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## Pride in Sports: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms Experienced by Gay and Lesbian Athletes

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the multifaceted perspective of gay and lesbian athletes participating in sports, specifically focusing on their challenges and coping mechanisms. A total of six (6) gay and lesbian athletes engaged in various sports were subjected to semi-structured interviews to investigate the impact of their experiences during sports participation and the development of their coping mechanisms. Despite growing endeavors towards acceptability and inclusion within the realm of sport participation, gay and lesbian athletes continue to face substantial challenges related to negative thoughts and feelings and social problems. Findings suggest that gay and lesbian athletes conceal their sexual orientation, actively seek support from peers, family, and coaches, and develop a strong sense of identity to navigate these challenges effectively. Moreover, it examines the coping mechanisms employed by gay and lesbian athletes to overcome these challenges, such as self-affirmation, establishing relationships, and coping strategies. Through exploration of these challenges and coping mechanisms, this study aims to shed light on the complexities of gay and lesbian athletes' experiences in sports and provide valuable insights for fostering greater enhanced inclusivity and support networks within sports communities.

### INTRODUCTION

The binary nature of gender, consisting of male and female, has emerged as a crucial factor in sports. Sexual orientation and prejudice occur when individuals diverge from the widely accepted gender roles and methods of self-expression (Denison *et al.*, 2021; Baiocco *et al.*, 2018a; 2018b). LGBTQ+ individuals face limited opportunities for competitive sports and engagement, while being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity. This local and global issue has recently caused much debate (Marivoet, 2014; Hargie *et al.*, 2016; Greenspan *et al.*, 2019). A national survey found that 24.7% of LGBTQ players avoided using school sports fields or facilities due to feeling unsafe, and 11.3% were discouraged by school staff or coaches from participating in sports because of their LGBTQ identity (Kosciw *et al.*, 2018).

The role of sports and physical activities in expressing gender has gained significance through participation in sports traditionally associated with masculinity, femininity, or gender neutrality, adopting specific approaches to playing sports, and either conforming to or challenging gendered expectations within the realm of sports. (Braumüller *et al.*, 2020; Tanimoto & Miwa, 2021). In competitive sports, athletes must “align themselves as female and male and join the corresponding team, “which most do unconsciously (Martínková *et al.*, 2021). Transgender athletes are challenged by needing to align to the sex binary and follow sports regulations that typically require a match of biological sex and gender identification (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Martínková *et al.*, 2021). As a result, the term “homophobia” is employed to

conceal and protect one's gender identity; it refers to an individual who experiences anxiety or fear about being seen by others as homosexual (Anderson *et al.*, 2016). As demonstrated in the study by Hargie *et al.* (2016), persistent challenges such as homophobia, homophobia, discrimination, abuse, and bullying remain prevalent in sports settings, with the ultimate goal of stigmatizing and silencing LGBTQ athletes, parents, and coaches.

Large-scale studies in Canada (Morrison *et al.*, 2014) and Australia (Symons *et al.*, 2016) found that most LGBTQ+ students (89-98.4%) experienced homophobic language in the context of school sports, with 47%-59% reporting that this behavior occurs with a high frequency. According to Kosciw *et al.* (2018), LGBTQ+ youth also identify sports facilities as school settings where they feel unsafe, and most trainers and PE teachers (92.7% of those surveyed) report they have heard homophobic use by students towards others.

### LGBTQIA+ in Sports Participation

People's perception of gay and lesbian athletes has slowly changed as they came out, played for their country on a global stage, and achieved prominence in their chosen field (Clark & Kosciw, 2021). Numerous studies have discovered that homophobic language and attitudes continue to fuel widespread stereotyping, discrimination, and ongoing exclusion in athletics despite the representation and visibility across various fields and platforms (Marivoet, 2014; Denison *et al.*, 2020; Torrance, 2022). Despite experiencing feelings of shame, fear, discrimination and distressing experiences, LGBTQ+

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people have remarkable resilience and are anticipated to thrive despite challenging situations (Baiocco *et al.*, 2018a; Denison *et al.*, 2020). Several studies have also discovered adverse consequences associated with participating in sports, such as social exclusion and perceptions of insecurity (Cunningham & Pickett, 2017; Eime *et al.*, 2013). These findings are relevant to LGBTQ youth toxic school environments (Kosciw *et al.*, 2018). Studies conducted with transgender adults have revealed that sports are not safe and inclusive environments (Hargie *et al.*, 2016; Symons *et al.*, 2016). The discrimination and gender-biased expectations prevalent in sports contribute to transgender adults developing unfavorable attitudes towards sports (Hargie *et al.*, 2016; Devis-Devis *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, this leads to decreased levels of engagement in sports. Research undertaken in various sports settings has consistently shown that LGBTQ+ individuals frequently face prejudice and exclusion in sports (Symons *et al.*, 2010; Cunningham & Pickett, 2017; Baiocco *et al.*, 2018a; 2018b; Kosciw *et al.*, 2018). A study by O'Brien *et al.* (2013) reported that 82% of the people who took part had witnessed homophobic and transphobic words used in sports, and 90% thought that homophobia and transphobia were still a problem in sports. Among transgender people, 46.2% said they had experienced direct prejudice over the past year. According to a study conducted in Scotland, 80% of transgender individuals believe that homo/trans negativity significantly hinders sports involvement and that it is a prevalent issue within the sporting community (O'Brien *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, there is empirical proof that the majority of transgender individuals have experienced discrimination against transgender people in the realm of sports (Oakleaf & Richmond, 2017; Pérez-Samaniego *et al.*, 2019). Discrimination against LGBTQ+ youth who are afflicted with moderate-severe depression, engage in substance abuse, self-harming, or attempt suicide has been consistently identified by various researchers as a significant risk factor (Russell & Fish, 2016).

LGBTQIA+ groups are now actively participating in sports tournaments. Despite their competence and excellence in sports, however, the visibility and representation of the community continue to be recipients of gender discrimination and abuse in the sporting environment (Baiocco *et al.*, 2018a; 2018b; Symons *et al.*, 2016). While numerous studies have pointed out the challenges LGBTQ+ people encounter when trying to participate in sports (Marivoet, 2014; Symons *et al.*, 2016; Denison E. *et al.*, 2020), very few have examined the coping ways in which LGBTQIA+ people, particularly gays, and lesbians, can overcome these challenges. This study aims to explore the challenges and coping mechanisms experienced by gay and lesbian athletes in sports.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

This study employed a qualitative research method to examine the challenges of gay and lesbian athletes

experienced and the coping ways they deal with them while playing sports. Semi-structured questions were asked, which allowed the participants to share and reveal the challenges faced and coping mechanisms employed in sports participation. Consequently, it helped the study to gather adequate information on how these challenges and coping mechanisms influenced the participants' sports performance and involvement. An exploratory-descriptive approach was employed in this study to help understand the problem that needs to be discussed and illustrated.

### Participants

Six (6) gay and lesbian athletes in Iligan City, Lanao del Norte, Philippines were chosen for this study based on the following criteria: They must (1) be an athlete with at least five years of experience competing in various tournaments and (2) be openly gay or lesbian, within the Visibility Management Approach to carefully choose what to disclose and monitor how they show their sexuality in different settings (Twist *et al.*, 2017). The researcher collected data in person, using semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations. This study used purposive sampling based on the abovementioned criteria to select participants.

### Procedures

Prior to data collection, a consent form was sought from the participants. Before the interview, the researchers conducted a pilot test to see if the questionnaire was valid or had worked and if they were qualified to conduct the interview. The final steps included interviews and observations with the research subjects in person. Following the Visibility Management approach is also part of the process for making sure that the participants are eligible. Gay and lesbian athletes must be open about being gay or lesbian and have at least five years of experience participating in various tournaments. Instructors clarified how to conduct the interview and store the data (by recording it on audio and video).

On the other hand, there was only one interview session, which gave the researchers enough time to read and recheck each participant's answer. If researchers find something confusing or inconsistent with the answers, they will be returned to the participants as soon as possible for clarification (members check). With the participants' approval, the researchers moved on to the next step. Obtained data from the interviews were analyzed and then coded. The interview data went through three steps before it was coded: it was transcribed, translated from Cebuano to English, and checked to ensure the results were fair.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive exploratory research methods, such as interviews and direct observation, enable a thematic analysis to assess actions, concepts, and experiences throughout a given data set. This study included (1)

sorting and classifying participant information, including organizing observation field notes several times to immerse in data, and (2) examining and verifying interviewee answers to determine if the data provided were sufficient. Third, generate initial codes (coding, tagging, or labeling the data); fourth, find main themes from the codes; and fifth, review and define themes. This study used legends to identify data and its location rapidly. After gathering participant responses, researchers (6) derive findings from the analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The themes of this study were determined through

data analysis of transcripts and participant responses that were organized in accordance with the research objectives. These themes were utilized to determine the primary challenges and opportunities experienced by gay and lesbian athletes. The six (6) athletes who participated in the study had the following experiences with sports and their daily lives. The following are summaries of the personal and sports backgrounds of the participants. Each participant has fantastic stories and secretly yet freely shares close sporting experiences. Each participant had competed in tournaments and leagues as athletes, which helped them grasp the phenomenon. Table (1) shows participant demographic information.

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of participants

Name	Gender	Years of Sports Experience	Type of Sports
Noe	Gay	12 years	Volleyball
Kriztian	Gay	10 years	Swimming
Josh	Gay	12 years	Soccer
Zerah	Lesbian	11 years	Basketball
Cristine	Lesbian	9 years	Volleyball
Angelique	Lesbian	10 years	Futsal

**Themes**

The themes of this study were found by examining the transcriptions, notes, and answers that the participants gave that were organized and in line with the research questions. The themes were used to figure out what the

six (6) gay and lesbian athletes’ most significant challenges were and how they dealt with them. The data were used to develop themes and sub-themes, listed and summed up below in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary of Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories
Challenges	Negative Thoughts and Feelings	Prejudice
		Self-doubt
	Social Problems	Gender Discrimination
		Stereotyping
Coping Mechanism	Self-affirmation	Improved self-esteem
		Self-acceptance
	Establishing Relationships	Self-adjustment
		Peer support
Coping Strategy	Healthy Detachment	

**Challenges Experienced by Gays and Lesbians in Sports Participation**

Based on the data findings, all six participants reported negative thoughts, feelings, and social problems while participating in sports. Most of the participants had negative thoughts and feelings because of the adverse effects that prejudices against their identity and sexual orientation had on their skills. Additionally, participants disclosed that they had to cope with negative emotions that were brought up by their self-identification. Participants confirmed that gender discrimination was one of their continual challenges while trying to demonstrate their

enthusiasm for sports. Among the many challenges they had to deal with was inequality based on gender. The participants openly acknowledged that the persistent gender stereotypes forced them to suppress or even public attention, and they noted that participants had persistently maintained their outdated views on gender in general. The discussion and summary of this theme were designed and intended to answer research question 1: What challenges do gay and lesbian athletes encounter in sports?

As mentioned above, the two biggest challenges that the participants had were negative thoughts and feelings

and social problems. Moreover, it was found that people have prejudices towards the participants because of their gender and sexual orientation. As a result, they have had self-doubts as they tried to show their love for sports. Participants' coaches and opposing teams doubted their ability and skills, got paranoid, and fell off in training because of separation; the coach belittled them for how they identified. This made athletes feel low during tournaments, uncomfortable with their skin, and self-conscious, insecure, and suppressed. The participants also faced gender prejudice. Despite the benefits of being on the team, players had to deal with limits and stereotypes while playing sports. Gender discrimination, bullying, homophobic remarks from teammates, and skill criticism have happened to them. Participants also described being challenged by people's preconceptions and preconceived notions about gender roles and dealing with teammates' negative attitudes are considered social problems in sports (Hossain & Ferreira, 2019). A study by Weinhardt *et al.* (2021) showed that being outside the gender norm affects one's self-concept and self-esteem, which are based on their beliefs of meeting those norms. Numerous studies found that LGBTQ+ people are still more likely to experience shame, fear, abuse, and bad or traumatic events (Hossain & Ferreira, 2019; Denison *et al.*, 2020). Symons *et al.* (2010) found that LGBTQ+ athletes experienced guilt and hurt due to traumatic events. As a result of societal expectations that people should conform to gender stereotypes, some athletes may feel pressured to hide their sexual identity (Hossain & Ferreira, 2019). Some athletes may try to separate personal life from sporting life by avoiding conversation about their families, partners, and social activities, distracting them from training and the sports and lowering their performance (Weinhardt *et al.*, 2021).

Symons *et al.* (2010) emphasizes that LGBTQ+ athletes experience homophobia in diverse forms across all levels of competition. Sexual orientation or identity-based harassment includes verbal, physical, or emotional harassment, insults, offensive graffiti, humiliation, exclusion, threats, or refusal of care (Elling-Machartzki, 2015; Symons *et al.*, 2016; Nye *et al.*, 2019). Symons *et al.* (2016) emphasize that sports discrimination, stigmatization, and harassment make queer athletes feel hopeless, alienated and apart from colleagues. Various studies have found that societal stress and stigmatization caused LGBTQ students to have low academic, professional, and social self-esteem in the classroom and across campus (Weinhardt *et al.*, 2021; Kosciw *et al.*, 2018; Eime *et al.*, 2013). LGBTQ+ youth's lack of self-confidence and identity security may cause psychological pain and disorder, as participants had to overcome while playing sports (Weinhardt *et al.*, 2021). Participants who took part in this study mentioned that they were frequently confronted with prejudices and orientation-based negative views. Russell and Fish (2016) determined that the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ individuals are profoundly affected by the long-term effects of dealing with prejudice and discrimination.

### **Coping Mechanism Employed by Gay and Lesbian Athletes**

Considering the numerous difficulties they faced, the participants had to come up with coping mechanisms to manage the stressful situations, which ultimately proved beneficial in navigating experiences as gay and lesbian athletes in sports. The discussion and summary of this theme are designed to answer research question 2: What are the coping mechanisms that Gays and Lesbians employ as an athletes?

The highlighted coping mechanisms in the study are self-affirmation, establishing relationships, and coping strategies. These three sub-themes enabled the participants to enhance their self-confidence, cultivate self-acceptance, adapt to their circumstances and get acceptance from others, while also avoiding potentially unfavourable situations. The study data hypothesized that the individuals encountered diverse obstacles, encompassing personal, discriminating, and environmental factors. These issues have compelled the participants to exert more effort to cope with the intrinsic and extrinsic pressures that arise from deviating from gender norms. According to Braumüller *et al.* (2020) individuals who self-identified as LGBT have encountered heightened levels of discrimination, stigmatization, and harassment in comparison to non-LGBT counterparts. Various studies indicate that students exhibited diminished academic performance and professional and social self-esteem due to prejudice and stress in society (Weinhardt *et al.*, 2021; Stallman, 2018). The absence of self-assurance and a sense of identity stability has resulted in psychological distress and maladjustment among LGBT youths, specifically gays and lesbians. The instances above illustrate internal and external stressors that place significant cognitive and behavioural demands on individuals. The Coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) individuals must first assess a situation as potentially stressful before coping with it. Individuals experience stress, typically classify the situation as a threat, a challenge, or a loss. The presence of social support networks, high self-esteem, and healthy detachment are beneficial for gay and lesbian athletes in managing stress (Stallman, 2020; Kawamichi *et al.*, 2015). A substantial body of research has identified two (2) primary functions of coping: emotion-focused coping, which involves regulating the distress or emotion associated with the stressful situation, and problem-focused coping, which involves directly altering the elements of the stressful situation to resolve the source of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mara *et al.*, 2020; Stallman, 2020; Biggs *et al.*, 2019). The results indicated that the participants employed both coping mechanisms. Gay and lesbian athletes regulate their emotions or distress due to prejudice, stereotypes, and homophobia they have faced. They are experiencing stressful situations, managing to bounce back from their experiences, and developing coping strategies to manage internal and external stressors while participating in sports.

The healthy detachment was the best coping tool an individual could never lose since it made everything

easier to handle. Detaching oneself from the emotion and refraining from engaging in the situation is an ideal amalgamation for eliminating feelings of humiliation and hurt. Desjardins *et al.* (2019) discovered that detachment is a reaction to distress that leads to heightened levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. Negative mental and physical well-being is linked to social isolation and detachment (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Wilson *et al.*, 2017; Desjardins *et al.*, 2019). Research has shown that employing healthy coping mechanisms, such as social support, relaxation training, and coping self-talk, can alleviate psychological stress, state anxiety, and dysphoria and increase positive mood states, well-being, and productivity (Broderick, 2005; Jain *et al.*, 2007; Stallman *et al.*, 2018). There was a noticeable increase in how LGTB, specifically gay and lesbian athletes, dealt with stress after stressful situation in sports. This implies that re-evaluating coping methods enabled individuals to utilize healthier coping strategies effectively. Two studies of distress university students found that coping plan training improved their well-being and reduced their distress (Stallman, 2020; Biggs *et al.*, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the challenges experienced by gay and lesbian athletes of participation in sports and explores diverse coping mechanisms employed by navigating these challenges. This study utilized qualitative research design employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, identifying sub-themes, including negative thoughts and feelings, and social problems, as significant barriers to their full participation in sports. Thus, our findings highlight the importance of self-affirmation, establishing relationships, and employing various coping mechanisms to promote inclusive environment for LGTB especially gay and lesbian athletes. One of the key findings of this study is gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, and negative attitudes from their teammates within the sports environment, which leads to adverse effects on psychological well-being, including their self-identity, success in sports, and self-perception and understanding of their own gender identities and expressions. Despite these challenges, this study highlighted the coping mechanism employed by gay and lesbian athletes to navigate and alleviate the impact of prejudice and discrimination. However, it is essential to note the limitations of our study. Firstly, our sample size was minimal and may not comprehensively depict the varied experiences of gay and lesbian athletes across various sports and cultural contexts. Additionally, the study predominantly focused on the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes. Future investigations should aim to include the perspectives of bisexual, transgender, and other gender and sexual minority athletes to offer a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ experiences in sports. Notwithstanding these limitations, this research contributes to the growing body of literature regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion in sports. It offers valuable insights

that can be utilized by athletes, coaches, administrators, and policymakers seeking to establish more inclusive and supportive sports settings for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

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