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Multi-level influences on LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations: A qualitative study

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The author of this thesis received substantial help from Dr. Xavier Sanchez in the completion of this research project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
DESCRIPTION OF TABLE	v
DESCRIPTION OF FIGURE	vi
LIST OF APPENDICES	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
ABSTRACT	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
Multilevel Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sports	
Participants	2
Micro-Level Factors	3
Meso-Level Factors	4
Macro-Level Factors	4
Rationale and Purpose of the Study	5
METHODOLOGY	6
Design	6
Participants	7
Ethics	8
Interview Guide	9
Procedure	9
Data Analysis	10
RESULTS	12
Conceptualization of Inclusion and Welcoming	13
Multi-Level Factors	14
Micro-Level Factors	14
Demographics	15
Personal Identity and LGBTQ+ Status	15
Coming Out Stories	16
Body Image	17
Meso-Level Factors	19
Education and Programming	19
Allies	20
Leader Behaviors	21
Organizational Culture	22
Macro-Level Factors	23
Laws	23
Institutional Norms and Governing Structures	25
Outcomes Associated with Inclusion and Welcoming	27
Chosen Family	28
Social Media Influences	30
Locational Differences	31
DISCUSSION	31
Conceptualization of Inclusion and Welcoming	32
Multi-Level Factors	33

Micro-Level Factors	33
Meso-Level Factors	35
Macro-Level Factors	36
Outcomes Associated with Inclusion and Welcoming	37
Implications	38
Limitations	39
Methodological	39
Author's Biases	40
Future Research	40
CONCLUSION	41
REFERENCES	44
APPENDICES	59

	DESCRIPTION OF TABLE	
TABLE	DESCRIPTION	PAGE
1	Participants Demographic Information	8

DESCRIPTION OF FIGURE

FIGURE	DESCRIPTION	PAGE
1	Illustration of Multilevel Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sport Participants	13

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX	DESCRIPTION	PAGE
A	Definitions of LGBTQ+ Terminology	59
B	Semi-Structured Interview Guide	61

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the factors that influenced the experiences in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, plus (LGBTQ+) individuals in recreational sport organizations. The factors that influenced their experiences within recreational organizations are shown through a conceptualized model, which is derived from multi-level factors including the micro (individual), meso (organizational/team), and macro (societal) levels of analysis within the multi-level system of a sport organization. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations. The aim of the present study was to adequately examine the following three research questions: (a) How do LGBTQ+ individuals conceptualize their inclusion and welcoming in recreational sport organizations?; (b) What multi-level factors influence an LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences in recreational sport organizations?; and (c) What are the outcomes associated with recreational sport organizations who include and welcome LGBTQ+ individuals? Using a qualitative research method, six self-identifying LGBTQ+ individuals participated in semi-structured interviews that were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and presented for clarification that provided knowledge on experiences faced within recreational sport organizations. Results indicate that alongside the aspects of the theoretical concepts of the multi-level factors including micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis, the experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals encounter within recreational sports organizations involve aspects of their coming out stories, chosen family, body image, social media and location differences that also impact experience.

Keywords: conceptualization, diversity, education, inclusion, leaders, policy making

Multi-level influences on LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations: A qualitative study

The lesbian^{1*}, gay*, bisexual*, transgender*, questioning*, plus (LGBTQ+*) individuals, in general, experience a world that is different than their heteronormative* counterparts. Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals have been shown as a social stigma, violent, and discriminatory (Gruberg et al., 2020; Herek, 1991, 2009; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Poushter & Kent, 2020; Reid, 2020) and as a mental disorder (Drescher, 2015). These attitudes were mirrored within a sports environment and the LGBTQ+ athletic experience has involved, amongst others, physical and/or verbal assault and threats, discriminatory harassment (Denison et al., 2021; Denison & Kitchen, 2015; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), state-sponsored homophobia* (Rheenen, 2014), and stigmatization and discrimination (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2014; Shannon, 2013; Symons et al., 2010). The first international study conducted on homophobia in sport found that 80% of all participants have witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport, over half of the participants remained in the closet* completely or partially, and those who did come out* preferred to have an ally* or supporter on their team and to play for a team with a culture that is supportive of diversity (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). These attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals within sports organizations demonstrates the importance of LGBTQ+ specific, educational diversity training programs in sporting organizations (Anderson et al., 2020; Denison & Kitchen, 2015; Pecoraro & Pitts, 2020).

Sport recreational organizations provide a location for people to participate in physical activities, and the benefits of participation in recreational sport has been shown to improve life (Henchy, 2011). Many times, there is a discriminatory factor for those individuals who live on the LGBTQ+ spectrum and the impacts of discrimination have negatively impacted the lives of LGBTQ+ persons in sport (Symons et al., 2017). The sport participation structure has influences from sexuality* (Elling & Janssens, 2009; Wellard, 2002), and these influences are incorporated in the multilevel dynamics of a sport organization. Collectively, sports environments have

¹ In Appendix A, the terminology that is presented throughout this research pertaining to the LGBTQ+ lifestyle is listed with definitions from the Humans Rights Campaign (2021); each word, when it is first introduced throughout the research, is followed by an (*) for the readers' convenience.

shown an increase in their inclusive space for LGBTQ+ individuals (Anderson, 2009; Griffin, 2012). However, to obtain a holistic perspective of LGBTQ+ experiences, there is an emphasis on conceptual models that consider influences from micro (i.e., individuals), meso (i.e., team or organizational), and macro (i.e., societal) levels of analysis within the multilevel system of a sport organization (Cunningham, 2019); the exclusion of one of these levels would express a partial story (Dixon & Cunningham, 2006).

The implementation of LGBTQ+ diversity management policies and procedures have increased across every major sports league and governing bodies (Cunningham, 2011, for a review); however, the focus pertains to that of race (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010; Nadeau et al., 2011), gender (e.g., Bruening & Dixon, 2008; Kamphoff et al., 2010; Shaw & Frisby, 2006), and organizational diversity strategies (e.g., Chelladurai, 2009; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). Within recreational sport organizations, findings show the attitudes towards lesbians and gay men in college campus recreational settings (Anderson, 2017; Anderson & Mowatt, 2013) and the implications of transgendered policies (Pecoraro & Pitts, 2020) have improved overall; however, there is a significant misrepresentation of the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ individual experiences in recreational sport organizations.

Multi-level Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sport Participants

Sport organizations, individually, are complex, multi-level systems incorporating factors at a variety of levels, including societal level norms and activities, organizational culture, influences from the different activities of the organization, and decisions made from management (Chelladurai, 2009). With the complexity of sport organizations individually, the additional multi-level model for understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ sport participants provide a structure focusing on three key factors: micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Cunningham, 2012). These three key factors provide a multi-level analysis of the experiences in which LGBTQ+ individuals encounter: which each level intertwining together for the development of a greater understanding of the whole picture. Each level provides key

factors that influence a specific aspect of experience; whether individual, organizational, or societal.

Micro-level Factors

Within the micro-level factors described as LGBTQ+ status, personal identity, and demographics, the possibility of influence, both, by and on the meso- and macro-level factors within an individuals' well-being, attitudes, and behaviors is ubiquitous. Continuously, though the status of an individual within the LGBTQ+ community is thought to be a part of a single group, where experiences, opportunities, and attitudes are equal, this thought may seem relevant in a select number of certain situations, though not necessarily true in others. Typically, the prejudices towards transgendered individuals within a sporting context has been greater than that of sexual minorities (Cahn, 2011; IOC, 2015; NCAA, 2011; Sykes, 2006; Tagg, 2012; World Rugby, 2020). A process that is involved with the development of an individual's LGBTQ+ status, the discovery is shared through an experience known as a coming out story. These stories are personal to that of the storyteller, provide insight into a perceived notion of personal identity, and are the epiphany of the characteristics in which one describes oneself.

Alongside LGBTQ+ status, the personal identity of an individual represents one's self-image, who someone is as a person, and how one feels about oneself (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Randel & Jaussi, 2003). Expression of personal identity allows for professional development (Ragins, 2004), while psychological and physical withdrawal can happen if others fail to recognize an individuals' identity (Pinel & Swann, 2000), and the suppression of LGBTQ+ identity will likely leave feelings of guilt and shame (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016; Wagner et al., 2016).

A complex, additional, piece of the micro-level factors of understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals is the demographics of the individuals, predominately sex and race stereotypes (Cunningham, 2019), research has shown the prejudices and influences that both sex and race have upon the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals (Anderson, 2011; Bernstein, 2004; Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McCormack & Anderson, 2014; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Southall et al., 2011; Whitley et al., 2011).

Meso-level Factors

Organizational or group-level factors, including leader behaviors, organizational culture, education and programming, and the presence of allies, can potentially influence LGBTQ+ athletic experiences, which defines meso-level factors (Cunningham, 2019). “Virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people’s behaviors and the consequences for them” (Bandura, 1986, p. 19) and that of LGBTQ+ treatments, athletes will look to leaders, whether in teammates, coaches, or administrators, for acceptable behavior. The values, assumptions, and beliefs within an organization that are developed over time and widely followed by organizational members commonly known as organizational culture can be used to shape behaviors from current members but also taught to new members. This is a key drive of diverse, inclusive sport organizations (Chelladurai, 2014; Doherty & Chelladuri, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999), which can affect experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes. When an athlete experiences psychological safety within an organizational culture, the negative consequences of self-image, status, or career can be minimized (Kahn, 1990).

Another aspect of the meso-level factors is education and programming, which can take place as formal diversity training and the material can be used upon the training when it is “explicitly linked with the sport organization’s strategic plan and used as a way of improving performance, as opposed to fulfilling compliance requirements” (Cunningham, 2019). The final aspect of meso-level factors are allies or “individuals who offer support for diversity initiatives, social justice causes, and people from underrepresented groups” (Cunningham, 2015a, p. 280). Because an ally has more power and privilege, using their platform to take a stand against transphobia* and homophobia provides society with messages of respect, acceptance, and equality (Cunningham, 2019; Taylor, 2015).

Macro-Level Factors

Within an organization environment, there are elements of three key macro-level factors deriving from societal practices: laws, governing structures, and institutionalized norms (Cunningham, 2019). LGBTQ+ related laws fluctuate greatly depending on the country in which one resides; some countries allow punishments of death or imprisonment (Human Rights Watch, 2019) while improvements have been

continuously strived for in others (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). When pertaining to LGBTQ+ related laws, there are ramifications of well-being and health, positively or negatively, accordingly (Hatzenbuehler, 2017; Raifman et al., 2017). Governing structures can also influence LGBTQ+ athletes' experiences and opportunities; recent documentations have been pertaining to the regulations for transgendered athletes to compete (IOC, 2015; NCAA, 2011; World Rugby, 2020). In terms of institutionalized norms, institutionalization defined as when "social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on rule-like status in social thought and action" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341); which currently describes a variety of activities, mindsets, or ideals that, over time, people unquestioningly accept them (Cunningham, 2012). Recent studies have shown that experiences for sexual minorities* in relation to gender, sport, and participation have been influenced by institutionalized norms and rules (Epstein, 2009; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012; Staurowsky, 2012; Townsend, 2018).

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

The rationale of this study derives from a few concepts; primarily, LGBTQ+ individuals participate in physical activity for a variety of reasonings including enjoyment and satisfaction of participation with shown improvements in self-esteem, life satisfaction, mood states, and body esteem (Zamboni et al., 2008), the desire to acquire or develop new skills and competencies (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000), and the desire to build relationships and develop friendships (MacLean & Hamm, 2008; Pronger, 1990). Regardless of these motivators to maintain within physical activity, research on LGBTQ+ individuals has shown a variety of sexual prejudices within the sport environments (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Piedra et al., 2017; Pronger, 1990; Shang et al., 2012), it also shows that recreational organizations provide individuals with the opportunity to participate in physical activity and the benefits of participation in recreational physical activity practices has been shown to improve quality of life (Henchy, 2011; Maugeri & Musumeci, 2021). Through this, the sport participation structure has influences from sexuality (Elling & Janssens, 2009; Wellard, 2002), and these influences are incorporated in the multilevel dynamics of a sport organization (Cunningham, 2019). Collectively, sports environments have shown an increase in their inclusive space for LGBTQ+ individuals (Anderson, 2009; Griffin, 2012);

however, to the best of the author's knowledge, there is a limited amount of research pertaining to the influences on LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations. The current study uses qualitative methods via in-depth, semi-structured interviews to obtain information pertaining to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sports organizations.

The acknowledgement of using the LGBTQ+ blanket term while engaging in a multitude of identities runs a risk for assumption that a coherent LGBTQ+ collective exists (Caudwell, 2014). This risk is without verification that the LGBTQ+ individual participants in this research, and as a community, will occasionally use a multitude of descriptors pertaining to members of their community in terms such as LGBTQ+, LGBTQI*, LGBT*, "gay people" *, "gay community"* , and other blanket terms but respectfully, the acknowledgements that individual experiences are not to be broadcasted towards all members of a diverse, differential, community.

Therefore, providing a diverse perspective of individual experiences across different cultural contexts and communities allows for the present study to effectively aim at examining the following three research questions: (a) How do LGBTQ+ individuals conceptualize their inclusion and welcoming in recreational sports organizations?; (b) What multilevel factors influence an LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences in recreational sports organizations?; and (c) What are the outcomes associated with recreational sports organizations who include and welcome LGBTQ+ individuals?

Methodology

Design

The author of this research is a lesbian, cis-gendered* woman who is open with her sexual orientation* and gender identity*, both personally and professionally. Though the author of this research has experiences with regards to her LGBTQ+ status and recreational sports organizations, there is an acknowledgement that observations of reality can be influenced by perspectives and experiences. With that, the research provides a hint of critical realism to allow for the research paradigm to

distinguish the objective truth from observed reality (Easton, 2010), while including the perspective of post-positivism. This in turn allows for an encompassing way to examine real world problems and seek to explicate social concerns (Henderson, 2011) and with that, a qualitative design was applied. The purpose of this study was to examine the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations; therefore, to maintain integrity of the participants' experiences, the key focus of the researcher was to refrain from enforcing personal beliefs or experiences on the participants shared experiences.

Participants

The targeted participants were self-proclaimed members of LGBTQ+ community who participated in recreational sport organization, either team or individual activities. A total of six self-identifying LGBTQ+ individuals voluntarily participated in individual, semi-structured interviews; each participant was over the age of 18 years and have participated in physical activity practices in recreational sport organizations ranging from 7 to 28 years. Primarily, the participants were purposively sampled from social media outlets with the researchers' connections within the LGBTQ+ community. The usage of purposive sampling provides the selection of individuals that are believed to have extensive knowledge and/or experience with the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the participants were recruited through a snowball sample method, which is the process of obtaining participants with the necessary characteristics through people with similar characteristics (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The participants' sexual orientation and gender identity consist of two cis-males*, three cis-female*, one transman*: with two self-identified as gay, two self-identified as lesbians, one self-identified as bisexual and one self-identified as straight. All participants were from the United States of America, where three currently reside in the state of North Carolina, one resides in the state of Florida, one resides in the state of New Hampshire, and one resides in the state of Ohio. The educational levels of the participants included three with masters' degrees, one with a bachelors' degree, and two have completed some college; with only one who is currently studying. Participants were involved with a number of recreational activities including running club, hiking, martial arts, biking, rock climbing, scuba diving,

dance, horseback riding, rugby, soccer, baseball, gym, kickball, slow-pitch softball, disc-golf, golf, basketball, and softball. Table 1 below provides a summary of the participant's demographics.

Table 1.

Participant Demographic Information

<i>Name</i>	1. Alex	2. B.A.B.	3. Flash	4. Dottie	5. Luke Cage	6. Wonder Woman
<i>Gender Identity</i>	Cis-Male	Cis-Female	Cis-Male	Cis-Female	Trans-Male	Cis-Female
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>	Gay	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual	Straight	Lesbian
<i>Current Location</i>	New Hampshire, US	North Carolina, US	Florida, US	North Carolina, US	North Carolina, US	Ohio, US
<i>Level of Education</i>	Bachelors	Masters	Masters	Some College	Some College	Masters
<i>Recreational Activities</i>	Running, Hiking, Martial Arts, Biking, Rock Climbing, Scuba Diving	Many sports, Dance, Martial Arts, Horseback Riding, Rugby	Soccer, Baseball, Gym, Running Club	Kick Ball, Slow-Pitch Softball, Disc golf, Golf	Basketball, Softball, Rugby	Soccer, Rugby
<i>Years of Participation</i>	7-8 years	23 years	15 years	10 years	23 years	28 years

Ethics

This research was approved by the Local Ethics Review Team at the School of Health and Welfare at Halmstad University, Sweden. Each participant in this research was provided with an Agreement of Cooperation and a Participant Information Sheet that entailed details pertaining to the purpose of the research and their participation, the benefits, confidentiality regulations based on an ethical code of conduct, and professionalism, and establishment verified by a signature from both researcher and participant. To ensure the dignity and welfare of the participants, ethical principles were followed (FEPSAC, 2011), information that might identify a participant was concealed to maintain confidentiality, and participants were informed their participation was optional and they had the right to terminate without providing reasoning, at any time. The information regarding ethical guidelines were repeated at the beginning of the interview process.

Interview Guide

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather perspectives about ideas, opinions, and personal experiences of the participants within their respective recreational sport organizations. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to share their experiences in their own words (Geer, 1988), this resulted in the construction of a semi-structured interview guide for the in-depth interview sessions (Adams, 2015). The semi-structured interview guide provided questions relating to the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences within a recreational sport organization. The semi-structured interview guide first covers basic background information pertaining to the interviewee and ends with a starter question on their relationship with physical activity. The semi-structured interview guide provided the researcher with key points in relation to the multi-level model for understanding experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organizations. Additional questions were asked in relation to provide supplementary information to the answers provided by the participants; therefore, interviews were only semi-structured based upon each participants' individual experiences. Interview guide is presented in Appendix B.

Procedure

The interviews consisted of a recorded time ranging from thirty-three minutes to one hour and thirty minutes in length and they were recorded with both audio and video. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim and, for credibility, presented to the participants for approval. Each participant provided a written email approval for the contribution of their individual interviews within this research presentation. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews were conducted using the online video call platform, Zoom, while the participants were interviewed once, in some cases, additional information was requested from participants via text.

The actual gathering of data was developed as follows. Firstly, the researcher ensured that the participants met the participant criteria as self-identified members of the LGBTQ+ community, participated in recreational sports organizations, and were interested in participating in the research. Prior to the interview, the participants were provided with the purpose of the interview, the regulations pertaining to the confidentiality of the information they shared were explained, and the participants

were reminded that termination of their participation was acceptable at any given moment. The participants were presented with two documents titled Agreement of Cooperation and a Participant Information Sheet, asked to sign, and present their consent to begin the research prior to scheduling an interview. Secondly, the interviews were conducted at a date and time selected by the participant. The interviews began with a brief review of the purpose of the interview, confidentiality, and basic background and demographic information was collected by the researcher. The interviewees were asked a probing question “What is your relationship with physical activity?” to begin the flow of conversation on their experiences as LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sports organizations. In some cases, the order in which the questions were asked varied between participants to maintain a flowing, transitional interaction between the researcher and interviewee. Throughout the interview, interviewees were encouraged to further elaborate with probes and examples regarding the information that was addressed. To expand on an answer and to provide further relevant information and details, participants can be asked to provide examples and can be probed to continue with their explanation (Roulston et al., 2003). The interview ended with “Is there anything else you wish to add regarding your experiences in recreational sports organizations?” and the participants were thanked for their participation in the research. Lastly, the participants were explained that the interview was to be transcribed verbatim and their approval was needed, once more, for the usage of their information. Additionally, they were provided the option of receiving a final copy of the presentation of research if they desired and were presented with the possibility that additional information may be necessary. The participants were thanked for their involvement in the research process and providing information pertaining to their experiences as LGBTQ+ individuals within recreational sport organizations.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis to identify patterns pertaining to the experiences faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sports organizations. The primary encounter with the data was a semantic focus and latent focus with the secondary. Braun et al. 's (2017) description of semantic focus ‘means you’re coding and reporting on *explicitly-stated* ideas, concepts, meanings, experiences, etc.’ while

latent focus is ‘where you code and develop analysis around more implicit ideas or concept that underpin what’s explicitly expressed.’ Both deductive and inductive processes were used by the researcher in analyzing the raw data and these processes, in practice, are regularly used together (Braun et al., 2017). With the usage of Cunningham’s (2019) multilevel model for understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ sport participants, the researcher deductively analyzed the data, which is the analytical process being driven by theoretical concepts (Braun et al., 2017). The process of developing theories based on the data analyzed, or inductive approach was used by the interpretation of the data and allowing significant themes to emerge from the results (Braun et al., 2017).

To become familiar with the interview content, the researcher first participated in a process of familiarization of the transcribed recorded data of 127 pages and deeply immersed within the data by reading and re-reading all data and creating notes. The next process was the phase of coding where data was identified and labeled into codes, relevant to the three research questions, within both semantic and latent level. Multiple codes were identified and then information was organized into three overarching themes based on Cunningham’s (2019) multilevel model. Furthermore, the codes were concluded into a total of six themes and two subthemes. Codes that were not recognized across several sets of data, after being checked against one another and relevance, were excluded from the research. After the development of the themes, notes taken were used to finalize the analysis with summarizing the findings both illustratively and analytically with a balance between both methods of data extraction. For qualitative research, maintaining trustworthiness has significant importance to ensure reliability (Golafshani, 2003) and trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morse, 2018). Credibility of a study refers to how believable the research is (Burke, 2017) and to ensure credibility, the participants were provided with the written transcriptions of the interviews, providing them with the opportunity to verify and approve the data analyzed. Out of the six participants, five gave their written approval for the usage of the original transcription, one provided correction to locational names and spelling errors, followed with an approval. After the data was analyzed, the participants were allowed to check the results for accuracy and resonance regarding their experiences through member checking, which, according to Birt et al (2016), member checking

provides an enhancement of the credibility of the research. After the finalization of data analysis, the participants were given an opportunity to check themes for resonance. All participants agreed that the themes resonated with them, while two provided minor comments on clarification. The findings are able to be transferred to a different context, depending entirely on the readers judgements but, transferability is analogous to the generalizability used in qualitative research methods (Burke, 2017). To ensure transferability, the reader is provided with sufficient contextual information and a detailed explanation of the results central to the research question. To provide consistency among the research, the technique of dependability is to provide a detailed description of the steps taken during the research process (Burke, 2017). To ensure dependability, the researcher has explained the steps of data gathering and the analysis process in detail. Lastly, confirmability is to reassure that the findings mirror the experiences of the participants (Burke, 2017) and to maintain integrity of the experiences intact, the present research gathered information pertaining to the experiences of LGBTQ+ participants in recreational sports organizations who gave their personal experiences without the researcher enforcing personal beliefs and/or experiences.

Results

The results of the research are in relation to the three overarching themes: including six themes and two subthemes.

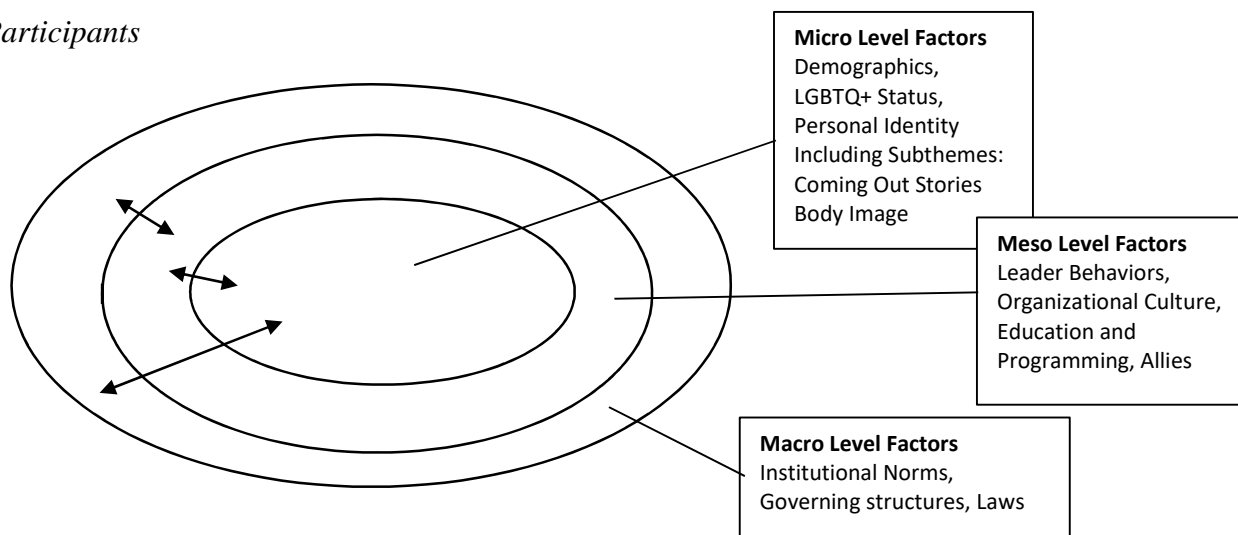
- Conceptualization of Inclusion and Welcoming
- Multi-Level Factors
 - Micro-Level
 - Coming Out Stories
 - Body Image
 - Meso-Level
 - Macro-Level
- Outcomes Associated with Inclusion and Welcoming
 - Chosen Family
 - Social Media Influences
 - Locational Differences

Within the overarching theme of the multi-level factors, Cunningham (2019) provides an illustration of the multilevel model for understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ sport participants within three multi-level factors in Figure 1. This illustrates the connections between each level and the importance of their contributions upon each

individual level and their intertwinement provides a holistic description of LGBTQ+ experiences.

Figure 1.

Illustration of Multilevel Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sport Participants



Conceptualization of Inclusion and Welcoming

For the LGBTQ+ participants in this research, the conceptualization of inclusion and welcoming into their respective recreational sport organization is shown as a positive interaction depending vastly on the ability to formulate relationships between other members of the recreational sport organization and the LGBTQ+ community. B.A.B shares that she found rugby after she watched her girlfriend at the time play for a women's team; "by the end of it (the rugby game), I had asked how I could get into, like, where is this near me?... <>... and it was one of the best decisions of my life". A component on whether LGBTQ+ individuals are able to experience a positive interaction relates to interpersonal interactions, by that of word-of-mouth between members of the LGBTQ+ community as Flash shares,

before I moved to Florida, my roommate and two friends had mentioned to me that when I got here, they wanted me to join them in the running club and it is an LGBTQI inclusive running club... <>... So, before I even came here, I was already aware of them and when I found out more about the club and more about the social aspect, (it) was really nice to me because I thought this is a way for me to meet friends and meet other gay people.

The purposeful connection with clubs proclaiming an LGBTQ+ inclusive environment and knowing an organizations reputation beforehand eliminates the complications of adventuring into unexpected situations. Flash shares that joining an

inclusive LGBTQ+ club allowed for him to feel comfortable outside the normal dating apps and separate from the bars in connecting with LGBTQ+ individuals within the running club.

I thought, 'what a great way to be active and kill two birds with one stone.' Be active, be social and really meet people and think like that so this is why I actually joined, and I am enjoying it. I've never really had that before (Flash).

Interpersonal interactions within the LGBTQ+ community provides a secure network that will allow individuals with an opportunity to join a group that will accept who they are as individuals and formulating relationships within recreational sport organizations ultimately provides a conceptualization of inclusion for LGBTQ+ participants. WW shares that she joined an intermural (recreational) rugby team while attending university because a girl that she liked played and, ultimately, because

Sports is just how I got to know people, that's how I made friends. Very rarely do I make friends outside of sports just cause I'm a quieter person and playing rugby allowed me to be in a place where I felt really comfortable with me being who I was because there's other LGBTQ+ people like me (WW).

Multi-Level Factors

For clarity, the multi-level factors that contribute to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organization are separated into the three key theoretical constructs of micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors and other contributing factors that were presented from the participants including coming out stories, body image, social media influences, and locational differences. The multi-level factors attribute to the experiences of LGBTQ+ experiences (Cunningham, 2019), while the additional subthemes provide a holistic image of the experiences of these LGBTQ+ individuals. Each theme and subtheme are an intertwinement of one another, and while the presentation of research is separated into simplistic themes, the actual experiences have influences upon one another and the exclusion of one of these factors expresses a partial story of LGBTQ+ experiences (Dixon & Cunningham, 2006).

Micro-Level Factors

From the theoretical aspect, micro-level factors consist of three separate but integrated constructs including the demographics, personal identity, and the LGBTQ+ status of the participants. These factors contribute towards an individual aspect of

understanding the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences within recreational sport organizations. Additionally, there are the concepts of coming out stories and body image that include to the micro-level factors of influences on the LGBTQ+ participants' experiences within recreational sports organizations.

Demographics. The demographics of the participants included information pertaining to age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, educational level, place of birth, current location, years of recreational participation and specific recreational activities. Due to the nature of the information provided and the considerable chances of identification, a few demographical categories were omitted from the presentation within Table 1.

Personal Identity and LGBTQ+ Status. The presentation of the participants' personal identity is relevant to examine the influences of LGBTQ+ individual experiences in recreational sport organizations. Each participant was asked the question, 'How would you identify yourself?' and for instances like Dottie, she provided simplistic details including name, location, age, and a simple fact about herself. While Flash stated simplistic details, he went into a further description about personal details pertaining to his life.

I would say, of course my name, I'm from Texas, born and raised. I identify as a gay man. I work in human resources, I recently moved to Florida from Texas before then, I was in (a foreign country) for two years with the Peace Corps. I am getting back into physical activity after about a year and a half hiatus, due to the pandemic, and just due to being at home and working from home and leading a more sedentary lifestyle (Flash).

How a person expresses their personal identity is a personal development and is able to change in regard to the people interested, as is the case with WW stating, "I think it depends on where I met that person". She goes on to say that if she is talking to members of the rugby community, she shares her LGBTQ+ status and other information right away because of the comfort she feels but if they are not related to rugby, she tends to be a bit more conservative. An alternate empirical example that is examined in LGBTQ+ experiences is that an individual's personal identity does not initially offer an individual's sexual orientation but maintains a focus on accomplishments. Alex shares that when initially conversating with someone, his sexual orientation 'doesn't usually come up unless it's been asked or something, and it's just relevant, then I'll mention it'. Alex states,

Now, a lot of times when I identify myself, I don't offer up my sexual identity first, it's more about my accomplishments at work more than anything because I've worked very hard to get where I am and I'm proud of my accomplishments so, usually that's what I'm talking about is, that sort of thing... <>... As you grow, you start to learn what you're interested in, like I learned that I am interested in men and then I also learned that I am interested in fitness.

Ultimately, when it comes to an individual's personal identity and LGBTQ+ status, the information shared derives from a personal significance to the expression of identity. Luke Cage expressed displeasure and can be viewed uncomfortable as he states, "I don't like those questions, I didn't like them then (when he was younger) and I don't like them now." Through these participants, they provided a variety of examples in how each individual expresses their personal identity and LGBTQ+ status with others.

Coming Out Stories. Each coming out story is unique to the individuals' experience and should not be considered a static action but rather a variety of motivations, goals, and strategies that can be placed into a single catch-all for a complex identity management system (Orne, 2011). The decision to come out, at times, is not an easy decision, as Flash explains that it was a moment in his life that he would never forget and after coming out to friends in university, his decision to come out to his family came from not wanting to hide himself anymore. He states,

coming out for me was not an easy decision. It was very hard to make that decision as far as actually coming out. It was very hard to ever imagine myself doing that... <>... After nearly two years of coming out to my friends in college and being accepted and being a part of the friend group, I felt like 'why should I go home and hide things when I am happy with who I am, I'm finally free, I'm finally able to live my life. I'm surrounded by people who love me regardless and so why would I go home and hide that from my family?'. And so, I made the decision that I would go home one weekend and I would tell them and that was scary. Very scary. That was a moment in my life that I'll never forget.

While the decision to share a coming out story is not easy, the participants of this research shared that their own LGBTQ+ status was known at the early stages of adolescents. While this information is known on a personal level, the acknowledge of their status is followed with fear of the repercussions that may follow. Alex, Flash, B.A.B, WW, and LC all shared with me, severally, that their decisions to postpone their coming out stories to their families was due to the nature of their upbringings and the influences of religion within the family background. Alex shares that because of his Christian upbringing, he didn't know the name for his sexual orientation, and he felt that it was considered 'bad' and needed to be repressed. This repression leads to a

lack of support from family and the fear of coming out to others that inevitably lead to the expression of his own sexual orientation to happen in the early stages of adulthood, as a similar case with B.A.B. She shared that due to a religious upbringing and being homeschooled, she didn't know what a lesbian was until she entered high school and due to the lack of support, she, also, didn't officially come out until early adulthood.

At times, these LGBTQ+ individuals experienced a coming out story later in life due to the lack of support, religion, and repression of their own emotions but regardless, each individual story is different. With WW, she shared that even with her lesbian friend group, the process of coming out scared her due to the nature of a religious aspect.

I knew pretty young, 12-13, that I was a lesbian, but I hid it from everybody. I had some friends that I was comfortable coming out to because they were also lesbians. It was a lesbian friend group, but I didn't tell my family until I went to college just because I was scared that they wouldn't accept me because they are really religious, very catholic (WW).

While LC experienced a religious aspect in his family background, initially the process of acceptance moved from a story of sexual minority to a story of gender minority as the initial instance was a mistake of feeling.

I've known I was different and that I had these desires to be a male from childhood. I can't tell you at what age that happened and when that process started occurring but at least acknowledging my sexual interest in women; that happened when girls typically start having crushes on boys. I think that happened when I was in the first grade, I had my first crush on a girl and then I kept continuing, it wasn't a thing, it wasn't an instance, it was me mislabeling my feelings (LC).

Despite LC experiencing a mislabeling of his feelings from sexual orientation to gender identity, the process of understanding his own feelings was complex, in nature. Dottie expressed that one of her best friends growing up was a lesbian and she wanted to be friends with her, only to help her figure out her own identity. She stated, "I think there's always been clues my whole life, like little things where I thought someone might be my friend but then I realized I had a crush on them" and through dating a few women, she was able to understand her own sexual orientation. Regardless of the details of their coming out story, the participants shared a vital importance of the process and acknowledgement of their individual story had upon their lives.

Body Image. The examination of the LGBTQ+ community has added an additional factor that contributes towards the micro-level factors that influence the experiences

of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organizations with the conversation on body image. For Alex, he contributed to the notion that there are a variety of issues with body image within the LGBTQ+ community but states, “for me, you know the reason I really started working out back in 2013 has very little to do with body. In fact, when I fretted about my body image, it made it harder for me to start working out”. As his journey with fitness and health improved, the concept of body image became more relevant; “I became more obsessed with the body image aspect the more fit I got, and I’d find myself looking into the mirror being like ‘oh, he’s hot. (laughs)” (Alex). While Alex shared that he obsessed over body image after his involvement with fitness, for Flash, joining an LGBTQ+ inclusive recreational sport organization, the concept of body image comes for the process of learning an individual’s own capabilities and a communication between the coaches and trainers with the individual. He shares his experiences that the coaches and trainers emphasize that any physical activity pursued is on the individual and everyone is on their own personal journey with fitness and health.

So, you know your body, you know what level to take your body to when it comes to activity. They always stress that just because someone is able to run six miles does not mean that I should be able to run six miles right then and there. I should always be aware of myself, aware of my body, aware of my physical activity, aware of my goals and finesse it around them (Flash).

Because body image can affect an individual’s mindset, whether with themselves or within their fitness community, recreational sport organization can provide an LGBTQ+ individual within an environment that includes all forms of body types. For B.A.B., she explains that when participating in her rugby practice, if an individual is to express disheartening comments of their image, that actions is shut down by the entirety of the team, immediately.

Where (you’re) making a negative comment about your body at practice, no one’s going to laugh or agree with you and laugh it off, (it’s more) like ‘shut the f**k up, no you’re not’. If you are feeling negative or expressing something, there is a whole line up of women who are going to make sure you’re okay, even if you, like say, you’re newer and we don’t really know you, we’re gonna try even a little harder to figure out who you are to make sure that you’re (able) to get to a level to where we can be like, ‘what’s going on with you, what’s going on within your life?’ (B.A.B).

The concepts of the body image of an athletic individual, there are perceived expectations of femineity and how a female is to be portrayed to society. At times, there is a prejudice that a female individual involved with sport is automatically portrayed in a category other than heterosexual*. An individual can be assumed a part

of the LGBTQ+ community when they participate in sports, in general. LC talked about how female players tend to be placed in the “other than straight category” after a certain level of participation. While Dottie wondered if her physical appearance affected how people treated her, “I look like a heteronormative woman...<>... I feel like if I looked different, would people approach me differently?”. Flash related to this concept of body image and physical appearance can affect how people treated him but shared that this mindset changed with age and ultimately, there is a precedent on the concepts of health rather than appearances.

I think when I was younger, I may have been in that mindset of like ‘oh, I have to look a certain way because a man won’t like me’ or ‘I have to look a certain way because I may not be accepted into a gay group or gay friends’ or ‘I have to look a certain way because I won’t ever, I will always be alone, and I’ll never find someone to be with’. I think as I got older, those ideas kind of flew out the window. I didn’t really care too much about who saw me in a certain whatever. I cared more about my own health and my own lifestyle rather than what someone else had an opinion of me (Flash).

Meso-Level Factors

From the theoretical aspect, meso-level factors consist of four separate but integrated constructs including the influences of education and programming, allies, leader behaviors and organizational culture. These factors contribute towards a societal aspect of understanding the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences within recreational sport organizations.

Education and Programming. Speaking with Alex on the concepts of education and programs for LGBTQ+ individuals within recreational sport organizations, he shared that he thinks that there would be benefit for people if these programs were readily available. “I tend to think that people like to feel included and people like when they’re a part of a group that they feel special. I know, for myself, I think it would be very exciting!” (Alex). The participants shared that the availability of educational programs within their respective recreational sport organizations was scarce but LC shares that he thinks ‘a lot of places are really taking off with those kinds of support groups now; making sure that they have those resources available’ and how it is a recent development. He continues on with how a lot of places are starting to recognize the importance and the need for diversity groups to hear the voices of all individuals participating in the organization. “It’s important that these DIV (Diversity) committees are being formed, but more importantly, that action comes of them being

formed. If they are just being formed, (if) they are just ticking a box, we don't want that" (LC).

Noticeably, the creation of a diverse, inclusive organization is not the same for every club, institution, or situation. It is shown that there no 'one size fits all' ideology when it pertains to education and programming is inaccurate for B.A.B shares that her rugby team provides an BIPOC Ally Resource Group, 'which is a resource group within our team for allies who want to get more involved, makes our team more aware on how they interact with different people of color within the team or a little more, like PC (politically correct) and really talk about that' (B.A.B). She shares that there a very wide scaled pallet of people involved with the team including, but not limited to, Native Americans, people of color, people from Asia, and transgendered individuals. While B.A.B. is involved with a recreational sport organization that prioritizes the necessity of a resource group, Dottie explained that within her area, with her sport of softball, that did not happen and WW explained that the creation of an educational program depended heavily upon the club, for some groups were more structured and organized, while others were not. For each other these individuals, there concepts of education and programming for LGBTQ+ individuals were dependable upon their location, their club, and the organization in which they were involved with.

Allies. An ally is an aspect of an LGBTQ+ individuals' life and for Flash, the concept of being an ally is looked at as a verb.

So, whenever someone asks about an ally, I always look as an ally as a verb. It doesn't necessarily mean that someone is on your side but, actually, actively helping you or doing something; being an ally is a verb. There're actions an ally takes, there's things that they do that make you feel comfortable, that make you feel included (Flash).

An ally comes in many forms, for a lesbian who is weary of men, B.A.B shares that majority of the rugby guys she is associated with are the only men she trusts because they portray ally protection for individuals, especially when they are also involved within the rugby community. She shares that typically, after a rugby match, there is a rugby social where the participants participate in bar hopping, drinking, and having a good time with each other. She shares that regardless of what city she has participated in these socials, she continuously sees rugby guys being protective of the people in the group, whether male, female, other, etcetera. "No matter what their gender or

identity is, because they just see them as rugby players and them rugby players are family, so they'll protect them just the same as if they were blood" (B.A.B).

For LC, when communicating about allies, he shared that regardless of an individual's opinion on sexuality or gender identity, if an individual can recognize their own pitfalls and acknowledge that an individuals' happiness is the upmost importance, they are considered an ally. "You have a struggle and that's important that you acknowledge it, that you work through it, but you work through it (and) ultimately recognize that my happiness supersedes your struggle with something that doesn't have anything to do with you" (LC). Most importantly, the concept of being an ally comes from the position of acceptance and with that acceptance, and B.A.B adds to that concept by explaining that another personal opinion is allowed without the contradiction of an another's identity.

People are allowed to have all of their opinions that they want but if you expressing that opinion is going to contradict a whole person's identity, who they are, what they are and it directly attacks them, even if it's not genuinely about them; it's addressed, it's not okay (B.A.B).

Leader Behaviors. Within a sports organization, the concept of leaders has derived from many different aspects, the official leaders make up titles including a coach, captain, and managers and at times, an organization can have a variety of members of the team that participate in leadership positions upon a team. For B.A.B., her rugby team has two coaches, and a board of team members including a President, Treasure, Secretary, Social Chair, and a Rookie Recruitment.

We'll have meetings every quarter or so to just take an overview of what's going on with the team, what needs to be done, what we need, what we would like to do, goals, things like that. All from working directly with athletics and different drills to where we want to play, who we want to play, to what we want to do in the community, to what our funding looks like, different way to make an outreach, different platforms we can use for better communication; it's like a mini company (B.A.B).

The leaders on the team create an environment that will allow for a multitude of aspects, coaches set the standards for which their team stands for. For Dottie, her coach is softball intelligent, organized, and determined to win, "he (the coach) is really good, and he is really organized so he's definitely the best option for the job; and he's inclusive of everyone. But he likes to win. No matter who you are; gay, straight, white, black, tall, short. As long as you're good, you can play".

While leader behaviors have an impact on the acceptable behaviors of the participants in an organizational level of recreational sport organizations, at times, there can be a

presentation of negative behaviors but for LC, to put everyone involved within an organization into a negative category, simply because of one individual's negative positioning is not appropriate. "I can't paint everyone with a broad stroke. It does come from a lot of leaders; the leaders set the tone, but when the leader takes action, there are people within their community that would follow" (LC).

While leaders contribute to an organization in a variety of ways and can hold a variety of titles, for LC's experiences, there has been a representation for members of the sexual minorities but when it comes to gender identity, representation is scarce.

The clubs I've been a part of, they put people in power that intentionally, they make sure that when it comes to, at least, being queer, the LGBTQ+ part, that part is definitely represented, and that part is definitely heard. The (gender) identity thing is more of a struggle than sexual orientation is but at least for that part, the representation is, at least, been on the team, so getting it to be a representation on the people who are the leaders hasn't necessarily been an issue (LC).

Representation within leadership positions is important for these LGBTQ+ individuals within recreational sport organizations and there is a need for a variety of representations within leadership positioning.

Organizational Culture. To describe the organizational culture of the rugby community, LC shared that when rugby players get together, there are similarities to a family reunion. "Rugby is, like a family reunion, man. Everybody that shows up in your family, like you got the dysfunction and discord that somehow has created this harmonious, beautiful, sloppy, crazy mess and we love and enjoy (it)" (LC). A contributing factor that was shared that led to the participants' decision to participate within an organization was whether that organization marketed towards LGBTQ+ individuals. This is particularly important for Flash, who decided to join his run club because it openly caters towards the LGBTQ+ community. "It's (the run club) open to all, marketed obviously towards the LGBTQI community, but definitely open to all and there is no discrimination as far as if you're straight or if you're not a part of the LGBTQI community" (Flash). Whether it is an entire organization or a specifically selected group of individuals, the aspect of inclusivity within the group provided the LGBTQ+ individuals with a sense of comradery. Alex once participated in a relay race where each individual within the group knew of his sexuality and provided him with a sense of inclusion.

I did a relay race one time, and they all knew that I was gay...<>...It was the biggest feeling of comradery with this group cause in a relay race, you have ten people and you run through

the night and each person takes turns running. You're in a van, you're barely sleeping, everyone's running on like two hours of sleep and needs the best encouragement ever, so I just remember all the group being the most encouraging group ever...<>... and even though I don't think any of the other ones were gay, I just felt such a connection to them that I have a fitness crush on these people (Alex).

There is an importance placed up on organization to be perceived as desirable, proper, or appropriate depending on the individuals' values and beliefs; for Dottie, her values and beliefs placed an emphasis on the concepts of winning and maintaining that competitive edge over her opponents and because she is involved with an organization that meets her desired values, trying to change a system she does not deem broken seem redundant.

Well, the team that I play for in the league that I've been in for years, it's all about winning. I mean, it's fun for the ones that play all the time but the ones that don't play all the time, they get to play when we're winning, a lot; or when we're beating the crap outta (out of) people, but when it's close... they might not get to play as much...<>... (And) well, I think that if it's not an issue within the organization, then maybe talking about it will make it a big issue, you know what I mean? Sometimes that when something is not broke, you shouldn't try to fix it (Dottie).

In due course, the process of selecting an organization that fits into an individual's desired and expected values and beliefs is shown important and the desire to belong, the process of inclusion, and the level of acceptance depends on the individual.

Macro-Level Factors

The societal aspects of influence contribute to the extended layers of the multi-level paradigm involving the macro-level factors of LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations. These aspects contribute to the laws, governing bodies, and institutional norms that affect members of the LGBTQ+ community as a part of a society.

Laws. While laws may be written to protect a society, there are times in which laws can create a burden for a select minority, especially when laws are written based upon the constructs of sexual orientation and gender identity. Within the United States, laws can either be Federal or State and there are times in which a law can be passed on a State level, but not on a Federal level and these laws passed can cause a variety of emotions. Dottie, who currently resides in North Carolina, shared that a few years ago, the governor of the state created national attention when he introduced a Bathroom Bill regarding to the rights of transgendered individuals and their selected

bathroom of choice (Johnson, 2021). Recreational organizations provide bathrooms at their facilities which can create an issue when the state government passed a law disallowing transgendered individuals to use the appropriate bathroom in accordance with their identity. With this law, North Carolina faced a variety of repercussions from many profitable events (CNBC, 2017).

A couple years ago, we had a governor in this state who had a Bathroom Bill* so trans people couldn't use the bathroom of their choice and that was a big controversy. Half the United States freaked out, rightfully so, which is great, and they took away a lot of profitable things for the state of North Carolina and cancelled them and sent them other places that were more inclusive, but it's (the law) gone now. But there's some controversy over it still because the ultraconservatives in this state, that did not vote for our new governor who got rid of that law, they raised hell...<>... They raised hell; we raised hell. Everyone raised hell. When the law was put into effect, we raised hell, and then whenever they repealed that law, the other side raised hell (Dottie).

Amidst all the changes regarding the rights for transgendered athletes, these changes have created a confusion of the technicalities in regard to participation in sporting events. Historically, the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo provided the first instance where transgendered individuals were able to compete in sporting events (Dawson, 2021) but even with professional sport allowing transgendered individuals to compete, the rules and regulations are not entirely clear. For LC, this has created a sense of confusion and an unclarity as to where he is allowed to participate at a recreational level.

I'm really confused and mixed on what (the laws within rugby in accordance to trans right and trans athletes) they are. I think, technically, I would still be able to play with the women and honestly, they can kick my ass right now. I'm smaller than I was as a cis woman, transitioning and taking testosterone has done nothing for my physicality, it's done everything for my mental health. It's done wonders for my mental health more than anything, (though) I feel others will be hostile against me because I'm male identifying (LC).

The stance of inclusivity towards transgendered players comes from the belief that trying to ban trans players from clubs is wrong, WW shares and that inclusivity brings about a diver crowd, a diverse athlete. Flash states, "I would say that the world, in general, is becoming more open and I think that's why countries are passing laws because they know that things are changing".

Regardless of an individual's personal stance on the laws pertaining to LGBTQ+ individuals, the topic of conversation on how laws effect and LGBTQ+ individual experiences continues as Dottie suggested, jokingly, that there is not much you can do to change an individual's mind, "all you can do is hope for a better future and teach other people, younger people, to be more inclusive to everyone and to love everyone

and to accept everyone for who they are and eventually they (the discriminatory people) will die off (laughs)” (Dottie). Laws, regards of an indirect or direct approach, affects all individuals within a society according to Flash.

I would say that the laws passed affect everyone. I’m not married, I may never get married, but the option is there for me and me having a right to do so, to me, it was an unimaginable day that was even a question, you know what I mean? Like, who is anyone to tell us, ‘you can’t get married’ or whatever. You don’t have the same rights because of your sexual orientation rather than because you’re a person. I mean, it definitely affected me, may not like directly but still directly (Flash).

Institutional Norms and Governing Structures. Currently, governing structures within sport have created restriction guidelines regarding the height and weight requirements towards transgendered athletes that members must adhere to, as is the case for English rugby, under the Rugby Football Union (Ingle, 2021). This ruling has been met, according to LC with a confrontational uprising of the rugby sporting community.

Long story short, I think it’s a joke. I mean, I was, at my largest, I’m 5’7”, at my heaviest, I was 250lbs. When I was playing rugby while transitioning, I was at 175 pounds and getting my ass kicked by a women’s team in Utah. I was getting my ass beat, straight up. Very good, very, very, strong women’s team but that just goes to show that whether there is someone on the field taking testosterone or not, that has no impact in the positive of how they’re going to perform as an individual. I mean, it helped, don’t get me wrong but it was a very physical game and I got worked. I say it’s a joke because at that point, there are women on that team who would not pass that ruling, that whole team would get disqualified for either the height restriction or the weight restrictions or both. There was a time that I would have gotten disqualified by that height/weight restriction. I would have passed as a transitioning female to male, but I would have completely failed it as a cis woman; as a lesbian identifying cis woman. That makes zero sense, it’s a joke. The person who came up with it is an absolute clown (LC).

These regulations brought forth from English rugby’s Rugby Football Union have transcended into other governing structures with the rugby community, that according to WW have caused many clubs within her region to create a mindset of ‘screw what USA Rugby says about trans, we accept you, we want you to come play with us, despite all these laws that they’re trying to put out there’. She continued on sharing that, though she has not physically spoken to individual players, rugby club’s social media accounts are proclaiming that they understand what USA Rugby stance is on trans right and abilities to play but that the club, as a whole, disagrees with that and are disgusted by it. There is a rally of acceptance for all players, and a willing to let everyone play.

Even as these regulations have been put into place, B.A.B has shared that these restrictions have brought attention to the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+

individuals and because her rugby team created a diversity group, this, in turn has cause a number of (unexpected) people to speak up about it. These conversations, to her, were “really, really, huge and really moving to see because if it wasn’t for that (the diversity group) they probably wouldn’t have had that different mindset change or advocate or stood up for someone who’s being misunderstood” (B.A.B).

Even outside the rugby community, the conversation on transgendered rulings from sports structures have brought to light a conversation of fairness, which in turn bring about the discussion of a new way of doing sports. For Alex, he shared that he did not believe in the separation of male and female sports to begin with but would rather a new system be created that had nothing to do with gender and focused more on the capabilities of the athletes.

I don’t think it’s fair to let a person who is born as male who identifies as female, who is like *a beast* (dominating, strong, kicking ass), participant in female sport, competing out of the league. I would expect that Women’s Rights Activists should have an issue with that. It’s my personal opinion cause it’s not fair for women, it’s also not fair to the transgendered person, so I get it. So, my solution, as I thought it through, was, how about we just do away with the whole gender issue and just group people depending on their capabilities and that’s good enough...<>... And I’d go down to youth, absolutely. I used to love to play with the girls, and then they put me with the boys, that was so annoying (Alex).

According to Dottie’s experiences within her recreational sport, she is involved with a co-ed league and while there is not a transgendered individual involved with her league personally, and she did not know how to maintain a sense of fairness within softball. For her league, there is currently a rule that states that there needs to be a alternation between man and women in the batting line up to avoid the possibility of stacking together the best hitters on the team, due to the nature of her location, the non-acceptance towards transgendered individuals, Dottie shared that she did not know how to create a ruling that involved both the fairness for transgendered athletes, as well as the integrity of the game of softball. She continued on that, regardless of the rulings, when necessary, there needs to be an inclusivity towards all individuals who aim to participate.

With the reactions of member of the sporting community in support of transgendered athletes, it was still unfortunate that it had to be such a reactionary thing, according to LC. He goes on to share why progress that’s a long time because the same individuals are continuing to be placed into leadership positions that it is mind blowing to consider but states that ‘eventually we’re going to get somewhere because that’s the other side of the work’. He continues on sharing that the sporting needs to put people

in charge that are going to create the necessary changes and move things into a direction that he, and other transgendered athletes, need but that the community uprising towards the restrictions shows that people are paying attention and that is what ultimately matters. “Are we being active participants, or are we being passive participants? We need to be active participants, in order to move things in the direction we need them to go” (LC).

At times, the presence of issues has caused for members of the rugby community to branch off and create their own inclusive organization. Within rugby, the International Gay Rugby organization came into existence because cultural differences within members of men’s clubs. “IGR exists because enough men felt like they weren’t supported or safe with their local men’s clubs, so they created their own queer friendly clubs. They consist of mostly gay men, but I do know some transmen that have played” (LC). The differences between the men’s cultures from the women’s cultures have caused a point for the creation of a queer friendly rugby league, which as a member of the transgender community, LC stated that transitioning into this league would create a different experience within his rugby career.

It would just come to playing a different position than I’m typically used to just because my body type on the field is going to be different than what it’s traditionally been. But at the end of the day, rugby is rugby and if I decided to play, I’m athletic enough to be able to adapt to wherever it is that I play. But it’s more of a ‘am I safe as a transman here?’ No one’s going to like, I don’t want anybody on the other team or anybody on this team; (ultimately) I want to make sure that the people on this team have my back and that no one on the other team is going to try hurt me...<>...I don’t know a super much about their organization (IGR) because the teams that I’ve been on haven’t been a part of that organization. I think if people feel enough to create a separate organization and there’s enough teams around the country that have done so. When people feel enough to separate and do that, what does that speak to your culture (in USA Rugby Organization) and are you doing anything actively to fixing that? Not that whole ‘I stand in solidarity’, that people like to (do), that people have been throwing around for the last year but like, ‘what have you actively been doing to make people like me feel otherwise?’; nothing (LC).

Outcomes Associated with Inclusion and Welcoming

The outcomes that are associated with a recreational sport organization that include and welcome LGTBQ+ individuals provide an environment for growth, for acceptance, and creates a sense of community. Regardless of the sport, finding an organization that allows an individual the opportunity to present themselves truthfully creates an environment that benefits the group as a whole. Dottie, who participates in a softball organization, shares that from her experiences on a team, even if you do not

like everyone on the team, there is still a necessity for everyone to work together for one common goal. “Even if you don’t like everybody on your team, you still need them to win,” she states. She continues on with, “that’s how people become more accepting. It’s because they are forced to do something with someone they never thought they’d get along with. And then they realize they do.”

Team, by Merriam-Webster (2021) definition, is a group of players formed together to achieve a common goal, therefore, teams provide a sense of community that is necessary for inclusion to allow the limitation of alienating individuals based off mundane differences. Pertaining to teams associated with inclusion, WW expresses that to avoid the alienation of many people, inclusion is necessary; “I think that in order for a team to be a good team, they got to build a strong relationship, so I think it is necessary that the team be inclusive to everybody for that to happen”. With this, the process of organizations creating a space for inclusion and acceptance is allowing the small steps reciprocate into larger movements.

Flash expressed, “I think that all these steps is what’s creating this idea of togetherness, this idea of openness. The world is shifting too, it’s small changes that allow the world to shift in the right direction. An additional outcome that is associated with inclusion and welcoming is that it is no longer acceptable to be anything but. Primarily, the conversations of inclusion in sport have begun and with that, a conversation of acceptance, safety, and a fight for social change starts. LC remained adamant on his stance of inclusion and welcoming:

There’s really no room for people who don’t view this (discrimination towards LGBTQ+ members) as an inequality thing. The longer we wait to have that particular conversation, the longer it’s going to take for us to move on. We are getting there, we are having this conversation in a very broad sense because we’re seeing this whole thing of, it’s the same thing with gay rights; being picked at and ‘gays can’t do this’ and ‘gays can’t do that’. ‘trans people can’t do this, trans people can’t do that’. We’re starting to see that same thing. And then there’s going to be the next group that gets picked at and so on and so forth and for some reason we are having to specifically name groups in order for them to be protected. In order for them to be recognized and in order for us to treat people like people but we are recognizing that ‘yes, trans people are people, trans men are men; trans women are women. Let people be where they’re going to be safe, that’s important (LC).

Chosen Family. An outcome of inclusion and welcoming within a recreational sport organization provides an opportunity for LGBTQ+ individuals to create a chosen family. Within LGBTQ+ culture and because there is a higher percentage of LGBTQ+ individuals losing their relationship with blood family, Flash shared that the

concept of a chosen family has impacted his life immensely and because of his chosen family, he was introduced to his current run club.

You know a very famous drag queen*, RuPaul Charles*, always talks about, as gay people we have the ability to choose family. We have the ability to be surrounded by people who actually love us and care for us, which is nice. And I take that to heart. Whenever he says that I always think, 'absolutely, absolutely!'. I was able to choose my family in college, I was able to choose my friends, I still have them, I live with one. I have known him for almost 15 years. I moved to Florida with my best friend from college. I think it's nice to always have that support system, it's nice to have someone's back (Flash).

The concept of a chosen family provides a security for LGBTQ+ to be themselves, with B.A.B., she said she had a theory about the stigma of people who look into the LGBTQ+ community and wonder why there's a variety of colorful characters that are super loud, making decisions in life, or doing things and going places without consulting with anyone. "I feel like the general public is almost shocked with the audacity of the (LGBTQ+) community, but it's like... in more situations than one, no one really cared, not necessarily care but it's like you don't need to check in (with anyone)" (B.A.B.). With that, joining a recreational sport organization has begun with the concept of a chosen family, as is the case for B.A.B, Flash, WW, and LC, who all joined recreational sport organizations because of their connection with LGBTQ+ individuals within that organization. For B.A.B., she shared that a huge domino effect happened all because she started playing rugby, she figured out herself through the connections she made within the rugby community and for LC, the environment of his rugby connections provided a security to be his authentic self with his gender identity. "I was never in an environment where I felt safe enough to act on it, and to even announce it until I joined the rugby team at (my university)" (LC).

Ultimately, the outcomes of recreational sports organizations that include and welcome LGBTQ+ individuals allow for an individual to grow, to develop a better sense of self, and provide an LGBTQ+ with the chosen family of their discretion. Not only does it help LGBTQ+ individuals find a chosen family, but it also allows for growth of a family from members of the organization who are LGBTQ+ and those that are heteronormative.

The way that the sport can change people, whether it be helping them understand who they are, encouraging them to be who they are and know that they are accepted, or educating them first-hand and playing alongside someone who they were raised to think was nothing more than a sin or piece of trash, or grew up hearing slander about someone just because of who they love. They (unaware individuals) have that opportunity to completely change their mind by what they experience and how cool (LGBTQ+) people are and how amazing even if they are not a part of the (LGBTQ+) community and, in my case, really finding a home in the sport and a family that I didn't really have for the majority of my life (B.A.B).

Social Media Influences. When interviewing the participants, the influences of social media were brought up amongst the participants, whether it was to share the process of coming out, the concepts of body image and their influences, or to stand in solidarity with transgendered athletes. WW, B.A.B., and LC all commented on how organizations and members of the organization are using social media as a means of support for equality towards all participants within rugby. That using social media has allowed for members of the rugby organizations to find ways to connect in solidarity, proclaim their acceptance, and promote their clubs as inclusive and welcoming organizations.

I love the reaction of the actual social media presence that people have taken. People are posting pictures of themselves, cis women* who are clearly over the 5'8" restriction. They're like, 'I'm 5'10", I'm 6'1", I'm 6'2"'. 'I weigh 235lbs, I weigh 240lbs.' there was a girl that was like 'I'm 5'2" and I weight 300lbs, like I play rugby.' Like what? Like awesome! Like, yes. Yes. Yes. Yes! Let England know that there are women of all ranges and then you got the women we are like 'I'm 5'1" and I do weigh 120lbs, so what?'. They're all cis-women and you're not going to say that someone who is a transwoman* that happens to look like any of these larger women is a safety risk. I love the callouts, I love it (LC).

There is also the usage of social media within LGBTQ+ inclusive clubs and organizations as a means to meet up. Flash shared that his run club using running applications to gather information pertaining to the work out of the day and to record all their physical activity and achievements being made so they, as a group, can provide support. Not only has social media impact how an organization will interact with its members, how LGBTQ+ individuals will stand against discrimination, or how it has created a safe place for LGBTQ+ individuals, social media also has an impact on the images and perceptions of the body. Flash talked about how when he was younger, social media played a role in what he saw was acceptable for gay men, but also allowed for him to find an alternate group that accepted alternate body expectations and created a reality that regardless of physique, everyone deserves to be loved and accepted.

I think when I was younger, social media plays a big impact as far as what gay men see, what gay men think is appropriate, is accepting of physique or the way someone looks. Gay men just tend to be more focused on the outside of someone. That's just, I guess, part of who we are as gay men...<>... Of course, social media plays a role and what society deems as good looking or healthy or whatever, but within that, within the same society of gay males, there are also groups of, like bears*. Who don't necessarily have the mindset of 'I much have perfect physique and workout 24-7 and look a certain way' but rather you are who you are and that's acceptable, also. Everyone deserves to be loved and there is no room for hate as far as because someone doesn't have a six pack, or someone isn't physically active all the time (Flash).

Ultimately, social media influences a variety of constructs within LGBTQ+ experiences and allows for an outcome of inclusion and welcoming because it provides a means of communication amongst the members of both the LGBTQ+ community and within recreational sport organizations.

Locational Differences. Throughout the interviews, a contributing factor to the influences of LGBTQ+ individual experiences within recreational sport organizations depended on the location in which the participant was located. Multiple participants have spent time within location that are different than that of the current residence. Alex, who has experiences outside of the USA, was able to share his experiences and opinions on the concepts of inclusion and welcoming within recreational sport organizations. “I don’t think the U.S. is doing a good job at it, I don’t think Costa Rica is, and I don’t think China is either. It’s just not a thing” (Alex). He went on to explain that in comparison to the variety of countries he has lived, the United States was the most open country that he lived in but explained that there were differences depending on the location.

When I lived in California, I had no doubts about showing whatever I wanted to show. Versus Boston, there’s still conservative pockets, even though it’s a liberal city. So, within the United States, there’s differences for sure, but in large, it’s miles ahead (Alex).

While location can have a negative impact on an outcome associated with inclusion and welcoming, there are times that locational differences can allow for an individual to create a sense of family in a variety of different places. Both Flash and B.A.B. have spent time within different parts of the U.S. and have shared that their encounters with members within recreational sport organizations have created an atmosphere that allowed them a beneficial encounter with inclusion and welcoming. With WW, she shared that the biggest difference between playing rugby in a number of different states, the biggest differences was that of the social aspect of the game; but, because of rugby, her chosen family has grown. “I’ve played in four different states now and I feel like I have family everywhere I go because of rugby” (WW).

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the multi-level factors that influenced LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations. A qualitative methodology

was applied to inquire on (1) how LGBTQ+ individuals conceptualize their inclusion and welcoming in recreational sport organizations, (2) the multi-level factors that influenced LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations, and (3) the outcomes associated with recreational sport organizations that include and welcome LGBTQ+ individuals. These aspects were examined at a micro- (individual), meso- (organizational/group), and macro (societal) levels. To summarize, LGBTQ+ individuals conceptualize their inclusion and welcoming in recreational sport organizations from word-of-mouth communication and interpersonal relationships so that they may form an idea of a recreational sport organization before they are willing to join. The multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations include concepts from the theoretical constructs of the Multi-Level Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sport Participants from micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors of analysis but, these participants included the concepts of their coming out stories and body image as key factors that additionally influence the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organizations. And the outcomes associated with recreational sport organizations that include and welcome LGBTQ+ individuals are that experiences are influenced, both negatively and positively by aspects of social media, chosen family, and locational differences. The Multi-level Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sport Participants provides three key factors (micro, meso, and macro) as intertwining factors for the development of a greater understanding of the entirety of LGBTQ+ experiences (Cunningham, 2019).

Conceptualization of Inclusion and Welcoming

In the realms of the conceptualization of inclusion and welcoming that these participants encountered, predominately, the ideologies of relationship formulation provided the necessary information for their interest in joining their respective recreational sport organizations. To conceptualize is to form a concept or an idea of something while to describe inclusion is where an esteemed member of a group perceives they are experiencing treatment that gratifies the need for belongingness and uniqueness, and those involved in an inclusive surrounding feel safe, authentic, supported, and trusted (Cunningham, 2015b). The formation of relationships before, during, and after the initial enticement to join their respective recreational sport

organization provide the notion that within the LGBTQ+ community, the concept of establishing relationships allowed for the conception that an organization is welcoming and inclusive towards those that belong to the sexual and gender minorities*. Whether it was from a romantic relationship or platonic friendships, the concept of word-of-mouth is perceived to be predominate in the involvement of LGBTQ+ individuals within a specific recreational organization. How people behave around LGBTQ+ individuals (Nishii & Rich, 2014) and language used can affect perceptions of inclusion (Cunningham, 2015b) but interpersonal interactions can be subtle behaviors and not particularly explicit (Cortina, 2008). With that, and while there are improvements, ‘Americans’ attitudes towards LGB (TQ+) individuals still lags behind other groups...<>... sexual prejudice is still socially acceptable. As such, if a region is open to LGB(TQ+) individuals and communities, then they are likely accepting to all persons’ (Cunningham, 2015b). This ultimately shows from research and from the participants, that the conceptualization of inclusion and welcoming of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organization is dominate within interpersonal relationships and the connection of word-or-mouth communications and that there is a need for additional improvements in an organizations inclusivity and welcoming.

Multi-Level Factors

Micro-Level Factors

The demographics of an individual determine the experiences encountered and these experiences can vary vastly depending on those differences, whether it is racial, gender identity, educational, or location (Anderson et al., 2019; Cunningham et al., 2021; Hidman & Walker, 2020; Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2020; Mollborn & Everett, 2015; Whitfield et al., 2014). With demographics, personal identity has been researched for a number of years (Olson, 2021), though regardless of the stance an individual may view the concepts of personal identity, according to Cunningham (2019), the incorporation of personal identity within the influences of LGBTQ+ experiences are relevant. Personal identity can mean different things to different people, psychologist have referred to it as ‘a person’s self-image to one’s beliefs about the sort of person one is and how one differs from others (Olsen, 1997, 2021). While some participants shared an abundance of details pertaining to their personal

identity and LGBTQ+ status, others shared minimal details to ensure that the importance of a personal identity depends on an individual, that each story is unique within its own and, righteously, there is no right or wrong answer as to who and what information is shared.

To communicate on an LGBTQ+ individuals' personal identity and LGBTQ+ status and to withhold the process of coming out, dilutes the holistic picture of LGBTQ+ experiences, in general. A coming out story shares a key insight into an LGBTQ+ individuals experiences and allows for an expression of self. Coming out is a key concept of an LGBTQ+ experience allows for an individual to express their sexual orientation and gender identity from multiple meanings and the notion of a coming out story is not considered to be a one-time experience (Mason, 2019; Orne, 2011). There is an importance for an LGBTQ+ individual to share their own individual coming out story and the acknowledgement and process is vital (Dhesi, 2016) and being able to express ones' own story allows for the LGBTQ+ community to present themselves freely. Eliminating a coming out story within LGBTQ+ research on influences of experiences, forgoes the identity of an individual.

In additional research, the impact of body image concerns affects a higher percentage of LGBTQ+ individuals in comparison to their heteronormative counterparts (Kumar, 2019; Mental Health Foundation, 2019; Smith et al., 2017). Body image, by definition, is "the manner in which on view one's own body and how one imagines that others perceive one's body can have substantial implications for the individuals physical and psychosocial health" (Filiault & Drummond, 2008). Because recreational sport organizations supply the amateur athlete with an environment to focus on their health and body, there are other aspects contributing to the fixation on body.

Typically, for gay men, the sportsman simply develops a body for specific sport while gay men are meant to alter their bodies to achieve an ideal body type (Filiault & Drummond, 2008). While the gay men within this research shared this similar concept, other participants also shared the influences that body image has upon the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within recreational sport organizations. There has been a recent notion that body image affects an individual's mindset in how they are to present themselves to a society that portrays a multitude of messages on how an individual should look (OASH, 2019) and that 'females are few to be feminine, they don't have to be butchy* and they don't have to be perceived as lesbians' (Sartore-

Baldwin, 2012) but that concept shown to be inaccurate for the question still arises and the perception of females in sports is that they are still labeled amongst the other than straight categories. In turn, body image is a concept that influences an LGBTQ+ individuals experiences within recreational sport organizations.

Meso-Level Factors

Heteronormative individuals within recreational sport organizations can gain an understanding on how to manage experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals when they are provided with educational programs on the inclusion and visibility for LGBTQ+ individuals (Anderson et al., 2020b; Cunningham, 2019), but currently, there are not enough research articles on the effective or ineffective stance that are created by educational programs (Sartore-Baldwin, 2012). The notion of a 'one size fits all' ideology is not accurate and while there are the beginning steps towards a better future, the creation of open space for all participants needs more (Anderson, 2017). Regrettably, even if there is an educational, diversity training within an organization, there is a lack of specific training for the LGBTQ+ community and participants (Patchett & Foster, 2015), and a limited amount of evidence that shows the impact of these programs on the attitudes and competences of the participants (Anderson et al., 2020b). Regardless, the importance of educational programs is thought to benefit the LGBTQ+ community from research and the LGBTQ+ individuals themselves and to begin the initial steps is taking a position towards a better future (Anderson, 2017; Cunningham & Hussain, 2020).

With education and programming, this provides an opportunity for the concept of an ally to be presented. But to provide an effected advocate for social changes, there is an utmost importance placed on the ally to, ultimately, stand up and speak out when there is a display of discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals (Toomey et al., 2016). In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of public figures who support LGBTQ+ individuals within sport and many vocal public figures are publicly stating their stance against discriminations towards LGBTQ+ athletes. (Anderson, 2021; Murley, 2021; Sartote-Baldwin, 2012; Seahawks Communication, 2021; Smith, 2016). Importantly, allies are necessary in leadership positions because typically, the behaviors that are associated with the leaders set clear expectations for others to follow, simply, when it comes to acceptable behavior, people look to the leaders

(Cunningham, 2019) and diverse leaders advocate on topics of diversity and set expectations for inclusion; this ultimately creates a trickle-down effect and people model and behave accordingly (Cunningham, 2015c). With LGBTQ+ representation within leadership positions, it is relevant for the betterment of society, the betterment of an organization (Chin, 2010; Chin & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007; Fassinger et al., 2010).

Predominately, research has shown that the impacts of stigma and discrimination in sport organizations have created complications towards LGBTQ+ experiences (Chang et al., 2020; Denison et al., 2021; Gruberg et al., 2020; Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Poushter & Kent, 2020). Research also shows that the inclusion of diversity towards LGBTQ+ individuals within an organization provides an attractiveness of the organization, an increase in performance (Cunningham & Nite, 2020), and a greater bonding and connection to the team (Anderson, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2018). Therefore, for an organization to thrive, the necessity of an organizational culture to uphold the inclusivity towards LGBTQ+ individuals inadvertently allows for the concepts of a chosen family to arise. This, in turn, provides an important factor that for an organization to be perceived as desirable, proper, and/or appropriate, it needs to follow an individuals' constructed system of norms, values and beliefs (Cunningham & Nite, 2020).

Macro-Level Factors

Laws, in general, are a representation of a society, as a whole, and as societal standards may shift, law changes can provide a safe environment for LGBTQ+ individuals. With that, the conversations regarding transgendered participants, discrimination, policies, and rights within sport have increased in the recent years (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; López-Cañada et al., 2021; Patchett & Foster, 2015). The changes in law may provide a creation of a safe sport environment, which maintaining them for the participants may diversify the traditional definitions of athletes, making them unreconcilable (Herrick & Duncan, 2018); but this creation may bring a variety of different strategies to recruit and attract LGBTQ+ individuals towards an organization (Cunningham & Nite, 2020). Due to the nature that a vast majority of the American population knows an individual on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, laws, by proxy, pertaining to LGBTQ+ individuals affect a community, an

organization as a whole (Jones, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2016), and changes towards the betterment of LGBTQ+ lives will provide a betterment for society. Within sport, there are an abundance of governing structures that create a sense of regulations to be followed by the participants of an organization. These structures, in a sense, help develop the institutional norms that are followed by the participants and are shown in accordance with the ideologies displayed and accepted. Recently, governing structures have begun to develop diversified organizations including notions of pride games, rainbow merchandise (Heraux, 2019), while research describes the usage of diversity work as a means for economic gain (Spaaij et al., 2014, 2018), the continuation of homophobic language (Denison & Toole, 2020), and the suggestion that these pro-LGBTQ+ activities are solely designed to attract a cohort of fans that are measured in means of disposable income (Mumcu & Lough, 2017). Within the cross-flex of research, there are organizations who have provided a restriction guideline towards height and weight towards transgendered players (Ingle, 2021) and these restrictions have been met with an abundance of solidarity that sports should be open towards all individuals; that the systems in place need reforming to provide equality for all athletes.

Outcomes Associated with Inclusion and Welcoming

The outcomes associated with inclusion and welcoming brought forth from a recreational sport organization is that inclusion and welcoming is an obligation. That when there is an alignment between the community expectation and inclusiveness of an organization, that may predict success (Cunningham & Nite, 2020). Regardless of an individual stance on a subject matter, inclusion and welcoming needs to be the forefront of an organizations structure. That the concepts of a diverse, inclusive organization it allows for the recognition of social movements as an important factor of growth of the organization and agents of social change (Cunningham, 2015b). Historically, when an LGBTQ+ individual is discriminated against, they have left an organization but within recent years, there has been a rise in challenging the concepts of discrimination (Sartore-Baldwin, 2012).

With this, a recreational sport organization can provide an individual with a chosen family that allows for them to feel included and welcomed. Because sports, in general, provide an individual with the opportunity to grow, the possibility of finding a chosen

family for an LGBTQ+ individual within recreational sport organizations, is prevalent. This suggests that sports have the opportunity to change the world, to provide an inclusive and welcoming society for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Within an LGBTQ+ individual experiences, the concepts of social media effects the outcomes that are associated with inclusion and welcoming in a variety of ways. Social media allows for an individual to express themselves freely, find their chosen family, and support against the discrimination of others. The usage of social media within LGBTQ+ individuals is not a new-age concept (Zervoulis et al., 2020) and it has allowed for sport to become increasingly liberal and inclusive (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Magrath, 2017, 2018) which, in result, has also provided an increase in the number of out LGBTQ+ athletes (Billings et al., 2015; Schallhorn & Hempel, 2017; Sherwood et al., 2020; Ziegler, 2016). With social media, inclusion and welcoming can be shared amongst members of the LGBTQ+ community due to the nature that an LGBTQ+ individuals' inclusion and welcoming may vary depending on the location in one resides. With that, regardless of location, there is a necessary step for the implementation of inclusive, diversification, to respond to the needs of LGBTQ+ participants (Anderson et al., 2020).

Implications

This research offers implication for the development of diversity programs within recreational sports organizations that cater towards the LGBTQ+ experiences from gaining an understanding of the multi-level complexities involved with LGBTQ+ experiences. The usage of identifiable measures provides an opportunity to gain an understanding of the variety of factors that influences experiences within recreational organizations. The experiences of the participants implies that the need for LGBTQ+ specific diversity programs would benefit the individuals within a recreational sport organization. The research paradigm and discussion provided a collective that was shared across a multitude of sports, locations, sexual orientations, and gender expression. Though there has been an implementation of LGBTQ+ diversity increases across sporting leagues (Cunningham, 2011, for a review), there is evidence that LGBTQ+ discrimination and exclusion in sport remains (Denison, et al., 2021) and the research implicates both aspects. Additionally, it implies that inclusion and

welcoming of LGBTQ+ individuals within recreational sport organizations will provide a practical audience the benefits of LGBTQ+ participation. Ultimately, this research provides benefits within a scientific and practical approach for recreational sport organizations.

Limitations. Furthermore, though the study contributes towards furthering research within LGBTQ+ experiences and recreational sport organizations, there are potential limitations. Primarily, the focus of this study was within recreational sport organizations, as a whole, which caused for the complications of providing a description of a single recreational organization. There are a multitude of recreational sports organizations and though these experiences were representation of a few, they do not represent the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within recreational sports organizations world-wide. These limitations provide additional research opportunities to avail towards the development of a complete holistic description of LGBTQ+ experiences within recreational sport organizations. Additionally, using an online platform to conduct the semi-structured interviews created a disadvantage for the researcher to gather information pertaining to unspoken language, thus, creating a limitation. The potential of researcher bias due to the nature of the researchers' experiences with LGBTQ+ experiences and recreational sport organizations, though the research aimed to maintain an objective perspective of the experiences shared by participants.

Methodological. The researcher sought to gain an understanding through examining the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations by interviewing self-proclaimed LGBTQ+ individuals using a qualitative research method. There is a limitation of methodological design as for the research could benefit from a case study of a specific recreational sport organization. Though an appropriate method for researching experiences is the qualitative method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), the change in methodological design could provide an additional perspective.

This research used a thematic analysis to analysis patterns relating to the factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations. A large enough sample size is typically necessary to identify patterns across data sets (Braun et al,

2017) and the present paper had a sample size of six, which could be considered a rather low number of participants but, with Braun et al. (2017), there is a suggestion of a minimum of six interviews. Thus, the sample size could be considered sufficient, due to the nature that several patterns could be identified across datasets in the present sample. Due to the nature of several codes not able to be identified across datasets, several codes were eliminated from the present research. With this elimination, this may suggest that a larger sample size could have relevance for the codes across datasets. However, an alternate explanation is due to the nature that there may be universal experiences to be had, or perhaps it may also be distinctive to that of the individuals.

There is an acknowledgement that this research is not an adequate representation of the LGBTQ+ community and recreational sport organizations in its entirety.

However, due to the criteria of the participants, this is a conscious choice, though there are a few members of the LGBTQ+ community that are lacking representation. While the researcher aimed to interview a variety of participants on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, the research was limited to lesbians, gay cis-males, bisexual and one straight transman. To provide an articulate representation of the LGBTQ+ community, additional participants, who represent the thirty-six different sexualities, would need to be acquired (Zambon, 2020).

Authors' Biases. Due to the nature of the authors relationship with the LGBTQ+ community and the experiences within recreational sports organizations, there is a possibility of an authors' bias. The author aimed to remain objective towards the experiences of the participants in this research and to allow the stories of the participants to shed a light on the purpose of this research. To maintain a fully impartial presentation of the research, the author aimed to be unbiased, unprejudiced, and maintain a level of integrity to construct the experiences of the participants to shed a light for the LGBTQ+ community and their experiences within recreational sport organizations.

Future Research. Future research would benefit from examining the multitude of organizations, individually, providing an accurate representation of inclusivity and welcoming. The center focal point being a single recreational organization will allow

for a developed understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ within that recreational organization. Within this focal point of a single recreational sport organization, the development of LGBTQ+ educational programs would benefit for future research to examine the impact of these educational programs to determine the progression they have upon society and the LGBTQ+ community. Future research would be benefitted with the development of specific LGBTQ+ training programs that allow for an acknowledgement and universal understanding to equip organizations with the necessary tool to be successful.

There is also a necessity for research pertaining to the stereotypes involved with LGBTQ+ individuals and sport: whether stereotypes of a “gay sport” is what brings LGBTQ+ participants or the LGBTQ+ participant joins a sport for alternate reasonings, thus creates an environment that is inclusive. To provide a holistic picture of the experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals have, future research would benefit from a more diverse selection of participants involving individuals amongst the questioning and plus categories and a greater number of participants will allow for a greater understanding of the experiences faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Because the majority of research was at a focal point within the United States, the picture of inclusion and diversity outside the United States is minimal and the need for more research pertaining to countries with different laws against LGBTQ+ individuals is prevalent. Though it was briefly communicated on, further research pertaining to locational difference and the outcomes depending on location would benefit the research on LGBTQ+ individuals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical concepts of micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organizations, have been shown of great importance. The participants shared their experiences with recreational sport organizations and how this theory is shown to have influence. With the theory, there are added entities that proved to be of importance for the LGBTQ+ individual within this research. The added entities of their individual coming out stories shows that sports provide the concept of developing ones’ own chosen family, which is another added entity that is important to develop a holistic picture of the influences on LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational

sport organizations. A coming out story for an LGBTQ+ individual a pivotal point in their lives as mentioned by the participants. The initial coming out story provides a baseline for a variety of how an individual presents themselves to those that are surrounding them. Whether an individual is met with repression or support, the process of coming out clarifies those that are willing to be a part of the chosen family in which one must decide on who to allow into their inner circle.

With the conversation of LGBTQ+ individuals and the notion of health, fitness, physical activity, and/or sport, to eliminate the process of body image and the impacts that has on an individual's connection with an organization and activity would eliminate a key factor in explaining the reasonings behind joining. Body image plays a key role in a multitude of ways, whether it's the reasoning behind, a key concept of the organization, or an environment that allows for the entirety of body images be accepted, the concepts of body image influence the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in recreational sport organizations.

With all aspects of life, within the LGBTQ+ community, within recreational sport organizations, and within life in general, the influences of social media play an impactful role into everyday life. Social media has influences in all aspects of the multi-level factors of influence. Whether it is an individual's proclamation of their personal identity, a recreational organizations page promoting the acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals within their organization, or a societal page of government expressing the laws and structures to provide to LGBTQ+ individuals within an environment that promotes inclusion and welcoming, the influences of social media impact all aspects of life. To eliminate that from LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations would eliminate an imperative aspect of influence.

Lastly, the aspect of location provides a key point into viewing an individual's experiences within recreational sport organizations. Location within the United States provides a different culture, different societal standards, and different experiences faced. While some sport organizations may maintain a balanced experience for LGBTQ+ individuals within their recreational sport organizations, the location of an organization plays a key role in how LGBTQ+ individuals are perceived within that organization. Not only within the United States, but also within the world, the experiences faced by LGBTQ+ individuals are different depending on the area that is stamped upon an individual's passport.

Ultimately, with the theoretical constructs of the Multi-Level Model for Understanding the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Sport Participants, the concepts of the micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors, and the added entities of coming out stories, body image, social media, chosen family, and locational differences provides an improved holistic image of the multi-level influences on LGBTQ+ experiences in recreational sport organizations. The five key aspects allow for the reader to gain a better understanding of the influences on LGBTQ+ experiences within recreational sport organizations and allows for the enlightenment on the need for a diverse, inclusive recreational sport organizations. As the rise of LGBTQ+ individuals continue (Jones, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2016), there is a prevalent need for improved specific educational diversity training programs (Anderson et al., 2020; Pecoraro & Pitts, 2020; Theriault, 2017), and with that, the diversification of an organizations is a means for economical gain (Mumcu & Lough, 2017; Spaaij et al., 2014, 2018). Conclusively, the multi-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ experiences within recreational sport organizations provides insight upon the means to improve diversity within recreational sport organizations, thus providing for a better society, a better self.

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Appendix A

Definitions of LGBTQ+ Terminology

Ally | A term used to describe someone who is actively supportive of LGBTQ people. It encompasses straight and cisgender allies, as well as those within the LGBTQ community who support each other (e.g., a lesbian who is an ally to the bisexual community).

Bathroom Bill | A North Carolina law stating that in government buildings, individuals may only use restrooms and changing facilities that correspond to the sex identified on their birth certificates.

Bears | A larger and often hairier man who projects an image of rugged masculinity. Often hairy, heavy-set gay or bisexual man.

Bisexual | A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with pansexual.

Butchy (Butch) | A woman, especially lesbian or transgender woman who embraced identity markers that are associated with traditional expressions of masculinity, as clothing, hairstyle, interests, or behaviors.

Chosen Family | A term employed within LGBTQ+ communities to describe family groups constructed by choice rather than biological or legal.

Cisgender | A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Cis-Female/Woman | A woman whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

Cis-Male/Man | A male whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

Coming Out | The process in which an individual first acknowledges, accepts, and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others.

Drag Queen | A person, usually male, who uses drag clothing and make up to imitate and often exaggerate female gender signifiers and gender roles for entertainment purposes.

Gay | A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Men, women, and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Gay Slurs | Homophobic slurs. Slang terminology used to express a range of negative attitudes and feelings towards homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Gender identity | One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

Heteronormative | Denoting or relating to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation

Homophobia | Encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings towards homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Lesbian | A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

LGBT | An umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals.

LGBTQI | An umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex individuals.

Non-binary | An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do. Non-binary can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, genderqueer or gender-fluid.

Outing | Exposing someone's lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, or gender non-binary identity to others without their permission. Outing someone can have serious repercussions on employment, economic stability, personal safety or religious or family situations.

Out of the Closet / To publicly announce a belief of preference that one has kept hidden, especially one's sexual preference.

Queer | A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ movement.

Questioning | A term used to describe people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Remain in the Closet | A metaphor for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBTQ+ people who have not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity and aspects thereof, including sexual identity and sexual behavior.

RuPaul Charles | A famous American drag queen.

Sexual Minorities / A group whose sexual identity, orientation, or practices differ from the majority of the surrounding society.

Sexual orientation | An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual's sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.

Sexual prejudice / an umbrella term that includes homophobia, heterosexism, homonegativism, and, more recently, biphobia and transphobia.

Transphobia / dislike of or prejudices against transsexual or transgender people.

Transgender | An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

Transman / A man who was assigned female at birth.

Transwoman / A women who was assigned male at birth.

Appendix B.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

- **Background Information**
 - How old are you?
 - What is your gender identity?
 - What is your sexual orientation?
 - Where are you currently located?
 - What is your level of completed education?
 - Are you currently studying?
 - How many years have you participated in recreational physical activity?
 - What type of activities?
 - How would you describe your relationship with physical activity?
- **Micro-Level Factors**
 - Would you share with me on your own coming out process?
 - How would you identify yourself?
 - How has your personal identity changed throughout the years of your life?
 - How does your identification differ between the groups in your life?
- **Meso-Level Factors**
 - How would you describe your relationship with trainers, coaches, leaders, etc.?
 - What actions are portrayed by the leaders in your organization?
 - What differences have you noticed between individuals in leadership positions?
 - Can you elaborate on your experiences of the cultures surrounding physical activity in recreational organizations?
 - When you were a part of organizations, have you noticed any information pertaining to LGBTQ+ individuals?
 - If so, what were they?
 - If not, how would you feel they would influence people in general if they were available?
 - In your own words, how would you describe an ally and how has their presence affected your life?
- **Macro-Level Factors**
 - How have laws regarding LGBTQ+ individuals affected your life?
 - How would you describe the differences between governing structures towards LGBTQ+ individuals from your experiences?
 - What affects do they have?
 - What social activities does your organization partake in within your community?
 - Can you describe the processes of funding, recruitment of players, initiation to the team/activity, etc.
- Is there anything else you wish to add regarding your experiences as an LGBTQ+ individual within recreational sport organizations?