

Gay male athletes' coming-out stories on Outsports.com

International Review for the Sociology of Sport

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Abstract

For two decades, Outsports.com – the world’s first website dedicated to the LGBT+ community’s experiences in sport – has provided sexual minority athletes with the opportunity to share their stories. In this research, we examine the published coming-out narratives of 60 out gay male athletes across a variety of different sports. Our analysis indicates that, prior to coming-out, many of these athletes felt the need to adopt an identity predicated on masculine stereotypes, thus distancing themselves from homosexuality. Upon coming-out to teammates, however, most of these athletes experienced acceptance and inclusivity which, in turn, led to improved health and wellbeing. Additionally, we document the changing nature of homosexually themed language on these men’s sports teams. Finally, we recognize the importance of mediums such as Outsports in providing athletes across the world the opportunity to share their coming-out stories. Accordingly, this research advances a body of evidence documenting sport’s growing inclusivity for the LGBT+ community.

Introduction

Since its formation two decades ago, Outsports.com (Outsports, hereafter) has developed into the world's most prominent website dedicated to, and advocating for, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+ⁱ hereafter) issues in sport. Accordingly, it has become a valuable resource for LGBT+ athletes at all levels of sport to share their coming-out stories and subsequent experiences, most of which are positive (Buzinski and Zeigler, 2007; Zeigler, 2016). At the time of writing, for example, it hosts in excess of 300 autobiographical accounts covering a range of topics that are relevant to LGBT+ athletes, including coming-out, oppression, liberation, and general experiences of being an 'out' athlete in sport. Against the backdrop of a significant body of research documenting the increasing acceptance of LGBT+ people in sport (Adams and Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Lawless and Magrath, 2020; Magrath, 2017a, 2018, 2019, 2020), this, therefore, makes for fascinating – and important – research. Indeed, it permits us to further understand the experiences of multiple 'out' millennial athletes across a variety of sporting disciplines.

This article is the first to examine the post-coming-out experiences of out gay male athletes. By examining the coming-out stories of 60 out gay male athletes on the LGBT+ sports website, Outsports. Our findings indicate that, prior to coming-out, athletes adopted hypermasculine identities to distance themselves from homosexual suspicion. When they came out, however, all but four athletes described a positive, transformative experience. Indeed, every athlete in the sample described an acceptant and inclusive response from their teammates and, therefore, improved psychological wellbeing. Finally, we show that, after they came out of the closet, homosexually themed language among their teammates either declined, or was increasingly positioned as evidence of “gay-friendly banter.”

Accordingly, while this research is further evidence that sport is progressively becoming a more inclusive environment for sexual minorities (Anderson, Magrath and

Bullingham, 2016), we also show that gay male athletes' presentation of self can alter according to their personal circumstances. It also recognizes the importance of outlets such as Outsports, in that they provide LGBT+ athletes – both out and closeted – with a medium to share their experiences of being LGBT+ in contemporary sport.

Sport, Masculinity and Homophobia

For over a century, competitive team sports in most Western cultures have been understood to be a cultural domain in which boys and men were able to establish and reaffirm hypermasculine identities (Burstyn, 1999). Originating from the second Industrial Revolution – which took its hold on Anglo-American cultures in the mid-19th century – competitive team sports were thought to provide a solution to the cultural hysteria that men were 'going soft' (Filene, 1975). With Western societies shifting from primarily agrarian economies to industrial societies for the first time in history, the majority of the population migrated to cities. According to Cancian (1987), the social structure of work changed significantly during this epoch, requiring men to sacrifice their physical health in dangerous factories or coalmines for the financial wellbeing of their families. Combative and competitive team sports – like soccer, American football and rugby – served as a vessel for this indoctrination (Rigauer, 1981).

Around a century later, the relationship between sport, masculinity and homosexuality became a prominent feature of sociological analysis, largely through the continued maintenance of a socially desired gendered identity—and the presentations of the athletic male body as an idealized, orthodox, heterosexual symbol (Kimmel, 1994). At this time, conservative socio-political responses to the advent of HIV/AIDS – which became intimately associated with (male) homosexuality – demonized the gay community to the point that deleterious attitudes toward LGBT+ people in Anglo-American cultures increased. Social

attitude surveys in the US, for example, documented that, in 1988, the percentage of American adults who believed homosexuality was ‘always wrong’ had increased to 80% (Twenge, Sherman and Wells, 2016). Similar trends were also evident in the UK (Clements and Field, 2014). These data thus led Anderson (2009: 89) to conclude that “1987 or 1988 seems to be the apex of homophobia in both countries.”

Given this broader cultural context, it is perhaps unsurprising that research around this time found that it was near-impossible to locate out gay athletes. Pronger (1990) wrote that the gay men he interviewed – all of whom remained closeted to teammates – were “uncomfortable” with teamsports, and thus avoided them where possible. In her research in the Netherlands, Hekma (1998: 2) wrote that, “Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise.” And research with heterosexual athletes confirmed that they showed a “dislike for femaleness or homosexuality” (Curry, 1991: 129) and were, therefore, “unwilling to confront or accept homosexuality” (Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morpew, 2001: 247).

Since the turn of the millennium, however, the experiences of LGBT+ athletes in Anglo-American cultures have improved significantly. In the first-ever research with ‘out’ gay high school and collegiate athletes, Anderson (2002) documented more positive experiences than reported in previous research. Prior to disclosing their sexuality to teammates, each of these athletes reported that they were anxious about being socially excluded, verbally abused, and physically beaten. However, post-coming-out, these concerns were not realized for the majority; these gay athletes instead regretted not coming-out sooner. When this research was replicated almost 10 years later, Anderson (2011a) found even greater levels of social inclusion for gay athletes. This included a decline of the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ culture, inclusion of athletes in team activities, and the welcoming of their same-

sex partners to social events. Other, similar research has also documented the support of gay athletes in a variety of sports (e.g. Anderson, 2005; Jarvis, 2015).

Support from heterosexual peers toward the presence of LGBT+ people in sport has also improved considerably (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016). Bush, Anderson and Carr (2012), for example, found that while athletic identity was connected with homophobia among undergraduate sports students upon arrival at university, that link eroded for those students upon leaving higher education. Moreover, research with elite young soccer players found that, unlike older research at this level of play (see Parker, 1996), these players were broadly supportive of sexual minorities, as well as their participation in elite soccer, and equal marriage (Magrath, 2017a; Magrath, Anderson and Roberts, 2015). Even athletes socialized into strong religious environments – which have typically been more conservative in their tolerance of homosexuality – have espoused positive attitudes toward homosexuality, and acceptance of gay male teammates (Adams and Anderson, 2012; Magrath, 2017b).

Research on the changing effect of language is further evidence of this cultural shift. Indeed, research on the divergent use of phrases such as “that’s so gay” demonstrates the complexity of meanings associated with what McCormack (2011) calls “homosexually-themed language.” McCormack and Anderson (2010) found that while university rugby players often used such terms as a form of joking with friends, they would condemn their coaches’ more aggressive use of similar terms which they felt was stigmatizing. In his research among adolescent males in the UK, McCormack (2012: 116) documented such language as being used as a “cathartic expression of dissatisfaction” and a form of male bonding. And the gay men in McCormack, Wignall and Morris’s (2016) research reported notably similar perspectives to athletes in the previous studies, and interpreted such language in a positive way because of their experiences and friendships with people using the term.

Aside from athletes, even research on sports fandom – a demographic who have traditionally been stigmatized as homophobic – shows increasingly liberal attitudes becoming largely commonplace. Most notably, Cashmore and Cleland's (2012) large-scale research found that 93% of 3,500 soccer fans were supportive of the hypothetical notion of an out gay male elite player. These fans instead believed that a player's on-field performance should be the only significant factor on which they should be judged. Similarly, despite the anonymity of posting onto online forums, discussions of homosexuality have also been largely positive in the context of sport. Indeed, Cleland (2015) and Cleland, Magrath and Kian (2018) found a rejection of posts containing homophobic sentiment, with these users being warned that their views were "outdated" and "belong in a previous generation."

Finally, sports media, despite having typically erased explicit discussions of male homosexuality in sport (Vincent and Crossman, 2008), have become increasingly positive in their coverage and representation of LGBT+ athletes in recent years (Morales and White, 2019). Media analyses of elite LGBT+ male athletes – such as Jason Collins (Billings and Moscovitz, 2018), Michael Sam (Cassidy, 2017), and Tom Daley (Magrath, Cleland and Anderson, 2017) – document how "the institution of sport, and the sport media industry itself, are both rapidly adopting more inclusive perspectives concerning gay men" (Kian, Anderson and Shipka, 2015: 634). These positive narratives have also extended to the domain of sports journalism, which has been shown to be an overwhelmingly inclusive domain (Kian et al., 2015).

Theorizing Sport, Masculinities and Sexualities

The most prominent theoretical paradigm underpinning the social stratification of men and masculinities has been Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity (HMT). Connell's theorizing articulates two social processes: (1) That all men benefit from patriarchy—the "patriarchal

dividend” (1995: 26); and (2) The recognition of multiple masculinities in an intra-masculine hierarchy, with gay men at the bottom. HMT has been widely cited in research on sport, gender and sexuality (e.g. Vincent and Crossman, 2008). However, the theory received growing critiques about its continued ability to accurately theorize (e.g. Moller, 2007). In response to these critiques, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reformulated the theory, and argued that hegemonic masculinity presupposes the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities, and that it continues to be predicated upon one dominating – hegemonic – archetype of masculinity. While the attributes of this archetype may change, an essential component remains that other masculinities will be hierarchically stratified in relation to it. A primary concern of this, however, relates to the theory’s inability to accurately conceptualize masculinities in an era of declining homophobia (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012; Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016).

Instead, this research adopts Anderson’s (2009) theory of inclusive masculinity (IMT). Central to IMT is the concept of “homohysteria,” which seeks to explain the heteromasculine behaviours closely linked with men’s cultural fear of being thought gay. It is, perhaps, best defined as a “homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates” (Anderson, 2011b: 83), such as that of the 1980s and early 1990s. According to Anderson’s theorizing, three factors must combine to allow a homohysterical culture to prevail: (1) A widespread awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation; (2) A zeitgeist of disapproval of homosexuality; (3) A suspicion and concomitant condemnation of men’s femininity as a relational signifier of being gay (see McCormack and Anderson, 2014).

Unlike HMT, IMT was developed from research which documented more inclusive attitudes among young (primarily) sporting men (see Anderson, 2009)—and near-unanimous acceptance of LGBT+ athletes (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2017a,

2019). Its central premise is that, when cultural attitudes toward homosexuality improve, homophobia declines and men's gendered behavior becomes less regulated. In addition to attitudinal research, for example, scholars have found an increase in a range of activities previously coded as feminine. These include an increase in same-sex physical tactility (see Anderson and McCormack, 2015), emotional intimacy (see Robinson, Anderson and White, 2018; Robinson, White and Anderson, 2019), and a reduction of the one-time rule of homosexuality (see Scoats, Joseph and Anderson, 2018).

Since its evolution over a decade ago, IMT – and its associated concept, homophobia – has been prolific in its recent theorizing of contemporary masculinities. It has been widely cited in research on sport (e.g. Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016), as well as education (e.g. McCormack, 2012), and the workplace (e.g. Roberts, 2018; Magrath, 2020). It has been employed to theorize patterns of masculinities in over 100 separate academic studies. There is, therefore, evidence to suggest that a new generation of masculinities scholars are finding inclusive masculinity theory the most effective means of capturing complex masculine dynamics. IMT has been so widely employed in recent years that Borkowska (2020) argued that the most recent phase of masculinities research – the “third phase” – should be described as “Andersonian.” This phase has, for example, moved away from the “hierarchical order of social relations where men attempt to distance themselves from femininity or position themselves within the orthodox ideologies of manhood” (Borkowska, 2020: 411).

But despite the theory's emergence and its wide application, it has seen some resistance from sociological scholars. Perhaps most notably, De Boise (2015) argued that “a combination of underdeveloped theoretical arguments, inadequate consideration to research design and a selective use of examples means that a theory of inclusivity is difficult to accept” (333). This has also included suggestions that homophobia has not or is not

declining, that the continued presence of heterosexism is just as extreme as overt homophobia, and that attitudes toward homosexuality remain conservative in other part of the world. Others have critiqued the theory for its failure to successfully account for patriarchy (e.g. O'Neill, 2015), and that its findings are primarily restricted to White, university-educated, middle-class men.

In 2016, Anderson and McCormack (2018) addressed these critiques in the *Journal of Gender Studies*. Here, they utilized a range of international studies to show that declining homophobia over the past three decades was both sustained and profound across most Western nations (e.g. Twenge, Sherman and Wells, 2016; Watt and Elliot, 2019; see Smith et al., (2014) for an international analysis of attitudes toward homosexuality). They also draw on a range of qualitative studies to show that gay men's lives are dramatically improved now than they were in the 1980s due to the decline of hostile attitudes. They next argue that while qualitative work may be less generalizable than quantitative work, there exists no qualitative work which presents substantially different results than those using inclusive masculinity theory. Finally, Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue that inclusive masculinity theory does not account for the reproduction of patriarchy, noting that – indeed – this was not the purpose of the theory (see also Anderson and Magrath, 2019).

Methods

This paper was conceived as a novel approach to researching gay men and their experiences in sport, which is a worthy and necessary avenue for exploration. In utilizing the online resource Outsports.com, we explore the autobiographical accounts of out gay athletes at various levels of sport in Western society, predominantly the US. As we acknowledged at the start of this paper, since its formation by gay journalists Cyd Zeigler and Jim Buzinski in November 1999, Outsports has developed into the world's highest-profile website focusing

on LGBT+ issues across all levels of sport (Buzinski and Zeigler, 2007). It also provides a platform for out LGBT+ athletes to share their coming-out stories and subsequent experiences in sport (Zeigler, 2016). Outsports hosts a range of topics that are relevant to LGBT+ athletes, including coming-out, oppression, liberation, and their experiences in sport. It is also significant within sports media because it publicizes these experiences as transformative, boldly declaring on its website that, *Courage is Contagious*.

Importantly, unlike existing scholarly research – which utilizes more traditional methodological approaches, such as ethnography (e.g. Adams and Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson, 2010) and interviews (Anderson, 2011a; Magrath, 2017a, 2018, 2019) – these Outsports narratives are drafted completely autonomously by the athletes. This allows athletes greater freedom to discuss the points they perceive as most important, and thus better illustrate their own coming-out experiences and expectations. Accordingly, Outsports provides an athlete-led insight into contemporary sporting culture. Through using this approach, we are testing previous findings with alternative methods and approaches to triangulate previous, yet now dated, findings on the experiences of gay male athletes' post-coming-out experiences in sport (Anderson, 2011a).

The sample of this study comprises the first 60 stories posted on Outsports from 2016ⁱⁱ; these stories were written by cis-gendered, out gay male athletes. At the time of writing, most of these men were based in the US, although some were also in the UK, Canada and Mexico. The age demographic of these men ranged from US high school (typically aged between 14 and 17) to young elite professionals (aged between 18 and 26). Accordingly, all of these participants are categorized as 'millennials'ⁱⁱⁱ and, as such, have likely grown-up in an era of low cultural homophobia (Twenge, Sherman and Wells, 2016; Watt and Elliot, 2019). The men came from a range of sporting backgrounds, such as lacrosse, American football, soccer, cross-country, track and field, hockey, and cricket. The full narratives are

available to the reader in order to examine the rich data provided by this novel out-gay sample.

Because this approach relies upon subjective interpretation, all three authors (one White British gay male, one Latino American heterosexual male and one White British heterosexual male) worked independently using inductive levels of coding to highlight consistent themes within the article analyzed (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Once notes had been compared, we began drawing out the main themes surrounding the dominant narratives of these gay athletes. The analytical methods employed throughout this process ensured the validity of the approach taken, and the use of multiple and independent coding enhanced inter-rater reliability and trustworthiness of results (Denscombe, 2002). In presenting our findings, we have used the participants' own words to show the thick descriptive data and our resulting interpretations.

We note that while the growth of the Internet has, in recent years, provided researchers with numerous ethical dilemmas relating to participants' identities (see Cleland, Dixon and Kilvington, 2020), this concern is unnecessary in the current research. This is largely because de-anonymized versions of these athletes' narratives are freely accessible on the Outsports website. However, for clarity and consistency of our results, we provide a list of participants, their sport, and links to their Outsports stories in Appendix 1. Following the completion of data analysis, we identified four central themes which are unpacked in the results sections: (1) Gay athletes adopting a 'straight image'; (2) Coming-out; (3) Improved health and wellbeing; (4) Homosexually themed language.

Limitations

Through the use of autobiographical narratives, this research mitigates against researcher influence, which has previously been identified as a potential critique of IMT research

(Ripley, 2018), as the authors of this paper had no involvement in the construction of the narratives. This is not to say, however, that the gay athletes discussed in this research are not influenced by social pressures; it is, for example, likely that those who contribute may have better experiences than their peers. Additionally, we also note that this study could be further strengthened by a broader sample; for instance, most of our participants are White, and all are from the US, and those from outside this demographic may have different experiences. Finally, we cannot speak to the experiences of lesbian, bisexual or transgender athletes – each of whom face additional barriers to their participation and acceptance in sport (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016; Anderson and Travers, 2017).

Results

Adopting a ‘Straight Image’

Sport has traditionally been a social institution where dominant notions of masculinity are created, valued and reproduced, largely maintained through high levels of homophobia (Pronger, 1990). Although sport has become increasingly acceptant and inclusive of homosexuality in recent years (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016), these narratives suggest many of the athletes in this study still felt the need to adopt an identity predicated on heteronormativity and masculine stereotypes—thus distancing themselves from homosexuality (McCormack and Anderson, 2014).

Prior to coming-out, three-quarters of these narratives show athletes coded homosexuality with weakness and femininity. Thus, they predicated their identity on their role as an athlete, something they perceived as a hegemonic archetype: heterosexual, physically strong, and emotionally stoic. Indeed, before coming-out, many of these men believed the relationship between sport and homosexuality was incompatible. For example, Connor Curnick, who grew up in a conservative town in Southern California, was brought up

to believe that gay men were weak and thus unsuitable for sports. “I now know that’s not the case,” he wrote. Similarly, Jesse Taylor, South Dakota’s first-ever out gay college athlete, wrote that he “didn’t understand how [he] could be gay and be an athlete...I didn’t think it was possible.” Similarly, Patrick Bowland, a former college athlete from Olaf State, wrote that, “We’re supposed to be ‘men’, right?...I equated ‘gay’ with weakness, with effeminacy.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of these athletes attempted to establish an identity which they believed distanced them from suspicion. The upkeep of this role was critical in keeping these athletes’ sexualities hidden. Evidencing this, University of Iowa swimmer Mike Nelson said that, “Athletes are not supposed to be weak...I established certain goals [which] allowed me to ‘fit in’ as Mike Nelson, the ‘straight’ student-athlete.” Similarly, Alex Fauer, captain of the University of Michigan triathlete team, said that, “Running was going to ‘turn’ me straight.” In perceiving the hegemonic ideal, American football player Phil Cloudy “assumed the ‘jock’ identity...all the while ‘moving cautiously’ to hide who I *really* was.” He also wrote that focusing his efforts on sport and his academic work permitted the excuse of him being “‘too busy’ to date girls.” Like many of these athletes, playing to the hegemonic ideal served to help them feel safe.

Because sports – particularly hypermasculine teamsports – continued to be coded as hostile toward homosexuality, safety was of the utmost importance in these athletes’ accounts. Even in light of recent research on declining homophobia in sporting spheres (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2017a, 2019), the athletes presented that they intensely feared coming-out to their teammates—largely due to concerns of soliciting a negative response. Harrison Wilkerson, an American football player from North Carolina, wrote that this was caused by the “masculine bias” surrounding the sport (see Cassidy, 2017). Similarly, Taylor Vanderlaan, a rugby player from Michigan, wrote that, “I

didn't think that being gay would go well." And others spoke of "fearing the worst" when coming-out, including concerns relating to their safety and place on the team.

Liberating Impact of Coming-Out

Such was the fear of coming-out that these 60 athletes described, almost all of them discussed experiencing severe emotional and psychological stress. When they came out publicly to teammates, however, they reported a profoundly different reality—with experiences largely consistent with those documented in recent research on gay male athletes (Anderson, 2011a; Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016). Noah Ratcliff, for example – a recently graduated high school water polo player – recognized "it's not easy coming-out." But the positive responses made him wonder why he "waited so long." Similarly, Macoy McLaughlin, a soccer player from North Idaho, was "astounded" by his teammates' reactions after coming-out. Canadian ice hockey player, Voight Demeester was "amazed by the overwhelming support" his teammates gave him; he described these as being "the opposite...I had imagined." And Alex Fauer described the "overwhelming support" and "love" he felt from his teammates after declaring his sexuality to them.

Interestingly, these athletes indicated their desire for teammates to view them as equals, hoping that coming-out would not change any perceptions of them. Evidencing this, collegiate swimmer Connor Griffin wrote that, "My teammates can be some of the most accepting and uplifting people. Not once have they made me feel out of place or like an outcast...They see me just like everyone else, a teammate." Likewise, Ben Meyer, a cross-country runner from Clark University explicates his team dynamic: "My sexuality wasn't the punchline of a joke...nor has it ever been with my team. To them, it was just an aspect of me...It simply didn't matter." Another cross-country runner, Ian Davies from the University

of Pennsylvania, wrote of the normality of homosexuality among his teammates. Indeed, much to his relief, his teammates' reaction was "more of a non-reaction."

When describing their teammates' surprisingly positive responses, numerous athletes in this study explained that an important factor in their coming-out was the celebration of "being yourself." Andrea Barone, for example – an ice hockey referee who grew-up in Canada – explained that, "The amount of support I've received has only reinforced the idea that being yourself is [the] only way out [of the closet]." Similarly, Chad Walker, a cross-country runner from West Virginia wrote that, "I got to the point where I just couldn't lie anymore...I told my teammates...[and] all they wanted was for me to be true [to] myself." And Brandon Meier, a cheerleader from Kansas State, wrote of the significance of expressing his "true" self. He commented "I'm glad I took the leap...I couldn't be happier."

Athletes in this research also spoke of their pride in teammates' responses to their coming-out. Hunter Fromang, a basketball player from Virginia, wrote that:

I'm super proud of my teammates. In sports we are given so many reasons that athletes would reject a gay teammate...These guys have accepted me for everything I am. They have not just tolerated me, they have accepted me.

Similarly, Nick Cottrell, currently contracted to the Milwaukee Bucks basketball team, wrote that, "It doesn't matter [about] your sexual orientation, your race or ethnicity, your income, your level of education...you're there to support the men and women who don your city's colors." Rush Rotas, a mixed martial artist from Washington, critiques his sport's notoriously homophobic reputation: "At my gym nobody has really cared." Further evidencing Rotas's supportive environment, when he asked his coach his thoughts on posting his coming-out story on Outsports, he responded: "Go for it. If someone doesn't like it, fuck 'em. We don't need them here." For athletes in this research, then, the overwhelming response to their coming-out was one of acceptance, support and inclusivity.

There were, however, four athletes who described some negative reactions and experiences following their coming-out. Connor Curnick, for example, wrote that he “still face[s] discrimination” and, as such, continues to “promote understanding and ensure equality in the workplace.” For Jack Massari, a multi-sport athlete from Connecticut, ‘FAG’ was keyed into his car shortly after he came out, something he lamented as “immaturity and recklessness.” Two of the athletes in this research even experienced resistance from their closest allies: Alex Fauer’s parents, for instance, initially denied that he was gay, and claimed that he was “too stressed to think rationally.” And for PJ Painter, a rodeo cowboy from South Dakota, his best friend used “Christianity to defend her position against the ‘lifestyle’” of homosexuality—thus triggering “inner turmoil I hadn’t felt in years.” However, while these negative experiences must not be denigrated, they were not the norm among the athletes sampled for this research. Nor were they even the dominant narratives among these four athletes; however, these negative experiences still serve as a stark reminder that declining homophobia is an uneven social process (Anderson, 2009).

Improved Health and Wellbeing

Athletes in this research outlined a marked turnaround in their psychological state—from depression and anxiety, to the elation coming-out provided. Indeed, in these sporting contexts, coming-out was universally associated with greater happiness and self-confidence. Brandon Meier, for example, wrote that he was glad he “took the leap and dive into the unknown...[I] couldn’t be happier.” Similarly, despite the discrimination outlined above, Connor Curnick wrote that, since coming-out, he has become “a much happier, productive and successful person.” Greg Arther, a Wisconsin track athlete, wrote of the dissipation of his mental health issues after coming-out of the closet: “I instantly felt happier than I had been in over a year. I began to feel less anxious and my depression started to melt away. Slowly I

started to enjoy running again.” And Brendan Housler, a cycling champion from New York State, describes his experiences and even gives advice to closeted athletes: “My life instantly evolved, and everything became better. The changes were amazing. Your friends will LOVE the real you. Life will feel so VIVID, like you can’t yet imagine.”

Other athletes in this research also alluded to the improvement of their mental wellbeing in various other ways. Spencer Clark, a Washington Nationals batboy, wrote that, “Coming out has been the biggest confidence boost in the world. Not having to hide who I am has allowed my best self to emerge.” Clark also said that his openness had allowed “better communication with people and better relationships because of it.” Another significant factor in athletes’ wellbeing was the management of fear. McCoy McLaughlin, for example, described his Outsports story as helping him feel “fully liberated” and the beginning of a life that he can be truly “proud of.” Accordingly, even though sexual minorities continue to report higher levels of mental health issues (e.g. McDermott, Roen and Scourfield, 2008; Mustanski, Garofalo and Emerson, 2010), coming-out of the closet must be recognized as a key player in reducing this burden—particularly in the traditionally hypermasculine domain of sport. In fact, research has illustrated that higher levels of concealment (i.e. remaining closeted) amongst LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) individuals is significantly associated with lower psychological wellbeing and more depressive symptoms (Riggle et al., 2017).

Homosexually Themed Language

Finally, the nature of homosexually themed language was examined among these athletes’ narratives (see McCormack, 2011). Language has typically been the most ubiquitous way through which to judge the gay-friendliness of a particular culture (Hillier and Harrison, 2004). Before coming-out, many of the athletes in this research spoke of how their teammates routinely deployed homosexually themed language—something they found hurtful and

problematic. For example, Christian Hayes, an American football player from Michigan, wrote that, “[It] was just something that the guys did, calling everything ‘gay’ and everyone a ‘faggot.’” Similarly, Taylor Reifert, a soccer player from California, wrote it was “sad [that] gay was used as a disparaging word” and that, “Every time I hear someone say fag, I feel that pain again... Words can hurt.” And Andres Bustani, a Mexican tennis player who attended college in Idaho, wrote that his teammates’ use of this language forced him to hide his identity. He wrote:

As I began to understand my sexual orientation more, these hurtful phrases made it even more challenging to come out because I assumed that my friends and peers would not accept me.

Thus, these accounts suggest that these athletes believed, prior to coming-out, that the prominence of homosexually themed language among their teammates would automatically result in their ostracism from the team.

More recent research, however, has contended that the decline of cultural homophobia across the West (Twenge, Sherman and Wells, 2016; Watts and Elliot, 2019), has complicated the nature of homosexually themed language (McCormack, 2011; Magrath, 2018). It is suggested in this work that the interpretation of language is more complex than the surface level of words, and necessitates consideration of intent, context and effect in order to more appropriately understand how the language is situated (McCormack, Wignall and Morris, 2016). Supporting this argument, some of the athletes in this research documented the decline of homosexually themed language after they came out to teammates. Connor Curnick, for example, wrote that some of his friends on the team who regularly deployed homophobic language ended up becoming his “biggest supporters.” And Chad Walker, a long-distance runner from West Virginia, said that his teammates no longer “throw around

gay slurs” and that, post-coming-out, he was supported by “the entire student body and community.”

For those athletes where homosexually-themed language remained, there was a greater recognition that – congruent with similar recent research (e.g. Magrath, 2018) – this could be coded as gay-friendly “banter” among teammates. Indeed, there were a multitude of examples that outlined how these athletes’ homosexuality was assimilated into everyday language and, importantly, athletes were cognizant of the fact that it was used as a team bonding mechanism. Evidencing this, University of Minnesota soccer player Luke McAvoy was jocularly informed by a teammate that he “really was gay” when he ordered a hot chocolate instead of a coffee in a Starbucks. He describes this moment as when he “knew I was accepted by them...Being made fun of for it was when I knew that they were totally cool about who I was.” Similarly, one of Noah Ratcliff’s “favorite” responses after he came out was from a teammate who wrote: “Anyone who does water polo is at least a little bit gay. But seriously way to go dude.” For Ratcliff, the humor attached to his friend’s comment was a key signifier in knowing he had been fully accepted.

And Colin Shaw, a lacrosse player from New York, outlined how, in the name of equality, his teammates were able to tease him about his homosexuality—just as they would with any other subject. He wrote: “They immediately ripped me for everything from being gay to living in England. The last thing I want is to paint a picture of a group of bigoted lacrosse bros, because that’s not what they are.” Thus, for Shaw, the treatment of his sexuality as being on-par with any other element of identity – along with the rejection of overly sensitive political correctness – was clear evidence that there was no pernicious intent attached to his teammates’ language (see McCormack, 2011).

Discussion

Previous research has documented how sport has traditionally been a highly homophobic institution (Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morpew, 2001).

Through participation in competitive teamsports, boys and men were socialized to adopt hegemonic ideals of masculine embodiment and, in turn, control and oppress the behavior and sexual identity of other men (Messner, 1992). More recently, however, a plethora of recent research has documented growing levels of inclusion in a vast array of sporting cultures (Anderson, 2011a; Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2017a, 2018, 2019, 2020).

The present research examined the coming-out stories of 60 out gay male athletes on the LGBT+ sports website, Outsports. For three-quarters of these athletes, fear of being rejected by heterosexual teammates was a key component in their presentation of an elevated heteromasculine image in order to avoid homosexual suspicion. While these fears may be explained as a physiological defense mechanism derived from the *expectation* of homophobia, this proved to be unjustified: these athletes' coming-out experiences were largely positive. Moreover, while older research documents the notion of "reverse relative deprivation" – the idea that fears of being assaulted and harassed do not materialize, and gay men thus overstate the positive reaction they receive (see Anderson, 2002) – athletes in this research spoke of the pride they had for their teammates' inclusive reaction. Accordingly, there is evidence that sport's acceptance of homosexuality has improved since the publication of initial, embryonic research in this area.

Research with closeted athletes nearly two decades ago (see Anderson, 2005) examined the negative impact of remaining closeted in sport. However, the present research focuses on the effect of improved mental health *after* coming-out. At this point, athletes acknowledged considerable improvement in their overall health and wellbeing (Herek and Garnets, 2007; Russell and Fish, 2016). Specifically, athletes wrote of improved mental

health in numerous ways, including greater self-confidence, declining levels of anxiety and depression, better and more effective communication, as well as simply feeling liberated, proud and generally happier. Accordingly, this research tackles the assumption that sport remains a high-risk environment for sexual minorities (e.g. Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2017a, 2019).

We also acknowledge the changing nature of homosexually themed language (McCormack, 2011; McCormack, Wignall and Morris, 2016; Magrath, 2018). Prior to coming-out, many of these athletes reported that this language was commonplace among their teammates. After coming-out, however, for some of these men, this language simply stopped. Naturally, this could be read as heterosexual teammates' awareness of the potentially negative effect this language could have. For the remainder of gay athletes in this research, the language continued; however, consistent with McCormack, Wignall and Morris's (2016) model of homosexually themed language, this was coded as "banter" and a way of them simply being included on the team (see also McCormack, 2011)—rather than evidence of homophobia. This is, then, evidence that the "social context of language has changed" (Anderson, 2011: 259). Given the ongoing presence of this language among a small number of participants, however, this is evidence of cultural lag—particularly when one considers the positive environment of these athletes' teams.

The findings of this research are broadly consistent with Anderson's (2009) IMT. Despite athletes' fears and concerns that they would not be accepted by their heterosexual teammates, their overwhelmingly positive coming-out experiences support the theory's central premise of growing inclusion of homosexuality in contemporary sport (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016). Additionally, the removal of pernicious intent and negative social effect of homosexually-themed language is congruent with IMT's recognition of the changing nature of language (McCormack, Wignall and Anderson, 2016; Magrath, 2018).

Our findings also advance existing theorizing by showing that gay athletes, in response to fears of rejection from their teammates, instead adopt a hypermasculine identity. Importantly, though, their coming-out realities are far different from their concerns. Moreover, unlike most IMT research, data for this article was not conducted in the presence of a researcher and, as such, athletes' declarations have not been influenced in the same way. This research therefore counters previous critiques of IMT that participants may be offering socially desirable answers in response to pro-gay researchers. It is possible, of course, that this self-selecting sample may be skewed toward more positive experiences, with participants sharing their experiences with Outsports; but note that Outsports also publish negative coming-out stories, too, even if these are fewer in number.

We also recognize here that the coming-out stories we examine in this article are restricted to gay male athletes in the US. Indeed, while sport in the West has made significant advances toward the inclusion of sexual minorities (Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016; Magrath, 2017a, 2018, 2019), there are broader challenges for sport internationally. Declining cultural homophobia is an uneven social process (e.g. Anderson, 2009), and explicit support for the LGBT community is significantly weaker in many countries across the world (see Smith et al., 2014). Accordingly, there are limits which must be placed on the generalizability of this research. Future research examining LGBT athletes' experiences internationally is also warranted.

Finally, we acknowledge the significance of media outlets such as Outsports in creating a cycle of activism. Not only do athletes feel inspired to tell their coming-out stories as a way of communicating to closeted athletes that it gets better; those stories then embolden closeted athletes to come out and tell their own stories, perpetuating gay athletes' visibility in sport. Moreover, by sharing their successful coming-out stories on this platform, they also serve as role models for other sexual minority athletes more broadly. The findings presented

in this research further critique the claim that sport is a hostile environment for sexual minorities; there is now a significant body of research on Western sport which challenges this line of reasoning (e.g. Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham, 2016). Further, perpetuating the narrative that sport is homophobic without an impartial body of evidence is, in itself, potentially further traumatic to closeted athletes already concerned about coming-out. Online outlets such as Outsports provide the opportunity for LGBT+ athletes to tell their own – unbridled – coming-out stories.

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Appendix 1: List of Participants

	Athlete	Sport	Outsports story
1	Drew Allensworth	Cheerleader	Outsports
2	Greg Arther	Cross country	Outsports
3	David Baggs	Baseball	Outsports
4	Andrea Barone	Ice hockey	Outsports
5	Patrick Boland	Cross country	Outsports
6	Jack Bristow	Triathlon	Outsports
7	Chris Burns	Basketball	Outsports
8	Andres Bustani	Tennis	Outsports
9	Spenser Clark	Baseball	Outsports
10	Phil Claudy	Marathon runner	Outsports
11	Nick Cottrell	Basketball	Outsports
12	Conner Curnick	Water polo	Outsports
13	Ian Davies	Cross country	Outsports
14	Voight Demeester	Ice hockey	Outsports
15	Jon Denton/Schneider	Swimming	Outsports
16	Cody Derby	Athletics	Outsports
17	Matthew Dils	Golf/cross country	Outsports
18	Konrad Eiring	Runner	Outsports
19	Patrick Faerber	Baseball	Outsports
20	Alex Fauer	Triathlon	Outsports
21	Hunter Fromang	Basketball	Outsports
22	Jonny Gascoigne	Cricket	Outsports
23	Connor Griffin	Swimming	Outsports
24	Matt Hatzke	Soccer	Outsports
25	Griffin Hay	Runner	Outsports
26	Brendan Housler	Cycling	Outsports
27	Jared Indahl	Basketball	Outsports
28	Samuel Johnson	Ultimate frisbee	Outsports
29	Bryson Jones	Soccer	Outsports
30	Evan Kail	Martial arts	Outsports
31	Ayrton Kasemets	Swimming	Outsports
32	Chris Kelley	Rowing	Outsports
33	Kyle Martin	Lacrosse	Outsports
34	Jake Massari	Baseball	Outsports
35	Nathan Matthews	Volleyball	Outsports
36	Christian Mays	American football	Outsports
37	Luke McAvoy	American football	Outsports
38	Macoy McLaughlin	Soccer	Outsports
39	Bryan McColgan	Gymnastics	Outsports
40	Brandon Meier	Cheerleader	Outsports
41	Ben Meyer	Cross country	Outsports
42	Mike Nelson	Swimming	Outsports
43	PJ Painter	Rodeo	Outsports
44	Stefan Palios	Athletics	Outsports
45	Chase Ratliff	Marathon runner	Outsports

46	Noah Ratliff	Water polo	Outsports
47	Rob Redding	American football	Outsports
48	Taylor Reifert	Soccer	Outsports
49	Saieed Rihan	Cross country	Outsports
50	Cooper Robinson	Swimming	Outsports
51	Nicholas ‘Rush’ Rotas	Martial arts	Outsports
52	Colin Shaw	Lacrosse	Outsports
53	Landon Streit	American football	Outsports
54	Jesse Taylor	Basketball	Outsports
55	Josh Thorne	Cross country	Outsports
56	Taylor Vanderlaan	Rugby union	Outsports
57	Ricardo Vazquez	Swimming	Outsports
58	Chad Walker	Cross-country	Outsports
59	Harrison Wilkerson	American football	Outsports
60	Tanner Williams	Pole vault	Outsports

ⁱ ‘LGBT+’ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—as well as other, more marginal forms of sexual identity (including asexual, queer, pansexual, and so on).

ⁱⁱ This was chosen as, at the time of writing, there were a particularly high number of Outsports stories on gay athletes in this year.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the West, ‘millennial’ is typically understood as a group of people whose adolescence or young adulthood occurred early in the 21st century.