

The Experiences of Transgender Student-Athletes

Abstract

This article draws on data from a large quantitative study of the experiences student-athletes who are open about their minoritized sexual and/or gender identities to their teammates. Data accounts for the experiences of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender high school ($n=278$) and/or collegiate ($n=475$) athletes playing in the United States or Canada. Results show that transgender student-athletes ($n=11$) report similar experiences to gay, lesbian, and bisexual athletes. Overall findings suggest acceptance and inclusion in sport, challenging the narrative that sport is solely a space of exclusion and hostility for sexual and gender minorities.

Keywords; Student-athletes; Inclusion; Acceptance; LGBT; Sexual minorities; Gender minorities

Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been a rapid increase in liberal attitudes toward sexual minorities in North America (Pew 2020). This is a shift that has been affected by both cohort replacement and attitudinal change within cohorts, trends that continue into the current epoch (Kranjac & Wagmiller 2021). The causality of these shifting attitudes is multifactorial (McCormack & Anderson 2014), and evidence also suggests that the shift is progressive - but not uniform - across the demographics of gender, class, age, race, and educational attainment (Adriaenssens, Hendrickx & Holm, 2021; Southall et. al. 2012). Important to this analysis, another hypothesized dampening variable is fraternization with conservative, masculine institutions, such as sport (Anderson et al., 2024).

Examining the relationship between homophobia/transphobia and institutionalized, competitive, team sport is not straightforward. This is because homophobia decreases unevenly and because, early into a social movement, a framework of modern prejudice (Bonilla-Silva 2003) suggests that there may be a lag between overt attitudes and improved experiences for minorities. For example, Diefondorf and Bridges (2020) take this perspective, arguing that a methodological paradox exists for research on sexual minorities. They write, (p. 1271), "...while surveys of opinions suggest Americans are more supportive of gender and sexual minorities, representative surveys of the actual lived experiences of gender and sexual minorities in the U.S. are inconsistent with this shift."

Whilst there is a continuing trend of increasing liberal attitudes toward sexual minorities across Anglo-American cultures (Pew 2020), which is matched with some research reporting on positive experiences of sexual minorities in sport (Gaston and Dixon, 2020; White et al., 2021), there are complications to applying this research to the study of gender minorities in sport. This is firstly due to the general scarcity of transgender athletes, as well as the geographical, international, variance that emerges from research on them. Transgender people, and thus, transgender athletes, are a small population among the already minority population of people with minoritized sexual and gender identities. This often leads to research on sexual and gender minority athletes conflating lesbian/gay women, gay men, bisexual men, bisexual women, transgender men and transgender women into one category, as if there were no differences in social antipathy or experiences across this population.

Importantly, 'LGBT' has become an all-encompassing acronym which does not offer a valid analytical fit for disparate minority groups that vary across gender and sexuality issues. Transgender issues are fundamentally issues of gender, and not sexuality, the way gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues are. There also appears to be far more antipathy toward transgender people than sexual minorities (Cunningham et al., 2018). Thus, this paper examines the experiences of transgender athletes compared to sexual minority athletes in recognition of the contextual differences between these minority groups.

Medicalizing Transgender Experiences in Sport

Within the last decade, there has been growing social awareness of the existence of transgender people, particularly within sport. Significantly, however, the social discussion and media attention around this issue is not as inclusive as it is for sexual minorities. There exists a considerable amount of old and new media coverage over the idea of transgender women existing within female spaces, with sport being the epicentre of this.

The discussions in sport reflect wider cultural responses to gender, whereby trans women specifically in sport are highly politicised and applied to a broader ‘culture war’ around competing gender ideologies which cut across the political spectrum. It manifests in two domains: the first being social. Here, trans women are portrayed as a threat to cisgender women: in locker rooms and bathrooms. This threat is mostly a moral panic, rather than an ostensible and salient condition. More so, this threat examines only cisgender women as being potentially ‘in peril’, ignoring the potential dangers of leaving a trans woman within homogenous male spaces.

The second politicised variable considers fairness and equality, through medical and biological discourse. While not an issue for locker rooms or bathrooms, this is where most of the socio-cultural discourse around trans athletes is centred: on ideas of ‘inclusion vs fairness’ as well as perceived safety, particularly with respect to trans women and perceptions of biological advantage (Jakubowska, 2024; Jones et al., 2017).

Such matters of biological advantage are complex and a detailed discussion beyond the scope of this article. Ongoing debates around biological advantage aside, and whether stakeholders of sport ought to be more concerned with the positive impacts of teamwork and exercise over winning, the cultural response has been widespread demonization and (often) insensitive media reporting around trans women. The exaggeration of the inferred innate biological advantage of males over females has led to media discourse that falsely presents transgender women as dominating in women’s sport (Thorpe, Nelson, Scovel, & Veale, 2023), and creating a double bind for transgender women between cissexism and sexism (McClearen, 2015). This phenomenon in sport has launched the issue into the mainstream with journalists, politicians, policy makers, athletes, scientists, and the public all voicing their opinions on the subject.

Socially Problematising Transgender Athletes

This biological situation makes discussions of trans inclusion distinct to that of sexual minorities in sport, and research has highlighted discrepancies in attitudes, with social attitudes towards sexual minorities being more progressive than attitudes toward gender minorities (Norton and Herek, 2013; Hargie et al., 2017; Cunningham & Pickett, 2018). However, recent research has highlighted that this variance may not be as large as we might expect given the hostile media coverage of trans athletes. Hardwicke and colleagues (2023) reported that amongst a sample of competitive cyclists, sexual and gender majorities reported attitudes towards gender minorities that were in close proximity to sexual minorities, which were overall positive and accepting. Given the socio-cultural focus on trans women, it was also interesting that there were no differences reported in attitudes toward trans men and trans women in the research.

Furthermore, Knoester and colleagues (2023) recently reported on findings from the U.S National Sports and Society Survey, where they examined public opinions about transgender athletes’ rights, rights for athletes with varied sex characteristics, sex testing, and gender segregation in sports. From a sample of 3,993 U.S. adults, findings showed 56% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed with transgender athletes’ right to choose which gender they compete with. It was also reported that 20% somewhat or strongly agreed that athletes with varied sex characteristics should not be allowed to compete with females, and 54% somewhat or strongly agreed that gender segregation in youth sports is problematic.

Of course, positive attitudes amongst sexual and gender majorities reported in survey-based research may not reflect the lived experiences of minority groups (Diefondorf & Bridges, 2020). Such empirical findings must be triangulated with research exploring the experiences of trans athletes to gain a full understanding of the situation. Yet, due to issues mentioned above, there is a dearth of research on trans experiences in sport; but what does exist presents mixed findings.

There have been several small-scale qualitative studies on trans experiences in sport (Caudwell, 2014; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012; Semerjian & Cohen, 2006; Tagg, 2012; Travers, 2006; Elling-Machartzki, 2017; Kavoura, Channon, & Kokkonen, 2022). Most of this work is from a queer/feminist theoretical standpoint and mostly suggests a negative picture for trans experiences in sport. However, some research has suggested things may be more positive for transgender experiences in sport (Travers & Deri, 2011; Ogilvie, 2017); but this was for trans men, and not trans women.

Researchers must also be careful to scrutinize the scholarship on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender athletes for variance between these categories. There is, unfortunately, much equating of transgender athletes into the sexuality spectrum; sometimes even on research that explicitly did not examine transgender athletes. Because the equating of transgender athletes into the sexuality spectrum is relevant for political and not social-scientific inquiry, we report upon the experiences of transgender athletes in comparison to sexual minority athletes. Furthermore, because much of the literature either focuses on historically dated experiences or on elite levels of sport we instead focus on recent experiences amongst high school and college student-athletes.

Methods

The Survey

Results from this research come from the Out in Sport Survey. This exists as a systematic, web-based, sampling approach to target people who identify as a sexual or gender minority, who lived in the United States or Canada, and were at least 14 years old at the time of coming out to their high school or collegiate team(s). It was co-constructed by the lead author following a critical review of other surveys on the topic of sexual and gender minority athletes. However, in line with the work of Wignall (2017) and Browne (2008), who both found existing categorization of sexualities to be inadequate, the survey was not prescriptive in its categorization, and we thus offered a range of sexualities (including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Pansexual, Queer, Asexual) to select from while also allowing participants to identify their own identities (which resulted in additions such as Demigirl and ‘I really don’t know’). Importantly, recognizing the fluidity of sexualities, we allowed participants to identify with more than one identity.

The survey measured coming out experiences. The structure of the high school and university surveys was identical. There were 20 questions on the survey, and it took approximately 3-5 minutes to fill out a section for each. There was also room for qualitative input should the participant desire, for which 342 provided such. There was also the opportunity for

participants to share their email address with the researchers, for the purposes of interviews. Analysis of the qualitative data is not included in this paper, as it forms the basis of a subsequent paper that combines the open-text and interview data with a different research focus to the one we consider here.

The survey design operations phase began December 11th, 2020, with dozens of iterations after input from scholars concerned with the study of these separate populations. The final operational draft was launched to 20 preliminary athletes, strategically chosen for diversity of gender, sexuality, and sports variation for a trial run. This occurred on February 9th, 2021. There were no reported problems or user-concerns that required amending; thus, the survey was officially launched on February 12th, 2021. Surveys were closed to partial responses. Instead, participants were prompted to answer all questions before continuing to the next page. The survey also assessed eligibility with opening questions and participants not meeting the criteria were thanked on an exit page.

Considering the positive-negative asymmetry bias, or human condition of being more forcefully impacted by negative than positive experiences, we advertised and worded the survey with language designed to decrease self-selection bias for people who have had more homo-/transnegative experiences than others. The survey was promoted and written in a neutral way, avoiding expressions like “negative experiences”, “discrimination”, “harassment”, “positive experiences”, “acceptance”, or “inclusion.”.

Participant Recruitment

The absence of large-scale quantitative studies on the topic of sexual minorities in sport is made difficult for three reasons. First, because sexual and gender minority people represent a small fraction of the total population. Second, because they must also choose to play sport over other cultural activities. Third, because they must first come out in sport in order to be studied. Thus, as with studying any cultural subgroup, locating gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender athletes who have played openly for a high school or collegiate sport team is extortionary difficult: these athletes cannot be captured in meaningful numbers using population-based surveying methods or general school population studies. Instead, they must be located by a more difficult and targeted recruitment means.

To tackle challenges related to sampling hard-to-reach, hidden and vulnerable populations, recruitment efforts were made using a combination of sampling strategies (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). To do this, we used a total of 14 stakeholders in sport networks. Essentially, participants were gained via purposeful sampling techniques through the following methods: 1) An advertisement for distribution was sent out to scholars from the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport; 2) Emails were examined for those contacting the website OutSports.com; 3) An advertisement was placed on OutSports.com. 4) 100 college athletic directors were emailed asking for distribution to their coaches. 5) high school and collegiate coaches were emailed, individually; 6) Stakeholder websites related to several sports were solicited for advertisement of our survey; 7) GoSpace, a Facebook organization related to sexual and gender minority athletes contacted its membership base.

Participants

Participants were eligible for the survey if they played as an openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender athlete on one or more high school or university teams. Being out was defined as being out to at least one or more teammates. Athletes who were out in sports apart from high school or collegiate athletics, who resided outside the United States or Canada, were ineligible for this survey. Owing to low sample sizes in other identities (Queer, Multiple, Asexual, Pansexual, Non-binary and Demi-sexual) and the specific focus of this paper, only openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender student athletes were included in the analysis. The survey is identical for high school and college athletes, so that one participant can be accounted for on the high school and university level.

Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentage scores are presented in table format for responses to each question to provide a descriptive overview of the data. This descriptive analysis was completed using SPSS v.26. The raw responses are shared under the following thematic areas relevant to our focus: Overall experiences, Parity of Outcome Across the Spectrum of Sports, Team Support and Surpassing Expectations. Data from high school and college student-athletes are separated throughout, as are sexual minority and transgender responses. Inferential statistical tests were not performed due to the low sample size of transgender participants.

Ethics

Institutional Review Board approval was granted for this project through two universities. The survey was anonymous, unless participants chose to leave an email address if they desired to take part in a qualitative interview; in this case, the email address may not, may partially, or may fully identify first and last names. These email addresses were kept confidential by the researchers. Participant consent was achieved through agreeing to the participant information page on the survey. Consent was required to progress with the survey. Parental consent for those under 18 years of age was not deemed necessary, as asking for parental permission from those under 18 years of age is problematic, as it potentially causes more harm for this group if they have not come out to their parents.

Results

Survey responses were monitored as they came in by time-stamp for duplicate submissions. A total of 53 duplicate surveys were identified and removed. Several controls were also built into the survey: these included two questions asking about year of coming out and age of coming out, as well as year of both. Mathematical variance was used to show fabrication. Also, several questions included an option for 'other' with open-ended response options. This permitted participants to invent sports, such as one who identified his sport as competitive shoelace tying. We removed 7 such data sets from the sample. The sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (male to female and female to male) coming out experiences in American and Canadian high school and collegiate sports analysed in this paper can be seen in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Overall Experiences

Respondents were asked “How would you describe your overall experience with your high school/college TEAMMATES and being out to them?”. Results indicate that, at both the high school and college levels, ‘coming out’ experiences were positive for the majority of lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Specifically, 72.3% ($n=198$) of lesbian, gay and bisexual high school athletes reported a good, very good, or perfect/near perfect experience. For lesbian, gay and bisexual college athletes, 90.4% ($n=423$) reported a good, very good, or perfect/near perfect experience. For the trans student-athletes a broadly similar trend was present at the college level but not high school. The 4 trans high school athletes were split evenly: 2 reported a bad experience and 2 a very good one. The 7 trans college athletes reported mostly positive experiences: perfect/near perfect ($n=4$), very good ($n=2$) and neutral ($n=1$). Full responses are detailed in Tables 2 and 3.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

[TABLE 3 HERE]

Parity of Outcome Across the Spectrum of Sports

Responses to ratings of overall experiences of being out in sport were stratified by sport type. We categorised these into the ‘Big 5 Sports’ (Football, basketball, baseball, soccer, and hockey) and ‘Other Sports’. The ‘Big 5’ represent the most popular and historically masculinized sports played within high school and college sport (Anderson, 2005). Here, reported experiences broadly followed the patterns outlined above and were not influenced by sport type. The majority of high school lesbian, gay and bisexual athletes reported a good, very good, or perfect/near perfect experience in the ‘Big 5’ sports (37 out of 50, 74%) and other sports (162 out of 224, 71.9%).

Similarly, the majority of college lesbian, gay and bisexual athletes reported a good, very good, or perfect/near perfect experience in the ‘Big 5’ sports (76 out of 85, 89.4%) and other sports (347 out of 383, 90.6%). The 4 trans high school athletes were split evenly again across sport types. For the ‘Big 5’, one reported a bad experience and the other very good. For other sports, the same response was seen. The 7 trans college athletes’ responses were mostly positive. For the ‘Big 5’, one responded neutral and the other very good. For other sports, response was only positive with very good ($n=1$) and perfect/near perfect experience ($n=4$). Total responses stratified by sport type are detailed in Tables 4 and 5.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

[TABLE 5 HERE]

Team Support

Participants were asked “AFTER coming out, how did you feel about the support you received from teammates for being LGBTQ+?”. Results indicate that, at both the high school and college levels, team support was positive for the majority of lesbian, gay and bisexual student-athletes. Specifically for lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents, 67.2% (n=184) of high school athletes and 81.8% (n=383) reported they got most or all of the support needed. The 4 trans high school athletes’ responses to levels of team support needed were: some support (n=2), most support (n=1) and all support (n=1). The 7 trans college athlete responses were: most support (n=2) and all support (n=7). Full responses are detailed in Tables 6 and 7.

[TABLE 6 HERE]

[TABLE 7 HERE]

Surpassing Expectations

In order to investigate the variance between social expectation of acceptance/intolerance versus the reality of the athletes’ experience after coming out we included the following as question “BEFORE they found out you were LGBTQ+, how did you think these teammates would react to finding out you are LGBTQ+?”. Responses are detailed in Tables 8 and 9.

[TABLE 8 HERE]

[TABLE 9 HERE]

To evaluate if respondents’ perceptions of the level of acceptance/intolerance they would receive was accurate, we asked the athletes a follow up question which read “How was your high school/college teammates’ INITIAL reaction to you being LGBTQ, compared to your expectations?” Responses are detailed in Tables 10 and 11.

[TABLE 10 HERE]

[TABLE 11 HERE]

The data shows that reported experiences surpassed expectations for both lesbian, gay and bisexual and transgender respondents. For the high school trans athletes, initial expectations of coming out to teammates about their identity were: very negative (n=1), somewhat negative (n=2) and neutral (n=1). Once out to teammates, comparison to expectations were evenly spread: somewhat worse than my expectations (n=1), same as my expectations (n= 1), somewhat better than my expectations (n=1) and much better than my expectations (n=1). Responses for the college trans athletes were more positive. Initial expectations were: neutral (n=2), somewhat positive (n=2) and very positive (n=3). Comparison to expectations were: same as my expectations (n= 2), somewhat better than my expectations (n=2) and much better than my expectations (n=3).

Discussion

Sport is frequently charged with maintaining a higher degree of exclusion for sexual and gender minorities than other social institutions. Storr et al. (2021, p. 16) recently wrote, “Yet inclusion [in sport] is perhaps just an illusion....the sport sector is still failing inclusion,” and “claims about the advanced progress in inclusion for LGBT+ people [in sport] are problematic.” (p. 1).

However, the data from this study challenges such statements. When one talks about ‘sport’, one is mostly talking about athletes, as institutions are comprised of people. Thus, claims that the sport ‘sector’ is homophobic and exclusive is to suggest that athletes hold more socio-negative attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities than non-athletes. Yet, evidence from this study on those most capable of judging that question (sexual and gender minority athletes) suggest that, and consistent across all sexual and gender minority identity categories studied, participants’ social evaluation of their experiences was mostly positive, and teammates were more accepting of their minority status than commonly believed.

This finding may be because, to our knowledge, this is the largest study to be conducted on sexual and gender minority high school and college student-athletes in United States and Canada which strictly focused on the most *recent* experiences of coming out. Thus, our data does not include historical experiences of antipathy towards persons retrospectively reporting on experiences, but rather focuses on young people’s experiences in the contemporary social zeitgeist. Based on these findings, this zeitgeist appears to be one of acceptance and inclusion, supporting other research findings in contemporary settings (White et al., 2021; House et al., 2022).

Of particular interest, this finding held steady across sport types. Attitudinal research on the expected outcomes of attitudinal disposition on behaviours of heterosexual collegiate athletes shows that athletes from highly masculinized sports, like football and basketball, maintain more antipathy and suggest that they do or would treat gay teammates worse than they would athletes from collegiate, lesser masculinized, sports (Southall et al. 2012). It would perhaps be an expected finding that participants in any of the ‘Big 5 Sports’ (football, basketball, baseball, hockey and soccer) teams might be amongst teammates less accepting of sexual and gender minority players and therefore such players would downgrade their experiences with these teams compared to sexual and gender minority athletes on teams of sports that are less masculinized. However, findings of this study suggests parity in outcome across sport types.

There are reasons to speculate, however, that transgender athletes might have worse experiences on athletic teams than gay, lesbian, and bisexual athletes. These reasons centre around the idea of transgender athletes being medicalized, and trans women athletes being perceived to have a biological advantage in sport. This debate is also framed as men intruding on women’s spaces. The cultural discussion of transgender equality is also newer to the cultural agenda of rites: ‘T’ was in fact later added to ‘LGB’.

However, results from our research suggest that while transgender athletes are a minority of the broader sexual and minority population, they do not lag far behind lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletic experiences when they are open about their trans gender identity in sport. We found that on measures of overall experience and support received, there was little variation between the aggregate of lesbian, gay and bisexual responses compared to transgender. We also found little to no variance in this across the masculinized sports, like

football, and the lesser masculinized sports, like swimming. Finally, as with lesbian, gay and bisexual athletes, transgender athletes expected their playing out/open experience to be worse than it actually was. Indeed, most student-athletes reported upgrading their experience compared to what they thought it would be.

This leaves us to ask the most germane question: why is it that despite transgender athlete's being a topic of vehemence within current cultural discussion, there is little variance of their experience compared to lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletic experiences? These, perhaps surprising, results support recent findings amongst competitive cyclists (Hardwicke et al., 2023), where positive attitudes were found towards both sexual and gender minorities, with only a small variance, and this was matched with mostly positive experiences reported by sexual and gender minorities. Furthermore, recent data from the U.S. on public attitudes towards trans inclusion in sport suggested majority acceptance (Knoester et al., 2023). Taken together, it may be argued that the 'culture war' around trans inclusion in sport (mostly concentrated on elite levels) and cultural hysteria in the media may not be reflective of the everyday experiences of non-elite trans athletes nor their peers' dispositions on issues of inclusion – particularly among younger generations.

While this finding might be an artifact of social networks and friendship patterns with athletes, this is speculative and not without contestation. It is likely that, when the participants came out to their teammates, they were simultaneously coming out to friends with vested interest in them; their team involvement does not preclude them from having friendship networks outside of sport. More so, it highlights that research reporting social antipathy toward transgender athletes among cisgender athletes may not be illustrative of what happens when one plays with a transgender athlete.

Whatever the causation of this finding, it seems evident that in absence of extensive, comparative, research examining both the attitudes toward, and the treatment of sexual and gender minorities, by both athletes and non-athletes, proclamations that sport—and therefore athletes—are more hostile in their attitudes or treatment of sexual and gender minorities is to judge and socially demote athletes without evidence. As tempting as it may be to assume that the storied history of sport and homophobia/transphobia carries into present day, the evidence presented herein challenges such a narrative. This proclamation does not deny that transphobia exists within sport and sensitivity towards variance in sporting experiences is absolutely necessary, but it does suggest that it is inappropriate to describe the entire institution as such.

We acknowledge the limitations of our data based on sample-size. Despite a systematic and detailed sampling approach, only a small number of trans athletes were identified for this study. This numerical variance likely reflects trans people are both a minority group within the general population and they are a further minority within high school and/or college sport settings. Given trans athletes are few and far between, we suggest this is not an ideal sample to study for our strict focus on student-athletes' most recent experiences, but it is better than no data at all.

Overall, this study suggests that the experiences of transgender student-athletes in sport are not far behind those of lesbian, gay, and bisexual athletes. These experiences, in majority, appear to be ones of both inclusion and acceptance within sport. We hypothesise that this may be due to the social progress made by sexual minority social movements over the past two decades opening the door for the inclusion of gender minorities as well. However, a lag

does exist and there is progress yet to be made for the full inclusion of gender minorities in sport. And this progress will likely not be linear given the rise of social conservatism and anti-trans rhetoric, particularly in the U.S, which necessitates continued attention and care toward gender minorities experiences in sport.

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