

**Safe spaces, shared goals: the role of LGBTQ+ sports teams in gay men's identity and
sense of belonging**

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Veronica.

Statement of Terms

This thesis uses the term *gay men* to refer to those who identify as both men and as gay. This identity-based language is used in preference to terms, such as *homosexual*, which are associated with medical or historical categorisations (Herek, 2004) or the behaviour-based *men who have sex with men (MSM)* or *Gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM)* that are more commonly used in public health research (Young & Meyer, 2005). As this study focuses on identity, expression, and personal experiences, it was concluded that *gay men* is the most appropriate label.

The term *sexual identity* is used instead of *sexual orientation* to emphasise the ways that participants identify and experience their sexuality, given their social and cultural context. This understanding is guided by the Attraction-Identity-Behaviour (AIB) model which conceptually separates these terms (Ybarra et al., 2019). Therefore, the focus is on identity (e.g., how a person identifies and journeys their sexuality), as opposed to attraction or behaviour (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Research Summary

This qualitative study explores gay men's experiences of team sports across the lifespan, with a particular focus on discrimination, identity, and belonging. Despite the psychological and social benefits of sport participation, research has consistently shown that LGBTQ+ people face significant barriers in sports settings due to marginalisation and heteronormativity. The research draws on minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986) the psychological mediation framework (Hatzenbuehler, 2009), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). These theories will be integrated to propose a conceptual model to understand how these challenges manifest and are navigated by gay men.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 24 cisgender gay men who were active members of LGBTQ+ sports teams in the UK. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify six key themes: (1) early expectations of sport engagement; (2) barriers to participation; (3) masculinity, identity, and sexuality; (4) LGBTQ+ teams as transformative spaces; (5) redefining relationship with sport; and (6) finding belonging in LGBTQ+ teams.

Findings highlight the psychological impact of discrimination in sport and the potential of LGBTQ+ sport environments to support people with the impacts of this. The utility of the integrated conceptual model is supported by the findings and relevant literature. This study contributes to a growing body of literature highlighting the need for structural and cultural changes in sport to ensure accessibility, equity, and psychological safety for LGBTQ+ people.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

Sport is regarded as an opportunity for individuals to engage with others and improve both physical and mental health. However, it can also be felt as a space that is not inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). Until fairly recently, team sports have been shaped by a set of heteronormative and cisnormative norms, traditional gender role norms (Krane & Waldron, 20w0), and hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Team sports may be difficult spaces to navigate for gay men due to psychological, social and emotional factors and these can act as barriers that may result in them feeling marginalised, discriminated against and excluded from sport (Symons, 2010).

This thesis explores gay men's experiences of team sports throughout their lives and their journeys to playing for LGBTQ+-friendly sports teams. The introduction chapter will investigate the historical roots of exclusion within sports and the issue as it presents today and will use a variety of theoretical frameworks to understand these complex experiences. Using these frameworks, an integrative conceptual model will be proposed as a more in-depth way to understand gay men's experiences of team sports. This chapter will also highlight the research gaps in the literature and the rationale for this study.

1.2 Literature Search Strategy

A systematic database search was conducted between March and April 2025 using EBSCO Host to identify relevant literature on the research topic. The databases searched were: PsycINFO, PsycArticles, CINAHL Ultimate, MEDLINE Ultimate, and SPORTDiscus. These

were chosen to capture psychology, health, and sport-specific literature relevant to the research questions.

The search strategy was developed to focus specifically on the experiences of gay men in team sport settings and was refined through an iterative process. It used the terms ‘gay men’ and ‘gay male’ to capture literature examining identity-based experiences of gay men. Broader population terms such as ‘LGBTQ+’ were considered too wide for identifying literature specifically examining the experiences of gay men, while epidemiological terms such as ‘men who have sex with men’ are typically used within medical and public health research and do not necessarily reflect sexual identity or community affiliation (Young & Meyer, 2005). Therefore, the population component of the search focused specifically on the terms ‘gay men’ and ‘gay male’. The psychosocial terms included within the search strategy (e.g., discrimination, belonging, identity, minority stress, inclusion) were selected to capture literature investigating the social and psychological experiences of gay men within sporting environments. Additionally, terms relating to LGBTQ+ teams and clubs (e.g., LGBTQ team*, LGBTQ club*) were included to ensure that studies on inclusive or LGBTQ+-specific sporting contexts were captured. Rugby, football, and soccer were also included because these are among the most researched and conceptually relevant sports contexts due to their historically hypermasculine cultures. The initial searches using broader terms produced many results that were not directly relevant, which provided further justification for narrowing the search to more specific population, sport context, and psychosocial constructs.

During this process, various combinations of additional terms were tested, leading to the final combination of population, sport context, and psychosocial terms that best captured studies

addressing the research questions regarding gay men and team sports. The final search string used was:

((gay men OR gay male) AND (team sport OR rugby OR football OR soccer OR LGBTQ* team* OR LGBTQ* club* OR gay sport*) AND (discriminat* OR inclusion OR belong* OR identity OR minority stress)).

No date restrictions were applied, although limits were set to English language and peer-reviewed publications.

This search aimed to identify studies exploring gay men's experiences in both mainstream and LGBTQ+-inclusive team sports contexts. The search returned a total of 45 records across five databases prior to screening for relevance (see Table 1).

Table 1

Search Outcome

Search	Search terms	Number of results
S1	gay men or gay male	30,786
S2	team sport OR rugby OR football OR soccer OR LGBTQ* team* OR LGBTQ* club* OR gay sport*	368, 939
S3	discriminat* OR inclusion OR belong* OR identity OR minority stress	2,214,337
S4	S1 AND S2 AND S3	45

The titles and abstracts of the identified records were screened for relevance to the research topic. Broad inclusion criteria were applied to ensure that the literature considered was relevant to the aims of the review. Studies were included if they (a) examined the experiences of gay men; (b) focused on team sport environments; and (c) addressed

psychosocial issues relevant to the research questions, such as identity, belonging, discrimination, homophobia, or minority stress. Studies that focused exclusively on other populations, contexts other than team sports, or topics unrelated to the psychosocial experiences in team sport environments were excluded. Following this screening process, 16 studies were considered relevant to the topic of the review (see Table 2).

Table 2

Screening of records identified through database search

Stage of screening	Number of records
Records identified through database search	45
Records screened by title and abstract	45
Records excluded as not relevant	29
Records considered relevant	16

In addition to database searching, reference lists of the results were also reviewed to identify additional relevant literature. Grey literature, including survey reports from LGBTQ+ and sporting organisations and relevant media coverage, was also considered where appropriate. Foundational and contemporary literature on minority stress theory was identified through targeted author searches and other relevant psychological theories were identified through established textbooks and articles.

Although the search returned 45 records, only a limited amount directly examined gay men's experiences in team sport settings. Furthermore, the studies identified involved a range of methodological designs and were conducted across various sporting contexts, making direct comparison between studies difficult. As a result, a systematic literature review was not considered feasible. While a systematic review using broader search terms may have been possible, the aim of this chapter was to provide a conceptual overview of the literature most

relevant to the research questions rather than a comprehensive synthesis of research on LGBTQ+ people's experiences in sport more broadly. Therefore, a narrative approach to the synthesis of the literature was considered most appropriate for the Introduction chapter.

1.3 LGBTQ+ inclusion and exclusion in sports

The development of sport has always been closely linked to the norms, values, and power structures of society, especially those relating to gender and sexuality (Lenskyj, 2003). To understand the experiences of gay men in sports, it is crucial to look closely at these historical roots and their influence today.

1.3.1 Historical roots of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity

For centuries, organised team sports have been an important way to shape and display certain types of masculinity (Anderson, 2005; Messner & Sabo, 1990). Sports were often created in elite male-only schools and colleges to support young men to develop certain traits such as *manliness*, discipline, and competitiveness, which were thought to be necessary for leadership in business and the military (Holt, 1989; Mangan & Park, 2012). This led to team sports being viewed as imperative for the development of what Connell (1995) referred to as 'hegemonic masculinity'. Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally dominant form of masculinity that sustains patriarchal power at the same time as normalising the subordination of women to men (Connell, 1995).

Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is defined in opposition to gay and other non-heteronormative masculinities (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As a result, sport emerged as a location where heterosexuality was assumed, and beyond that, celebrated as the 'normal' sexual identity (Krane & Waldron, 2020). Heteronormative values were

omnipresent in changing rooms, on the field, and in the stories of what it means to be good at sports. Gradually over time, and often in very subtle ways, these beliefs began to discourage others from sport who did not feel they matched the stereotype of what a straight person 'should' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Even though Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledged that hegemonic masculinity is not static but varies across contexts and time, their views have been criticised for potentially overstating the uniformity of masculine norms within sports, when in reality different sports, teams, and regions may exhibit varying degrees of heteronormativity (Anderson, 2009).

Young men feared being labelled as gay and deliberately displayed stereotypical masculinity, being conscious to not present as feminine or gay (Messner, 1992). This produced a stigma about same-sex attraction and being queer, which othered gay men within sport (Symons, 2019). Athletes who were gay or perceived to be gay were compelled to suppress their sexual identity in order to not be targeted and harmed (Anderson, 2009; Denison & Kitchen, 2015). There have been very few professional male athletes who have publicly come out as gay, which is in part due to the culture of valuing heterosexual masculinities (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Scambler, 2009). This has no doubt influenced the existing structures, cultures, ideologies and implicit biases that persist in sport today (Fink, 2016; Norton & Symons, 2019).

Culture within English rugby union teams has been a focus for researchers, and it has been hypothesised that these environments may reinforce a more traditional form of masculinity, one that embraces homophobia, misogyny, and physical aggression (Anderson & McGuire, 2010). It is also suggested that the constructions and associations of hegemonic masculinity have been embedded in sports culture and have influenced the experiences of

athletes as well as the perspectives of the wider sporting community (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This broader impact also helps explain why sport can be such a challenging space for diverse groups, such as LGBTQ+ people to engage with.

1.3.2 Ongoing challenges

Despite progress for LGBTQ+ people in many western societies, the sporting world has remained less welcoming, making it difficult for gay men to engage in (Storr et al., 2021). Whilst explicit homophobia may be less socially acceptable than it was, there are subversive forms of discrimination that occur (Denison et al., 2020; Symons, 2019). Studies have shown that individuals from the LGBTQ+ community continue to be marginalised in sports settings (Storr et al., 2021) and these experiences are not just confined to the playing field but also take place in changing rooms and at other team events as well (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Ryall et al., 2019).

Gay men may hide their sexual identity from their teammates and coaches because they are afraid of how they will react, and this process has been labelled as 'identity management' (Clair et al., 2005). It has been reported that this process can have a negative effect on people's mental health (Jones et al., 2017; Symons, 2019). Research by Baiocco et al. (2018) provides support for this by arguing that discriminatory behaviour still takes place regularly in sports. Their study surveyed 88 gay men and 120 straight men from Italy and found that gay men reported higher rates of both general bullying and homophobia-specific bullying in sports settings. The study also reported that gay men were more likely to drop out of sports because of a fear of bullying and pressure to engage in traditionally masculine sports. It should be noted that the sample for this Italian study was relatively small (n=88 gay men) and confined in its geographic scope, and results may not necessarily be generalisable to

other cultural contexts, such as the UK where attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals in sport may be different (Menzel et al., 2019). Furthermore, this cross-sectional design cannot make inferences about whether discrimination caused dropout or if other factors were at play.

There have been efforts to enhance the participation of LGBTQ+ people in sport, with some progress reported in the last 25 years (ILGA-Europe, 2021). Nonetheless, LGBTQ+ athletes are still exposed to high levels of prejudice (Denison et al., 2020; Shibli et al., 2021). Five hundred and two UK participants took part in the 2019 EU wide survey by Menzel et al. (2019), 92% of respondents in the UK believed homonegativity was an issue and 88% in Europe. Asked whether they felt the need to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation, 52% of respondents in the UK said it was not relevant, compared with 40% in Europe. Only 6% of British people said they had tried to conceal their sexuality, compared to 14% in Europe. Disclosure was also higher in the UK, where 53% of the country's respondents were open about their sexuality to almost everyone, compared with 36% of Europeans. But 29% of UK participants said they had been denied access to some sports or had given up playing because of their identity, compared with 19% across the rest of Europe. Sixteen percent of respondents from the UK had also experienced abusive behaviour in their main sport in the last 12 months, compared to 12% across the Europe as a whole.

A meta-ethnography of LGBTQ+ student-athletes revealed that persistent bias continues to have harmful effects on the mental health of young people (Xiang et al., 2023). The authors reported that prejudice manifests in violence, discrimination, stigma and internalised bias. Xiang et al. (2025) conducted a follow-up study in China, in which they demonstrated how heteronormativity influences the daily running of sports clubs and teams and the way in which this may exclude young LGBTQ+ individuals. In this study, LGBTQ+

students reported difficult experiences involving coaches assuming their gender and relationship status. Additionally, they reported that gay student-athletes were exposed to negative statements about gender and sexual identity frequently. However, Xiang et al.'s (2023) meta-ethnography, while valuable for synthesising qualitative findings, was limited to student-athletes in educational settings. This raises questions about whether these findings transfer to community sport settings, older athletes, or non-university contexts where support structures and institutional policies may differ substantially.

Symons et al. (2010) conducted a mixed methods study in Australia and found that men reported more homophobic occurrences than women. They reported that the most prevalent effects of this were negative emotions including sadness, anger, distress, and shame. This often led to men disliking sports and making the decision to give up sports altogether (Symons et al., 2010). These findings provide support for the psychological impact that discrimination within sports environments can have.

Recent evidence from the UK provides further support that these issues still exist (Table 3). Out and Out Football's survey found that almost 75% of LGBTQ+ people in the UK have encountered or heard anti-LGBTQ+ abuse while watching men's football and 93% of these people wanted stronger action against homophobia (Out and out, 2025). According to Stonewall, a leading LGBTQ+ rights charity in the UK, 1 in 4 LGBTQ+ persons (26%) do not feel accepted at live sports events and 27% do not feel comfortable in community sport clubs or community team sports (Stonewall, 2024). Additionally, the report found that 1 in 5 (21%) people who went to a live sports event in the last year said that they experienced discrimination and 22% reported discrimination in fitness clubs or sports organisations because of their gender identity or sexual orientation (Stonewall, 2024). While these survey

data provide insights into prevalence, self-report surveys of discrimination experiences are subject to recall bias and may underestimate the extent of subtle or everyday heteronormativity that individuals have normalised or not recognised as discriminatory (Denison et al., 2020). Furthermore, the survey's reliance on participants already engaged with LGBTQ+ sports networks may mean it captures a less marginalised subset of the population, potentially missing those who have disengaged from sport entirely.

Nevertheless, these reports highlight that there seems to be a disconnect between policy and practice, as formal policies seek to address inclusion but do not always succeed at making sports safe for LGBTQ+ people (Anderson et al., 2016; Krane & Waldron, 2020). Despite many sports organisations and governing bodies employing policies, codes of conduct and diversity and inclusion programmes research continues to find that LGBTQ+ people experience feelings of discrimination and marginalisation (Muir et al, 2022).

Spurdens and Bloyce (2022) focused on policies tackling LGBTQ+ equality, diversity and inclusion with sport clubs in England and their results presented 'a state of partial stasis' and that policies are often seen as symbolic gestures, with little effect on the underlying culture. It is noted that heteronormative systems and hegemonic masculinities prevail, creating environments where homophobia and marginalisation take place (Kimmel, 2013; Symons & Watson, 2019). Similarly, Denison et al. (2020) suggest that alternative approaches are needed in order for the LGBTQ+ community to be fully accepted within sports. Without this, LGBTQ+ athletes will continue to feel discriminated against in sports settings (Denison & Kitchen, 2015).

Despite the existence of anti-discrimination policies, homo- and transphobia are limiting LGBTQ+ inclusivity in sport, and furthermore, robust policies do not necessarily

mean less discrimination (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021). As a response to these barriers, Hartmann-Tews & Csonka (2022) argue that the sports organisations should assume more responsibility for the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes and for the development of sustained collaboration for inclusion.

In their findings, Out and Out Football (2025) noted a reporting gap in the UK in that only 23% of those who experienced abuse on account of their gender or sexual orientation reported it. This suggests that formal reporting systems may not fully capture the extent of the problem. The persistence of subtle heteronormativity, along with a disconnect between policy and lived experience, indicates that the issue is not solely structural but deeply rooted in culture and the dominant norms of masculinity. To make inclusion practices truly effective, it is essential to address the informal cultures, attitudes, and everyday conversations that shape behaviour in sports environments.

Table 3

Key UK-specific statistics on LGBTQ+ experiences in sport

Study (Year)	Statistic	Percentage	Population / Context
Stonewall (2024)	LGBTQ+ do not feel welcome at live sports events	26%	UK-wide Stonewall survey
	LGBTQ+ people do not feel welcome in community sports groups or team sports	27%	UK-wide Stonewall survey
	LGBTQ+ people felt discriminated against at live sporting events in the past year	21%	UK-wide Stonewall survey

Study (Year)	Statistic	Percentage	Population / Context
	LGBTQ+ people who experienced discrimination in fitness clubs or sports groups	21%	UK-wide Stonewall survey
	Racially minoritised LGBTQ+ people experienced discrimination at live events	34%	UK-wide Stonewall survey
OutSport (EU, 2022)	UK LGBTQ+ athletes consider homonegativity a problem in sport	~90%	OutSport EU report
	UK LGBTQ+ athletes consider trans negativity a problem in sport	~90%	OutSport EU report
	UK LGBTQ+ athletes involved in organised sports clubs	46%	OutSport EU report
	UK LGBTQ+ athletes choose explicitly LGBTQ+-friendly clubs	26%	OutSport EU report
	UK LGBTQ+ athletes experienced negative incidents related to their identity in the past year	20%	OutSport EU report

1.3.3 Media representation and the meaning of ‘progress’

While perceptions and attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community have changed dramatically over the past two decades in many Western societies, with relatively more legal

rights and acceptance overall (Pew Research Center, 2020). This has also gradually been the case, in sport, albeit not without its difficulties (Anderson & White, 2019). Media coverage of out LGBTQ+ athletes has historically been largely negative or non-existent, but it is now reported in more positive ways (Bruce, 2016). Out LGBTQ+ athletes are more visible than ever before, challenging previous assumptions and creating role models for others (Anderson, 2011).

However, the concept of ‘progress’ in sports for gay men and how they are represented is not a straightforward trajectory (Symons, 2019). Even though overt homophobia may have declined, it is suggested that it has been replaced by more subtle forms of discrimination, such as homonegativity, which is a more general negative attitude towards gay people, or heterosexism, which is the systemic privileging of heterosexuality (Symons et al., 2010). Media representation continues to discriminate by reinforcing stereotypes, engaging in bisexual erasure by portraying all non-heterosexual athletes as gay, or focusing too much on the coming out story and ignoring the different aspects of athletes’ lives and careers (Krane, 2016; Symons & Watson, 2019). Furthermore, greater visibility of LGBTQ+ athletes does not automatically result in change within team and changing room culture (Scambler, 2009). For example, researchers have detailed a paradox in which apparent progress with regard to public discussion of LGBTQ+ inclusion in sport has taken place, while exclusion is thought to persist as well (Denison et al., 2020; Storr et al., 2021). This is clear evidence that inclusive sport is not just about acknowledging but respecting and celebrating different sexual and gender identities (Krane & Waldron, 2020). However, this emphasis on affirming and valuing diverse identities reflects a particular cultural shift and may not fully account for how athletes from different intersectional backgrounds (e.g., gay

men of colour, working-class gay athletes) may experience affirmation differently depending on which aspects of their identity are focussed on. Even though this approach is quite progressive, it could be challenged for not sufficiently addressing how race, class, and other identities interact with sexuality in shaping sporting experiences.

In their study, Muir et al. (2022) expand the paradox mentioned above by suggesting that although homophobia has lessened, exclusion endures in various other forms, such as gay men feeling physically ‘unprepared’ to join mainstream teams or needing to belong beyond traditional spaces for gay men. This suggests that even though overt forms of homophobia are decreasing, heteronormative norms continue to shape men’s self-presentation in sport. Exclusion often manifests as socially accepted norms rather than deliberate acts of discrimination and, thus, it becomes more difficult to identify and appropriately treat.

1.3.4 High profile gay athletes

When high profile sportsmen come out as gay, it challenges society’s preconceptions and provides support for others struggling with their sexuality (Anderson, 2009). However, coming out in male-dominated and heteronormative environments like professional sports settings can be personally and professionally difficult and come with career risks and public rejection (Anderson, 2009; Scambler, 2009).

In October 1990, the English Professional footballer Justin Fashanu came out as gay in an interview published by the Sun newspaper, thus becoming the first openly gay professional footballer in the UK (The Sun, 1990). According to Anderson (2009) the era was not an easy period to be a gay sportsman, making Fashanu's revelation more significant. Subsequently, he was subjected to overt homophobia in public once he came out, and was not supported by the football community, the media or by his family members. As a result, his career suffered, and

he started to struggle with his mental health and sadly died by suicide, resulting in news coverage reporting that his death was due to reactions about his sexuality (Anderson et al., 2016). During this time, homophobia had a strong presence, and hegemonic masculinities were celebrated but deviation from heteronormativity resulted in negative responses (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Scambler, 2009). Fashanu's unfortunate story highlights the emotional cost of challenging these norms whilst being a professional sportsperson. It is also worth noting that his experience may have been further compounded by his race, as a Black man navigating both racism and homophobia in professional football.

Welsh rugby union captain Gareth Thomas publicly came out as gay in 2009, which was perceived as a significant step forward in the sport of rugby due to its associations with traditional hegemonic masculinity. Overall, the response to him coming out was generally positive, which contrasts with how Justin Fashanu was treated two decades earlier (Doward, 2009). Thomas came out in different circumstances as he was not pressured by the media. Researchers suggest that when gay athletes can take control of their own coming-out story and have a pre-existing masculine sports identity, they may be able to navigate heteronormative sports contexts with fewer negative consequences (Anderson, 2005; Anderson 2011). His coming-out was widely celebrated, and it helped open up conversations about gay men in rugby (Anderson, 2011). However, it could be said that how Thomas is portrayed in the media illustrates that his public image sometimes supports a 'straight acting' queer masculinity. Anderson (2002) argues that even though the situation is improving for LGBTQ+ sports people, being a gay man is still often interpreted through more socially acceptable ideas of masculinity, i.e., expected behaviours, attitudes, and physical appearances that align with traditional male norms.

In May 2022, Jake Daniels (17) became the first active male professional footballer in the UK to come out as gay since Justin Fashanu. Daniels was supported by the Football Association (FA) and multiple LGBTQ+ campaigns (MacInnes, 2022). Other athletes and even the broader community showed solidarity with him, considering him a role model for young players (Baden, 2022). However, alongside the positive support, Daniels received an enormous amount of homophobic abuse online that was criticised by Stonewall (Ford, 2022). Daniels's experience illustrates the paradox in relation to progress mentioned by Denison et al. (2020) whereby gradual increases in institutional support coincided with him experiencing public hostility.

These cases highlight the importance of public figures as role models in the fight against homophobia, but as Daniels's story illustrates, there is still stigma that exists in sport today. While there are more public conversations about gay men in sports, there are spaces where the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in sports continues to be resisted.

Daniels's experience also highlights the challenge in researching LGBTQ+ experiences in sport, whereby high-profile cases receive disproportionate media attention but may not reflect the experiences of most non-professional LGBTQ+ athletes whose stories remain unexamined. Research has often focussed on either top athletes or university students, with less attention given to recreational and community sports settings where most gay men's relationship with sport actually unfolds (Muir et al., 2022). Furthermore, the focus on individual 'coming out' narratives may inadvertently reinforce the burden on LGBTQ+ individuals to manage their identity disclosure, rather than challenging the heteronormative cultures that necessitate such identity management in the first place (Denison et al., 2020).

1.3.5 The Gay Games and Eurogames

To create safe spaces in sports, the LGBTQ+ community set up organised events such as the EuroGames and Gay Games. The Gay Games are a worldwide sporting event that take place every four years which aim to make sport inclusive, regardless of sexual identity, gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, or ability. The Federation of Gay Games (FGG) is built on the core principles 'Participation, Inclusion, and Personal Best' (FGG, 2024). Research has shown that taking part in the Gay Games enhances self-esteem, community connectedness, and feelings of empowerment (Symons et al., 2010; Lenskyj, 2003). Anderson (2011) suggests that events like the Gay Games help to normalise the presence of LGBTQ+ people in sports and challenge heteronormative assumptions.

In Europe, the European Gay and Lesbian Sport Federation (EGLSF) set up the EuroGames, with the first event taking place in The Hague in 1992. They take place every year in a different city within Europe. Similar to the Gay Games, the goals of the Eurogames include diversity, inclusivity, and participation (EGLSF, 2024). EGLSF aims to create a network of inclusive sports organisations throughout Europe (EGLSF, 2024). The EuroGames have succeeded in fostering inclusion, empowering LGBTQ+ communities, and developing inclusive sports in Europe (Wachter & Torrance, 2022). As well as the Gay Games, the EuroGames are viewed as effectively challenging heteronormative stereotypes within sport in Europe by creating inclusive environments (Solans-Prat et al., 2022). Overall, the EuroGames have been found to enhance the mental and physical health of LGBTQ+ individuals by providing safe and supportive settings to take part in sport (Symons et al., 2010).

Yet studies into LGBT sports events have been criticised for their often-descriptive nature and lack of theoretical context (Symons, 2019). In addition, they frequently use participants who already have access to such events, excluding the voices of those who find it

difficult to attend these events due to geographical, financial, or intersectional factors. In addition, the Gay Games and similar LGBTQ+ sporting events have also been criticised for potentially creating a form of ‘parallel segregation’ rather than challenging heteronormativity within mainstream sport (Jarvis, 2015). Some academics argue that establishing separate sporting spaces, may inadvertently reinforce the notion that LGBTQ+ individuals do not belong in traditional sporting contexts and may reduce pressure on mainstream organisations to become genuinely inclusive (Elling & Janssens, 2009).

1.4 Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

This section will refer to several theoretical frameworks and propose an integrated conceptual framework to better understand the challenging experiences of gay men in team sports and their journeys to LGBTQ+-friendly teams. These theories point to the psychological, social, and cultural factors at play and demonstrate how the complex relations among personal identity, social situation, and wellbeing occur in varied ways.

1.4.1 Minority stress theory

Minority Stress Theory (MST; Meyer, 1995, 2003) provides a useful lens for understanding the health challenges faced by stigmatised groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals (Figure 1). Building on work by Brooks (1981) examining minority stress among lesbian women, Meyer (1995, 2003) developed and expanded this framework to include broader sexual minority populations. The oppression, discrimination, and stigma to which minority groups are exposed to by society are understood to contribute to minority stress (Meyer, 2003; Meyer & Frost, 2013). Meyer (2003) proposes two types of stressors: distal and proximal. Distal stressors are external and objective e.g., discrimination, prejudice, and

violence. They occur as a result of someone's social environment and affect individuals regardless of their perception. Whereas proximal stressors are internal and subjective. They include expectations of rejection, internalised stigma (e.g., internalised homophobia), and the pressure to conceal one's identity. These arise from an individual's internal response to their minority status and the anticipation of negative treatment. Brooks (1981) first identified these internalised stress processes among lesbian women, demonstrating how societal stigma becomes psychologically embedded even in the absence of direct discrimination.

In sport, distal stressors could involve people being called names, excluded from a team, or treated unfairly. Proximal stressors encompass internalised experiences of social oppression, such as when LGBTQ+ individuals internalise negative cultural stereotypes, for instance, a gay person believing harmful things about their sexuality (Meyer & Frost, 2013). It is also important to recognise that sexual identity can often be concealable, meaning individuals may choose to hide their identity in certain contexts as a coping strategy or protective measure.

In sports, MST demonstrates that the prevailing heteronormativity and homophobia contribute to the feeling of stress experienced by gay/bisexual male athletes in a manner distinct to non-gay/bisexual male athletes (Symons & Watson, 2019). The need to conform to expectations of male beauty and behaviours, as well as the threat of being 'caught out', can result in significant mental distress, anxiety and depression (Jones et al., 2017). For example, research on sexual minority student-athletes demonstrates how college athletics heteronormativity exacerbates minority stress and how it results in poor mental health (Xiang et al., 2025). Conversely, MST posits that factors such as social support, sense of belonging to the community, and positive identity can help minimise the impact of minority stress (Meyer

& Frost, 2013). LGBTQ+ sports teams can support this process as they provide safe, welcoming, accepting environments which allow people to express their identity, which reduces minority stress and promotes better mental health (Krane & Waldron, 2020). This idea is particularly helpful when considering why gay men seek out and thrive in these sporting spaces.

The minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) has evolved over time, with earlier versions focussing mainly on the stress and negative experiences that LGBTQ+ people are subjected to. However, more recently researchers have recognised that factors such as resilience, personal strength, community connection, and identity affirmation play an important role (Frost & Meyer, 2023). This new perspective helps to deeper understand why gay men experience difficulties in mainstream sports and the benefits of playing with LGBTQ+ sports teams.

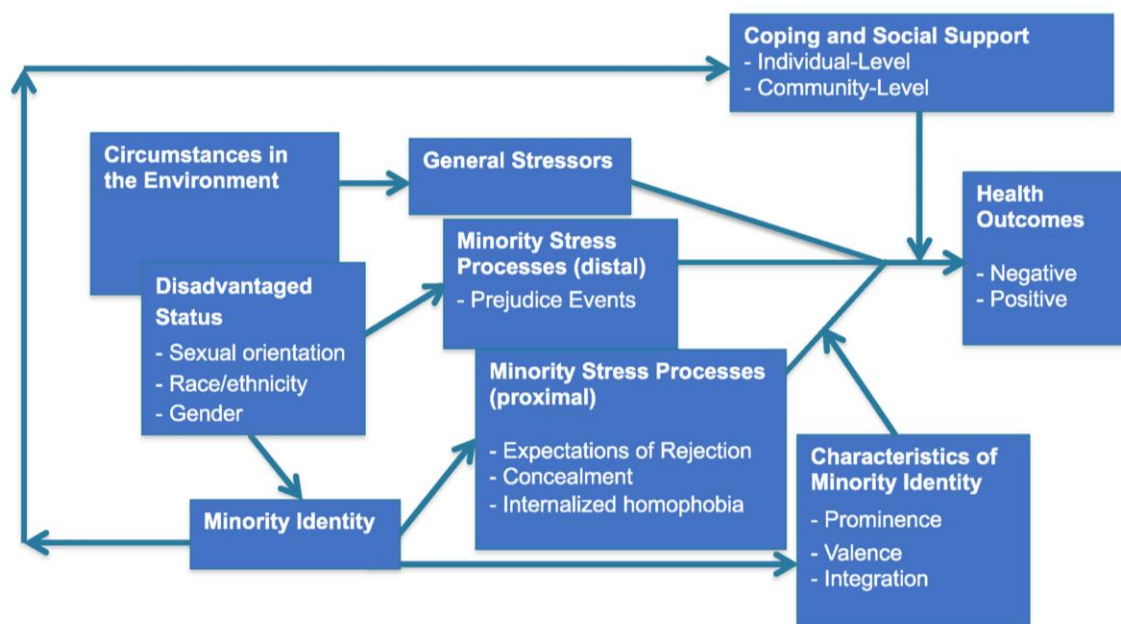
Xiang et al.'s meta-ethnography (2023) also indirectly supports MST by identifying 'experiences of discrimination and violence', 'perceived stigma' and 'internalised prejudice' which negatively impact the mental health of LGBTQ+ student-athletes. This study also confirms that sport in Chinese universities, despite its characteristics of teamwork and group honour, can create barriers for sexual minority student-athletes to be open about and express their sexual identity. Symons et al. (2016) explain that the constant reminder of being part of a minority group can negatively affect an individual's sense of performance in sports, and this can lead to emotional difficulties, ultimately causing individuals to withdraw from participating in sport.

Building from MST, Quinton & Rich (2024) explain the manner in which gay men manage and continue to move forward through potentially stressful situations in the face of

negative experiences. Their phenomenological study consisted of semi-structured interviews from nine gay men, between the ages of 32-43 from Canada and the United Kingdom. Thematic findings included ‘Craving Community: Reconciling Past Experiences’, ‘Sports and Living Authentically’, and ‘Sports as an Escape’. They reported physical and mental health benefits of playing sports even when faced with challenges, which provides further evidence for the idea that opportunities to take part in sports in supportive environments reduces minority stress and enhances mental health (Krane & Waldron, 2020).

Figure 1

Minority Stress Theory



1.4.2 Identity process theory

Identity Process Theory (IPT; Breakwell, 1986) provides a fundamental framework to account for how individuals construct, protect and sustain identity, when they are confronted by difficulties in a group or social context (Figure 2). This model is based on two fundamental

psychological processes: assimilation-accommodation, through which meaning associated with new information is integrated with the person's sense of identity, as well as evaluation, which judges the value or concept of the new information in relation to the broader sense of self (Breakwell, 2001). The four motivators are continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy that facilitate and orientate these operations, and contribute to a stable and adaptable self (Vignoles et al., 2002).

When violations of identity principles are perceived, people experience identity threat and use coping responses to reduce distress (Breakwell, 1986). These principles are, however, commonly impacted by stigma, exclusion and discrimination experienced in heteronormative spaces, such as team sports (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022). For example, when a gay man experiences homophobia within a sports setting, their sense of self and connectedness can be affected (Anderson, 2011). In relation to this threat, individuals may resort to coping strategies, such as hiding, denying, or revealing to protect the self (Jaspal, 2014).

Gay men in team sports tend to have to navigate challenging social situations that involves managing visibility and acceptance. Heteronormativity and traditional masculinity are often reinforced in male sporting teams and can marginalise gay male athletes (Symons et al., 2017). This situation may also represent a barrier to gay athletes integrating their sexual identity into their athletic identity without sacrificing important IPT principles related to the self (i.e., self-esteem) (Jaspal & Williamson, 2017). The athlete may be able to suppress or separate their identity, demonstrating the assimilation-accommodation aspect of the IPT model (Breakwell, 2001).

In team sports, discrimination is not always explicit but can manifest in the form of microaggressions, homophobic language, or simply the absence of visible LGBTQ+ role

models (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). This type of marginalisation can lead to a chronic threat to an individual's identity, particularly where the person considers their sexual identity as being inconsistent with the norms of the team or sports club (Anderson, 2005). These experiences undermine the principle of distinction, which implies that being 'different' is not valued in society (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022). Others may cope by seeking support outside the team or by participating in LGBTQ+-friendly sports groups to derive self-worth (Symons, et al., 2017).

IPT offers a valuable framework within which to consider the 'coming out' process within sport, which is often a critical identity transition. Within a sports context, it is suggested that if gay men disclose their sexual identities to their teammates, they risk a potential rejection, teasing, or a change in relationship that would disrupt continuity (Jaspal, 2014). Those with high levels of identity resilience will be those who are strongly satisfied across all four principles and are more likely to positively manage this process (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022). Resilience can also be enhanced by peer support, having positive role models, and inclusive team cultures that acknowledge LGBTQ+ identities (Anderson, 2011).

Diverse teams have the potential to act as a powerful buffer against identity threat through the establishment of a context where sexual diversity is constructed as 'normal'. More accepted athletes experience a better appraisal of sexual identity and thus require less defensive coping (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). In those situations, not only does the IPT principle of self-esteem remain intact, but it is also even reinforced as athletes are given positive validation and feel pride in their identity (Symons et al., 2017). The process of membership was a construct later proposed for inclusion in IPT and one that is particularly

relevant in team sports in which togetherness and shared goal orientation characterise the team environment (Vignoles et al., 2002).

However, in many sports environments, the threat of exclusion is very present for gay men. As a result, they may feel unable to express their desires or experiences, choosing instead to come out later in life in order to avoid being discriminated against (Anderson, 2005). This postponement or hiding perpetuates identity management tactics, which are designed to sustain an existing self and self-esteem but contribute to internalised homophobia and mental distress (Jaspal & Williamson, 2017). IPT helps explain the tension between expressing one's true self and the risks involved in doing so. Some individuals may choose to focus on portraying an acceptable identity to gain social acceptance, rather than risking rejection by revealing their authentic selves (Breakwell, 2001).

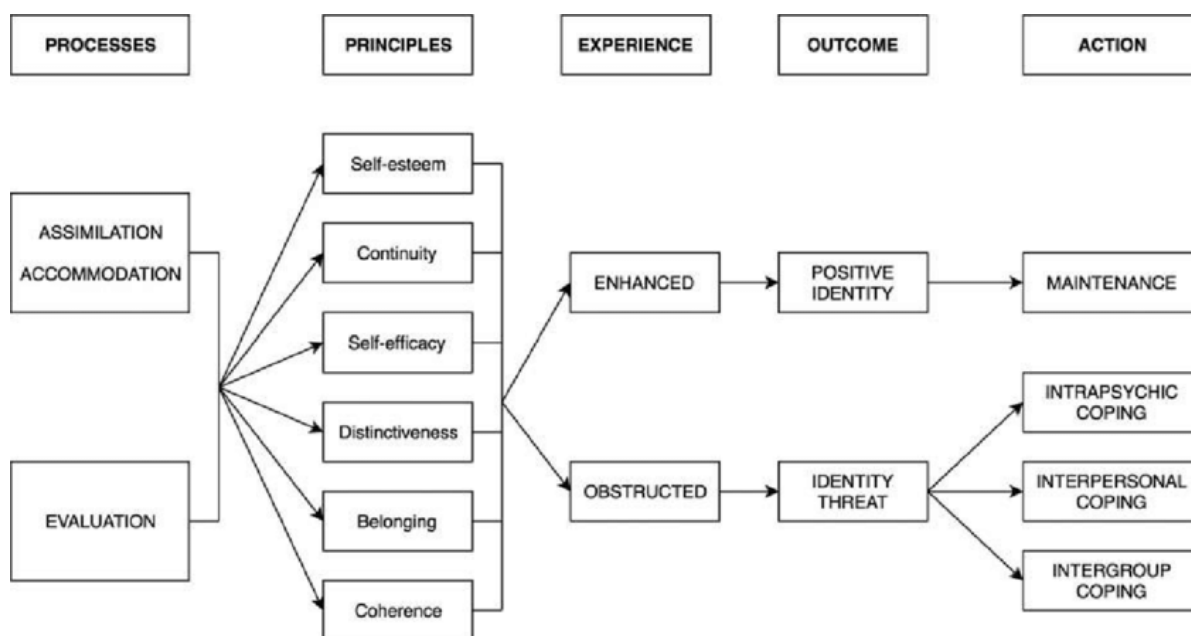
For athletes who do find/create LGBTQ+-appropriate spaces, there is also evidence that this can lead to enhanced feelings of identity and increased wellbeing (Symons et al., 2017). These environments accommodate all four IPT principles and enable athletes to integrate their sexual and athletic identities without difficult choices. In addition, membership of these groups contributes to the collective resilience of individuals, making the point that identity threat can indeed be managed not only personally but collectively (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022).

There is no doubt that IPT is a helpful theory for understanding how people engage in psychological processes like managing and protecting their identities. Especially in the context of this research where gay men's identity experiences are influenced by their own individual psychological processes. Nevertheless, researchers have acknowledged that IPT on

its own struggles to fully capture the social and structural factors that shape these experiences (Hammack, 2005).

Figure 2

Identity Process Theory



1.4.3 The psychological mediation framework

Hatzenbuehler (2009) proposed the Psychological Mediation Framework (PMF), which details how experiences of stigmatisation are transformed into adverse mental health consequences through intermediate psychological steps (Figure 3). Whereas MST posits that change takes place as the sexual minority individual contends with the external and internal stressors (stigma and victimisation) of a minority status, PMF specifies mediational processes suspected to link these stressors to psychopathology (e.g., emotion dysregulation, cognitive distortions, interpersonal problems) (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

The PMF is also useful when considering the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in team sports, where overt and covert structural and interpersonal discrimination can take place (Anderson, 2011). Exclusion based on identity and microaggressions are minority stressors in such environments and operate through psychological processes to impact mental health, social integration, and identity development (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

Emotion regulation is one of the main constructs of the PMF. When faced with discrimination or rejection, people find it difficult regulating their emotions, and such experiences are typically linked to greater depression, anxiety, or other hostility (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Gay men in sport are prone to constant and repetitive exposure to homophobic language which may lead to chronically high levels of hypervigilance or avoidance (Symons et al., 2017). This can prevent them from performing to their full potential as valued members of the team and diminish overall feelings of belongingness and in-group inclusion (Krane et al., 2002).

The pressure of stigma may reduce trust and the ability to form close relationships, necessary for team sport cohesion (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). As a result, gay athletes may socially withdraw from sport altogether anticipating negative behaviour towards them based on past negative experiences (Anderson, 2005). This withdrawal decreases the perceived social support and leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which is strongly associated with poor mental health and a lack of participation in sport (Symons et al., 2017).

In addition, cognitive processes (e.g., negative self-schemas and rumination) are considered central to stigmatisation. Homophobia coming from the wider sporting community may result in LGBTQ+ people internalising stigma and forming maladaptive beliefs about their competence and adequacy (Pachankis, 2007). In sport, in which heteronormative

masculinity is valorised, gay men may feel that they are in conflict with the collective identity and may experience chronic identity threat and self-doubt (Jaspal & Williamson, 2017). Such a cycle could result in cognitive preoccupation and avoidance that may ultimately lead them to withholding their identity and reduce their sport participation (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

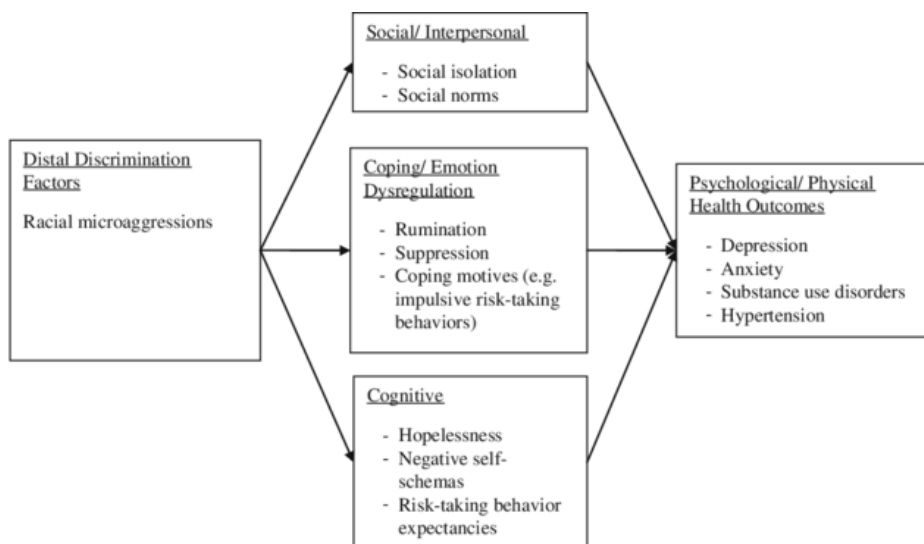
Within the sport environment, LGBTQ+ athletes may experience persistent identity denial, changing room 'banter', or social situations that pressure them to feel out of place, each of which can add to the experience of chronic stress (Anderson, 2011). The PMF can also help explain why mental health disorders among LGBTQ+ individuals vary. Not all LGBTQ+ athletes who are exposed to discrimination are necessarily harmed by it, for example, those with stronger emotion regulation skills or more supportive interpersonal relationships may be buffered from its negative effects (Mereish & Poteat, 2015).

Crucially, team inclusion and affirming environments are protective factors that mitigate against the effect of these psychological mediators. Where there is a sense of acceptance and belonging from teammates, there is a resulting enhancement of their emotion regulation and ability to trust, which would disrupt the mediation pathway outlined in the PMF (Symons et al., 2017). Affirming settings question the internalised stigma and negative cognitive scripts which proliferate within exclusionary sports communities (Krane et al., 2002). In addition, belongingness, which is also a psychological need is especially relevant in team sports. The PMF proposes that a lack of belonging increases the mediating pathways that connect stigma to poor mental health (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Similarly, a strong sense of identity belonging may counter the psychological costs of identity-related stressors. Athletes who identify as LGBTQ+ who are in inclusive teams show increased self-esteem and reduced

depressive symptoms when compared to those that are in exclusionary environments (Mereish & Poteat, 2015).

The PMF is consistent with intersectionality, since it acknowledges that stigmatisation is multi-layered. For instance, racialised gay men may encounter dual minority stress from their race and their sexuality and this could undermine psychological mediators further (Pachankis et al., 2014). This framework provides a comprehensive account of the mechanisms by which sport-related discrimination contributes to gay men's psychological distress. Finally, the PMF also provides important knowledge about what it feels like to be a gay athlete on a team by including major mediating mechanisms in the model (emotion dysregulation, interpersonal problems, cognitive distortions) and it also emphasises how inclusive, supportive environments are crucial in interrupting these cycles.

Since its introduction, the PMF has also been advanced and updated, due to researchers recognising the importance of considering risk and protective factors (Meyer & Frost, 2023). Its main strength lies in its ability to identify the psychological processes that link stigma to mental health, and these processes can be viewed as targets for therapeutic interventions. Regarding the current research, the PMF is not only helpful in understanding how discrimination in mainstream sports can activate these processes, but also in witnessing how being a part of LGBTQ+ sports can interrupt their pathways and improve overall wellbeing.

Figure 3*Psychological Mediation Framework***1.4.4 Self-determination theory**

Self-determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a comprehensive model of human motivation, personality development, and wellbeing. SDT is based on the assumption that human motivation for optimal functioning and psychological growth is founded on satisfying three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Meeting such needs leads to greater intrinsic motivation, wellbeing, and optimal functioning. When these needs are not met, reduced motivation, low wellbeing and disengagement occur (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Autonomy is the experience of acting in line with one's own values and feeling a sense of ownership over one's actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sports contexts where being open about one's sexual identity is implicitly or explicitly discouraged may limit autonomy of

LGBTQ+ athletes (Cunningham, 2012), resulting in psychological stress and decreased motivation (Krane, 2019). This hiding behaviour further impacts authenticity, a core element of autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The second basic need, competence, is about feeling capable and successful in what one does. LGBTQ+ men might be strong athletes, but they may not feel confident or successful in how they fit in socially with the team because of stigma and microaggressions (Anderson, 2005). Even when they are successful, a lack of acknowledgment, confidence and fairness both from teammates and coaches can hinder their motivation (Cunningham, 2012). This is particularly relevant in team sport, where competence is not only individual, but it is also relational to others (Ryan & Deci, 2007).

SDT suggests the most critical aspect is relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which plays a particularly important role in team-based sports that depend on social cohesion for both performance and identity. Yet the hypermasculine culture of many teams tends to exclude or marginalise non-heterosexual athletes, making it hard for LGBTQ+ men to form meaningful connections with others (Anderson, 2011). Research demonstrates that athletes who perceive low relatedness are at an increased risk of dropping out of sport or experiencing negative health outcomes including anxiety and depressive symptomatology (Bartholomew et al., 2011).

Discriminatory or non-affirming contexts may actively suppress basic psychological needs, setting in motion an array of harmful outcomes. The frustration of these needs, rather than simply the absence of fulfilment, can lead to controlled forms of motivation such as acting to avoid shame or gain approval, as well as to amotivation and burnout (Bartholomew et al., 2011). LGBTQ+ athletes might participate in team sports to achieve or avoid exclusion

instead of for the love of the game. This can be demotivating and make them more susceptible to mental health issues (Ryan & Deci, 2017)

Conversely, when teams develop inclusive environments, which have the capacity to foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and belonging, LGBTQ+ athletes report greater levels of engagement, wellbeing and authenticity (Cunningham, 2012). For instance, encouraging coaches and teammates who are committed to openness and inclusivity with respect to diversity, may foster the development of autonomy in the sense of allowing individuals to be their authentic selves (Krane, 2019). Positive reinforcement and feedback serve as forms of recognition, helping to enhance perceived competence, while the sharing of team rituals and history fosters a sense of relatedness (Symons et al., 2017). These are conditions that foster autonomous motivation, which supports athletes in voluntarily engaging in training and competition with greater enjoyment, persistence, and psychological wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In summary, SDT provides a strong psychological framework to explain how team sport environments might facilitate or hinder the wellbeing and motivation of gay men. The fulfilment of basic psychological needs is important for identity formation, general wellbeing and sports participation.

Within this research, it is hoped that SDT will explain the barriers to and the factors that fulfill psychological needs in mainstream and LGBTQ+ sporting environments, and its focus on autonomy is particularly relevant where some participants might have felt that they needed to hide their identity. Despite this, it has been noted that while SDT is well supported in Western contexts, the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can vary

across cultures (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Therefore, using it in combination with the other theoretical frameworks included will strengthen its usefulness.

1.4.5 Social identity theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides an analytical lens for explaining the impact of group membership on self-concept, intergroup relations and social action. SIT claims that an individual's self-perception or self-esteem are to some extent affected by which social groups they belong to and that this guides their attitudes, motivations, and behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This model relies on three fundamental psychological processes, social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison (Hornsey, 2008). These mechanisms not only influence how we see ourselves relative to others, but also how we behave in and between groups.

SIT is particularly well-suited to the experiences of gay men in team sports, in which identity is inextricably linked to functioning within closely bound, often masculine-coded in-groups. A sports team tends to operate as a powerful social identity offering a source of meaning, belonging and value (Anderson, 2011). Nonetheless, the culture of collective sports is to be described in terms of strong heteronormativity, sometimes expressed in the exclusion of sexual minority groups (Cunningham, 2012). For LGBTQ+ athletes, this generates tensions between the affirmation of their sexual identity and the maintenance of identity as an athlete or team member (Krane, 2019).

The main process in SIT is social categorisation, when both the self and others are mentally divided into groups, such as gay/straight, athlete/non-athlete, masculine/feminine (Hornsey, 2008). In the context of sport, they are often dictated by hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2005), for example, LGBTQ+ men are frequently positioned as an out-group.

Regardless of whether or not it is solely based on stereotypes, this form of categorisation leads to people feeling ostracised and excluded even when there is no explicit discrimination (Symons et al., 2017).

Social identification involves a degree of aligning oneself with the perceived norms and values of the in-group. This identity is thought to be self-enhancing and self-confirming, but also a psychologically burdensome phenomena for LGBTQ+ men in sports (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Some people adapt or partially internalise dominant norms in order to be accepted, which may involve denying, suppressing, or hiding parts of themselves (Cunningham, 2012). For example, some athletes might adopt behaviours (i.e., minimising the expression of sexual identity) to protect against exclusion (Krane, 2019).

This compromise between group identity and authenticity is thought to contribute to identity conflict, a factor known to be associated with poor mental wellbeing in terms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Roberts et al, 2024). It can cause someone to disengage from sport entirely or withdraw from the team's social environment. For others, the psychological burden of concealing one's identity may be outweighed by the fear of coming out and losing access to a vital support network of peers. This dynamic may be explained by identity compartmentalisation, in which sexual and athletic identities are kept separate (Anderson, 2011).

The third component of SIT is social comparison whereby people assess their in-group in relation to relevant out-groups. Furthermore, membership in a high-status in-group (e.g., a sports team) may serve to boost self-esteem. When an individual perceives that their subgroup (e.g., LGBTQ+ athletes) are undervalued within teams or the larger sports culture, it can be internalised as stigma and low self-esteem (Hornsey, 2008). Studies have found that LGBTQ+

people may find it hard to identify with elite sport due to the lack of representation, which may lead to a feeling of marginalisation (Symons, et al., 2017).

A core proposition of SIT is that social identity is flexible and context dependent (Tajfel & Turner (1979, 1986). There is a possibility that LGBTQ+ athletes feel excluded from the dominant cultures of sport which can lead them to try and seek out or form other groups where their identities and abilities can be recognised. LGBTQ+ sports clubs are environments where positive social identity can form, resulting in greater wellbeing, satisfaction and retention in sport (Cunningham, 2012). In these ways, individuals can challenge conventional understandings of teammates and stereotypes, thereby producing alternative and more inclusive team environments (Krane, 2019). Equally important is the influence of supportive players and coaches, and when they express positive attitudes towards diversity and include LGBTQ+ players, it makes it easier for them to feel a genuine sense of belonging without having to lose parts of their identity (Cox & Thompson, 2000).

SIT shows how in-group and out-group situations can shape someone's identity and feelings of belonging, but it also acknowledges that people have many different social identities at the same time (Crenshaw, 1991). For this reason, it is a very valuable theory when thinking about gay men's experiences in team sports as they may be holding multiple identities, particularly if they are concealing their sexual identity.

1.4.6 Cognitive dissonance theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) developed by Festinger (1957) argues that a person experiences mental discomfort (dissonance) when the person holds at least two incongruent cognitions, or when a behaviour does not match with a value or belief. This discomfort compels people to reduce the dissonance using a number of psychological

techniques, like altering their attitudes, changing behaviour, or through rationalising the inconsistency (Festinger, 1957). CDT has grown to become a core theory in social psychology and has received empirical support across various areas of research (e.g., moral decision making, identity, group behaviour) (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

CDT is particularly relevant to the lived experience of gay men in team sports, where the desire for group belonging and validation through sport participation can conflict with the need to express one's authentic self. Dissonance often occurs in such environments when athletes find themselves forced into a team culture that is heteronormative and then must struggle with their own private identities as gay men (Anderson, 2011). The subsequent identity dissonance creates major emotional stress as it becomes an internal struggle to match one's true identity with what society expects (Krane, 2019).

For gay male athletes, self-identity and team norms constitute a common source of dissonance. In these settings, traditional heterosexual masculinities, which are dominant in many sports teams (Anderson, 2005), can implicitly marginalise non-heterosexual identities or contribute to public stigma. Gay men who identify with team norms while also maintaining a positive sexual identity may experience a tension between who they are and who they think they should be to belong (Symons et al., 2017) This dissonance is exacerbated in contexts where homophobic language or actions are accepted, even in a subtle form (Cox & Thompson, 2000).

Athletes may use dissonance reduction in response and one such strategy is inhibition or hiding of sexual identity so that the individual is able to conform external actions to presumed group norms (Festinger, 1957). It is a short-term way of maintaining harmony between team members, but it is at the expense of their mental wellbeing and authenticity.

Concealment has been associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially when individuals are within unsupportive contexts (Pachankis, 2007).

Athletes can also discount their sexual identity as relevant at all or come to hold beliefs that sexual identity is somehow less incongruous with athlete identity (Harmon-Jones et al., 2015). For instance, an LGBTQ+ athlete might rationalise by convincing themselves that ‘being out doesn’t matter’ or ‘no one else talks about their private life’ so that it reduces dissonance by re-framing the issue. Yet such cognitive changes may restrict wellbeing in the long-term and prevent coherent, integrated self-concept development (Krane, 2019).

In contrast, verifying environments reduce dissonance as they permit internal concepts and external behaviour to remain aligned. When individuals are part of affirming and inclusive team environments, gay men are more likely to feel safe expressing their authentic selves without fear of negative social consequences. This fit serves both the necessity of integrity of the self and the necessity of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In these situations, less effort is needed to achieve consonance, and an increased potential positive mental health and motivation can be achieved (Cunningham, 2012).

Notably, CDT also offers to explain identity conflict and behaviour of avoidance. For some athletes, when dissonance between attitude and reported beliefs cannot be resolved, avoidance of dissonance-producing situations by dropping out of the sport may be controlled (Festinger, 1957). This has been reflected in research where LGBTQ+ men reported leaving team sports during adolescence because they felt uncomfortable in changing rooms, in hypermasculine spaces, or feared of being ‘outed’ (Anderson, 2011; Symons et al., 2017). This behaviour escape reduces dissonance while sacrificing the psychological and physical

benefits of sports involvement. In sum, CDT can be useful for examining how gay men in team sports reconcile conflicting identities and values.

1.5 Integrated Conceptual Model

The integrated conceptual model (Figure 4) draws upon the above theoretical frameworks (Breakwell, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Festinger, 1957, 1954; Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to develop a deeper understanding of the psychological experiences of gay men in team sports. The model suggests that the relationship between individual, social, and cultural factors is dynamic. Central to this is the sports team culture which is deeply embedded with heteronormative norms (Connell, 1995) and the influence of hegemonic masculinity. This in turn creates minority-specific stressors, including overt rejection or hostility (distal stress), as well as an internalised need to hide or monitor one's identity (proximal stress) (Meyer, 2003).

Direct challenges to an athlete/gay man's identity base principles will arise from these stressors as posited by IPT (Breakwell, 1986). At the same time, their fulfilment of basic psychological needs for autonomy and relatedness may be frustrated (Deci & Ryan, 2000), if they are unable to express themselves as they would like or develop authentic relationships with teammates. These external pressures and unmet needs elicit internalised psychological responses (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Cognitive dissonance can occur when someone's identity is at odds with the team norms (Festinger, 1957). This stigma-related stress can in turn be associated with negative affective and cognitive responses (PMF), increased anxiety, rumination, or even maladaptive coping mechanisms, for instance substance use (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

The athlete may then employ coping strategies in response to identity-related stressors (Meyer, 2003). These strategies can include absorbing new identity content, such as remaining closeted to maintain group inclusion, or adapting one's identity by coming out and redefining the self (Breakwell, 1986). Social support seeking is also frequent through engaging in LGBTQ+ sport communities or teams. This behaviour can be understood through SIT by searching for belonging and identity-validating group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

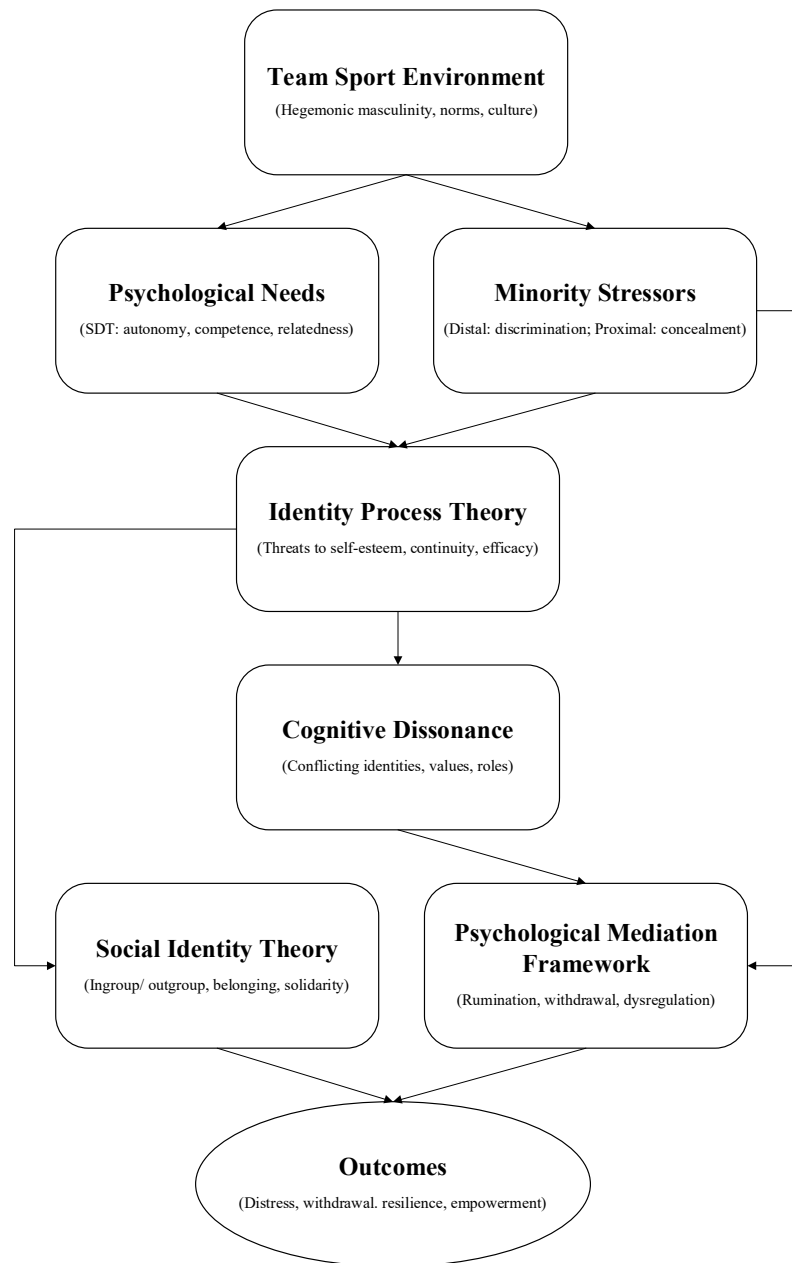
The model hypothesises that in exclusionary situations (e.g., homophobic teams), one would anticipate high levels of stress, poor wellbeing, unmet psychological needs, disordered identity integration, and perhaps disengagement from sport.

By concealing one's sexuality, the athlete can remain part of the team and maintain a sense that they are still the same person. On the other hand, people may also struggle with inner conflict as they try to align their sexual identity with some of the expectations, patterns, and values of their relationships, community, or culture. These tensions can be stressful (Meyer, 2003) and may lead to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

In the negotiation of identity (e.g., thinking about coming out) the athlete evaluates their identity values and the extent to which these are congruent with group membership. IPT (Breakwell, 1986) suggests efforts to preserve self-esteem, while SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasises the search for autonomy-supportive environments. Anticipating cognitive dissonance responses could provide an explanation for why athletes would disclose and/or challenge internal conflicts, such as 'coming out', by confronting conventional masculinities within sport (Festinger, 1957).

Gay men in inclusive settings will have a higher sense of belonging, satisfying the need for relatedness and enhancing self-efficacy. When team identity reflects personal values, SIT implies that this is associated with an enhancement of self-esteem. In such contexts, the intersection of gay identity and athletic identity is more likely to support psychological needs and foster wellbeing (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In conclusion, the model presents a dynamic feedback: broad sports culture exerting pressure (internalised within hegemonic masculinity) → minority stressors → that interact with how the gay man understands who they are (assimilation/accommodation, identity principles) and their basic psychological needs (autonomy, relatedness) → generating cognitive dissonance and activating affective/cognitive mediators (e.g., rumination, social withdrawal) → ultimately shaping specific mental health and identity outcomes (Breakwell, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Festinger, 1957, 1954, Meyer, 2003; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By combining all these psychological (IPT, SDT, CDT) and macro-social (MST/ PMF, SIT, hegemonic norms) processes into one model, it provides a powerful explanatory framework to help understand why it is that gay men might feel the need to be closeted in team sports or feel marginalised, or how they come to feeling empowered in inclusive environments.

Figure 4*Integrative conceptual model*

1.5.1 Exploratory hypotheses

Drawing on the integrated conceptual model, the study explores the following theory-informed exploratory hypotheses, which serve to guide interpretation of the data.

Minority Stress Theory:

Negative experiences that participants report in mainstream sports settings will be consistent with distal and proximal stressors that contribute to reduced participation and poorer mental health outcomes.

Identity Process Theory:

While discussing past experiences of playing in mainstream teams, participants will describe using identity management strategies (e.g., concealment or assimilation) to reduce threat, resulting in diminished identity satisfaction and self-esteem.

Self-determination Theory:

LGBTQ+ sports teams will fulfil gay men's basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), enhancing motivation, wellbeing, and sport retention.

Social Identity Theory:

Participants will report greater group identification and belonging from playing in LGBTQ+ teams, which will positively impact identity integration and psychological wellbeing.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory:

Participants who experienced dissonance between their identity and team norms in mainstream sport will have either disengaged from sport or reframed their involvement.

1.6 Rationale for the current study

To overcome stress caused by marginalisation and stigmatisation that members of the LGBTQ+ community may experience within sports settings, LGBTQ+ clubs have evolved to

combat these issues (Anderson, 2002). Menzel et al., (2019) found that 26% of UK athletes who took part in organised sports, chose a specific LGBTQ+-friendly club, which is higher than Europe as a whole (18%). Honneth (1997) emphasised the importance of recognition for LGBT people and communities, highlighting the potential of the social environment to enable strong, connected communities that support LGBTQ+ overall wellbeing. In their study, Ceatha et al (2019) noted the importance of LGBTQ+ organised sports clubs and events and how it supports the wellbeing and connectedness within the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland. This supports research carried out by Whitman and Nadal (2015) who found that having contact with people who have similar identities plays an important role in emotional wellbeing and social identity.

Despite the growing interest in sexuality and sport, there are still substantial gaps in the literature. Research has continued to focus mainly on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals participating in sports more generally (Denison et al, 2020). In addition, much of the research that has been carried out has either been completed in North America (Anderson, 2011) or has focused on university athletes (Pariera et al., 2021). Existing research typically examines the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth (DiFulvio, 2011) and emphasises the benefits of larger LGBTQ+ spaces and communities (Formby, 2017; Detrie & Lease, 2007). Furthermore, much of the literature tends to treat LGBTQ+ people as a single group, which can overlook important differences in experiences related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and other overlapping social factors. To summarise, little research has been done on the experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes who play for LGBTQ+ sports clubs and there is limited research specifically examining gay men's experiences of playing for an LGBTQ+ community sports team in the United Kingdom.

Addressing these gaps, a few studies have recently started to examine the experiences of gay men within LGBTQ+ sports. Gay men's reasons for leaving mainstream sports clubs and joining LGBTQ+ clubs were wide-ranging and remained in LGBTQ+ clubs for several years (Jarvis, 2006). Elling (2003) reported that gay men are under-represented in club-organised sports and teams compared to commercially based fitness activities such as gyms, fitness classes, and personal training sessions. Additionally, gay men were found to quit or never participate in sports as a result of bad experiences, hoping to avoid discrimination in these environments (Petty & Trussell, 2018).

Quinton and Rich (2024) discovered that sport was instrumental in fostering gay men's wellbeing in their negotiation of stressors. It has also been suggested that gay and bisexual men gain more than lesbian and bisexual women from involvement in LGBTQ+ sports clubs (Mock, et al., 2022). A gay rugby team in Liverpool was cited as a safe and inclusive space for gay men to play at (Gaston & Dixon, 2019). Muir et al., (2022) investigated the function and culture of gay rugby clubs in the UK. The authors found that the primary reason people were attracted to such clubs was not to escape homophobia in mainstream rugby environments but for social interaction. Although these studies have illuminated experiences of gay men in relation to LGBTQ+ sports environments, there is a need for additional research so that we might have a deeper understanding and gain a wider range of experiences within this domain.

While existing studies have illuminated some aspects of gay men's experiences in LGBTQ+ sports contexts, there has been less focus on how these experiences compare with those in mainstream sports environments. The complex ways that mainstream sports settings frequently instil stigma and shame in gay men remains an under-researched area. Little is

currently understood about the underlying mechanisms and individual narratives of these diverse patterns. To gain a deeper understanding of this subject, it is crucial to investigate questions such as: How do prior negative experiences influence a gay man's decision to join a sports team later in life? What draws gay men to LGBTQ+ clubs, and what unique benefits do these clubs offer that mainstream clubs do not? Additionally, what effects does participating in sports, inclusive or not, have on their social networks, self-perception, and mental health?

The thesis aims to fill in the gaps in the literature by exploring the experiences of gay men in two different contexts: (1) mainstream sports environments; (2) team sports that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ athletes. It is clear from the introduction that these settings can affect gay men's identity, sense of belonging, and participation.

A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to elucidate these complex questions. By conducting semi-structured interviews with gay men currently playing on LGBTQ+ sports teams, this study will aim to gather rich, contextualised accounts that explore factors such as identity development, coping, and community. This approach is consistent with recommendations in the fields of sport sociology and LGBTQ+ psychology, which advocate for a greater emphasis on narrative and phenomenological research (Xiang et al., 2023).

The UK is a unique location in which to investigate this topic due to its cultural and sports history, particularly in terms of the popularity of rugby and football and the supporter cultures they share. Additionally, the study was grounded in the UK's wider public discussion of and efforts to tackle homophobia in sport. For example, the Premier League's support for the Rainbow Laces campaign and parliamentary inquiries, such as the 2016-17 Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into homophobia in sport. Therefore, the main practical value of the research underlines the potential utility of its findings for the UK's mental health

services, schools and universities, sport and athletic committees, and cultural and diversity programmes.

The study positions the participants' narratives in the integrated frameworks in the hope to further develop the application of the individual frameworks. For example, it could be investigated whether MST (Meyer, 2003) presents itself in a specific way in the context of sport environment, how IPT (Breakwell, 1986) explains the behaviour of people experiencing higher and lower wellbeing in a team where tolerance prevails, or the PMF (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) explains the role of stigma-induced stress in the mediation of the impact of discrimination on the possibility of involving in sport and psychological levels of gay men. The integration of several theories into the analytical process allows for richer and more nuanced interpretations.

The research is also theoretically underpinned by a clear practical rationale. Sport is often posited as contributing to health gains as well as social inclusion. When LGBTQ+ people are excluded from sport due to discrimination, not all communities have entirely gained access to the benefits of sport (Denison et al., 2020). It is important to gain an understanding of gay men within sport, and what promotes and hinders their engagement. This information is important for policy to develop the sporting culture into being non-threatening to all. This study's findings might enable coaches, sports organisations and educators to develop inclusive team settings by, for example, stressing the importance of visible allyship, insight into the value of a zero-tolerance approach to homophobic language, and the potential value of established LGBTQ+ -specific teams or leagues. Clinically, the findings from this study may influence therapeutic work with LGBTQ+ clients. Interventions may be built around conversations about re-engaging in supported activities such as sport as a

means of validating self-identity, challenging feelings of isolation and improving self-confidence and sense of belonging.

1.7 Aims of current research

Mental health and sport in sexual minority populations is an under-studied area. The aim of this study is to explore how engagement (or lack of) in sport impacts the psychological wellbeing of young gay men. Specifically, the study will answer the following questions:

1. How do gay men's experiences of discrimination within team sports settings influence their sport participation?
2. What are gay men's experiences of LGBTQ+ team sports?
3. What impact does sport participation have on gay men's identity and sense of belonging?

This qualitative study will focus on exploring the experiences of gay men in team sports in the UK. Building on previous work, it is predicted that discrimination has been a significant obstacle to this; however, many gay men have experienced empowerment and therapeutic growth through engagement in inclusive sport that has led them to reconstruct their identities and feel connected. At the same time, the research is receptive to emerging themes, including certain types of resilience, difficulties in inclusive spaces, or generational disparities in experiences, particularly as the social context may change.

This study intends to contribute to the understanding of the impact of identity and belonging on the wellbeing of gay men, with a specific focus on team sports context. Through examining how inclusive sports engagement can promote mental well-being in terms of positive identity construction and connectedness, the latter remains the main aim of this study. It is hoped that the findings will involve significant clinical implications for addressing issues

related to minority stress, social inclusion, and identity development, contributing to more effective mental health interventions and support strategies for gay men.

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the theoretical and empirical inquiries that follow. The next chapter will outline the methodology used to explore these questions, followed by the presentation of results and a discussion that engages with the integrated conceptual framework to interpret gay men's lived experiences of team sports.

Chapter 2: Methods

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the philosophical foundations of the study by taking a critical realist social constructivist perspective. It provides an argument for the chosen methodology by evaluating alternative methodologies and explaining the use of thematic analysis.

Additionally, the lead researcher discusses their own personal involvement with the study topic. The chapter concludes with an overview of study design.

2.2 Ontology and Epistemology

2.2.1 Ontology

Ontology relates to the study of being and the nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Crotty (1998) further states that it is a field of philosophy that concerns the nature of things and the way that they are organised. It is considered to be a branch of metaphysics and covers various concepts and beliefs drawn from different branches of philosophy, as well as from the social sciences. It is widely acknowledged that practices within qualitative research are heavily influenced by a researcher's ontological standpoint (Crotty, 1998).

Similarly, Guba and Lincoln (1994) advised researchers to pursue questions on, what reality is and the relationships that exist between entities. Crotty (1998) suggests that this focus allows the researcher to reflect on their own assumptions, which in turn may inform methodological choices in research. Therefore, ontology is key in shaping research paradigms and research methods. More particularly, ontology serves to guide researchers in their research on what questions to ask, and how they are engaging with the research topic (Grix, 2002). Thus, a clear understanding of ontology enables researchers to critically examine their

assumptions and ensure that their methods correspond to their epistemological positions (Crotty, 1998).

2.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is a philosophical study of knowledge and investigates the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge. It attempts to separate true belief from opinion through the examination of what is known as knowledge (Audi, 2010). Research methodologies are highly influenced by epistemology, as understandings about the nature of knowledge shape conception, validation and interpretation of knowledge in that area (Crotty, 1998). Consequently, it is a building block for methodology, in determining how researchers can understand their research topic and what can be accepted as knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

2.2.3 Ontological and epistemological positioning of the current study

A critical realist social constructivist approach was used in the current research study to explore the experiences of gay men in team sports. Bhaskar (1978) posited that critical realism, as an ontological position, supports the idea that reality is constructed through social structures and individual agency while being independent of human perception. This is useful in understanding gay men's experiences in team sports, because it takes into account that structural discrimination and homophobia are taking place in sports settings, and that the participants interpret and respond to these structures in varied ways (Collier, 1994). Working within this framework supported an in-depth analysis of how social norms, discrimination, and community membership shape the sporting trajectories of gay men. A critical realist social constructivist viewpoint is grounded in literature which justifies the rationale of critical

realism (Bhaskar, 1978) and the constructivist view which argues that meaning is socially and culturally situated (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Historically, sporting environments have been spaces that perpetuate hegemonic masculinity and where heteronormative discourses dominate, and exclusion and discrimination are sustained (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). From a critical realist perspective, these are real social structures that can have significant effects on people. However, these effects can be reduced or even eliminated through social agency and collective activism (Archer, 2003). Therefore, the stance of this study is helpful for understanding the long-term impact of discrimination on gay men's participation in sport, because it allows for an exploration of how systemic barriers shape individual experiences, while also recognising the potential for resistance at both personal and social levels (MacCharles & Melton, 2021). The concept of disciplinary power, which was proposed by Foucault (1977), can help explain the way sporting environments influence how people express themselves physically and how they behave in ways that reinforce heteronormative norms and marginalise those who do not conform. When participating in team sports, gay men may experience microaggressions, exclusion, or overt discrimination which impact their sport participation and identity formation (Anderson, 2009). A critical realist perspective provides an opportunity to interrogate these structures, whilst a social constructivist standpoint opens up understanding of how such experiences have been interpreted and responded to by individuals (McNay, 2000).

Regarding epistemology, social constructivism is consistent with the ontological position discussed, highlighting that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and engagement with communities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This has implications for the

current research on identity and belonging of gay men in sports because the ways in which sexuality, masculinity, and athleticism are defined are socially constructed, rather than biologically determined or fixed (Butler, 1990). In considering a social constructivist epistemology, this study recognises that the experience of being a gay man cannot be reduced to a reflection of external reality, but is one that is mediated through discourse, social norms and personal narratives (Burr, 2015).

Expanding on this, examining the role of LGBTQ+ sports teams requires an epistemology that places an emphasis on how people construct meaning through experiences and their social worlds. Participants in these teams are able to achieve a sense of belonging, build solidarity and validate one's identity, so for some, their understanding of belonging and masculinity in these teams may be realised in ways that were not possible while playing with the mainstream clubs (Anderson, 2011). From a constructivist perspective, these teams offer places where individuals construct personal and collective meanings about sport, identity, and community (Anderson, 2011). At the same time, critical realism recognises that while LGBTQ+ teams work within sporting structures, they also serve as sites for individuals and groups to influence such structures through collective action (Symons et al., 2010).

2.3 Positionality and self-reflexivity

As qualitative research is interpretative by nature, the identity, assumptions, and worldviews of the researcher are part of the production of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative that researchers consider their own positionality and self-reflexivity, especially in the context of a critical realist social constructivist lens.

Positionality relates to the researcher's social, cultural and ideological standpoint (Holmes, 2020), and includes issues like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and lived experiences,

and the way participants are interacted with, and data is interpreted (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). It is important that researchers reflect on and share their positionality while carrying out research as it orients the reader to their relationship to the research topic (England, 1994) and allows them to be curious about the production of knowledge within the findings (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

As Finlay (2002) claims, self-reflexivity encourages researchers to constantly question their part in the process of enquiry, and to notice the ways that their own preconceptions and experiences impact the study. It is considered a helpful way of prompting researchers to critically question their positionality during the research process (Berger, 2013). Reflexivity is especially important in qualitative research, where the researcher is heavily involved in the production and interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It provides a means for transparency, credibility and for minimising potential biases (Tracy, 2010). Methods such as self-reflection in journals, memo writing, and supervision help to support reflexive research practice (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

Reflexivity and positionality are critical elements of rigour and honesty in qualitative research. Positivist approaches privilege researcher distance and objectivity, whereas qualitative approaches recognise the subjective experience as integral to the knowledge-making process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, it is this view that is especially pertinent in the context of thematic analysis where the analyst actively searches for and develops themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not an objective process, but one that involves interpretation and reflection on the researcher's theoretical and epistemological position (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexivity helps to anchor the analysis in

the voices of participants, while at the same time critically questioning the meanings imposed by the researcher (Nowell et al., 2017).

Due to the positionality of the researcher and the fact that the research is investigating the experiences of gay men in team sports, reflexivity is especially significant within this context. Although there are strengths, such as cultural competence and the ability to gain trust and build rapport with the sample, allowing for richer data, the researcher must remain conscious of possible bias, including the tendency to assume shared understandings without examining the participants' experiences in full (Chavez, 2008). Reflexivity has the capacity to reduce this potential threat by making researchers critically aware of their own assumptions in data analysis (Finlay, 2002).

When researchers hold insider positions, they can use their experience and knowledge of the community, and language, etc., to gain in-depth and authentic data (Merriam et al., 2001). However, they must reflect on factors such as role duality and power within the interview process, to ensure that their relationship with the research topic does not heavily influence the way the data gets collected and analysed (Ross, 2017). Lincoln & Guba (1985) advise exploring options of different interpretive frameworks which can support the credibility of research. Additionally, seeking feedback through peer review helps to moderate these and other challenges related to subjectivity and interpretation.

Reflexivity and positionality also help to interrogate bias, power, and ethical considerations within qualitative work. By reflecting critically on one's own viewpoint, researchers can recognise and consider personal bias rather than unknowingly imposing their position on the research (Tracy, 2010). By encouraging the researcher to confront the power imbalance between themselves and the participant, reflexivity provides ethical insight

(Guillemin & Gillam 2004). Ethical reflexivity encourages researchers to be transparent about the power they hold and to counterbalance this by actively empowering participants, by implementing techniques like member checking and being clear about confidentiality, as this is valued within small communities that participants may be recruited from (Holmes, 2020).

2.3.1 My positionality

[REDACTED]

2.3.2 Self-reflexivity

[REDACTED]

2.4 Rationale for thematic analysis

Data analysis is an important aspect in any qualitative research; it is the process that determines the way data is understood, and meaning is made. In this study of gay men in team sports, a thematic analysis was determined to be the most appropriate analysis method. Thematic analysis is a flexible, yet systematic and rigorous process for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The rationale for the use of thematic analysis will be discussed, comparing it with other methods of qualitative analysis, and how it fits within the critical realist social constructivist stance of the current research.

2.4.1 Understanding thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyse and report patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In contrast to other qualitative methods, it means it is flexible and can be used within a variety of epistemological and methodological standpoints. This approach uses a step-by-step approach of coding, theme extraction, and interpretation, which allows the

researcher to form a comprehensive, coherent account of participant experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Thematic analysis may be inductive, whereby themes are derived from the data and not constrained by existing theoretical or conceptual frameworks, or deductive, whereby themes emerge from existing literature and theoretical understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This flexibility allows it to be used across a range of topics while also ensuring the depth and rigour of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, it can be conducted at a semantic level (focusing on surface meanings) or at a latent level (focusing on underlying assumptions and ideologies) (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

2.4.2 Relevance to the research

2.4.2.1 Focus on subjective experiences

Thematic analysis is a good fit for the exploration of participants' subjective experiences and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is therefore congruent with a critical realist social constructivist inquiry. The topic of this study requires a methodological approach that enables the personal narratives of the participants to be heard. As such, by using thematic analysis, it becomes possible for the study to elicit the richness of these narratives and patterns that reflect shared and individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4.2.2 Flexibility

The flexibility of thematic analysis as a method is another reason for its wide use (Braun & Clarke 2006). It is more flexible and less prescriptive, unlike other approaches such as grounded theory, which follows a very strict sequence of stages. This flexibility ensures that the researcher can adapt the method to the demands of the particular study, if necessary by emphasising certain aspects of the data or adding theoretical insights (Braun & Clarke,

2006). This flexibility is particularly important for this piece of research which is looking at individuals' experiences at different life stages and exploring broad patterns and idiosyncratic variations.

2.4.2.3 Contextual Sensitivity

Thematic analysis is well suited to capturing the cultural and social aspects of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke 2006), which is consistent with the ontological and epistemological stance of this study. It identifies nuanced themes, and can therefore uncover how wider social contexts, for example, the heteronormative conditioning of sport, influence how participants feel within those spaces. Such contextual sensitivity helps to situate their perspectives within wider social and cultural trends, as opposed to just describing their views (Terry et al., 2017).

2.4.3 Other qualitative analysis approaches

In order to justify the thematic analysis, it is important to contrast it with the other qualitative methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), grounded theory, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis. Each of these has their strengths and weaknesses, yet thematic analysis was chosen as it is aligned to the epistemological and ontological position of the study and serves the purpose of addressing the research questions.

2.4.3.1 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is focused on self-reported and narrative accounts and intends to explore the ways in which participants have made sense of their experiences and the role of meaning-making and interpretation by the researcher (Smith et al., 2009). It is grounded in a double hermeneutic process, where the participant makes sense of their experience, followed by the researcher interpreting that sense-making. Given

that it is idiographic in nature, and that IPA studies usually use small groups of similar participants, it is especially appropriate for detailed, interpretive individual-level analyses. Although IPA might have been suitable to employ in this study, its consideration of individual sense-making would narrow the discovery of more general patterns across participants. As the study is an in-depth study of the shared experiences of gay men in team sport, a thematic analysis was considered to be more appropriate.

2.4.3.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a rigorous, qualitative research approach developed to construct theories grounded in the data using analytic step-by-step procedures for gathering and analysing data (Charmaz, 2014). It focuses on continual comparison and developing conceptual categories through emergent coding. Although the grounded theory is useful for theory generation, it tends to fit with epistemological orientations from positivism to constructivism. Based on critical realism and social constructivism, this research does not seek to develop new theories but rather to make sense, interpret, and understand the experiences of the research participants within specific social contexts. In addition, it is possible that the systematic nature of grounded theory could restrict the flexibility necessary for the examination of rich and nuanced participant stories. In contrast, thematic analysis provides a more flexible interpretive inquiry into the data, without the need for theory to be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4.3.3 Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis explores how people construct, interpret, and use stories to make sense of their experiences and to build and represent identity. It highlights key narrative features such as structure (chronological sequencing, plot, resolution), temporality, and

coherence (Riessman, 2008). It can provide insight into how individuals formulate and articulate their lived experiences. Even though narrative analysis may have offered a rich understanding of how gay men make sense of their identities and experiences in team sports, it would have focused too much on the structure and content of individual stories, rather than allowing patterns to emerge across multiple stories. It was concluded that thematic analysis was methodologically more appropriate due to the study's aim to explore patterns and shared meanings.

2.4.3.4 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis investigates how language constructs social reality, power dynamics, and identity (Fairclough, 1995). It is particularly useful for examining how dominant discourses and institutional norms shape the ways individuals articulate and interpret their experiences. Although discourse analysis could help explain how heteronormative discourses in sport culture impact gay men's experiences, its main concern is with the structure and functioning of language and would not be well suited to exploring participants' feelings and emotions. Since the study wants to examine subjective realities as well as cultural patterns represented in the data, thematic analysis was deemed more appropriate than discourse analysis.

2.5 Quality assurance

When carrying out any kind of qualitative research, it is important for researchers to assess the rigour of their studies, this is particularly important while taking a critical realist social constructivist stance (Bogna & Dell, 2020). It is accepted that the way people make sense of their experiences is a socially and culturally contingent process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This research considered the experiences of gay men in team sports at

different life stages and their pathways to participation in LGBTQ+ sports teams and the extent to which they influenced their identity and sense of self. Consistent with the interpretive paradigm of the study and the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the quality assessment was based on the principles of transparency, reflexivity, ethical sensitivity, and coherence, rather than objective or positivist criteria such as replicability.

The study used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Qualitative Checklist (CASP, 2018) as a template to evaluate the robustness of the study and to underpin this approach. CASP offers a flexible yet structured 'toolkit' to enable critical and reflexive analysis of study design, data collection, positionality of the researcher and depth of analysis - all of which are relevant when working with marginalised groups and complex processes of identity (Tong et al., 2007). Its use served to ensure trustworthiness and transparency of the research, whilst also remaining philosophically congruent with the critical realist social constructivist approach of the study. The ways in which this research met the criteria of the CASP are detailed in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Critical Appraisal Using the CASP Qualitative Checklist

CASP Question	Response
Q1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes – The aims of the research have been clearly stated in the Introduction chapter.
Q2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes – A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as the aims were to gain insights into the lived experiences of participants.
Q3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes – Carrying out semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to collect rich, nuanced data by enabling participants to share their subjective experiences in their own words. Using

CASP Question	Response
Q4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	<p>thematic analysis supported an inductive exploration of the themes.</p> <p>Yes – Purposive sampling was used to recruit people who identified as cisgender gay men and were members of LGBTQ+ sports teams in the UK. This strategy was appropriate as it was in line with the study’s aims to explore the lived experiences of a particular sample of the population.</p>
Q5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	<p>Yes – Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. The interview guide was reviewed by a research supervisor and assessed as aligning with the research aims. Interviews were carried out online to allow for countrywide recruitment. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.</p>
Q6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	<p>Yes – The researcher reported on their positionality in the methodology and reported on self-reflexive measures used to manage their own biases when conducting the research. Relevant details on the researcher’s positionality were also shared in the participant information sheet so that participants were consenting to interviews with the researcher in an informed way.</p>
Q7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	<p>Yes – Ethical approval was granted by the University of Essex Sub-Committee 2. Informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw were all addressed prior to participation.</p>
Q8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	<p>Yes – Data were analysed by following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis. This is a widely accepted analytic approach for qualitative research.</p>
Q9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	<p>Yes – Clear, well-defined themes and subthemes are presented in the results. These are explored in further detail in the discussion chapter.</p>
Q10. How valuable is the research?	<p>The study proposes a novel integrated conceptual framework for understanding</p>

CASP Question	Response
	participants' experiences and provides new insights. The findings have important clinical implications and contribute to the research topic. Limitations and future research directions are outlined.

2.6 Research design and methodology

2.6.1 Design

2.6.1.1 Study setting

This study was conducted in the UK, with participants recruited from various locations across the country. It was not situated within any specific medical institution or organisation. However, it was affiliated with the University of Essex, where the researcher was based while completing their doctorate in clinical psychology.

2.6.1.2 Materials

Materials used in this project involved a research recruitment poster, participant information sheet (PIS), consent form, and a semi-structured interview script (see Appendices). All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. The recording feature on Microsoft Teams was used to record the interviews. These files were transferred to a secure hard drive and assigned a unique participant ID sequence, with the ID key stored separately on a password protected document. No potentially identifiable information was recorded in the interviews, and participants were cautioned against divulging identifiable details before the interview. Any inadvertent disclosures were deleted before transcription. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams and with grammatical errors edited. Once transcribed, the recordings were

deleted, and the transcribed documents securely stored on Box, the University of Essex's secure cloud-based storage platform.

The transcribed data underwent coding and thematic analysis using DELVE software (Delve, n.d.).

Demographic information was obtained at the beginning of each interview (Table 5). As the theoretical framework of this study is grounded in themes around identity, it was hoped that demographic information would add to the richness of the data. This information was stored on a password protected document with participant unique ID sequences.

The interview involved questions exploring participants' experiences of sport in school and university, and their journey to playing with an LGBTQ+ community sports team. The interview schedule was reviewed by two experts by experience and the research team to ensure questions were asked respectfully and were not too intrusive.

2.6.1.3 Participants and sampling method

A purposive sampling method was used to obtain participants from LGBTQ+ sports teams in the UK. As the lead researcher is a member of an LGBTQ+ hockey team in London, this club was excluded from the list of clubs to contact.

Using a publicly available list of LGBTQ+ sports clubs compiled by Pride Sports (<https://pridesports.org.uk/>), the lead researcher collated contact emails for relevant clubs. Pride Sports is an organisation representing UK LGBTQ+ sports clubs and teams with the aim of increasing LGBTQ+ participation in sport. This study was limited to participants who are involved in team sports as it is broadly interested in exploring the social aspects of being a gay man playing team sports. Before contacting the individual clubs, consent was obtained from Pride Sports trustees and co-chairs via email explaining the research.

An introductory email and research poster was forwarded to each club, and they agreed to share the poster on social media pages. The poster stated that participants would receive a £25 gift voucher as a token of appreciation, in line with ethical guidance on participant reimbursement (Health Research Authority, 2022). Interested participants contacted the lead researcher via email, as per details on the research poster.

2.6.1.4 Inclusion criteria

Identify as a cisgender gay man

≥18-year-old.

A current member of an LGBTQ+ sports club in the UK.

Have been a member for at least three months.

Taken part in a minimum of ten training sessions.

English-speaking.

2.6.1.5 Exclusion criteria

Deemed by the researcher to be unable to provide informed consent.

2.6.1.6 Sample size

A total of 35 participants contacted the lead researcher to express their interest in taking part in the study. However, due to funding limitations, data collection concluded after 27 interviews. On completion of the interviews, three interviews were excluded from the analysis as the participants had not met all the inclusion criteria. Therefore, the final study sample for analysis was 24 interviews.

Table 5*Participant demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Place of Birth	Religion
Fiachra	35	White Irish	Ireland	None
Nico	41	White Asian	UK	Methodist
Jose	49	Asian – Filipino	The Philippines	Christianity
Anan	34	Thai	Thailand	Buddhist
Owen	28	White	UK	Atheist
Callum	46	White British	UK	Quaker
Rhys	45	White British	UK	None
Joel	23	White British	UK	Atheist
Darragh	28	White Irish	USA	Catholic
Dale	44	White British	UK	None
Niall	55	White British	South Africa	Atheist
Alastair	27	White British	UK	None
Matheus	31	Latino	Brazil	None
Miles	33	Mixed	UK	Christian
Jake	27	White British	UK	None
Tiago	42	Latino	Brazil	Christian
Neil	28	White British	UK	None
Sergio	35	White European	UK	None
Russell	44	White European	UK	Atheist
Ioan	28	White British	UK	Atheist

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Place of Birth	Religion
Cian	31	White Irish	Ireland	None
Lukas	33	White German	Germany	Christian
Jamie	28	White British	UK	None
Gareth	26	White British	UK	Atheist

2.6.1.7 Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) was used to analyse the data following the six-step process detailed below. In addition, the ten core assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) were held in mind while analysing the data.

1. Familiarisation with the data. This involved reading and re-reading through the interview transcriptions and making initial notes.

2. Coding involved reviewing the transcripts and identifying any potentially relevant sections within them. Each highlighted portion was assigned a shorthand label that summarised its content. After all the data was reviewed and coded, these labels were organised into groups based on similarity. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, coding began mainly at a semantic level, staying close to participants' explicit meanings while generating initial descriptive codes. As the researcher got more familiar with the dataset and theme development progressed, latent coding took place, which allowed underlying patterns, assumptions, and contextual meanings to be identified.

3. Themes were derived from the codes generated, which involved identifying patterns among them. These themes encompassed broader concepts than individual codes and

consolidated several codes into a single overarching theme. Codes that were overly vague or irrelevant were eliminated during this phase. The themes provided valuable insights into people's experiences of sport and playing for an LGBTQ+-friendly club.

4. Reviewing themes ensured their utility and accuracy as reflections of the data. This involved a thorough re-examination of the data and comparison with the identified themes to confirm their presence. Themes underwent changes, amendments, or were even discarded during this phase to ensure their alignment with the data.

5. Establishing and labelling themes consisted of two key steps: Defining themes to precisely articulate the essence of each theme and identify its contribution to making sense of the data; Naming the themes to develop clear and concise titles that capture the essence of the data within each theme.

6. Writing up the results for the doctoral thesis project and disseminating the research.

2.6.1.8 Ethical consideration

The British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) guides members on professional conduct, with a focus on four primary ethical principles: respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity. Within this document there are specific research guidelines contained within the Code of Human Research Ethics and Practice Guidelines. All stages of this research adhered to these guidelines, as detailed in the following sections.

2.6.1.9 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Essex Research Sub-Committee 2.

2.6.1.10 Informed consent

When participants expressed interest in taking part in the research, they were provided with the PIS via email. The PIS explained the purpose of the project and what was required of

them in relation to time commitment. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions that they were not comfortable with. The PIS stated that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw from the study. However, the PIS informed participants that it would not be possible to withdraw their anonymised data two weeks after their interview had taken place due to the commencement of the analysis phase. Participants were invited to contact the lead researcher via email if they had any questions at this point.

In addition to the PIS, participants were sent a dedicated secure link to SignWell where they could read and sign their individual consent form. Only participants who signed the consent form took part. At the beginning of each interview, consent was also obtained verbally to ensure that participants were consenting to take part. While gaining verbal consent, capacity to take part was also assessed by exploring individual's understanding of the research and what it entailed.

2.6.1.11 Confidentiality

At the beginning of each interview, the lead researcher informed participants of the limits of confidentiality and explained that they would need to liaise with their supervisor if participants shared information which raised safeguarding concerns for themselves or others (BPS, 2021).

2.6.1.12 Anonymity

During transcription, interviews were anonymised using pseudonyms and these transcripts were stored as password protected files on a secure university drive.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community in London, there was a possibility that the lead researcher may have inadvertently encountered London based participants in social

settings on completion of the research. Participants may have been conscious of this when taking part in the research and it was possible that this may have impacted how they engaged in the interview. However, it was hoped that participants felt safe in the knowledge that the lead researcher is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and that it would enhance their engagement. Participants were fully informed of the lead researcher's position in relation to the research within the information sheet and they needed to sign a specific question on the consent form acknowledging that they understood this.

2.6.1.13 Data storage

Each participant was assigned a unique identifier code and this code, along with participants' names, were stored in a password protected Excel file on a secure drive. In the case that a participant wished to withdraw from the study, these unique identifier codes could have been used to locate transcripts. The recordings of the interviews were stored as password protected files on a secure drive. Once transcription had taken place, the audio files were deleted.

2.6.1.14 Psychological Distress

This project did not recruit from a clinical population; however, it was possible that some participants who chose to take part may have had mental health difficulties or other vulnerabilities. The lead researcher was a trainee clinical psychologist with over ten years of experience working with clinical populations. Therefore, they were attuned to any distress displayed during interviews. If this were to occur, the researcher was prepared to check if the participant wanted to continue. If they did not want to continue, a risk protocol would have been followed.

In addition, a debrief was offered after each interview, and participants were directed to relevant support services if necessary. This information was included in the PIS. Finally, the lead research supervisor is a qualified clinical psychologist. If any participants were to become distressed, the research supervisor was available to discuss further to ensure that correct protocols were adhered to.

Chapter 3: Results

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter provides the final themes and subthemes identified from the data. Quotes from participant interviews are used to develop an in-depth analysis of the uncovered themes and subthemes. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to comply with ethical standards.

Table 6

Interview order, pseudonym, and duration of interview (N = 24)

Interview Order	Pseudonym	Duration of Interview (hr:min:sec)
1	Callum	01:20:03
2	Owen	00:57:10
3	Rhys	00:55:30
4	Anan	00:56:21
5	Darragh	01:04:51
6	Miles	00:54:59
7	Nico	00:58:19
8	Fiachra	00:53:12
9	Joel	01:15:24
10	Dale	01:06:52
11	Sergio	01:11:29
12	Tiago	01:19:01
13	Alastair	01:18:34
14	Niall	00:59:19
15	Matheus	00:47:00
16	Lukas	01:12:57

Interview Order	Pseudonym	Duration of Interview (hr:min:sec)
17	Jake	01:22:39
18	Neil	01:15:54
19	Cian	01:21:46
20	Ioan	00:55:57
21	Jose	00:46:55
22	Russell	01:26:11
23	Alan	00:48:48
24	Gareth	00:54:08

3.2 Themes and subthemes

Following a thematic analysis, six main themes were identified, with 19 subthemes. These will be discussed, and relevant participants' quotes will be included to support the subthemes. Table 7 shows an overview of the final themes and subthemes.

Table 7

Overview of themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Early expectations of sport engagement	Family influence Societal and cultural expectations Peer pressure
Barriers to participation	Experiences of homophobia Role of authority figures Love of sport vs. emotional burden
Masculinity, identity, and sexuality	Homophobia in sport Pressure to conform

Theme	Subtheme
Redefining relationship with sport	Reframing regret and shifting blame Affirming spaces and skill development Shifting motivations
LGBTQ+ teams as transformative spaces	Reclaiming identity/true self Finding safety in sport Psychological growth and healing Discovering new strengths
Finding belonging in LGBTQ+ teams	Shared queer identity and understanding Developing meaningful relationships Inclusivity Comparison to straight teams

3.2.1 Theme 1: Early expectations of sport engagement

From a young age, participants' relationship with sport was heavily shaped by their social contexts, and often before they had any awareness of their sexual identity. This theme explores how early expectations, from family, culture, and peers, laid the foundation for later experiences of sport. The subthemes illustrate the multifaceted ways young boys are introduced to sport and show how sport represented a key site where masculinity, belonging, and identity were first navigated.

Family Influence

From the data it seems that family members' attitudes toward sport influenced participants' early involvement in sport. Some grew up in families that encouraged or even expected participation, while other families placed less emphasis on sport. Several men relayed how their family members introduced them to sports or modelled sporting abilities. Even when parents did not play sports themselves, they often encouraged sports involvement. Nico recounted the importance his father placed on playing football:

My dad had always really been into sports. He didn't play, but he kind of pushed me into playing [football]. I guess I probably didn't really feel like I had a choice haha. But I just got on with it.

Ioan described how his mother supported his brother's football and took him along to matches, eventually leading to him taking part:

Neither of my parents really played sport, but my mum often gave my brother lifts to football matches, and she'd encourage me to go along. I didn't want to play, but there was always like that gentle nudge to maybe give it a go. Eventually I did, just cos I got tired of the nudges.

Sport was portrayed as a positive outlet and a way to socialise or develop skills. It seems that participants' families often valued sport as a way of staying active or teaching discipline. Some participants noted that their parents' encouragement was less about performance and more about participation and keeping busy. For example, Rhys said his parents wanted him and his siblings "out of the house at the weekends". Owen, whose father was a rugby coach and whose older brother played, recalled how his family were supportive and encouraged him to try anything: "We were always encouraged that if we've got spare time... be outside doing something. They were very much a family of go and give something a go. If we can get you there, we will."

However, some participants grew up in families who appeared to be indifferent to sport. Alan shared that no one in his family played sports or pushed him to do so, and that he pursued athletics and rugby due to his own interest:

Honestly, off the top of my head, no one in my family played sports. So, my dad wasn't into sports, my mum wasn't into sports, and I grew up with three older brothers, and

they weren't particularly sporty either. I think at school I was the only one that really took an interest in sports myself.

Societal and cultural expectations

In addition to the role that family played, broader societal and cultural norms strongly influenced participants' early involvement in sports. Many participants grew up in communities where boys were expected to play sports and this provided a level of acceptance and social status. Several described living in communities where specific sports were idealised and took priority. For example, Tiago, explained how football is embedded in Brazilian culture, and there's an expectation that boys play football: "I'm Brazilian, so obviously football is big. It's a huge part of our culture. If you were a boy, you had to play football. Otherwise, there was something wrong with you."

Other participants described how this situation varied in different ways by location and how sport was intertwined with identity as well. Alastair noted how football was linked to religion and family tradition, which created a cultural pressure to play football.

So, me and my family, there's...predominantly, we're all Catholic. So, within that and within Glasgow as well, there's, you know, Celtic, it's the kind of Holy Grail. And you know it's kind of eh, it's just yeah, it's just embedded within it that you follow Celtic. Me personally, I don't really see it this way, but I guess from years gone by it's been em, linked to religion.

In contrast, participants who had relocated from their country of birth sometimes experienced a sense of disconnection. Sergio, who moved from Spain to the UK as a child, found that sports accessibility and norms differed: "In Spain everyone plays every sport. In the UK, class plays a role in what sport you play."

Sergio's observation points to another layer of complexity where class also plays a role. In addition to feeling "very much the outsider" when attempting to play new sports such as cricket, he also sensed class-based exclusion. This highlights that cultural expectations around sport can either include or exclude, and for a young gay person, these added barriers may intensify feelings of otherness.

Peer Pressure

Participants spoke about experiencing peer pressure to conform and engage in sports. In school settings, many participants felt pressured by friends to join in, or they were teased and bullied by others, which pushed them to participate. Several men reported that most of their friend groups played sports, so they felt compelled to play. Russell described a felt pressure from his friends:

Most of my friends played rugby and I never really had an interest. But you know they'd always take the piss out of you for not playing and it's like, to kind of avoid the attention, you just do it. To avoid the hassle.

Cian recalled an internal peer-related drive where he wanted to excel at football, partly to avoid derision from other students: "I internally wanted to be really good at football because if somebody was ever to turn around and say anything, I could say well I'm better than you at football." This quote illustrates how peer competition and fear of judgement fuelled perfectionism. Cian's self-imposed pressure to perform well was a pre-emptive strategy to protect against the stress of peer pressure.

It can also be seen from the accounts that the interviewees felt a pressure to be able to achieve certain standards in sports, and if they were not seen to meet these standards, they

risked experiencing general ridicule or more targeted homophobia. Callum openly acknowledged how he contributed to this type of culture:

And, you know, I'm bold enough and brave enough to say that I probably bought into that culture at the time. That's what you did, you know, back at school, back in the day. And, you know, things like "Don't throw like a jessie or don't be such a faggot.", excuse my language. But you're a big bollocks back then, and you know all these kinds of gay slurs. It was just what was commonplace.

From a young age, boys learned that incompetence within sport would be linked to being gay or feminine, highlighting heterosexist peer culture that young people are often faced with. Such remarks not only pressured participants to perform well in sports but also taught them that being gay, or to be suspected of it, was shameful in sport contexts.

This theme highlights how participants' earliest sporting experiences were influenced by external pressures and cultural narratives that prescribed how boys and young men were 'supposed to' behave. The subthemes link together to show how sport became a space where they felt pressured to conform to masculine stereotypes, where individuals were often rewarded for conforming, and others were alienated for not. These early encounters were formative, setting the scene for the complicated relationship many participants later developed with sport as gay men.

3.2.2 Theme 2: Barriers to participation

As participants developed into adolescence and started to either question or become more aware of their sexual identity, they began to encounter significant barriers within sports environments. These ranged from overt discrimination to more subtle but equally harmful experiences of exclusion. The subthemes demonstrate the psychological impact that being in

these sports settings, which felt unsafe or hostile, had on the individuals in the study. Each subtheme reveals a different layer of this hostility, collectively showing the systemic nature of the marginalisation.

Experiences of homophobia

Many participants described experiences of hearing homophobic language or encountering negative attitudes towards gay people in sport environment, during secondary school and university. Direct homophobia involved slurs and insults being directed at participants. For some, their experience of homophobia was more indirect, not always aimed at them personally (especially if they had not revealed their sexual identity), but present in the culture and therefore, implicitly threatening.

Participants detailed how students and teammates often used 'gay' as an insult and joked about people's sexuality. Anan recalled it being "very common for people to say that things were gay or to make fun of people being gay". These comments signalled that being gay was something to be ashamed of in sports settings. As noted by Cian, "there was a lot of like homophobic stuff...very bad culture" which made him "wary of other people".

Gareth described the longstanding impact of his experiences of homophobia in school sports settings which resulted in him choosing to stop playing sports in adolescence.

I'm still not like fully over that like relationship with homophobia and sport. Like, that's still a thing for me and I think it always will be. And like I know, I'm 27, so it's been a long time since I've been at school. But like some of those challenges I faced there...like I still don't...don't use urinals. And em, you know, it's been 11 years. But like some of those challenges are ingrained and will probably always be ingrained.

Jake spoke about his reasons for pulling away from sport in university.

And it got back to me through one of my friends that one of the more senior players in the club who played on the first team had been going around calling me a faggot and like, it was just unpleasant. And it made me not want to go back.

This example displays how hierarchies within sport can allow homophobia to exist. Such incidents caused severe anxiety among the participants which influenced their relationship with sport. Importantly, several participants did not publicly identify as gay when they were younger yet still suffered homophobia due to gender non-conformity or rumours being spread. The fear of being 'outed' or targeted led to constant self-monitoring, resulting in many participants withdrawing from sport completely.

Intimidation and exclusion were common experiences among the participants who were perceived as 'different' to their peers. Intimidation included physical and verbal aggression, while exclusion often took the form of being picked last or being left on the bench.

Anan recalled, "I wasn't the best player, so I wasn't the first person someone would pick.", which left him feeling inadequate. Lukas reported "At school, I was always picked last. It really stayed with me...like a feeling of not being wanted."

Social exclusion also occurred in more subtle ways for other participants. Jake shared that after 'coming out', some of his friendships changed: "There were people on the team who I was close friends with who distanced themselves when they found out I was gay." Jake spoke about the pain of this loss and feelings of isolation within the team. For young gay men, such ostracism by peers can confirm their worst fear of unacceptability, reinforcing internalised shame and homophobia.

Other participants admitted that they engaged in verbal intimidation of others as a way to protect themselves. Alan reflected, “I probably even said things that I regret now. But it was a way to still be a part of sport and avoid being the target of all the negative stuff.”

Intimidation was experienced by others more severely through physical aggression and the fear of further physical aggression prevented some participants from continuing with sports in school. Tiago stated that his negative experiences “handicapped” him in life due to fear and anxiety, adding, “I had to run for my life, many times.” Neil described physical aggression within a school locker room:

The locker rooms were such a source of fear for me. That someone would see me looking at them, but also, they were a place that teachers didn't come into, so they weren't safe. And I got bullied and beaten up in the locker rooms more than once. And so did other people. You know, they were such a source of fear for me.

The hyper-masculine aggression often present in sports environments allowed individuals to act out their prejudices without being disciplined by authority figures. For those targeted by this behaviour, it fostered lasting trauma linked to their earlier involvement in sports.

Role of authority figures

Another barrier which caused participants to feel unsafe in sports settings during adolescence was the failure of authority figures in addressing homophobia and inclusion. Participants largely remembered authority figures as either passive bystanders or contributing to the issue. Few participants recalled instances where authority figures proactively intervened to create a safe environment.

Several participants discussed experiences where teachers witnessed homophobic behaviour and did not act on it. Niall shared, “It was happening in the presence of teachers, and they didn’t do anything. Adults don’t either believe or care about the issue, so you’re basically on your own.” Miles echoed this, “It was happening in front of teachers, and they never called people out. Sometimes they kind of found it funny as well.” These accounts are examples of authority figures neglecting the safety of young LGBTQ+ people. The implied message to the young gay men in this sample was that the institutions condoned the homophobic behaviour and did not value their safety.

Participants reflected on how some authority figures were subtle with their own prejudices. Callum suspected that one of his teachers was “quite homophobic” and that he didn’t want him on the running team. Prejudices held by those in positions of authority often surface through subtle actions, such as overlooking individuals during team selection or ignoring exclusionary remarks and can limit opportunities for young gay people to engage in sport.

In some cases, when support was directly sought from teachers, staff failed to advocate or support students. When Gareth went to speak to the pastoral team after encountering homophobia on his football team, they chose to ignore the bullying and focus on Gareth’s sexuality being the issue.

The example that stands out to me around like the impact that an adult had on me at that time is like when it [bullying] got really bad. I went to see like one of the pastoral team and I was like, “Look, I’m having an absolute shocker of the time”. And I told them I’m gay and about the bullying. They were like, “Oh well, how do you really know that you’re gay, like it’s probably just a phase.”

There were some participants who reported positive experiences of authority figures adopting inclusive practices. Joel recalled a teacher who embodied inclusivity in sport, reporting “he was quite instrumental in how important inclusion in sport is to me.” Such figures demonstrate the potential protective role of supportive adults. They enhance a young person’s confidence, counteracting the impact of negative exchanges with peers.

Love of sport vs. emotional burden

A difficulty running through many of the stories was the conflict between participants’ genuine love of sport and the emotional burden that sport environments imposed on them. Despite the discrimination and fear impacting their relationship with sport, many spoke about their passion for the sport. Unfortunately, for many, the emotional burden outweighed the passion during times when they did not have the support.

Fiachra highlighted how his love for rugby was overshadowed by his difficult experiences in university and the emotional toll they took:

So, it kind of just reinforced this atmosphere, and I knew it was not an environment where I would ever be comfortable to come out or tell anyone about me being gay. It was just something that didn’t feel right for me. Which kind of was one of the reasons, it was an area of nerves for me, I think...it's a shame that there was that sort of atmosphere around it and that I wasn't kind of able to enjoy it [rugby] and kind of take part in it as an unselfconscious need, maybe, as some other people did.

This example highlights a difficulty shared by many, an inability to enjoy sport without the need to be hypervigilant. Fiachra’s use of the word ‘unselfconscious’ points to the shame he was experiencing, which prevented him from engaging in sport in a carefree way.

Matheus described how the emotional burden caused him to reach a breaking point: “it kind of came to a boiling point. I realised I was gay.... I quit because I didn’t want to be out on the team.” Matheus’s fear of being ‘outed’ or targeted was overwhelming and led to him giving up sport.

Participants recounted how the culture within university sports created environments that did not feel safe for gay men or men who were questioning their sexuality. Alastair spoke of his experiences of playing football in university:

There was a lot of terminology that were kind of flung about, which is something that it was, it was triggering for me and felt like it wasn't something I wanted to be a part of... It just felt like an environment that I didn't really want to be in. And I used to be a very active person in terms of sports and like football, the gym and running as well. I stopped doing all of that and it definitely did knock my confidence.

The above subthemes provide a picture of sporting environments that systematically alienated participants through language, behaviours, and institutional neglect. Even though many of the interviewees had a genuine love for sport, the emotional burden and lack of support proved too overwhelming and challenging for them. The way in which the subthemes are all connected, displays how the sporting community often failed young LGBTQ+ individuals, not only through active harm but through silence, inaction, and a lack of safe spaces. This theme begins to introduce some understanding of the highly personal reasons why finding their way back to sport later in life has been so meaningful for the men in this study.

3.2.3 Theme 3: Masculinity, identity, and sexuality

This theme reveals how participants negotiated their identities within the hyper-masculine culture of sport, and it explores the internal strategies they adopted to survive in these environments. Once again, the subthemes are connected and highlight how expectations of hegemonic masculinity forced participants to suppress core aspects of themselves in order to be accepted.

Homophobia in sport

While homophobic incidents were covered in Theme 2, within this subtheme, participants discussed homophobia as an ingrained part of sports culture. This subtheme reinforces the argument that mainstream sports environments are structurally or culturally discriminatory toward gay people. This recognition often came in hindsight or once they experienced an inclusive environment and could contrast it with mainstream sports settings.

Jose spoke about his experiences of homophobia in sport, “If you win, you are the man, you are the big guy, otherwise you’re queer”. This quote links sporting success with heterosexual masculinity and failure with being queer. It shows how homophobia is woven into expectations of sports performance, and it becomes about playing well to affirm heterosexuality. For young gay men, losing or making mistakes can provoke homophobic ridicule, which creates a challenging environment in sports settings.

Others noted that homophobia is deeply entrenched in sport, and it’s difficult for it to go unnoticed. Gareth stated: “You don’t have to scratch very far below the surface to get to people’s homophobia,” A consistent thread was that being openly gay in a mainstream team would be extremely difficult due to levels of homophobia. Individuals reflected on how they probably wouldn’t have come out at all if they had stayed in mainstream teams. For example, Jake said:

Looking back now, I can't see how I ever would have come out had I stayed playing with that team. Like the amount of homophobic abuse people hurled at other teams. Actually, our own team members as well. Shocking. How is someone supposed to feel safe with all that shit going on.

Some participants even encountered negative views on LGBTQ+ people within inclusive settings. Darragh shared that “one of our players was quite badly transphobically abused by another player who was playing for another team.” Neil said, “even within the [club name] there is effeminophobia,” meaning that even in a gay team, more feminine-presenting men might be judged negatively. This comment illustrates how deeply rooted masculine norms are and that in an inclusive LGBTQ+ sports environment some people may still value these over feminine norms, which may also be associated with internalised homophobia within the gay community. It also implies that the ideal of complete inclusivity of LGBTQ+ people in sport is not only about being inclusive, but also about questioning internal biases among LGBTQ+ people themselves.

Pressure to conform

A number of participants spoke about how they actively hid their sexuality, or parts of their identity while in mainstream sports to avoid bullying and gain approval from peers. For a lot of the interviewees, the act of masking had begun well before they had ever been able to be open about their sexuality, and this was driven by their fears of having someone identify them as gay before they were ready to share this part of their identity. “I was very conscious of like the way I was walking or speaking. I was trying to monitor as much as possible.” –

Anan

Similarly, Cian stated:

I was conscious of the way I talked because I didn't want to be perceived as gay. So, I didn't want to have, like, a feminine voice, I wanted to have a masculine voice. But I dunno, I would pick up the way people talk and act or the way they they're saying things.

Fiachra recalled how he engaged in active self-monitoring to manage his anxieties around people finding out he was gay:

There was quite a lot of pressure to kind of be under the radar, trying to be like, don't let them know this, don't let them know that. Then I think that would tie in with the anxiety about the rugby because like, or whatever sports, because not being good at that was maybe a potential like indication that I was gay.

These quotes highlight the difficulty individuals had with regard to living spontaneously because their anxiety of being found out caused them to focus on monitoring their behaviour, as opposed to enjoying the sport. Fiachra's reflection points to an internalised stereotype that being gay equated to not being good at sports, which was also shared by other participants. Furthermore, it depicts how individuals repeatedly engaged in an internal dialogue as a way to protect themselves against any potential discrimination.

A number of participants avoided any conversations relating to personal topics such as romantic relationships. For example, Lukas reported, "I just avoided situations where I had to talk about girlfriends or dating." Again, highlighting the enduring nature of the masking and how it infiltrated into every part of their identity.

As well as feeling the need to hide their sexuality when playing for mainstream sports teams, participants also experienced a lot of pressure to adopt social norms in relation to being hypermasculine and aggressive.

For example, Russell recounted going on a date with a girl “just to feel part of something and because others were doing it”. This behaviour is as a result of peer pressure to conform, whereby he engaged in behaviour in an attempt to portray masculine norms.

Many of the men felt that they had to conform to certain cultures and group behaviours to be accepted, even when they did not align with their own personality or values. Cian noted, “Football was just lads pulling girls, that’s all they talked about. I didn’t feel like I could say anything, but I had to just go along with it.”

This felt pressure not only revolved around sexual identity but also included people’s demeanour and they felt that they had to adopt a tough and competitive image. Alan described a coach who encouraged aggression and shouting, which caused him to feel pressured into behaving like this:

I wasn’t like that, it wasn’t me. But I had to push myself to be like that because otherwise I would have stood out. And you don’t want to stand out at that stage. Especially when you’re coming to terms with being gay.

As with other participants, Alan pushed himself to conform as a way of avoiding ridicule and further stress. Similarly, Alastair mentioned, “There’s this boisterous environment... you had to have a certain persona.” The expectation was that people should align with hegemonic masculine ideals such as loud, dominant, and emotionally tough.

Underlying the above pressures were entrenched masculine stereotypes in sport. Participants frequently referenced these stereotypes, such as being strong, aggressive, competitive, and unequivocally heterosexual. They reported how these stereotypes contributed to their marginalisation and to their own internal doubts about belonging.

Each subtheme conveys a different layer of the same struggle where participants were navigating how to be a gay man in spaces where masculinity was narrowly defined and strictly policed. They became adept at 'fitting' into these spaces by concealing and abandoning particular parts of their identities, resulting in deep emotional pain at times. The theme illustrates that homophobia in sport is not just about slurs or exclusion, but about deeply embedded norms that dictate whether people feel like they belong. These internalised pressures often followed participants into adulthood, influencing how they related to sport and to themselves.

3.2.4 Theme 4: Redefining relationship with sport

After years of disengagement, many participants reconnected with sport through LGBTQ+ clubs. The subthemes convey how LGBTQ+ teams offered both a second chance and a corrective emotional experience where participants were able to redefine their relationship with sport.

Reframing regret and shifting blame

Participants shared their regrets about the time they lost or opportunities they missed in sport due to disengagement. For many, the process of returning to sport with LGBTQ+ teams became a means to heal from the regret and self-blame. Interviewees spoke candidly about the emotional complexity of their earlier disengagement, often linked to fear, isolation, or a lack of belonging. While regret was a common thread, participants were able to reframe these experiences as understandable responses to hostile environments, as opposed to personal failings. Dale shared his reflections:

I used to think it was me you know. Like I look back at that 14-year-old me and it's sad like because you do, you think it's you. You think you should be stronger and toughen up

or whatever. But now obviously I can see that it wasn't me, it was the whole setup, the environment and the people.

From many of the accounts, it was evident that the men learned to shift the locus of blame away from themselves and towards the broader societal issues that marginalised them. By playing with LGBTQ+ teams, they were in environments where emotional safety, camaraderie, and acceptance were prioritised. Through this experience, participants saw that it was possible to take part in sport within a supportive environment.

Jose spoke of his sadness for giving up football:

It is sad because it's about what could have been, maybe my life would have been completely different. Football was my life to a certain age. So, yeah, you never know what could have been. But at the end of the day, I don't blame myself anymore, I blame the culture that pushed me out.

Lukas poignantly spoke of a sense of forgiveness that he felt towards his younger self:

I've made peace with all that now though. I was just doing what I had to do to protect myself. But now I get to be part of a team and play. I'm doing it on my own terms really.

Several participants found a sense of closure by contextualising their past decisions through the lens of social exclusion. This enabled them to not only re-engage with sport but also reshape their sense of self.

Affirming spaces and skill development

The data showed that even after joining LGBTQ+ teams, participants still carried fears of judgment from their early exposure to sport. However, through positive experiences and support within an LGBTQ+ club, they managed to overcome these fears and recognise their own abilities. Niall described his experience:

I used to dread PE at school because I always felt like everyone was watching me, waiting for me to mess up. It wasn't just about being bad at sport, it was this constant fear of being laughed at or called names.... I still had that fear of being judged when I joined and it didn't go away overnight. But gradually you realise that nobody cares if you're not the best or if you mess up. All they care about is that you're there having fun. It's all about the good vibes you know.

Dale shared a similar reflection, recalling how his fear of judgement in his younger years acted as a barrier to team sports: "From my teens like, team sports were a 'no go' for me..... Just the idea of people looking at me thinking 'What the hell is he at?' But now I don't have that."

Like Dale, joining an LGBTQ+ club enabled participants to work through that fear over time: "Here, it's more about being part of something. There's no one judging you for how you run or kick a ball. It's just about having a go." - Ioan

For Rhys, fear of judgment had always centred around how he presented himself and the judgement of that: "I worried I was too 'camp' or not 'sporty' enough to be taken seriously.... Suddenly I was around people who didn't care about that. They were just happy to play and support each other."

Lukas spoke about his concerns and how they prevented him from engaging in sport:

Yeah, like I spent years thinking I didn't belong in sport because I thought others would see me as a joke, and like that's not good for the ego at that age. But playing with [club name] it eventually clicked that the fear was never really about me, it was about the environments I was in.

This subtheme highlights how deeply ingrained the fear of external judgment can be for gay men in sport, stemming from early experiences of being excluded or discriminated against. Many participants developed the belief that they were constantly being judged for their sporting ability and how they expressed themselves. Playing with LGBTQ+ teams provided them with a space where enjoying the sport was prioritised over how well they performed. As a result, participants were able to slowly unlearn those fears and experience what it's like to be a part of a team without a constant fear of judgement.

For many, being a part of these clubs marked the first time they experienced a sports setting as conducive to developing in their chosen sport. This experience appeared to be critical for creating an environment where they felt able to focus on improvement. Alastair highlighted these benefits:

The club is about developing people in a safe space without all the other stress. I know that I don't have to be perfect, I can just go along and be a part of it. For me, when you take all the other pressures away that gay men feel in these, I guess heterosexual environments, you'd be amazed at how we can actually thrive.

This quote depicts a shift from sport being experienced as a source of anxiety and towards it being a place of acceptance, non-judgement, and encouragement. Participants frequently contrasted their current experiences with past involvement in predominantly heterosexual sporting environments. In addition, the dynamics within clubs were noted as being paramount to people feeling safe. Gareth described a nurturing environment in his club: "It's like a kind of nurturing environment, like you're being taken care of... everyone just wants you to get better if that's what you want, which helps a lot. And I've never had that

before." This quote highlights how a culture of collective care can enable progression and reframe sport as a place where people feel empowered rather than excluded.

Importantly, these safe spaces were not simply about people feeling protected but also spaces where they felt they could grow. Several participants described improvements in their sporting ability, attributing their development to both formal coaching and the informal encouragement provided by teammates.

Joel noted, "I've got a lot better at cricket since joining. This is the first coaching I've had since school... I mean there's something in that you know. Something about the general ethos that makes a difference."

Ioan remarked, "I never thought I'd actually get better. As in I just joined for the social element, but we even got promoted last season which is mad. It's great."

Shifting Motivations

It was noted that participants' motivations to play team sport changed over time. They recognised that their earlier motivations to play sport when they were younger centred around trying to prove something or even hide their sexuality, but now they acknowledged a shift in motivation related to their membership of an LGBTQ+ club.

Joel shared: "Now I play because I want to and I enjoy it, not because I want to prove anything.... When I was younger, it was all about keeping that image." This quote indicates that the external pressures which were present in earlier years are not the driving force. Participants no longer link sporting performance with masculinity or worth, instead it is about the intrinsic joy they get from taking part.

Several participants communicated a shift from personal motives to more team-oriented motives. Initially, their motivations were focused on personal health or enjoyment,

but as they became more embedded in the club, they developed a sense of ownership and responsibility. Niall noted: “When I first joined, it was mostly for me and to get a bit healthier. But now I actually want to help keep it going.”

While other participants acknowledged a shift within their personal motives. Russell said:

Look, I’ll be honest, when I was looking for a club, I was going on their Insta pages and seeing who had the hottest guys haha. And that was it, I just wanted to meet fit guys. But now genuinely I’m actually loving being fitter and healthier than I’ve ever been, so yeah, I think that’s the driver now.

On realising their abilities, some individuals became motivated by getting better and being competitive. Matheus explained:

When I joined, it was more about meeting queer people because I had just come out of a long-term relationship, and I needed new friends. But then I started taking training seriously and started getting selected for matches. Now I’m thinking about joining another club as well... they’re a bit more competitive.

Many participants talked about how they now have more reasons to play, and they see themselves playing for much longer than they originally thought. While some acknowledged that they are playing less as they get older but hope to stay involved in other ways (e.g., coaching, admin).

Through their re-engagement with sport in affirming spaces, participants reframed their past negative experiences not as personal failures, but as understandable responses to hostile systems and spaces that were not set up for them. The subthemes illustrate how safety,

acceptance, and encouragement enabled participants to reconnect with their sporting identities.

3.2.5 Theme 5: LGBTQ+ teams as transformative spaces

LGBTQ+ teams did more than offer a safe return to sport, they became spaces of personal transformation. This theme captures the ways that healing and growth took place and involved participants developing their identity, improved mental health, and finding new skills. The subthemes demonstrate how inclusive teams functioned as catalysts for change, and they are linked by the idea that authenticity and acceptance can enhance confidence, connection, and sense of purpose.

Reclaiming identity / true self

A dominant narrative was that in LGBTQ+ teams, participants could finally be their true selves while playing sports, something they hadn't felt able to do before. They talked about rediscovering the joy of sport without the need to hide any part of their identity. This was often accompanied by language of freedom and authenticity which contrasts with their experiences of participating in mainstream teams.

For many, the first time stepping into a queer team space was revelatory. Fiachra recalled his experience of when he first joined his club:

It was the first time in a long time where I felt comfortable and enjoyed playing a team sport. I was like, "Wow, this is what it feels like. This is what it's like to play on a team and not feel different, to feel like I can just be me."

Feeling comfortable with who they are, while enjoying sport at the same time was a new experience for many participants. This experience seemed to be rooted in the knowledge that they knew they were not going to be judged for being gay. Jake noted: "You're never

gonna be judged for who you are. And that, that's something so freeing." The relief of not being judged or having to censor oneself allowed participants to reclaim their sporting identity as part of their whole self, not a separate persona.

Similar to Jake, many participants described feeling free:

The drive was to play a team sport and to be free and open. And I'm so much freer. It was like a cage had been removed from my chest. Literally. It's quite emotional thinking about it now. But at the time it was mind-blowing to me...that I could be a gay man *and* play rugby. - Dale

The emphasis on freedom points to a freedom from 'the mask', a freedom to talk about their sexual identity openly, a freedom to be a gay man on a sports field and make mistakes without being subjected to homophobia.

Participants frequently spoke of 'authenticity' and how being a part of an LGBTQ+ team enabled them to connect with the meaning of this on a deeper level. Neil shared:

Because for the first time I didn't have to conform, and I could be my authentic self. I could genuinely let down all the walls that I've been holding up for 30 years of my life. God. [Pause] You know, what we think or say or do, you know, playing a persona or acting a certain way or the expectations. All of that goes away because you can be yourself and there'll be no judgement.

Finding safety in sport

Another core aspect of people's experiences was the sense of safety they felt in LGBTQ+ clubs. In mainstream teams, individuals rarely felt safe; in contrast, the LGBTQ+ teams they joined actively fostered safety and inclusivity, and many participants explicitly described their teams as 'safe spaces'.

Participants frequently emphasised how pivotal this feeling of safety was to their participation. Following years of having to navigate environments where sport was often linked to discrimination or exclusion, many expressed a sense of relief within LGBTQ+ teams.

Certainly, within my team, I feel safe. It really is a safe space. You just get to go and play football without that added pressure or stigma. It's about being here, playing sport and feeling safe as a gay man. And I've not felt safe for a lot of my life. It is really significant. - Neil

This quote highlights how sport had been a source of anxiety in the past but now, it had become a space of safety and enjoyment.

The idea of safety extends beyond the absence of discrimination. For several participants, LGBTQ+ sports teams provided the only environment where they could freely engage with sport without fear of judgment. Tiago explained: “It’s a safe place to try sports out. If I’m trying something new, it has to be an LGBTQ group, because that’s where I feel safe now.” This illustrates how LGBTQ+ teams are spaces that enable people to explore, play, and participate on their own terms.

Lukas summed up the impact joining an LGBTQ+ team had on him: “It felt safe, like no one was going to judge me... I wasn’t the odd one out anymore.” This sense of psychological safety allowed individuals to participate more confidently while feeling safe and secure in expressing themselves.

Russell drew on psychological theory while reflecting on his relationship with safety in sport and linked it to basic human needs. His description indicates how the experience of

safety within LGBTQ+ teams is deeply impactful and provides needs which many participants had been denied elsewhere.

It's like a collective safety. You know that Maslow hierarchy of needs, that'll be kind of up there. Actually, it is about that, feeling safe... LGBTQ+ sports teams offer a kind of shelter... a fundamental building block of really, truly being able to be yourself and feel safe and contained.

Discovering new strengths

A significant outcome for many individuals was that LGBTQ+ teams became a platform for them to discover new strengths, particularly in leadership and advocacy roles. Participants spoke about feeling more confident to take on captaincy, coaching, committee roles, or outreach efforts. This represented a dramatic shift in their engagement with sport and illustrates a desire to empower others.

On a personal level, participants found strengths like assertiveness emerging. Dale said, "I've become more assertive as well. Yeah, just more bold in general. So, more willing to speak up and challenge things as well." This personal growth experienced by participants is likely due to LGBTQ+ clubs creating environments where people feel that their voices are valued, enabling them to further develop other skills.

Several participants took on formal leadership. Callum said:

I founded a team... I got a loan to buy the equipment.... I learnt so much from captaining and being in a group and I've got it wrong lots of times in my life, but it's had a huge impact on my leadership and as I've been a leader in my career. So, I think it became part of my identity very quickly.

Callum's response to exclusion was to create an inclusive team from the ground up, which enabled him to develop skills in a safe environment. Other participants later became captains or committee members of established clubs. Jake noted, "I'm on the committee and I help coach, run events, do social media for sponsorship and all that. It's made me feel like I'm doing something good."

Many participants referenced the pride they feel in contributing to their club and how leadership opportunities have given them a sense of purpose. This can be understood as a form of generativity, where efforts to enhance the experiences of other LGBTQ+ people can potentially act as a reparative experience.

Participants described helping to organise tournaments for Pride and supporting the club to take part in Pride marches. While others used their involvement in the club as a stepping stone to making a wider impact through founding larger organisations as a way of promoting inclusive sports. Callum spoke about his efforts to improve inclusivity in sport through leadership:

I'm one of the founders of [national organisation]. I came to [club name] to set up a club and now I've gone even further than that. I'm passionate about inclusivity and I just want it to be a case where people don't have to fight for it anymore.

These leadership endeavours indicate how empowered individuals have become since being a part of an LGBTQ+ club. They no longer feel like outsiders in sport and are now passionate about advocating for change within the wider sporting community.

Psychological growth and healing

One of the most powerful findings from joining LGBTQ+ sports teams was the healing effect on participants' mental health and wellbeing. Participants credited their team

involvement with reducing feelings of loneliness, improving mood, and increasing self-confidence and self-esteem. Participants' accounts describe how finding an inclusive team played a key role in improving their overall psychological wellbeing.

Nico spoke about how experiences of joining an LGBTQ+ team contrasts with his experiences in adolescence when he quit football due to feeling uncomfortable in the environment. He noted the impact it has had on other aspects of his life.

Mentally, I feel a lot stronger. I'm more confident and self-assured. Like, I'm fully okay with who I am now. And this has a knock-on effect in other areas of my life. My mental health, my relationships and friendships, my work. It has just helped with a lot.

Joel reported, "It's probably been the single most significant thing in the last 18 months for my mental wellbeing. And I've grown to be a more confident gay man. I'm just happier you know. More content." This statement further highlights how pivotal joining teams has been for participants, going beyond a reconnection with sport, and impacting how they now perceive themselves.

Participants continued to report the profound impact that joining LGBTQ+ clubs had on their mental health. Dale explained, "... there are ups and downs, but in general it's been an upward trend." Matheus shared:

So since joining [the club], like after four months, I stopped taking Sertraline, like with the NHS advising and everything. But I managed to stop.... That's what [the club] gave to me. I was feeling like myself again, because I had kind of lost myself.

This is a powerful reflection on the benefits of joining the LGBTQ+ club experienced by Matheus and illustrates how the club fulfilled social needs that in turn can help alleviate

symptoms of poor mental health. It should be noted that this is not to generalise that sport participation can replace medication, but it highlights the mental health benefits perceived.

Additionally, involvement in LGBTQ+ teams gave structure and meaning to participants' day-to-day lives, which helped them through difficult transitions or periods (e.g., moving to a new city, isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic). Darragh reflected that the team was "my outlet... I didn't realise how much I needed it until it was taken away during COVID." This shows the club became a coping mechanism and positive outlet for stress, and its absence was strongly felt.

Many participants reported that, in the supportive context of their LGBTQ+ teams, they were able to challenge and overcome self-critical patterns that had developed from years of negative experiences. In mainstream sports, mistakes would trigger harsh self-criticism, partly mirroring the criticism of others. In LGBTQ+ teams, participants learned to be self-compassionate and to play without the intense fear of failure. Darragh illustrated this:

Messing up and then realising, okay, you didn't die... gradually as it's gone on, I've gotten over that more. But you do develop those really harsh thoughts when you're younger and people are making fun of you for not being good and then you're conscious of how they'll relate that to your sexuality. It's just this vicious cycle of thinking there's something inherently wrong with you.

This comment underscores how participants previously reacted to mistakes with critical self-talk. Through making mistakes in safe and supportive environments, participants have developed skills to challenge these negative patterns.

Some participants who initially joined the club for the social aspect later pushed themselves competitively due to being able to challenge negative self-talk. Owen shared, "For

some reason, they saw something in me and put me in special training sessions. And I guess that did really help me believe in myself a bit more.” External encouragement from coaches or other team members enabled individuals to develop skills to challenge their own negative self-beliefs.

Several participants learned how to enjoy sport without the sense of perpetual self-judgment. Lukas noted:

I stopped telling myself I wasn't good at sport. I started focusing on having fun instead. And that's when things really changed for me. I mean I wouldn't go as far to say that I'm good, but I'm better than I ever thought I was haha.

This transition from self-criticism to enjoyment reflects a shift towards a more compassionate internal narrative, acting as a resolution for earlier identity conflicts, particularly those linked to self-worth and sporting ability.

Individuals reflected on their own resilience and how their clubs have supported them to recognise that they underestimated this part of themselves. Jake said, “It's probably made me realise that I'm more resilient than I thought I was.” This realisation experienced by participants has allowed them to directly challenge issues such as self-doubt.

In contrast to earlier experiences of exclusion and self-monitoring, LGBTQ+ teams provided an affirming space where participants could feel comfortable with being their true selves. The subthemes show how these teams supported not just physical participation, but psychological healing, self-expression, and skill development. Sport settings which were once a source of anxiety and fear, became a place where the interviewees focus on their enjoyment of sport while living authentically within these environments.

3.2.6 Theme 6: Finding belonging in LGBTQ+ teams

For many participants, joining an LGBTQ+ sports team marked the first time they truly felt a sense of belonging. This theme explores how that sense of belonging emerged and what it meant to the men in this study. These subthemes collectively show how belonging was not just about inclusion, but about being seen, understood, and valued.

Shared queer identity and understanding

One of the main aspects of belonging that was revealed within the data was to do with the feeling that people got from being around other queer people and having that shared identity. The participants described feeling understood by their teammates which allowed them to feel at ease, something they had not experienced fully in previous sports environments. This allowed them to no longer feel like ‘the odd one out’, which participants reported during their earlier experiences of sports or playing with mainstream teams. Rhys stated:

We've all been through similar shit you know. We've had some sort of difficult experience with coming out or been subjected to negative comments or whatever. So yeah, we get each other and that's a really comforting place for people to start from.

Many participants acknowledged the positives of everyone having similar challenges of growing up gay, dealing with homophobia, and negotiating identity.

Russell said: “I mean you go in there assuming everyone is gay. And that makes you think that people, even one person is going to have the same reasons for joining the club.” When people expressed these assumptions, it was not just about sexual orientation but about shared motivations and knowing that others were seeking safe spaces, connection, and affirmation as well. This subtheme also highlights the varying levels of closeness and

connection formed yet underscores a consistent sense of empathy and identification. Miles poignantly reflected:

I've made close friends and then I have other people who I chat to but I'm not that close to. Either way, I relate to all of their stories. We've made it through the same stuff. Yes, some have had really horrendous experiences and others not as much. But when it comes down to it, it resonates with us all on some level.

This indicates that the shared identity provides a lens through which members view one another with compassion and mutual respect.

In a powerful statement, Alastair shared, "I actually see a bit of myself in everyone who joins, maybe that's weird but I think it makes sense, and I find it reassuring." This statement conveys the solidarity and recognition of shared identity that is facilitated by LGBTQ+ clubs.

Developing meaningful relationships

Beyond sport itself, participants emphasised the sense of community and connection they discovered through joining LGBTQ+ clubs. For many, their clubs function not just as a space for sport participation but as a way of building a support network. This subtheme reflects how participation in these clubs facilitates meaningful friendships and connection.

Several participants spoke to the richness of the social life surrounding their clubs, highlighting how being involved in the club provided consistent opportunities for connection. Neil remarked, "It's definitely not just about the football. There's always stuff going on, some sort of social or someone's birthday. Since joining the [club name], I've never had a weekend where I haven't had options haha."

The depth of relationships formed within these spaces is another key aspect. Sergio said:

I've just, I guess, made lifelong friends. Some of my closest friends are from the club. And also, not just in my club but I've made friends in other clubs in the UK and in different countries from going to the Eurogames.

This sentiment points to the significance of friendships developed within the clubs, often becoming central to participants' support systems. In addition to friendships, romantic relationships also developed within many of the clubs, further highlighting the clubs' role in providing spaces where gay men can build meaningful connections within the LGBTQ+ community:

Well, I found my boyfriend in the club, so that's something I've got from it haha. All joking aside, I don't think our paths would have crossed otherwise. And now I'm friends with his friends and he's friends with mine. But again, I don't think any of us ever would have been friends. - Ioan

Within this subtheme, it was evident that participants felt a deep connection with the club and fellow members, which fostered a real sense of loyalty and care for each other, not just as teammates, but as members of the LGBTQ+ community and the wider society. Tiago succinctly commented, "We've become more than just a team, we've got each other's backs."

Inclusivity

The subtheme of inclusivity emerged as a defining feature of LGBTQ+ sports teams, not only in terms of sexual identity but across a broad spectrum of experiences, backgrounds, and needs. Participants took pride in how their clubs made efforts to include everyone and create a respectful environment. Some noted that their clubs were more broadly inclusive than

typical gay spaces, sometimes having significant straight ally membership or ensuring trans/nonbinary inclusion. Inclusivity was not viewed as a passive by-product of being an LGBTQ+ club, but as a conscious, ongoing commitment embedded in the culture of the clubs.

Owen described how this intention is reflected in concrete actions:

The club works hard to be inclusive and we're proud of that. We have taster sessions for trans and non-binary people. We make sure that people wear pants in the showers. We have our pronouns on our shirts. All of these things that seem small make a huge difference and that's what it means to be inclusive.

These examples show the impact that small, practical changes can have on people's feeling of safety and ensuring that inclusive practices are membership-wide, rather than the responsibility being on club organisers.

Participants conceptualised inclusivity as a reciprocal process, actively welcoming straight people, thereby creating a more integrative community. Nico explained: "There's actually a lot of straight guys in our club as well and I think that's something important to think about, that inclusivity works both ways." This reflects a shift away from exclusivity or insularity toward a model of openness, where shared values and mutual respect define belonging more than labels do.

The sense of belonging was especially evident in how clubs communicated acceptance from the outset. Jake shared: "When I joined there was a real sense of 'There's a place for you in the club, whatever your ability, age, size, gender, or sexuality.' and that helps to feel like you belong."

Inclusivity was described as an evolving process: "We all learn from each other and there are various committees and working groups. They really try to listen to members and

make sure it's improving all the time and meeting people's needs.” - Cian. This reflects an ethos of responsiveness and co-creation, where members are empowered to shape the culture that they are a part of, ensuring that inclusivity within clubs grows with the members they serve.

Comparison to straight teams

Finally, participants frequently drew comparisons between their experiences within LGBTQ+ teams and either previous or hypothetical experiences of predominantly heterosexual teams, highlighting the extent to which LGBTQ+ clubs were perceived as significantly more affirming and supportive. The reflections reveal that LGBTQ+ teams are not simply alternative spaces but are experienced as essential for the interviewees to be able to fully and freely engage in team sports as gay men.

Several participants described how joining a straight team would have triggered unresolved anxieties or negative associations from earlier life stages: “If I'd joined a straight team, I know I would have had all the same associations and hang-ups from university.” - Miles

This suggests that mainstream teams continue to be linked with environments where heteronormativity and anxiety-provoking dynamics are still present. Even when acknowledging that some heterosexual teams may be accepting in principle, participants consistently expressed doubts about how genuinely comfortable they would feel. Lukas reflected, “Would I join a straight team now? No, definitely not. There's no way I'd feel as comfortable as I do now. No matter how 'okay' people say they are with gay guys joining their club.” This comment points to the sense that while straight teams may not be overtly hostile,

they often fail to provide the deeper sense of belonging that participants find within LGBTQ+ clubs.

Importantly, this critique was not directed at individual heterosexual players but at a broader culture entrenched within sports settings.

Now I've joined [club name] I can't ever see myself going back to play with a straight team. And it's not about straight guys cos obviously we have straight guys in our club. But it's the overall toxic culture that exists generally. No, not for me. - Jose

For some, the emotional significance of LGBTQ+ teams was framed as a freeing experience in contrast to the constraints of mainstream clubs. Sergio poignantly noted:

I do think it's a pity that it's like this and that I feel this way. But for me, playing with an LGBTQ+ team means being able to play sport freely as a gay man. Playing with a straight team would be the exact opposite.

This final theme reflects how LGBTQ+ teams provided the participants with a powerful sense of belonging. Through a shared queer identity and feeling part of a strong, connected community, they were able to experience the benefits of being in truly inclusive sports environments. This feeling of belonging for many, was the most meaningful outcome throughout their journeys.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Chapter overview

This study set out to provide an in-depth exploration of the experiences of gay men in team sports throughout their lives. It investigated how they have encountered mainstream sports settings, which can be present as hostile and discriminatory environments, and their journeys to playing with LGBTQ+ teams. One of the main focuses of the study was to enhance understanding of these experiences by using an integrated conceptual model that frames them in terms of interrelated psychological factors, which may affect both sports participation and well-being. This chapter will discuss the study's qualitative findings in relation to this model and will examine the following three research questions: (1) How do gay men's experiences of discrimination within team sports settings influence their sport participation? (2) What are gay men's experiences of LGBTQ+ team sports? (3) What impact does sport participation have on gay men's identity and sense of belonging?

Firstly, a more detailed evaluation of the six themes and 19 subthemes will be presented. The research questions will then be reviewed by incorporating the qualitative data with the theory previously discussed, alongside relevant literature, to support the findings. In addition, a specific section will focus on applying the newly proposed conceptual model to enrich interpretation of the results. To conclude, the study's strengths and limitations, implications for psychological theory and practical applications, and directions for future research will be outlined.

4.2 Summary of key findings

A thematic analysis revealed six overarching themes with 19 subthemes that represented the experiences of gay men in team sports at different stages of their lives. The themes are presented chronologically, from participants' experiences in conventional team sports to their experiences in LGBTQ+ teams.

Individuals' early experiences of team sports were impacted by early expectations of sport involvement, including the influence of family, societal and cultural norms, and peer pressure (Theme 1). As they entered adolescence and gained more awareness of their sexual identity, they often faced negative experiences and barriers to participation (Theme 2). This theme described participants' experiences of homophobia, the role of authority figures, and the ongoing tension between a love for sport and the emotional strain it caused.

Participants were confronted with challenges relating to masculinity, identity, and sexuality (Theme 3) from an early age; however, these became more prominent during adolescence and university years. They spoke about how they navigated the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals, which manifested in masking and hiding their sexuality as a survival mechanism, yielding to expectations of masculinity, internalising masculine stereotypes in sport, and facing homophobia within the sporting culture.

Finding their way to playing for LGBTQ+ teams led participants to redefining their relationship with sport (Theme 4). In this theme, they reflected on a process of reframing regret and shifting blame away from themselves, which allowed them to overcome longstanding ingrained fears of judgment, and experience a shift in their motivations for participating in sports. The results suggest that LGBTQ+ sports clubs provided safe and

supportive spaces for people to develop their confidence and improve and progress in their chosen sport.

More significantly, participants relayed how LGBTQ+ sports clubs acted as transformative spaces (Theme 5) for them. They noted how they were enabled to reclaim their authentic identity, find psychological safety, heal from past negative experiences, discover new strengths, and confront entrenched self-critical patterns. Finally, LGBTQ+ sports clubs allowed participants to find belonging (Theme 6) through a shared queer identity and understanding, finding meaningful relationships, experiencing inclusivity within these teams, and reflecting on the comparison to their previous experiences in predominantly straight sports teams.

These themes, and their subthemes, provide the foundation for discussing the research questions and applying the integrated conceptual model. Table 8. provides an overview of these themes and their direct relevance to the research questions.

Table 8

Themes, Subthemes, and Corresponding Research Questions

Theme	Subtheme	Corresponding Research Question
Early expectations of sport engagement	Family influence	1, 3
	Societal and cultural expectations	1, 3
	Peer pressure	1, 3
Barriers to participation	Experiences of homophobia	1, 3
	Role of authority figures	1, 3
	Love of sport vs. emotional burden	1, 3
Masculinity, identity, and sexuality	Homophobia in sport	1, 3

Theme	Subtheme	Corresponding Research Question
	Pressure to conform	1, 3
Redefining relationship with sport	Reframing regret and shifting blame	2, 3
	Affirming spaces and skill development	2, 3
	Shifting motivations	2, 3
LGBTQ+ teams as transformative spaces	Reclaiming identity/true self	2, 3
	Finding safety in sports	2, 3
	Psychological growth and healing	2, 3
	Discovering new strengths	2, 3
Finding belonging in LGBTQ+ teams	Shared queer identity and understanding	2, 3
	Developing meaningful relationships	2, 3
	Inclusivity	2, 3
	Comparison to straight teams	2, 3

4.2.1 Discrimination in mainstream sports

Research question one: How do gay men's experiences of discrimination within team sports settings influence their sport participation?

The first research question concerns the influence of discrimination within team sports settings on gay men's sport participation. Within themes 1-3, the narratives of participants demonstrated that mainstream team sport contexts are typically heteronormative and can be exclusionary, which had significant impacts on how they continued to engage with sport. Many of them reported experiences of direct and indirect marginalisation of varying degrees, from overt homophobia and bullying, to a general feeling of intimidation and exclusion within

the changing room and on the field. The findings are consistent with past research that has shown that the culture of sport has historically been regulated by hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Sabo & Messner, 1994), creating an atmosphere in which LGBTQ+ people are left feeling alienated. In line with this, the participants often talked about how in order to be accepted on mainstream teams, they felt they had to act straight and more masculine, otherwise they would be othered (Theme 3). Several men talked about homophobic language being used flippantly by teammates, being the target of jokes, or just feeling unwelcome, all of which were consistent with prior data on pervasive sport-based homophobia (Symons & Sullivan, 2017). These experiences of discrimination were not just one-offs, but part of the everyday behaviour within some of the teams, making it feel like a perpetually hostile environment for gay players.

Participants in the current study reported experiencing significant levels of discrimination and hostility in sports throughout their lives, which align with surveys carried out in Europe depicting how homonegativity remains a problem in sport. For example, Menzel et al. (2019) found that 92% of UK respondents saw homonegativity as a problem, and 16% had experienced abuse in their chosen sport in the last year. Therefore, the results of the present study provide further support that these experiences exist due to ongoing systemic problems and are not just isolated occurrences.

From the findings, it is clear that discrimination within sports had adverse effects on participants' further involvement. In line with MST (Meyer, 2003) the men in the current study faced distal stressors in the form of insults and exclusion, and proximal stressors such as fear of rejection and hiding their sexual identities. For example, participants described how jokes about sexuality in the changing rooms led to a chronic worry about being 'found out' (Theme 3),

serving as an expectation of rejection (a proximal stressor) that influenced their relationships with team sports. Other participants shared experiences of being directly targeted with homophobic comments during matches, which led to them stopping playing altogether.

In addition to verbal insults, intimidation and exclusion acted as distal stressors for individuals, with social exclusion occurring in more subtle ways, like friends distancing themselves after participants came out. More seriously, were the physical attacks (Theme 2) in environments where there was no support from teachers, coaches, or parents. Linked to this, is a critical distal stressor involving the role that authority figures were seen to play. Participants reported stories of teachers and coaches who were silent bystanders and in some instances perpetrators of the homophobia (Theme 2). For young LGBTQ+ people experiencing homophobia, this non-response or even involvement, can be seen as almost an endorsement of the behaviour by institutions and they are left feeling that their safety and inclusion is a low priority (Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Sykes, 2004).

These findings are consistent with Meyer's model (2003), which argues that stressors resulting from stigmatisation have an adverse impact on the health of sexual minorities within hostile social environments. The fear and vigilance the participants reported, such as self-monitoring and being hesitant to change and shower with teammates, represent internalised anxiety that is present in MST, a process that links prejudice to adverse outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Such pressure began to lead to difficulties with confidence in sports, reduced enjoyment and, in many cases, having to give up sports as a result of the hostile environment. This supports previous research which has shown that there are higher rates of gay men dropping out of sports because of bullying and harassment. For example, in their study, Baiocco et al. (2018) reported, gay men in Italy were significantly more likely than their straight peers to drop out of sports to

avoid being bullied, reinforcing how overt discrimination can lead to disengagement. Similarly, Symons et al. (2010) found that homophobic experiences caused some Australian gay athletes to feel negatively about sport, which led to withdrawal.

A common theme present among participants' stories relates to the numerous strategies they used to hide or adjust their sexual identity while being exposed to the heterosexual norms in sports contexts in order to feel safe. Many of the participants reported that they had changed their behaviours to 'pass' as straight, which included avoiding talk about their personal lives, laughing off or even participating in homophobic jokes, as well as dating women earlier in life to avoid any suspicion (Theme 3). This behaviour is well documented in literature whereby people hide certain parts of their identity because they feel that it is unsafe to reveal them in some environments (Clair et al., 2005). The current study also supports research which has reported on how this type of identity management is paradoxical. While it acts as a protective strategy, the effort involved can cause high levels of anxiety and internalised stigma (Van Laar et al., 2019; Symons et al, 2017).

According to Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 1986), this desire for participants to keep parts of their identity hidden reflects a response to an identity threat. Breakwell (1986), suggests that individuals are generally motivated to maintain core aspects of their self-concept, such as self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, and self-efficacy, and when these are threatened by social situations they will engage in coping strategies to protect the self from threat. In a homophobic team environment, gay athletes struggle with 'continuity' (the perception that one's identity is stable and authentic) and self-esteem, as they fear the consequences of being 'outed' (Theme 3). Participants were using the strategy of concealment by 'acting straight' and separating their gay identity through conforming to heteronormative expectations. By adopting this

approach, researchers note that hiding parts of one's identity as a means of self-protection may be detrimental, leading to internalised negative self-views and identity threat (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022) and further mental health difficulties (Jaspal & Williamson, 2017).

A recurring sentiment in the accounts was that playing the sport they once loved had turned into an emotional burden while being in mainstream clubs. This phrase captures a form of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) where they had a genuine love of sport, but the emotional toll of constant vigilance and fear of rejection was overwhelming. In the results, this was encapsulated in the subtheme 'Love of sport vs. emotional burden,' highlighting the psychological discomfort of holding conflicting attitudes toward sport participation. CDT (Festinger, 1957) posits that holding two conflicting attitudes or behaviours creates psychological discomfort, causing people to make attempts to challenge the inconsistency in some way. In this study, participants tried to reduce the dissonance by changing their attitudes, for example, minimising or denying homophobia. Others, changed their behaviours by 'masking' or concealing, joining in on the homophobic behaviour, or in a lot of cases, dropping out of sports to avoid the psychological conflict. This is in line with Festinger's (1957) theory which states that people can sometimes remove themselves from situations that are causing them cognitive dissonance. This is supported by empirical research detailing how LGBTQ+ youth give up sports due to negative experiences (Doull et al., 2018; The Trevor Project, 2020). In addition, Baiocco et al. (2018) found that gay men found a relationship between the fear of bullying in sports contexts and gay men stopping sports, which is supported by the findings of this study.

The Psychological Mediation Framework (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) allows an exploration of the combined effects of identity threats and cognitive dissonance. From this perspective, processes such as rumination, withdrawal, and emotional dysregulation mediate the association

between minority stress and negative mental health outcomes (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008; Meyer, 2003, 2015; Pachankis et al., 2014). Several participants powerfully and poignantly described how past discrimination inflicted ongoing rumination and traumatic memories.

From the analysis, it appears that individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness were directly undermined by the hostile mainstream sports settings (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy was compromised, while having to conceal their true selves and adhere to heteronormative masculinities. This misalignment between their behaviour and their authentic identities led to a diminished sense of self within the sports environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Anderson, 2005). People's perceived competence was continuously threatened, and they described a long-standing fear of being judged and ridiculed for their athletic abilities, or gender non-conformity. When participants were exposed to this pervasive and persistent external and internal scrutiny it caused them to shift their focus from skill development and enjoyment, towards self-protection and avoidance of homophobia. Relatedness, which pertains to the need for connection and belonging, was also deeply impacted due to social exclusion leading to severe feelings of isolation (Meyer, 2003; Denison & Kitchen, 2015). The failure to establish meaningful relationships, and a continued fear of rejection, hindered this vital psychological need, which ultimately resulted in participants' disengagement in sports.

The experiences of participants in this study support what minority stress theory predicts about how discrimination can impact people's psychological wellbeing. Frost and Meyer (2023) noted that the theory now also focuses on protective factors and how they can reduce the impact of stress. The current findings provide further support for this new

understanding and also demonstrate how the stress experienced by participants led to the development of proximal stressors such as identity concealment and internalised stigma.

In summary, the findings of research question one show that the participants' experiences in team sports in schools, university, and mainstream sports had a negative impact on their relationship with sport and their participation. The individuals developed coping strategies such as concealing their sexual identities, behaving in ways that did not align with their true identities or values, or giving up sport completely. These results highlight the need for inclusive team sports, a point which will be strengthened by the discussion of research question two.

4.2.2 Experiences in LGBTQ+ team sports

Research question two: What are gay men's experiences of LGBTQ+ teams sports?

All participants in this study were currently playing on LGBTQ+ teams in the UK and their experiences of playing with these teams were in stark contrast to their experiences on mainstream teams. A theme which was present throughout the data was how LGBTQ+ clubs served as transformative spaces where individuals were able to reconnect with their love of sport while living authentically (Theme 4 and 5). Many participants spoke about not having to censor themselves in any way with regard to their speech, mannerisms, humour, or topics of conversation. LGBTQ+ clubs were repeatedly referred to as a 'safe space' in the interviews, indicating that participants felt physically and emotionally safe within their clubs. This is also consistent with MST, which suggests that supportive social contexts can protect minoritised people from societal stigma by providing support, acceptance, and connection with others in the community (Meyer & Frost, 2013). This is also supported by Anderson et al. (2016) who found that participation in LGBTQ+ sports teams was associated with better mental health

because of felt connectedness with the team, community, and affirmation of identity and perceived support, which all help to protect against the impact of minority stress.

One key finding is that gay men were drawn to LGBTQ+ sports teams for a variety of reasons that often combined a wish to escape negative and homophobic environments and a need to find community. Many participants reported on how they joined their LGBTQ+ clubs after a period of not playing sports and shared that their motivations were around feeling more connected to the LGBTQ+ community, reconnecting with sport, and getting fit again (Theme 4). These findings support research which found that gay men do leave mainstream sports for several reasons but also remain in LGBTQ+ clubs for a long time (Jarvis, 2015). Similarly, Petty and Trussell (2017) demonstrated how sports can be experienced either as transformative or stigmatising. Interestingly, some participants who had not experienced discrimination, still chose to join an LGBTQ+ team at this point in their lives because they were seeking the benefits of being in a community. This adds to the findings from Muir et al. (2022) in their study of gay rugby clubs in the UK, which reported that the main reason people were motivated to join those clubs was related more to the social and community aspects as opposed to escaping homophobia in mainstream clubs. From an SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) perspective, it seems that the LGBTQ+ clubs became valued 'ingroups' which enhanced participants' self-esteem and sense of self.

Participants spoke openly about how LGBTQ+ clubs provided spaces that allowed them to be their authentic selves and improve their wellbeing as a result, and these findings support those of Quinton and Rich (2024). The authors found that themes like 'Sports and Living Authentically' and 'Sports as an Escape,' highlighting that sport enables authentic identity expression, and these themes align closely with the themes of this research e.g.,

'Reclaiming identity / true self'. From the findings of the current study and Quinton and Rich (2024), it can be suggested that for gay men in similar cultural contexts within the UK, LGBTQ+ clubs help to enhance wellbeing.

It is evident from the results that many of the men felt that being in an LGBTQ+ club provided them with the first time where they could be their 'true self' and reclaim their identity as a gay man in a sports setting (Theme 5). The findings are in keeping with IPT (Breakwell, 1986) where the four principles of continuity, distinctiveness, self-esteem and efficacy were more fulfilled in LGBTQ+ teams. Participants reported that because coaches and teams were normally encouraging, they experienced increased confidence and self-esteem in these surroundings. The continuity that was achieved by the men because they did not have to separate their sexual identities and sports identities due to fearing rejection. In relation to IPT, these sport settings were not harmful to their identity, and therefore, their adoption of practices such as 'masking' and 'covering' were not needed. What they did instead was engage in identity-affirming acts such as talking about their lives, relationships and common interests. These experiences of being able to integrate all aspects of one's identity highlight the benefits of inclusive groups as they enable people to be their full, true selves, resulting in better identity outcomes (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2022).

Applying SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000), it is clear that the needs of the participants, which had not previously been met with mainstream teams, were satisfied while playing with LGBTQ+ teams. Through building friendships and finding support within their clubs, individuals were able to achieve relatedness. Examples of this reported include people regularly checking in on each other, feeling like they had someone to rely on, and the constant social events which provided opportunities to grow their network of friends (Theme 6).

LGBTQ+ teams enable the men to experience autonomy by creating environments where they could live authentically and also have decision-making or leadership roles. Many took on positions within the clubs and explained that they would not have had the confidence to do this in mainstream clubs. Linked to this is the need for competence, which participants were able to obtain by being in a sports setting where people were supportive and non-judgmental about abilities or experience (Theme 4). It was often shared that by shifting the focus to inclusivity and pure enjoyment of the sport, this created space for the men to be able to rid themselves of the fear of judgement and anxiety, and enjoy the sport, and this ultimately allowed for skill development, which was an unexpected experience for many. These met needs within SDT, contributed to participants redefining their relationships with sport, resulting in increased overall wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

An important theme within the data was the comparison to straight teams (Theme 6), which involved the men reflecting on what aspects of mainstream teams created challenges for them, and what aspects of the LGBTQ+ teams will cause them to remain in those clubs. Rather than experiencing rigid, hierarchical, and exclusionary culture often found in men's sports (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), the LGBTQ+ teams were built on the foundation of inclusivity. Interestingly, several participants mentioned that their clubs have straight members, which reinforces the idea that these clubs are seen as welcoming and free from the hypermasculine pressure in mainstream sports.

It is evident from the current findings that participants in this study experienced LGBTQ+ sports teams as hugely beneficial to their mental health and overall wellbeing. At the same time, some researchers have expressed concerns that these spaces might inadvertently cause mainstream organisations to feel less pressured to become more inclusive

(Elling & Janssens, 2009). This highlights the challenge for LGBTQ+ sport inclusion where there are clear advantages of these safe spaces, but they may impede on longer-term structural change. The results of the present study at least display that within a UK context, LGBTQ+ can play a pivotal role in supporting the wellbeing and identity of gay men, even if they don't contribute to resolving the broader integration issues.

The evidence from the findings of research question two convey the affirming experiences that the participants gained from being part of LGBTQ+ sports teams. These environments provided safe spaces where people could participate in sport freely and without discrimination, allowing them to integrate their gay and athletic identities, which had been kept either consciously or unconsciously separate in the past.

4.2.3 Sport participation, identity, and belonging

Research question three: What impact does sport participation have on gay men's identity and sense of belonging?

The findings from the previous two research questions offered differing perspectives on how sport participation within mainstream and LGBTQ+ settings can impact (negatively or positively) the overall wellbeing of gay men. Through exploring the results of this research question, the following section will outline how sports participation can affect gay men's identity and sense of belonging.

As reported by many of the participants, playing with mainstream teams led to their sense of selves being impeded due to having to split their identities because it did not feel safe for them to express themselves fully (Theme 3). As a result of this identity fragmentation, participants internalised views that it was not okay to be openly gay in sports environments, which illustrates how hostile environments can lead to proximal stress (Meyer, 2003).

Supporting this view, Jaspal and Breakwell (2022) found in their study that when gay men feel unable to express their sexual identity in certain contexts, this may manifest as internalised homonegativity and psychological distress. Many participants in this study shared periods of poor mental health during these times when they were hiding their sexual identity in sports settings, which left them feeling isolated and like they didn't belong in those environments. Symons et al. (2016) reports that these experiences can cause LGBTQ+ people to experience emotional difficulties and withdraw.

When considering the overall impact of sport participation on identity and belonging, the results of this study demonstrate that context is crucial to this impact occurring. As such, it is not necessarily the case, that sports participation is inherently positive or negative for gay men and it depends on whether the environment is validating or invalidating of their identity (Xiang et al., 2023). In mainstream sports settings, the environments tended to cause identity suppression and feelings of isolation (Theme 2), whereas in LGBTQ+ teams, there was a sense of identity affirmation, inclusivity, and connection, and this has been depicted through the use of the integrated conceptual model. For example, MST (Meyer, 2003) and PMF (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) would suggest that in exclusionary contexts such as mainstream sports, the minority stress and lack of acceptance may result in psychological distress, which was evidenced in the data of this study. However, within LGBTQ+ clubs, those stressors were minimised or eliminated, leading to greater overall wellbeing, which was also detailed in the current study (Theme 5). In terms of IPT, Breakwell (1986) would predict that people's identity principles are under threat in certain contexts, but affirmed in another, as underscored by the findings. SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) helps explain how psychological needs can either be met or unmet in different sporting contexts. While SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is useful

within this study to demonstrate the effect of belonging to ‘ingroups/outgroups’, with participants having experienced both. Finally, by applying CDT (Festinger, 1957), it was evident that the men in this study engaged in processes to resolve their cognitive dissonance, with some of these earlier processes being maladaptive to their identity integration.

An important finding is how being able to engage in team sports almost acted as a catalyst for improvements in other parts of the participants' lives as well. It was noted that playing sport on a team that was truly inclusive did not just help improve their mental health and wellbeing as already outlined (Theme 5), but benefited their social life, physical health, and in some cases even their careers because of improved confidence and personal growth. Some of the men expressed that their participation in inclusive sports was 'life-changing', which accurately highlights how many of them were passionate about sports from a young age, but this was tainted by negative early experiences. Engaging in sport in positive and supportive environments allowed them to enhance wider areas of their lives as well. To conclude, the findings from research question three offer further support for the use of the integrated conceptual model in understanding gay men's experiences of team sports and the impact on their identity and sense of belonging. The usefulness of the conceptual model will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.2.4 Utility of the integrated conceptual model

At the most general level, the model recognises the impact of cultural context and hegemonic norms on the experiences of gay men in sports. As a result, one of the key sources of exclusion, which remained pervasive in all of the findings, was mainstream sports culture, entrenched as it was with heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. This finding is consistent with the model assertion that the sport team climate often supports heterosexist

norms, and ultimately, may generate a hostile environment for sexual minorities. Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity, referred to in the model, resonated in the way that participants discussed an environment of hypermasculinity, where difference, in the form of being gay, was stigmatised. In another example, men reported feeling forced to take part in aggressive, sexist jokes and to adopt 'tough' images, which closely resembled the ideals of hegemonic masculinity as witnessed in sport.

The integrated model uses the idea that factors within culture contribute to marginalisation and suggests that sports environments create unique minority stressors for gay men. The data supported this hypothesis whereby respondents reported experiencing distal and developing proximal stressors in reaction, such as internalised fears and concealment behaviours. This is consistent with MST (Meyer, 2003), which the model represents to explain how these social conditions lead to stress at the individual level. This explanatory value of MST was reflected in the discussion of RQ1 when it noted the chronic stress faced by gay men in mainstream sports provided understanding as to why so many participants gave up sport.

The integrated model also drew upon Hatzenbuehler's PMF (2009) to specify the mechanisms linking stressors to outcomes. The pathways through this can be seen in the accounts from the participants where those who experienced homophobia more often reported anxiety, hypervigilance, and coping strategies that represent affective and cognitive mediators from stigma to health problems. Symons et al. (2017) noted that vigilant and avoidance in particular, as common responses among gay men facing continued prejudice in sport, which was reflected in the narratives in this study. Through the PMF, it was conveyed that it was not just external discrimination that was harmful, but individuals' responses to it that led to

further harm internally (e.g., rumination, fear, emotional dysregulation). For example, several participants spoke about how the emotional toll impacted them greatly, which illustrates how stigma is associated with emotional dysregulation and social rejection, as posited by PMF (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). On the other hand, in inclusive contexts, in the model it would be expected that there are much less stressors and hence much less negative mediators, which the findings support.

IPT (Breakwell 1986) explains how people respond to threats to their identity, and the integrated model highlighted the importance of IPT as a core process, which was evident in the interviews. The findings suggest that when faced with identity threats in mainstream sport, the men in the study used specific coping strategies as predicted by the IPT, such as concealment (assimilation-accommodation coping) or deflection (making excuses or rationalising discrimination to protect self-esteem). IPT also recognises that chronic threats have the potential for negative repercussions such as internal conflict or may result in the person eventually coming out. Both of these outcomes were reported by participants, with some choosing to continue hiding their sexual identity until they left those teams, which is consistent with a long-term threat management strategy that results internal distress/conflict (Breakwell, 1986). Others chose to come out, despite the potential risk, or to change to an LGBTQ+ team. Those who came out and joined inclusive teams, actively altered their identity narrative by integrating the gay identity into their athlete identity (IPT's accommodation) and many reported feeling empowered after doing this.

Therefore, IPT predicted this tendency, suggesting that the participants would either choose to conceal their identity in order to be included as group members or would respond by coming out and establishing new memberships that reflected their identity. The analysis of this study

demonstrated examples of each of these outcomes, thus supporting the use of IPT in the conceptual model.

The use of CDT in the integrated model was supported by the findings on participants' internal conflicts and decision-making. The model suggested that cognitive dissonance would occur when an individual's identity was in conflict with team norms, which was displayed in the subtheme 'Love of sport vs. Emotional Burden', and inconsistent behaviours such as taking part in homophobic acts. The model further shows that attempts to resolve this dissonance might involve actions such as deciding to come out or to leave a team, similar to IPT predictions. The findings showed that those who left mainstream sport often did so to challenge the dissonance, and those who came out, often did it because the conflict between hiding and their wellbeing became too overwhelming. Making the decision to come out while on a mainstream team can be seen as an attempt to restore cognitive congruence and corresponds to Festinger's (1957) theory that people will change behaviour or attitudes to reduce dissonance. With regard to the integrated model, including CDT adds explanatory power by accounting for why and when gay men might take the risk to come out or switch teams. Thus, CDT helped explain some of the agency of participants in reshaping their narratives, complementing IPT's focus on threat and coping.

The SDT element of the integrated model was important in informing the data because SDT focuses on how satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs (for autonomy, competence, and relatedness) affects motivation and psychological well-being. The model integrated SDT by noting that an individual's fulfilment of autonomy and relatedness needs may be frustrated in a hostile team if he cannot express himself or form authentic relationships. The results provided strong evidence of this need frustration in mainstream

contexts with participants experiencing no relatedness and no autonomy, and as SDT would predict, this corresponded with poor enjoyment, motivation, and wellbeing in those settings. Conversely, on LGBTQ+ teams, those needs were largely satisfied because participants felt a strong sense of belonging, free to be authentic, and improved their skills in their sport. The integrated model anticipated these outcomes by hypothesising that exclusionary environments would result in participants' needs being unmet and potentially lead to disengagement from sport, whereas LGBTQ+ clubs would meet their needs, fostering engagement and well-being. Through using SDT in the model, this study links the social context with individuals' motivational and emotional states, explaining the mechanisms through which they become disengaged or thrive.

SIT supplied a foundation with which to situate belonging and self-esteem within the integrated model at a group level, as reflected in the results. SIT was used to explain why the gay men in this study looked for LGBTQ+ teams. The participants also expressed that after feeling like they were part of an outside (outgroup) while playing with mainstream teams, when they joined LGBTQ+ teams they felt accepted and that they belonged to an ingroup as such. The sense of belonging helped to improve their self-esteem and confidence, and they no longer experienced the negative consequences of feeling isolated within a group. SIT suggests that self-esteem is boosted by being part of positively valued ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT also helped make sense of the way participants talked about their teams compared to others. There was a clear ingroup/outgroup dynamic where they often described their inclusive teams in contrast to the mainstream ones that had rejected them. This kind of comparison which involves valuing your own group more when it is set against an

exclusionary outgroup is supported by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and it helped reinforce their pride in being part of an LGBTQ+ team.

By incorporating these theories, the model comprehensively explains the full causal pathway from the influence of harmful sports culture and discrimination to individual difficulties with identity and wellbeing. It proposes a chain of processes in which the findings reported are consistent with: A hegemonic masculine sport culture elicits minority stressors (MST) that then produce psychological responses (PMF, including anxiety and concealment) which in turn undermine identity principles (IPT), resulting in psychological needs not being met (SDT). This situation produces cognitive dissonance (CDT) and maladaptive coping strategies that negatively impact mental health, identity integration, and sport participation. Whereas, in an LGBTQ+ club, buffering mechanisms (including social support and belonging) reduce stress (MST) and support positive emotions and adaptive coping (PMF). Following this, positive identity processes (IPT) are activated, and psychological needs are met (SDT), leading to reduced cognitive dissonance (CDT), feelings of belonging to an 'ingroup' (SIT), and improved wellbeing and sport participation. The aim of the model is to show how tightly connected these processes are, and to emphasise, for example, that the act of identity concealment (as a coping strategy in IPT) is not a static decision, but rather one that unfolds in social contexts, and creates further negative consequences that can ultimately lead to emotional or psychological distress, or isolation due to reduced involvement. To further highlight the importance of this approach, the use of a single theory to understand these dynamics may find that homophobia induces stress (MST), or not belonging affects self-esteem negatively (SIT), but might not recognise that it is the stress that leads to identity

concealment (IPT), or that a sense of belonging is tied to autonomy frustration (SDT) for example.

The model is supported by strong evidence for each component of the process, both in the literature and in insights from interviews. For example, the idea that exclusionary environments lead to disengagement and poorer mental health is supported by the findings by Meyer (2003), and participants in this study often described withdrawing or struggling in those environments. In addition, the model suggests that the buffering effects of being part of LGBTQ+ sports teams could build a sense of belonging and improve mental and physical health (Meyer & Frost, 20), which is also supported by the findings. Importantly, the bringing together of different theoretical approaches serves to demonstrate that, though MST alone can account for the harmful effects of minority stress, the PMF can inform, in greater depth, how the mechanism of this influence unfolds in relation to experiences of anxiety and rumination as presented by the individuals. The integration of SDT provides insight into the impact on engagement in sports over time. Moreover, in combining IPT and CDT, the study provides insight on these processes and the group affiliations that help manage them, as outlined in SIT. So, the model as a whole clearly outlines a more holistic understanding than any one theory could cover.

This model is a coherent framework that demonstrates the competing factors gay men face in order to conform to traditional sporting environments, and the freedom that they achieve in LGBTQ+ teams. It integrates psychological (IPT, SDT, CDT) and socio-cultural perspectives (MST, PMF, SIT) to explain the complex experiences and dynamics of gay men in team sports, and why they either continue with or give up sport. It suggests that if researchers are to have a full understanding of how gay men and other members of the

LGBTQ+ experience team sport, there needs to be a balanced focus on structural forces and internal processes and how they interact with each other.

Overall, the model's multi-faceted lens allows for an integrated theoretical framework to explain why discrimination in sport leads to particular outcomes (RQ 1), how and why LGBTQ+ teams offer unique benefits; (RQ 2) and, how sport participation impacts identity and belonging (RQ 3). A validation of this model based on the data is provided by the current study, which contributes to the literature by offering a more nuanced approach that can guide further research on this topic. The utility of this model highlights that there is not just one theory that can fully describe the dynamics alone, and that by using an integrated approach, it helps to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities, which can hopefully support key stakeholders to impact the wider sporting culture and support individuals involved. In conclusion, it can be seen that the integrated model provides a useful framework which has been supported by the powerful narratives of the participants and offers a valuable tool for understanding LGBTQ+ inclusion and exclusion in team sports.

4.3 Strengths and limitations

4.3.1 Strengths

This research has several strengths which enable it to make a valuable contribution to existing literature. As a qualitative study, it was able to provide deeper and more nuanced accounts of gay men's experiences of team sports, which would not have been possible through a quantitative approach. Furthermore, it would have been difficult to explore participants' specific experiences of identity conflict and their challenges in relation to heteronormativity quantitatively. The depth of this research comes from real voices of participants and their lived experiences, which powerfully link with the psychological theory

presented. In addition, the sample size of this study is relatively large compared to qualitative studies in general, which further adds strength to the findings.

A second strength of this study was focusing on a topic that is under researched within the field of psychology, and also a population that experiences marginalisation in society. While there has been increased attention on gay men and LGBTQ+ research, there is a lack of studies that investigate gay men and team sports (O'Connell & Bottino, 2024). This study aims to begin to fill this gap in literature by sharing participants' voices which detail their lived experiences of discrimination within sports and the wider implications on mental wellbeing and identity. It is hoped that it helps in contributing to efforts for more inclusive policies and practices in sporting bodies within the UK and further afield.

A final and major strength of the study was the use of a novel integrated conceptual model which involved integrating evidence based psychological theories to help explain the psychological processes that take place when gay men experience discrimination in mainstream team sports, and the different outcomes when they play with LGBTQ+ teams. By applying this model, the study has provided new perspectives on the complex relationship between team sports and gay men's identity and overall wellbeing, while being grounded in relevant theory.

4.3.2 Limitations

This study has some limitations which need to be taken into account when interpreting the outcomes. As with all qualitative studies, there can be challenges with regard to retrospective self-reports as they can involve recall bias (Hassan, 2005). A further limitation is around the generalisability of the research. The participants were 24 cisgender gay men living in the UK and while there was some diversity within the sample (Table 2.2), the findings

cannot be generalised to the wider population of gay men who may have other intersecting identities. Additionally, a criterion for participants were that they were currently playing on LGBTQ+ teams, however, this means that they had specifically sought out these clubs, therefore, the results should not be generalised to gay men who have remained in mainstream clubs. This points to further limitation of not having a comparison group, which would have given a more holistic view of gay men's experiences of team sports in both mainstream and inclusive settings.

Furthermore, the study used a convenience sample, as participants volunteered to take part based on the research topic and were recruited via LGBTQ+ sports clubs' social media. It is possible that participants were more likely to take part if they had positive experiences of LGBTQ+ clubs, which may have introduced bias and limits the transferability of the findings to the wider population of gay men involved in sport.

Finally, another limitation concerns the statement contained within the Participant Information Sheet that participants "may be contacted later to ask if you would like to hear about and comment on the research analysis." This step, often framed as a form of member checking, did not occur due to time constraints of the research. Member checking is not mandatory nor even always appropriate in qualitative research, but the opportunity for participants to respond to preliminary analysis can offer an additional layer of credibility, particularly in studies of identity, community, and minority experience, such as LGBTQ+ people's experiences of team sports. Leaving out this step means that participants were not able to confirm or challenge the interpretations presented and therefore the results relied solely on my interpretation. Although the analytic process was rigorous and reflexively grounded, it is possible that participant feedback may have provided alternative emphases or

further insight into the research topic. Therefore, it is necessary that this omission should be considered when interpreting the findings.

4.4 Implications for Theory

4.4.1 Minority stress theory in sport settings

This study provides strong support for Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory and its application within team sports. The results powerfully portray how distal (interpersonal), and proximal (intrapersonal) stressors can undermine participation in sport among gay men and their wellbeing (Meyer, 2003). From the results it seems that team sports environments, where there is a focus on masculinity and heteronormativity, can create situations where gay men experience minority stress. Examples of this can involve casual homophobia or even team members assuming that someone is straight in daily interactions and can result in gay men feeling under threat in these environments (Anderson et al., 2011). It highlights that distal stressors don't just involve explicit discrimination but can take the form of more subtle heteronormativity.

In addition, it highlights that the anticipation of discrimination can be as harmful as discrimination, resulting in concealment and withdrawal over time (Clarkson, 2005). This supports previous conceptualisations of proximal stressors, in particular concealment, as a central role in the development of mental health difficulties (Meyer, 2003). The study's findings show participants felt the need to be constantly aware of how they were engaging in sports environments to avoid hostility, and this links to a particular state of hypervigilance which is a central feature of minority stress (Anderson, 2005; Meyer, 2003) for gay men in sport.

The study adds to developments in minority stress theory, specifically in relation to recommendations that it should consider both stressors and resilience, agency, and community protective factors (Frost & Meyer, 2023). It also provides support for the idea that sport can be a source of stress and resilience. In addition, the findings demonstrate how affirming environments promote wellbeing, which is something that was underexamined by earlier minority stress research.

4.4.2 Self-determination theory

These results highlight the importance of the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) for the promotion of long-term engagement in sport, exercise and well-being, and especially for disadvantaged populations (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The findings emphasise that when these needs are not met within mainstream sport contexts, withdrawal occurs, but when the needs are met within inclusive LGBTQ+ teams, re-engagement and ongoing involvement can occur.

This study suggests that SDT can be applied to how LGBTQ+ individuals can experience positive psychological outcomes in an inclusive social context (i.e., LGBTQ+ sports teams). For gay men in this study, relatedness was connected to a common queer identity and understanding, which supported their feelings of connectedness to their clubs. Autonomy occurred through the freedom to authentically participate without fear of judgement or rejection, and a feeling of needing to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals. Alongside the support from coaches and other team members, the met needs of relatedness and autonomy helped them to achieve a sense of competence within their sport.

4.4.3 Identity Process Theory and Cognitive Dissonance

This study offers nuanced insights into the processes described in Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986), demonstrating how gay men can overcome negative experiences, related to their identities, from being part of mainstream sports teams. Participants openly shared how they experienced cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) when they found themselves behaving in ways that were not in line with their true selves. Significantly, the results illustrate how LGBTQ+ teams helped them to navigate these challenges. Participants discussed a process of cognitive reframing in how they had previously viewed blame and shifted it externally as opposed to internally. The results show that they were able to integrate the parts of their identities ('gay' and 'athlete') which had been kept separate up until joining an LGBTQ+ club.

4.4.4 Social Identity Theory

The findings support Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979), where the role of an 'ingroup' in the context of LGBTQ+ sport teams was crucial in helping participants find a sense of belonging and improve their overall wellbeing. The fact that LGBTQ+ teams were experienced so differently to mainstream teams by participants is highly relevant when considering the concept of 'ingroups' and 'outgroups' and the impact that these dynamics can have on someone's sense of self and mental health. For the participants, feeling part of an 'outgroup' while taking part in mainstream sports caused them to experience negative views of themselves, leading them to internalise societal views on masculinity, sport, and whether there is a place for gay men in sport. In contrast, finding their way to LGBTQ+ teams allowed them to feel part of an 'ingroup' through the sense of shared understanding and queer identity, and this supported them to challenge self-critical patterns.

Directly linked to SIT, the results also provide support for the idea of a ‘social cure’, by showing that when people can identify with a positive and supportive group like LGBTQ+ clubs, the harmful effects of minority stress can be reduced and wellbeing can be improved (Jetten et al., 2012). Participants described how their new ingroup identity offered not only support, but permission to reinterpret their experiences of the past and to share the responsibility of advocating for a broader change in society (Jetten et al., 2012; The Trevor Project, 2021).

4.4.5 Psychological Mediation Framework (PMF)

This current study's results are consistent with the PMF (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) arguing that stigma, prejudice and discrimination negatively affect mental health and are associated with ruminative processes and withdrawal. It suggests that such mechanisms can be mediated in mainstream sports. This study also highlights the ways in which LGBTQ+ teams create safety and belonging and affirm identity. By doing this, they help members overcome negative psychological processes referred to in the PMF (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) and they may subsequently develop helpful coping strategies to reduce the effects of previous harmful experiences (Jetten et al., 2012; The Trevor Project, 2021). This provides strong support for LGBTQ+ sports clubs and inclusive environments and their ability to positively influence psychological processes that were potentially acting as a barrier to LGBTQ+ individuals engaging in sport.

The PMF (Hatzenbuehler, 2009) explains how stigma can negatively impact mental health through specific psychological processes, and although this study didn't measure these processes directly, participants' accounts showed evidence of difficulties like emotion regulation, social isolation, and negative thinking. Understanding these processes can help

coaches, organisations, and mental health professionals to create targeted ways to help reduce the effects of discrimination. Which fits with recent minority stress research focussing on practical applications and interventions (Frost & Meyer, 2023).

4.5 Implications for Practice

The results of this study have major implications for stakeholders who are involved in creating inclusive and affirming sport environments for gay men and the wider LGBTQ+ community.

4.5.1 Mental health professionals

Mental health clinicians supporting gay men should be aware of the specific aspects of sports settings that they may find stressful such as bullying, internalised stigma, and fear of rejection, that can lead to substantial psychological distress (Baiocco et al., 2018; Hatzenbuehler, 2009). This requires an approach to care that recognises the impact of sport on identity development and mental health, as well as trauma and healing processes (Anderson, 2011; Symons et al., 2010). It is also important that professionals pay particular attention to different types of discrimination within sports settings and the psychological effects of this, including rumination, having fewer social relationships, and internalised homophobia (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Baiocco et al., 2018).

Affirmative therapy is important in the mental health care of gay men who may have been subjected to discrimination in sporting contexts, and in helping them process internalised homophobia, cognitive dissonance, and conflicting identity processes (Herek, 2004; Meyer, 2003). Therapeutically, clients are able to re-author their narratives of the past, externalise self-blame, and reclaim their true selves (Malyon, 1982; White & Epston, 1990). Furthermore,

NHS England (2019) advocates for the effectiveness of social prescribing as a tool for improving mental health. Therefore, if mental health professionals are informed on LGBTQ+ inclusive environments and their benefits, they can confidently support clients to engage with appropriate organisations, which can enhance resilience and promote empowerment (Pachankis et al., 2015).

4.5.2 Coaches and educators

Despite it being widely acknowledged, it remains important to continue to highlight the significant role of schools, physical education (PE) teachers, and coaches in supporting LGBTQ+ youth with sport (Greenspan et al., 2017). Educators need to take a positive approach to homophobia and acceptance, thus promoting inclusive sporting environments (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). This proactive approach requires confronting discriminatory comments and actions, because remaining silent or passive can mistakenly be interpreted as support for these negative behaviours (Sykes, 2004).

There needs to be more uniform and comprehensive training on LGBTQ+ identities, minority stress, and how to support this population (Cunningham, 2012). This training would not only strengthen educators' ability to react effectively when someone comes out or speaks out against discrimination but also enable them to create environments in which diversity is openly supported and championed (O'Connell & Bottino, 2024). In addition, coaches and educators can model inclusive values by promoting the visibility of LGBTQ+ role models and developing a culture where psychological safety, openness, and mutual respect are celebrated (Jetten et al., 2012). Being seen to actively support and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community is crucial to reassure individuals that it is safe to be themselves and reach out for support (Greenspan et al., 2017).

4.5.3 Mainstream sports and governing bodies

These bodies should ensure that they have meaningful anti-discrimination policies that refer explicitly to sexual identity and gender identity, with a clear demonstration of how they will be implemented (Greenspan et al., 2017). They must then be embedded into daily practice with consequences specified for prejudice when it arises (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). This type of change requires continued and deliberate interventions which disrupt the normalised heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity that continues to characterise many sports spaces (Anderson, 2007; Connell, 2005). While there have been attempts to implement these measures, evidence suggests that these are largely ineffective in bringing about long-term change (Menzel et al., 2019). To build on these efforts, there needs to be ongoing, progressive educational programmes focused on creating environments where safety is prioritised, particularly in areas that are often deemed unsafe, such as changing rooms (The Trevor Project, 2021). If left unaddressed, the anxiety and vulnerability that LGBTQ+ individuals associate with these spaces will continue to act as a barrier to their full participation in sport.

4.5.4 LGBTQ+ sports organisations

The results provide support for LGBTQ+ teams as restorative or reparative spaces for gay men where they can confront issues of isolation and marginalisation (Elling et al., 2003). With the growth of such organisations, they become key sites of more inclusive sport, expanding sports participation across different LGBTQ+ communities (Anderson, 2016). A core strength of these teams is their ability to develop a collective queer identity and understanding, which supports a sense of belonging and psychological well-being (Elling et al., 2003).

Beyond offering the opportunity to play sport, LGBTQ+ sports clubs also provide vital personal support with regard to identity affirmation, community connectedness and emotional health (Anderson, 2016). To maintain and develop these positive effects, these organisations could also ensure that they promote mental wellness, for example, being able to provide their members with appropriate information on mental health services as needed (Greenspan et al., 2017). They are also well positioned to lead broader cultural change, using their visibility to advocate for inclusion in mainstream sport and to model affirming, equitable practices (Anderson et al., 2024).

4.6 Recommendations for future research

If future research was to continue to focus on this specific population, a helpful direction may involve longitudinal studies that follow gay men's sport engagement from adolescence into adulthood, and their potential involvement with LGBTQ+ clubs. These studies could apply the integrated conceptual model, that was proposed by the current research, to provide further clarity on the pathways in the model and may elucidate how identity integration and resilience develop longitudinally.

Further research might benefit from exploring gay men's experiences in mainstream/non-LGBTQ+ sports teams, to compare to the experiences of those playing with LGBTQ+ teams. This would provide an interesting comparison of how gay men navigate identity, belonging, heteronormativity, and possible minority stress in these environments.

It should be noted that this research focused only on cisgender gay men. It is imperative that the experiences of bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and other gender and sexual minority members of the LGBTQ+ receive focus as well. It is highly possible that their experiences of discrimination, specific minority stressors (e.g., transphobia, biphobia), and

journeys to inclusion and wellbeing differ significantly from those of gay men (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). In addition, it will be important to expand this research to include LGBTQ+ individuals from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, as their intersecting identities may impact their experiences of team sports in different ways.

Despite the invaluable richness of the data within the findings, it should be acknowledged, as with any qualitative research involving small populations, these results are not generalisable to the wider LGBTQ+ community, or even gay men in general (Polit & Beck, 2010). While the significance of such research should not be lost, this research topic would benefit from mixed methods or large-scale quantitative approaches to compliment qualitative research. These types of studies could continue to make use of highly relevant scales, including the Sexual Prejudice in Sport Scale (SPSS; Baiocco et al., 2020) and the Sexual Minority Stress Scale (SMSS; Goldblum et al., as cited in Iniewicz et al., 2017).

There is a dearth of research evaluating interventions promoting inclusion in sports (Denison et al., 2023). Research could include randomised controlled trials of coach education programmes aimed at challenging heteronormativity and developing supportive attitudes. Moreover, there is a need for studies to look at the capacity of peer-led interventions to reduce homophobia and increase sport participation and wellbeing of the LGBTQ+ community.

This research displayed the considerable harm caused by the inaction of authority figures within environments where homophobia takes place, but also the positive effect that supportive authority figures can have (Cunningham, 2012). Future research could specifically focus on how heterosexual advocates are involved in creating inclusive sports spaces for LGBTQ+ people (Anderson & McCormack, 2010). By gaining a clearer understanding of

their role might inform programmes that are aimed at enhancing their potential to positively impact cultural change within sport (Cunningham, 2012).

Finally, it may be useful for researchers to consider the further exploration of anti-discrimination policies and inclusive practices within sports settings (e.g., all-gender changing rooms, explicit pronoun use, non-gendered language) and their role in supporting the wider LGBTQ+ community with sport participation and their mental health within sporting environments (Krane, 2016 Symons et al., 2010). This type of investigation should question whether these practices do indeed positively impact people's feelings of safety, belonging, and wellbeing. While results from the current study provided data on gay men's views on how such policies and practices are experienced by transgender and non-binary people, it is imperative that this is explored in more depth with these populations directly.

4.7 Dissemination

During the recruitment process, participants were informed through the PIS and during the interviews that the findings of the study could be shared with them if they wished. All participants requested a brief summary of the findings, which will be provided to them in due course.

It is hoped that the study will be shared with relevant organisations such as Stonewall UK, Pride Sports UK, Out for Sport, Sport England. Appropriate mental health services will also be contacted with the findings. The results will be shared with specific charities including Educational Action Challenging Homophobia (EACH) which tackles homophobia in schools. Additionally, the Department for Education and PSHE will receive copies of the findings to distribute in schools across the UK. Finally, I will aim to publish the research in journals such

as 'Journal of Homosexuality', 'Identity An International Journal of Theory and Research', and 'Journal of Applied Sport Psychology'.

4.8 Conclusion

This study has contributed to the under researched topic on the role of LGBTQ+ sports teams in gay men's identity and sense of belonging, by investigating their experiences of team sports throughout their lives. The results highlight the significant impact that being a part of these teams can have on gay men's identity and overall wellbeing, following histories of homophobia and attempts to conform to hegemonic masculine ideals. It can be seen from the findings that these negative experiences had long-lasting effects on some of the participants and often led to their withdrawal from sport altogether. These experiences were explored through the use of an integrated conceptual model, which was able to illustrate how distal and proximal minority stressors impeded on their basic psychological needs, resulting in difficulties with their identity processes, cognitive dissonance, maladaptive coping strategies, and finally leading to rumination and withdrawal.

Importantly, the use of the conceptual model in this research has pointed to the ability of LGBTQ+ sports teams in supporting gay men to heal from past experiences and achieve identity affirmation within these communities. It has shown that in the right environments, they could have their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness met. This process created a space for them to develop different parts of their identities in positive ways, while resolving entrenched internal conflicts and gaining a sense of belonging. The shared understanding that exists within these clubs allowed them to safely acknowledge their own resilience, shifting the blame and feeling empowered by this. Additionally, the participants poignantly demonstrated how their clubs also facilitated further personal growth

and development through them finding new skills that they were unaware of. In summary, the participants of this study reported on the role of LGBTQ+ clubs in their transformative experiences and strengthened relationships with sport.

The wider implications of this study suggest that there is still considerable progress to be made within mainstream sport settings, such as schools and grass roots clubs, to allow LGBTQ+ individuals to feel welcome. It has shown these spaces still continue to be experienced as heteronormative and homophobic, causing members of the LGBTQ+ community to feel unsafe. For real, impactful change, there needs to be consistent education, positive leadership, and a commitment to policy within sporting organisations and education settings in order to have an effect at a systemic level. Simultaneously, it will be crucial to continue to value and support LGBTQ+ sports clubs, as it is clear that these spaces are hugely important for people. Several participants reflected on a desire for there not to be a need for these clubs. However, whether this is a future long-term goal for LGBTQ+ communities and the wider society, the current need for these clubs to allow LGBTQ+ people to engage in sport freely and without fear and judgement is not under question.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Decision - Ethics ETH2324-1506: Mr Simon Roche

E **ERAMS**
To: Roche, Simon Fri 26/07/2024 10:32

University of Essex ERAMS

26/07/2024
Mr Simon Roche
Health and Social Care
University of Essex
Dear Simon,

Ethics Committee Decision
Application: ETH2324-1506

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "A qualitative study exploring gay men's experiences of team sports" has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 1, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster



Gay men's experiences of team sports

Research Participants Wanted

We are looking for gay men currently playing team sports in LGBTQ+ sports clubs in the UK.

Participants will receive a £25 Amazon voucher.

This study will explore gay men's experiences of team sports throughout their lives and their journeys to playing for an LGBTQ+ sports team.

The research will form part of a doctoral thesis in clinical psychology being undertaken in the School of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex.

If you would be willing to take part or would like to find out more, please contact the Lead Researcher, Simon Roche, via email:

or Research Supervisor, Dr Chris McCormack, via email:



Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: A qualitative study exploring gay men's experiences of team sports.

Invitation paragraph

My name is Simon Roche, and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study which I am conducting as part of my professional doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am being supervised by Dr Chris McCormack, Clinical Psychologist.

Before you decide to take part in the current research study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully. If you have any further questions about the study after reading the following information, please contact me with your questions.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to understand gay men's experiences of team sports and their journeys to playing on LGBTQ+ teams.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to take part as you are a member of an LGBTQ+ sports team in the UK and you have expressed interest in taking part.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this study is voluntary and you do not have to participate if you do not wish to. If you decide to take part, you can withdraw later without giving a reason. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to.

How do I withdraw from the study?

If you decide to take part in this study and wish to withdraw, you are free to do so at any time without prejudice, by informing the chief investigator. You can withdraw from the study after completing your interview **two weeks** after taking part. After two weeks, your responses will

be analysed and transcribed and will not be able to be removed from the project at this stage. If you wish to withdraw from the study after completion, please contact the chief investigator, Simon Roche, by email (simon.roche1@nhs.net) within two weeks of taking part.

What will happen to me if I take part?

To participate, you will be asked to take part in one interview via Microsoft Teams or face-to-face (lasting around 1 - 1½ hours). The interview will be recorded by using the recording feature on Microsoft Teams or an audio recording device (if face-to-face). The interview will involve talking to the chief investigator about your experiences of discrimination in sport throughout your life and your journey to playing for an LGBTQ+ sports team. If you consent,

you may be contacted later to ask if you would like to hear about and comment on the research analysis. You can decline this offer without giving a reason.

If you were to say anything that led the chief investigator to be concerned about your safety, they may signpost you towards options for further support and discuss this with their research supervisor. The chief investigator would keep you informed throughout this process.

Will I be reimbursed for my time?

Participants who take part in a 60–90-minute interview will receive a £25 Amazon voucher. It may take up to 12 weeks after taking part in the research to receive this voucher. This is to allow for university protocols to be carried out.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

There are no direct benefits for you in taking part in this research. It is hoped that the findings from this study will contribute to the literature and has the potential to inform government policies on LGBTQ+ inclusion in sports.

What are the potential disadvantages and risks of taking part?

If you find any of the questions particularly difficult or intrusive you do not have to answer them. You will be reminded that you can ask to stop, take breaks, reschedule the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time. There will be a space for a debrief at the end of the

interview and you will also be given information on relevant sources of support. There are no special precautions that you need to take before, during or after taking part in the study.

How will we use the information about you?

Your research data will be used for the purposes of data collection and analysis. In all cases, your information will be anonymised and stored on a secure password protected file on the University of Essex cloud storage which is compliant with current data protection regulations (Data Protection Act, 2018; General Data Protection Regulations, 2018). The recording of your interview will be deleted as soon as it has been transcribed. Your transcribed data will be stored securely for a period of five years, to allow time for questions to be raised about the research findings that may require consultation with the raw data collected from the study.

What are your choices about how your information is used?

During the interview stage you can choose what questions you wish to answer. After the interview, you can stop being part of the research study at any time, without giving a reason, but the research team will keep the research data about you that they already have. You can find out what would happen with your data before you agree to take part in a study. Researchers need to manage your records in specific ways for the research to be reliable. This means that they won't be able to let you see or change the data they hold about you. Research could go wrong if data is removed or changed.

Your anonymity will be preserved at all times.

All data that is collected will be anonymous to ensure that you cannot be identified from any information. On completion of the interview, you will be given a pseudonym name which will be stored securely and separately from your research data in a password protected 'link document'. This will enable your pseudonym name to be linked to your data. To reduce any risk of you being identified indirectly from identifiable information, the Chief Investigator will redact any information they or the research team and you may feel would lead to identification. The research team is aware that even if data is technically anonymous, some parts of the information may be rendered identifiable in combination with other contextual pieces of information within this project.

In the interest of transparent and open research practices, some research publications request that researchers share their raw research data when publishing their findings. This is so that other researchers can make judgements about the quality of the research. If the research is published in a scientific journal, your data may be used to summarise the findings of the research, however your data will be fully anonymised at all times.

Is the information collected from me confidential?

All information collected about you and the content of the interviews will be kept strictly confidential. However, if you reveal information during the interview which leads to concern about your safety or the safety of others or issues of malpractice, it may be necessary to involve a third party, and this will be done in consultation with the chief investigator's research supervisor unless there is an immediate concern. The chief investigator anticipates that, when possible, they will discuss this with you before confidentiality is broken. To protect your anonymity, your name and other identifying information will be kept securely and separately from your recorded interview and the subsequent data analysis.

If you have any additional concerns at any stage of the interview, every effort will be taken to agree with you what you wish to be anonymised. The chief investigator will carry out all the transcription and any identifying features will be altered in transcripts, reports, and any resulting publications. The recordings will be erased when they are no longer needed for university approval. The chief investigator will keep the anonymised transcripts securely for five years, as they may wish to develop this research for publication. Quotes and extracts from the interview may be used in the final write-up or in an article to be published in an academic journal. These will be carefully selected to ensure that other people cannot identify you.

Where can you find out more about how your information is used?

If you would like more information on how your information is used, please contact the chief investigator, Simon Roche, sr22971@essex.ac.uk.

How do I find out about the results of the study?

We are very grateful to you for taking part in this study and we welcome your interest in our research findings. From April 2025 onwards, you are welcome to contact the chief investigator using the contact details below to find out about the results of the study.

Concerns and Complaints

If you are unhappy or if there is a problem, please contact the chief investigator, Simon Roche, in the first instance. If you have a complaint that you do not wish to talk to the chief investigator about, please contact the supervisor of the project, Dr Chris McCormack (christopher.mccormack2@nhs.net) or the University's Research Integrity Manager, Dr Mantalena Sotiriadou (e-mail ms21994@essex.ac.uk).

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being carried out by a doctoral student at the University of Essex. The research forms part of the academic requirements of the doctorate in Clinical Psychology programme and it is not funded.

Who has reviewed the research?

The research has been reviewed by the University of Essex Sub-Committee 2.

Ok, so what happens now?

If you wish to take part in the research, please forward written consent to the chief investigator **Simon Roche** via email sr22971@essex.ac.uk.

Further information and contact details

For further information, please contact the chief investigator by email on sr22971@essex.ac.uk. If you wish to speak to the supervisor of the project (Dr Chris McCormack), please use the following email: christopher.mccormack2@nhs.net

Support Services

Switchboard - the LGBT+ helpline - 0800 0119 100, open 10am–10pm every day. Email support: hello@switchboard.lgbt. Online chat is also available through their homepage.

Mindout - MindOut Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer Mental Health Service – call 01273234839 or email info@mindout.org.uk or contact directly through their Online Support service. Dates and times on the website.

Samaritans offer 24hr FREE phone calls from landline or mobile 116 123 / Email: jo@samaritans.org

Appendix D: Consent Form

ERAMS ID: ETH2324-1506

Centre Number:

Study Number:

Participant Identification Number:

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: **A qualitative study exploring gay men's experiences of team sports**

Name of Chief Investigator: **Simon Roche**

	Please initial box
1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet (Version 1) for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2. I understand that the chief investigator, Simon Roche, is a member of the LGBTQ+ and plays on an LGBTQ+ hockey team in London.	
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up to two weeks after taking part in my interview. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal will be destroyed.	
4. I understand that after two weeks, my responses will be analysed and transcribed and will not be able to be removed from the project at this stage.	
5. I understand that the transcription of the interview will be stored securely and might be used to support other research in the future and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.	
6. I understand that any identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.	

7. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for the purposes of data collection and analysis as part of a service evaluation.	
8. I understand that the results of this study will be written up as a part of a doctoral thesis for the purpose of the researcher's professional doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I understand that it may also be used in an article to be published in an academic journal.	
9. I understand that the interview will take place on Microsoft Teams.	
10. I agree for the interviews to be recorded using the Microsoft Teams recording function. I understand that these recordings will be securely stored and deleted once transcriptions has taken place.	
11. I understand that if I complete a 60–90-minute interview, I will be reimbursed for my time with a £25 Amazon voucher. I understand that it may take up to 12 weeks after taking part in the research to receive this voucher and that this is to allow for university protocols to be carried out.	
12. I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Simon Roche

07/08/24

Name of Chief Investigator

Date

Signature

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Start of interview

- Emphasise consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw
- Any questions before proceeding?

General information about early experiences of sport:

- Can you tell me about the role sport played in your family growing up. (Prompt questions: Who played sport in your family? What sports did people play? Individual/team sports?)
- What was your experience of playing sports during your school years? (Prompt: What do you think the benefits of playing sport then were? Did you have any negative experiences relating to your identity? How did you respond to or cope with these? Were there any challenges or barriers to you engaging in team sports during your school years? What was the impact of these negative experiences/challenges? Do you think there is a relationship between these experiences and how you felt in yourself and general wellbeing?)

Experiences of sport in adulthood:

- Did you go to university or college? What was your experience of playing sports in university/college? (Prompt: What do you think the benefits of playing sport then were? Did you have any negative experiences relating to your identity while playing sports? How did you respond to or cope with these? Were there any challenges or barriers to you engaging in team sports during university? What was the impact of these negative experiences/challenges? Do you think there is a relationship between these experiences and how you felt in yourself and general wellbeing?)
- Did you play sports after university? How was this?

Journey to playing on an LGBTQ+ sports team and current experiences:

- Following these periods of your life, can you talk about your journey to playing with the XXX Club? (Follow up questions: How did you hear about the club? Did you specifically seek out an LGBTQ+ club and why?)
- What do you think the benefits of playing sport are for you now?
- What does playing for the club mean to you?
- How has your life changed since joining the club? (Prompt questions: How has it impacted your wellbeing/identity/friendships and relationships?)
- What's different about playing in this club compared to other experiences of clubs/teams?
- Have you had any negative experiences while playing with the club?

- Have your motivations for playing for the club changed over time? How so?
- Is there any other information that hasn't been covered by the questions asked that you think would be helpful to share?

End of interview

-Bring attention to support services on information sheet if necessary

Appendix F: Sample Coding of Transcript

7/20/25, 4:02 PM

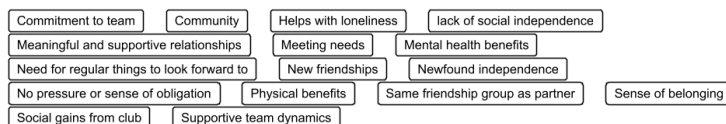
2025-07-20-Transcript for Appendices.docx

Transcript for Appendices.docx

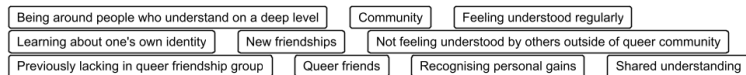
R And this is quite like a broad big question, but like, how has your life changed since being a part of the club?

P Friends. So having met all of the [club name] and there's a lot of them, some of them I don't really speak to too much and that's fine. Some of them I speak to somewhat regularly and some of them I speak to like basically every day. We've got like a WhatsApp group. We meet up, we go for dinner, we go to quiz nights. All of these things. And yeah, it's nice to have a community of people who I can, like rely on and lean on for certain things that maybe other people in my life don't get or like aren't as like included in. It's also nice to have like a different group of people in my life, because just for my personal situation, so me and my partner [name], we got together through a mutual friend. So, a lot of my closest friends are a lot of his closest friends, so it makes it easier for like meeting up with friends because there's less people to like get together. But for having time apart, just having a bit of like space to yourself, it's...if I want to go and meet up with, say, my friend down the road, [name] would usually come with me to go and see him because he's his best friend too, so it's nice for me to have my own group of people outside of that just to do my own thing. So yeah, definitely like friends. It has helped out massively. But also, I think I'm the kind of person where I like having something to look forward to, whether it's having like a holiday to look forward to or like I'm going out on the weekend. Having the [club name] like I can choose to meet up with people in the group myself or also like the [club name] they put on social events quite regularly. There's rugby training every Saturday. Like I said, there's new starter days quite regularly. They also get involved in like other events outside of the club like Pride. So, there are lots of things that keep happening within the clubs that they give you the choice to come and go. And I also quite love that. That's one thing I've not mentioned yet. I absolutely love that there is no pressure to do anything. And your involvement in the club is as much as you want it to be. There's no pressure to come to training every single week. There's no pressure to go to games every single time they're on. There's no pressure to go to events. Anytime someone hosts, when it's just, something's happening. If you want to come along, fantastic. If you don't. No problem. Have a great day. Like, I love that there's no pressure because Me being in [town name] especially, I'm quite far out of [city name], so I have to drive an hour to training and it's not as easily accessible for me. So

sometimes I do miss things here and there. And they just always give me the option of. There's no pressure. Like you don't have to do anything that you don't want to. But I think in terms of like impacts on my life, it has definitely like given me more friends, given me more things to look forward to, and given me a great sense of community. It has also helped keep my mental health significantly. Just getting out of the house, having a run around and feeling a part of something. I'm not saying my mental health was bad or anything like that, but it does boost your mood. Yeah, it massively helps with all that because it can be lonely sometimes as a gay man you know. But yeah, and obviously the physical aspect of it as well. It's great for all that too. RHmm. OK thank you. And do you think being a part of the club has impacted your identity in any way?



PI would say so yeah. I think having people who are really close friends in a queer space who have been through a similar life experience of coming out and struggling with their sexuality at an early age is important you know. I never really had a group of friends like that before because most of my friends were either girls or straight guys. Like it's one thing to have a conversation with somebody and say I'm feeling upset about something and they go, oh, I totally understand. But like, they don't because they've not been through what you're going through and you can appreciate that they're trying to help, but it's not the same. But to have someone say, I get it. I really get it, makes such a huge difference. That's what I've got out of being around people like this in this kind of community and. It just helps me kind of to learn more about myself as a person because I get to have those conversations with people now on quite a regular basis and I think that's just like, great.



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