secure enough to proactively defend teammates from prejudice.

A different experience takes place on the field, which Liam, a gay lacrosse player, described how his sport has had historical issues with sport culture:

The wealth of the sport creates a situation in which the people who are playing often come from educational backgrounds, where they are taught about inclusivity but also have a strong sense of entitlement that intersects with homophobia too. And there are people who come from working class backgrounds, which are often white and suburban. They haven't necessarily had an experience of being educated about inclusivity and there is this chip on the shoulder or blue collar mentality, which intersects with homophobia and sometimes racism.

Liam illustrates how our upbringings and family values can influence the way in which we treat others different from ourselves. On the lacrosse field, these biases manifest as homophobic slurs and a resistance to being educated. As stressed among most of the contact sport interlocutors, the added element of physical contact, aggression, and hostility strengthens the potential for homophobic actions to take place.

Transitioning from High School to College

The transition period between high school and college was described as incredibly transformative for interlocutors in coming to terms with their sexual identity and engaging in

communities that supported them with unconditional acceptance. The movement from one environment to a different setting was reported to have accelerated the development of comfortability, safety, and security in one's sexual identity. Sally, a softball player, stated:

When I got to college, I was opened up to lacrosse and field hockey and swim and dive and all these sports that I had never been exposed to. I definitely got a broader sense of the fact that there are other sports than softball that are full of LGBTQ athletes.

In Sally's case, her transition from her hometown, which had very little LGBTQ representation, to her college campus, which featured queer athletes in multiple disciplines, broadening her view of what was possible for young adults like her to achieve. It made it clear to her that she could flourish in this environment given the right support and visibility. Furthermore, Jake, a gay soccer player, provided a slightly different perspective:

My best friend from home has parents who are gay, so I grew up around them. I had gay teachers. But I'd never really seen people my age as normal in that sense. Then I went to [university name], and I was around these girls who were gay and totally normalized it for me.

Jake's insight exposes a very significant conception showing that queer youth can witness LGBTQ adults and their successes and impact on society, but struggle to imagine their younger years filled with that same degree of openness and security. For many interlocutors, normalization was key to loving themselves in their totality and in identifying with other fellow queer people of the same age, experiences, and questioning of their place in the world.

Solutions for Progress

Due to the lack of organizational support and resources for these athletes in their sports departments, as determined in many of the survey responses related to programming, workshops, pride events, and counseling access, many interlocutors denoted that the best methods for advocacy and awareness were increased team conversation, active allyship consistent in among

coaches and players, and dedicated efforts to increasing visibility and representation. The following excerpt, by Mark, a gay diver, best describes his stance on purposeful recruitment:

I feel like teams should have a few representatives and try to recruit a diverse class of people...If we just had more representation on teams, then there would be less of an issue.

By ensuring that LGBTQ athletes will be in the ranks through intentional scouting, it sets the groundwork for more talented queer prospects to identify with the institution and make an impact on the campus culture.

Once within the team, however, the work only continues. The favoring of frequent, consistent, and engaging opportunities for conversation with teams and coaches was popular among many of the respondents, including Sally, a pansexual softball player, who stated:

If you don't know about it, then you can't do anything about it. Having conversations with athletes could be a very easy way for an athletic department or coaches or a specific team to just even know more about the culture.

Sally emphasizes the threat of ignorance and oblivion when it comes to fighting against a form of oppression that for many athletes, just does not exist. Opportunities for exposure to the types of language, insults, or characterizations that hurt queer people would make athletes more understanding and aware of how their seemingly harmless banter may contribute to continued distress. Lastly, when this discrimination occurs, many interlocutors wished their teammates and coaches knew how to step in more effectively. As described by Tony, a gay swimmer:

My coach last year was very old fashioned and things they would say and how they would react aren't acceptable now. Some sort of education on how to act and react to those things.

Tony's statement shows how as the times change, not everyone follows suit. Making educational modules, workshops, or training more accessible in sports departments can help facilitate the formation of a more cognizant, respectful, and thoughtful athletic community.

V. DISCUSSION

LGBTQ Representation and Peer Support

The fairly positive outlook on their positionality that participants noted may be due to the presence of supportive fellow LGBTQ members within their involvement that inspired them to be more comfortable and vocal in their identity. This study found that 71.43% (35/49) of respondents noted that they had at least 1 other LGBTQ teammate while participating in their primary athletic involvement. These respondents described their relationships with those other LGBTQ teammates as “pretty close”, “discussed identities together”, “all had a part in coming out together”, and “good friends”. Furthermore, 42.86% (21/49) respondents reported that they had at least 1 LGBTQ coach or training staff member during their primary athletic involvement. These respondents described their relationships with LGBTQ coaches and staff as “close”, “the first person I came out to”, “would talk with me to help me feel more comfortable being ‘out’”, and “very close”. In various interviews, it was revealed that fellow queer athletes and coaches served as role models for respondents, often allowing them to explore their identity, ask questions, and confide in their peers for emotional support. This points to the general desire among interlocutors to carry on this tradition and motivate the next generation of queer athletes. This key finding is reinforced by past scholarship in the field, which illustrates how fellow LGBTQ members within a smaller sub community help construct a social safe space. A 2021 study on collegiate female athletes who identify as LGBTQ found that the existence of a safe social climate within their teams was facilitated by the presence of “strong LGBTQ role models as coaches or administrators” (Anderson et al. 2021, 8). Furthermore, this dependence on role models to become more open and visible also applies in non-athletic settings, such as the workplace and academic institutions. A 1998 study on the decision-making surrounding LGBTQ

doctoral students' relationships to their mentors in counseling psychology found that "before deciding to apply or accept an offer from a particular program, participants reported that they asked the impressions of openly LGB friends and colleagues" (Lark & Croteau 1998, 761). It is evident that connecting with someone with similar experiences stimulates growth and self-esteem for these queer youth.

A Culture of Homophobia and Heteronormativity

The support of these subcommunities communicated by respondents validates the low frequency with which direct, blatant verbal and physical harassment or discrimination are reported. However, the experience is highly sport-specific. The low reporting was especially evident among swimmers and divers, who made up 24.49% (12/49) of the sample. Swimming and diving were indicated by respondents as being fairly respectful and tolerant of sexual minorities, reportedly due to the co-ed environment, muscular movement associated with femininity and delicacy, and team-oriented community. Instead, a culture of homophobia among all sports, including swimming and diving, was determined to exist due to insensitive jokes, offensive language, and stigmatization due to stereotyped definitions of gender. As detailed in the Results section, 46.94% (23/49) of respondents reported that they had experienced at least 1 instance of a microaggression within their involvement. Interlocutors characterized these microaggressions as subtle jokes about sexual intimacy, not being included in conversations about potential partners, slurs heard around lockerroom spaces, and guidelines with respect to rooming on team trips to tournaments.

Several respondents noted the frequency with which they had experienced hearing or viewing homophobic phrases, insults, and humor used in their respective athletic environments. Although not physically abusive, the popularization of this language in sporting spaces breeds a

culture that resists promoting inclusion and acceptance. In turn, LGBTQ athletes within this culture feel a sense of psychological detachment and distress. The data from this study adds to an already existing field of research on the power of language in altering perceptions of self. A mixed-methods analysis conducted in 2019 found that more than 50% of students reported overhearing the term ‘gay’ spoken with demeaning connotation in athletic environments, leading to the students designating sports fields, gym locker spaces, and restrooms with the highest ranking of specific places where they might not frequent due to the potential dangers (Greenspan et al. 2019). This study confirms the fact that subconscious anti-LGBTQ views and indirect discrimination can affect the psychological well-being of LGBTQ student athletes.

Gendered Variation

These microaggressions tended to appear more frequently among male contact-sport athletes, including those who played soccer, lacrosse, and football. Current research in the field produces the narrative that discomfort associated with sexual identity is often most severe for male athletes and gendered in nature. A BBC Survey administered among hundreds of athletes from the UK in 2020 found that 68% of respondents felt that women are able to be more open about their sexuality than men (BBC 2020). This study confirms the bleak reality that due to heteronormativity and hypermasculinity in certain sport environments, male LGBTQ athletes do not feel the same level of safety and comfort. In all-male sports environments, stigmatizations related to masculinity defined in a strict patriarchal sense often ostracize those who do not fit the default heterosexual profile. A 2020 study on the perpetuation of toxic masculinity in heterosexual sporting environments found that most male athletes often seek to “criticize one another through the use of gendered terms” and “use certain language/gestures to demonstrate their heterosexuality and masculinity” (Rook 2020, 15-16).

Lack of Organizational Support & Resources

Although support for LGBTQ athletes is found through interpersonal relationships with their fellow queer teammates and allies, results from this study revealed that there is a need for more organizational and institutional support. Survey data illuminated the inadequate counseling options for athlete psychological distress, a rarity of Pride Month recognition or subsequent festivities, and an absence of educational opportunities or team workshops to raise awareness and foster reflection. Current scholarship reinforces this discovery, with LGBTQ psychological support often inaccessible for queer youth in academic institutions or delivered with misunderstanding of the queer experience. A 2021 study analyzing the narratives of LGBTQ assault victims in a university counseling center demonstrated that “participants experienced a lack of sensitivity around LGBTQ issues in their interactions with the counseling center” (Holland, Cipriano, & Huit 2021, 346). Furthermore, this institutional deficiency carries through into team leadership, with coaches and training personnel not often taking the initiative to be proactive about celebrating LGBTQ representation among their players. The importance and significance of LGBTQ awareness workshops in athletic settings is severely understudied, which adds to the misunderstood notion that activism is often reactionary instead of proactive. This is affirmed by a 2020 study of managers of recreational aquatic facilities working to identify the best ways to support LGBTQ members. These managers, when interviewed about their understanding of the issues facing this marginalized community, were found to have “expressed varying levels of (dis)comfort with their knowledge of LGBTQ-related social issues [and] discussed that their level of knowledge did not make them an ‘expert’ on the topic...[which] had an effect on inclusive management practices for the LGBTQ population.” (Anderson, Knee, & Ramos 2020, 27). As mentioned by several study participants, educational opportunities, such as

focus groups and workshops, are necessary to allow athletic staff, coaches, and administrators to better serve their LGBTQ athletes in various capacities.

A Period of Transition

Presented graphically in the Results section, this study determined that the transition from high school to college accelerates one's degree of comfort in openly expressing their sexual identity. The shifting environment appears to spur a period of self-reflection and personal growth, resulting in identity formation or confirmation. Current scholarship on LGBTQ open expression in novel environments demonstrates this phenomenon. A 2013 study on queer social work students in assessment of their environmental supports discovered that LGBTQ individuals' level of comfortability was significantly dependent upon their perceptions of how well peers would receive them (Dentato et al. 2013). Several interlocutors in this study described how moving away from their relatively conservative home environments to predominantly liberal, progressive institutions with diverse student populations pushed them to come out earlier than expected. Research also emphasizes the impact of the social settings of specific environments and how they can affect identity expression. A 2004 study analyzing development of sexual identity in college found that "comfort in particular locations had more to do with the people in them and the stereotypes attached to them than the actual physical space" (Stevens 2004, 197). College universities, with their diverse student population full of varied ethnic, sexual, and spiritual identities, offer a space in which young adults cultivate who they truly are.

A Path Forward

Lastly, what was mentioned the most among all the interviewees was a feeling of hopefulness and a desire to change the landscape of sports to be more inclusive through increased conversation and demands for active allyship. Respondents reported that their

experiences had awakened a degree of resilience and grit to continue working towards progress for the athletes that follow in their footsteps. A dedication to open and consistent communication among the team environment was prioritized. One interlocutor described an instance where a coach initiated a conversation about a freshman diver who had just been recruited, enabling a senior athlete to become more assertive in their mentoring role. Another respondent detailed their experience leading a team check-in with respect to an inappropriate text message sent in a group chat joking about the supposed “horrors” of having a gay son. Social interaction to solve disputes and misunderstandings was reportedly highly effective.

Furthermore, in facing direct harassment, participants denoted how uplifting it was to have teammates or coaches stand up for them in these circumstances. For instance, one participant discussed how teammates jumped in without hesitation after an insensitive comment was said during practice and another participant talked of a coach who responded with a half-time speech about collective action and unconditional support when one of his players was called a homophobic slur during a soccer game. It is evident that active, vocal allyship contributes to the empowerment of LGBTQ athletes in the most vulnerable of situations. This finding aligns with current research revolving around allyship and upstanding in LGBTQ populations. A 2017 study of confrontation of homophobic behavior in the workplace suggested “that confronting did not negatively impact ratings of the confronter and did not elicit lower intentions to confront in the future...but did result in more negative ratings of the perpetrator.” (Martinez et al. 2017, 78). This finding strengthens the idea that allyship in calling out homophobia not only helps protect the victim, but also prevents further harm and is not detrimental to the ally. Research exists in academic settings as well, in which teachers must take particular care to educate themselves on potential biases. A 2010 qualitative evaluation of a

professional development practice within classroom settings determined that “institutional and personal defensiveness about heterosexism was minimized because it was seen as part of a broader dynamic of oppression...and by examining the commonalities among different forms of oppression, both teachers and students learned to stand up and support those experiencing any form of oppression”(Schniedewind & Cathers 2010, 191). Combatting homophobia in the workplace and the classroom must be translated to the fields, courts, and locker rooms.

Limitations

This study, although robust in its collection of qualitative and ethnographic data and diverse in its student-athlete perspectives, has several limitations. The sample size (n=49) is fairly small for a research study compared to surveillance studies conducted on national or international scales. This limitation may have contributed to an overrepresentation of specific sport types, ethnic/racial profiles, or similar upbringings and environments. This sample size also makes generalizability of this research study somewhat difficult to verify given that some pathways to advocacy and awareness might not be the most effective or logistically achievable depending upon the structural organization of specific athletic departments. Furthermore, there was a large overrepresentation of male queer athletes who signed up for interviews. This may have led to the construction of a narrative that is male-centric and leaves out the important experiences of female and non-binary LGBTQ individuals. Given the timeline, resources, and participant pool available for this study, it is understandable that the sample size is small and that a snowball recruitment style was utilized instead of randomization. Furthermore, an eligibility requirement of this study specified that the participant must be publicly out in their most recent athletic environment. This requirement disqualified any LGBTQ athletes who are in the closet or not as open about their sexual identity. These more nuanced perspectives are especially

intriguing, and future research should be directed towards understanding the trials and tribulations of the coming-out process in athletic spaces.

Implications

Despite these limitations, this research has implications that are very impactful for LGBTQ athletes and the athletic institutions that they represent. The depth of qualitative data and ethnographic narratives provided allows for the public to empathize with a population whose opinions are so often left unheard in athletic spaces. These findings indicate that representation requires purposeful recruitment of talented LGBTQ athletes to teams and development of a sporting environment where everyone does not just feel accepted, but continuously celebrated. Setting this tone in the athletic space involves engaging in thoughtful conversations with LGBTQ athletes, starting with coaches, who should “ask the players specifically how they want to be addressed”, as described by a gay collegiate swimmer. All of these approaches should consult LGBTQ athletes before implementation, for they are their own best advocates.

VI. CONCLUSION

This project amplifies the voices of these athletes and provides material that can generate initiatives to promote advocacy and support for LGBTQ athletes within their programs as they navigate the often stressful and competitive realm of college sports. The findings demonstrated that LGBTQ athletes rely on representation to find security in their identity, live in a culture that does not serve their marginalized identity and in some cases rejects it, and have little to no organizational or resource support within their athletic programs. It was also determined that the LGBTQ athlete experience varies according to specific sport type and that to move forward and progress, queer athletes desire more engaged and frequent conversation, intentional visibility, and increased devotion to active allyship from teammates, coaches, and the entire athletic

community. This research serves as an opportunity to better understand the complex spaces in which gay athletes position themselves and how their sexual identity can play a role in their athletic involvement. It is important to note that these narratives are individualized, but work to tell a collective story about what it means to be an athlete, a member of the LGBTQ community, and an LGBTQ athlete. These three forms of identity come together to sculpt one's sense of self, which defines the way in which members of sexual minorities feel safe and secure in their academic and athletic environments. Institutions across the nation must recognize the need for a more nuanced, organization-wide approach to advocating for, honoring, and lifting up their talented LGBTQ athletes in order to generate real, purposeful change in the world of sport.

VII. APPENDIX

1. *Promotional Flyer with QR Code*



2. *Email Message Template for Prospective Participants*

“Hi _____,

I hope you are doing well!

My name is Joey Lohmann, and I am a senior at the University of Pennsylvania. As an anthropology major, a proud gay man, and a former lacrosse player, I am currently running a thesis research project in partnership with the UPenn Department of Anthropology called “LGBTQ Identities in Athletic Spaces”. I read your article on OutSports and was inspired by your story about your experience as a bisexual basketball player, and thought you might be a great person to share their narrative as part of this project! The purpose of this ethnographic study is to analyze and highlight the experiences of LGBTQ athletes in organized sports, and it includes a quick survey and possible follow-up interview if interested.

All data and information collected in this study will be anonymized and de-identified to protect the privacy of all participants. This study will be used to raise awareness for gay athletes and inform policy and programming discussions for athletic organizations across the country.

The link to the general study info, consent form, and baseline survey is below and feel free to send me any of your questions or concerns. I am more than happy to provide more info! The survey will close on Monday, March 7th at 11:59pm EST :)

LINK TO STUDY: https://upenn.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_e9h0rTMUoHF7srA

Thank you so much, I really appreciate it!

Best,
Joey Lohmann”

3. ***Baseline Survey Question Examples***

Example 1: Rating Scale

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being very uncomfortable, 5 being extremely comfortable), how comfortable did you feel in locker rooms and changing spaces?

Example 2: Free Response

What are the best actions coaches can take to make LGBTQ athletes feel comfortable, welcomed, and safe in sporting environments?

4. ***Interview Script Inquiry Example:***

How do you think your sexual identity/orientation influences the way in which you view both (a) sports in general and (b) your specific sport/affiliation?

5. ***Interview Guiding Questions***

- 1) What makes you proud to be an LGBTQ athlete?
- 2) Over your sports career, has the relationship between your sexual identity and your athletic involvement changed in any way? How?
- 3) Was there a significant transition from high school to college in your perception of sport as an LGBTQ individual?
- 4) How do you think your sexual identity/orientation influences the way in which you view both (a) sports in general and (b) your specific sport/affiliation?

- 5) Please describe a coach who has had a significant impact on your athletic career or life in general and if you discussed your sexual identity/orientation with them.
- 6) Please describe a time you felt unsafe/uncomfortable among teammates due to your sexual identity.
- 7) Please describe a time you felt validated/celebrated among teammates due to your sexual identity.
- 8) What do you think is the perception of LGBTQ athletes in the media and popular culture?
- 9) What do you think is the best way for athletic staff and/or departments to advocate for and support their LGBTQ athletes?
- 10) What advice would you give to your younger self in terms of finding pride in being an LGBTQ athlete?
- 11) What's the hardest thing about being an LGBTQ athlete?
- 12) How has the pandemic maybe affected your understanding of your sexual identity?

Reference List

American Psychological Association. n.d. "Identity foreclosure." Accessed April 22, 2022. <https://dictionary.apa.org/identity-foreclosure>.

Anderson, Austin R, Eric Knee, and William Dominic Ramos. 2020. "I'm Not an Expert, But...': Perspectives on Aquatic Management for LGBTQ Participants." *Recreational Sports Journal* 44, no. 1: 24-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558866120909449>.

Anderson, Austin R, Sarah Stokowski, Chase M. L. Smith, Megan R. Turk. 2021. "You Have to Validate It': Experiences of Female Sexual Minority Student Athletes." *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1990688>.

Aragon, Steven R, V. Paul Poteat, Dorothy L. Espelage, and Brian W. Koenig. 2014. "The Influence of Peer Victimization on Educational Outcomes for LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ High School Students." *Journal of LGBT Youth* 11, no. 1: 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.840761>.

Bartholomew, Kimberley J, Nikos Ntoumanis, Richard M. Ryan, and Cecilie Thogersen-Ntoumani. 2011. "Psychological Need Thwarting in the Sport Context: Assessing the Darker Side of Athletic Experience." *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 33, no. 1: 75-102. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.33.1.75>.

BBC. 2020. "BBC Elite British Sportswomen's Survey results." BBC Sport. Accessed April 22, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/sport/53593459?fbclid=IwAR1diKi555oFI1HpM7zhcHqIXK3Xy_kCO7nZvqe0mqoC6taHO6ZfuRHKVgA.

Beamon, Krystal. 2012. "I'm a Baller': Athletic Identity Foreclosure among African-American Former Student-Athletes." *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 2: 195-208.

Brewer, Britton W and Albert J. Petitpas. 2017. "Athletic Identity Foreclosure." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 16, 118-122. <https://10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.05.004>.

Chaiechi, Taha. 2020. "Thematic Analysis - Economic Effects of Natural Disasters". Science Direct. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/thematic-analysis>.

Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. "Content Analysis." Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Accessed March 20, 2022.

<https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/population-health-methods/content-analysis>.

Conron, Kerith J. 2020. "LGBT youth populations in the United States." UCLA School of Law Williams Institute. Accessed April 22, 2022.

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-Youth-US-Pop-Sep-2020.pdf>.

Dentato, Michael P, Shelley L. Craig, Lori Messinger, Michael Lloyd, and Lauren B. McInroy. 2013. "Outness among LGBTQ Social Work Students in North America: The Contribution of Environmental Supports and Perceptions of Comfort." *The International Journal* 33. no. 4: 485-501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.855193>.

Din , Engin and Serdar Arslan. 2021. "The effect of sports participation in obese boys on some obesity indicators and physical fitness parameters." *CHILD'S HEALTH* 16. no. 7: 479-483. <https://doi.org/10.22141/2224-0551.16.7.2021.244579>.

Figgou, Lia and Vassilis Pavlopoulos. 2015. "Social Psychology: Research Methods." *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, 544-552.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.24028-2>.

Fulginiti, Anthony, Harmony Rhoades, Mary Rose Mamey, Cary Klemmer, Ankur Srivastava, Garrett Weskamp, and Jeremy T. Goldbach. 2020. "Sexual Minority Stress, Mental

Health Symptoms, and Suicidality among LGBTQ Youth Accessing Crisis Services.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 50, 893-905. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01354-3>.

GLSEN. 2013. “The Experiences of LGBTQ Students in School Athletics.” Accessed April 21, 2022. <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/The%20Experiences%20of%20LGBT%20Students%20in%20Athletics.pdf>.

Greenspan, Scott B, Catherine Griffith, and Erin F. Murtagh. 2017. “LGBTQ Youths' School Athletic Experiences: A 40-Year Content Analysis in Nine Flagship Journals.” *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling* 11, no. 3: 190–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2017.1346492>.

Greenspan, Scott B, Catherine Griffith, Cassidy R. Hayes, and Erin F. Murtagh. 2019. “LGBTQ+ and ally youths’ school athletics perspectives: a mixed-methods analysis.” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 16, no. 4: 403-434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2019.1595988>.

Groff, Diane G. and Douglas A. Kleiber. 2001. “Exploring the Identity Formation of Youth Involved in an Adapted Sports Program.” *Therapeutic Recreation Journal* 35, no. 4: 318-332. <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/exploring-identity-formation-youth-involved/docview/62284728/se-2?accountid=14707>.

Harrison, Patricia A. and Gopalakrishnan Narayan. 2009. “Differences in Behavior, Psychological Factors, and Environmental Factors Associated with Participation in School Sports and Other Activities in Adolescence.” *Journal of School Health* 73, no. 3: 113-120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2003.tb03585.x>.

Holland, Kathryn J, Allison E. Cipriano, and T. Zachary Huit. 2021. “LGBTQ and Straight Sexual Assault Survivors’ Interactions with Counseling in a Campus Counseling Center and Women’s Center.” *Women and Therapy* 44, no. 304: 337-357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2021.1961439>.

Lark, Julianne S. and James M. Croteau. 1998. "Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Doctoral Students' Mentoring Relationships with Faculty in Counseling Psychology: A Qualitative Study." *The Counseling Psychologist* 26, no. 5: 754-776.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000098265004>.

Marques, Adilson, Ulf Ekelund, and Luis B. Sardinha. 2016. "Associations between organized sports participation and objectively measured physical activity, sedentary time and weight status in youth." *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 18, no. 2: 154-157.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2015.02.007>.

Martinez, Larry R, Michelle R. Hebl, Nicholas A. Smith, and Isaac E. Sabat. 2017. "Standing up and speaking out against prejudice towards gay men in the workplace." *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 103, 71-85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.08.001>.

Mereish, Ethan H and V. Paul Poteat. 2015. "Let's Get Physical: Sexual Orientation Disparities in Physical Activity, Sports Involvement, and Obesity Among a Population-Based Sample of Adolescents." *American Journal of Public Health* 105, 1842-1848.
<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302682>.

Pariera, Katrina, Evan Brody, and D. Travers Scott. "Now That They're out: Experiences of College Athletics Teams with Openly LGBTQ Players." *Journal of Homosexuality* 68, no. 5: 733–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1661727>.

Pate, Russell R., Stewart G. Trost, Sarah Levin, and Marsha Dowda. 2000. "Sports Participation and Health-Related Behaviors Among US Youth." *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 154, no. 9: 904–911. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.154.9.904>.

Rook, Janine. 2020. "Keeping Score: How Heteronormative Language in Professional Sports Shape the Identities of Student Athletes." Thesis diss., University of Portland.

Sonderlund, Anders L., Kerry O'Brien, Peter Kremer, Bosco Rowland, Florentine De Groot, Petra Staiger, Lucy Zinkiewicz, and Peter G. Miller. 2014. "The association between sports participation, alcohol use and aggression and violence: A systematic review." *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 17, no. 1: 2-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2013.03.011>.

Schniedewind, Nancy and Karen Cathers. 2010. "Becoming Allies for Each Other: An Inclusive Approach for Confronting Heterosexism in Schools." *Equity and Excellence in Education* 36, no. 2: 184-193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680303511>.

Stevens, Richard A. 2004. "Understanding Gay Identity Development Within the College Environment." *Journal of College Student Development* 45, no. 2: 185-206. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2004.0028>.

Trudeau, Francois and Roy J. Shephard. 2008. "Physical education, school physical activity, school sports and academic performance." *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* 5, no. 10: 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-5-10>.