The Lived Experiences of Transgender Footballers in the UK

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Copyright Statement

Abstract

Transgender athletes have always been under extreme scrutiny when it comes to participating and competing in sport. Transgender policies in sport often exclude trans* participants making it difficult for them to access sport. This is due to the notion that trans* athletes, especially trans* female athletes have a supposed athletic advantage over cisgender athletes, which is often not the case. Recent research regarding trans* experiences in sport take place in either educational or leisure settings but less so on lower-level competitive sport that is governed by a national governing body. There is also no recorded literature of transgender footballers in the UK, leaving this gap unexplored. Therefore, the aim of this research is to capture the lived experiences of transgender individuals navigating through organised competitive football in the UK.

Drawing on qualitative narrative research methods, stories were gathered through in-depth interviews in order to capture the experiences of the participants. These were completed either face-to-face, via video call or via instant messaging. The participants of this study included 3 trans* men and 1 trans* woman between the ages of 24 and 37 years old (mean = 29 years), who currently or have previously competed in Football Association (FA) regulated competitions pre or post transition. One participant no longer plays football, one only plays recreational, non-FA affiliated 5-a-side, and two participants play for a non-FA affiliated LGBTQIA+ team.

Through thematic analysis, two themes emerged; For the Love of Football and Beyond the Binary: Finding a Place in Football. The findings suggest that accessibility to FA-affiliated football as a trans* person is difficult. All participants struggled to access FA paperwork regarding their eligibility as well as experiencing frustration due to the lack of education around trans* guidance in football. It was shown from the data gathered that all participants felt safer in a female football environment compared to a male football environment and two participants experienced transphobia within male “LGBTQIA+ friendly” football teams. Participants also expressed concerns about the anti-trans rhetoric in the elite sports media and how this affects them participating in lower-level sport.

This study supports the need to further explore the experiences of trans* people in low-level competitive sport and how football and other sports can make themselves more inclusive of trans* participants through their policies. This research makes an important contribution to knowledge as the first piece of research to bring to light the personal experiences of trans* people in football.

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need for transgender inclusion in sports to promote equality and ensure the fundamental human rights of individuals. The sporting world, including football, has traditionally adhered to gender norms and binary distinctions, often excluding transgender individuals from participation. This thesis aims to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by transgender individuals in competitive football in the UK. By examining previous research on transgender inclusion in sport this study seeks to shed light on the complexities surrounding transgender inclusion in a competitive sport setting. The initial inspiration for this research came from a conversation I had with someone I know about his own experiences of having to quit football due to reaching a point in his hormone treatment where he had too much testosterone to legally compete with his former women's team. We spoke about how although his testosterone levels were too high, he felt like he was not at a point where he could compete and play with the men's team either. This sparked an interesting discussion about the culture of women's football compared to men's in regard to changing room "banter" and "lad" culture and how he would feel uncomfortable in a men's changing room having previously lived life as a woman. Luckily for him, his club were very supportive and offered him a coaching role, so he was able to stay with his friends, but he still had to give up football, a sport he had played for over 15 years. As a researcher this conversation lingered in my mind, and I started to think about whether this was a universal experience but there was a lack of literature in this area.

Previous research has contributed valuable insights into transgender inclusion in various sports context like schools, university or leisure (Caudwell 2020; Phipps 2019; Stewart 2019; Devis-Devis et al. 2018; Caudwell 2012), however, limited attention has been given to the experiences of trans* individuals in competitive football, especially competitions governed by the Football Association (FA). Competition can be defined as possessing a formalistic-structural description (Giossos et al. 2011), for the purpose of this research, competition or competitive is used to describe FA governed competitions. By focusing on competitive football, this thesis aims to fill a

significant gap in the literature and provide a deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities transgender individuals encounter within football in the UK.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of transgender footballers in the UK.

Objective 1: Explore the current policies on transgender inclusion in football in the UK
Objective 2: Shine a light on the real-life experiences of transgender footballers in competitive football in the UK
Objective 3: Make recommendations to the FA regarding their current transgender policy and inclusiveness

Research Roadmap

Table 1: Table outlining the research structure of this study

Chapter Name	***Chapter Content***
Literature Review	This chapter will review the literature surrounding current trans* inclusion in sport, hegemonic masculinity, gender identity and competitive sport policy
Methodology	This chapter will outline the research process and justify the use of the methods chosen and how they relate to the aims and objectives of the study
Results and Discussion	This chapter will present the key findings of the study and discuss the relation between the findings and previous literature and why it is important
Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations	This chapter will provide an overview of the findings of the study and identify the recommendations for further research

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Transgender (trans*) falls under the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus) acronym and is most commonly used as an umbrella term for people whose gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth (Stonewall 2021; Herrick et al. 2020; Phipps 2019; Oakleaf and Richmond 2017), it is counterpart to cisgender (cis) people who gender identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. The term 'trans*' (pronounced trans star or trans asterisk) is a term commonly adopted to include all non-cisgender identities such as but not limited to genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, transmasculine, transfeminine, agender and androgynous (Taha-Thomure et al. 2022, Killerman 2019). As opposed to previous terms such as 'trans' which was initially used to explicitly include only transgender identities such as transman and transwomen (Oxford English Dictionary 2024) In this thesis, the term 'trans*' and 'transgender' will be used synonymously when speaking generally about the trans* community and terms such as 'transman/transmen' and 'transwoman/transwomen' will be used in relation to literature and the research participants as these are the terms they have used. As well as this, the full acronym of LGBTQIA+ will be used in this text as it is the most up to date acronym.

Trans* people express their identities in numerous ways through both internal and/or external expression. Internal expression of gender identity refers to an individual's internal perception of their own gender as it is experienced in their own self-awareness of existing along a gender continuum (Singh and Dickey 2017). External gender expression is communicated externally through clothing, behaviours, hair style, voice, changing their name or pronouns, taking hormones, or undergoing medical interventions (Bramüller et al. 2020; Griffin 2012; Brierley 2000). Gender identity may differ to gender expression (Brierley 2000) for many reasons. A common reason being the fear of 'coming out' and living as their desired identity due to prejudice or violence (Perry and Dyck 2014). Trans* people may use a variety of pronouns, labels and expressions that suit their individual identity and situation which to outsiders may be confusing. In 2006, Travers discussed two terms to help bring to light the trans* experience;

gender conformers and gender transformers. Gender conformers were used to describe people who embraced the gender binary and altered their expression to conform to the male or female gender binary, often through undergoing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or seeking gender affirming surgery. Whereas the term gender transformers tend to be used to describe those who reject the gender binary and do not feel the need to make body alterations to affirm their gender. For trans* gender conformers, sport offers a structure that is heavily influenced by gender binaries. This societal practice can either create positive experiences if they are affirmed in their desired gender, or negative experiences if they are not (Perez-Samaniego et al. 2019). For gender transformers, such as but not limited to people who are non-binary, genderqueer or genderfluid; accessing sport may be more difficult due to their rejection of gender binarism and the rigid structure of gendered sport. Whereas gender conformers seek to be a part of and be accepted by societal norms of the binary therefore in theory be able to access binary sporting spaces. However, we know that to not always be true (Oliveira et al. 2022). The idea of gender conformers and transformers is simplistic and one that should be viewed with open mindedness because we cannot assume that there are only two experiences of being trans*. Trans* people may shift their image of being a conformist or transformist based on their situation, contexts, moments of their life, their involvement in sport (Perez-Samaniego et al. 2019), or for their safety (Perry and Dyck 2014). The takeaway here is that trans* people cannot be conformed into two categories and the subject of gender identity is broad and ever changing. Although, it is important to highlight the different challenges and prejudices conformers and transformers may face in sport (Bramüller et al. 2020; Darwin 2020; Semerjian 2019; Cunningham and Pickett 2018).

Despite there being a vast amount of research about LGBTQIA+ sport, it is to be noted that LGBTQIA+ scholars often take the experiences of only lesbian and gay people and frame it as LGBTQIA+ experiences despite not having any or very few bisexual or trans* experiences in their research (Henrickson et al. 2020). For example, Kavoura and Kokkonen (2020) conducted a review of 58 articles to identify what is already known about the sporting experiences of gender and sexual minority athletes and coaches, and out of those 58 articles only eight included experiences of trans* people in sport with zero articles that were distinctively

orientated toward bisexual or queer individuals, which further enforces the rhetoric that trans*, bisexual, queer, and people who use other labels are often grouped as experiencing the same difficulties as lesbian and gay people when this is often not the reflective of their experience (Henrickson et al. 2020) Caudwell 2012). It is important to note that lesbian, gay and bisexual are terms that refer to where a person falls in the spectrum of sexuality, a spectrum completely separate to gender identity and expression. Research around gender has proven that sentiments regarding trans* people are less favourable than those toward lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (LGB) (Huffaker and Kwon 2016; Norton and Herek 2013). This is mirrored in sport with LGB people receiving less negativity than trans* people (Cunningham and Pickett 2018). With this said, it is imperative that forthcoming research in the field differentiates the experiences of LGB people and trans* people to represent the groups accurately and provide insight into the specific experiences of trans* people.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Gender Normativity

Gender segregation in sports, while intended to promote fair competition and increase participation, can have detrimental consequences to those who do not fit within the gender binary. The rigidness of gender segregation in most sporting settings is often enforced from an early age, like at school. Segregation can either be used as a way for people to express their gender identity by engaging and conforming to typically 'masculine', 'feminine', or 'gender-neutral' sports (Braumüller et al. 2020) or reinforces the notion that males and females are essentially different from each other (Dolance & Messner, 2003 Lucas-Carr & Krane 2011). For trans* people and others that may not fall into these dichotomous categories, the constant enforced gender segregation in sport can heavily influence their participation as they are often subject to discrimination (Krane 2008) and uncomfortableness through gender specific uniforms and locker room spaces (Caudwell 2020; Greey 2020; Herrick et al. 2020; Hargie et al. 2016; Caudwell 2012). It can also be difficult for trans* people to participate in sport while navigating complex and frequently conflicting policies surrounding their eligibility and inclusion. This systemic bias is bolstered by personal experiences of trans* people in sport (Braumüller et al. 2020; Devis-Devis et al. 2018; Cunningham and Pickett 2018). With there being strict binary policies in sport routed in the obsession of hormone levels it often leaves trans* athletes with limited options as to how/where they can participate and feel safe (Jones et al. 2016). This ideology is damaging because not only does it repeatedly emphasise the differences between male and female athletes, but it also erases the thought of any similarities between the two (Kane 1995) furthering gender segregation even more. Kane (1995) discussed the existence of continuum in sport whereby women outperform men in a number of sports and physical activities, but this is not discussed by the mainstream due to challenging traditional beliefs of oppositional binary derived from biological differences. Suppression of any kind of evidence of a sport-continuum that allows men and women to compete with and against each other creates the notion that sport is 'naturally' segregated by gender binary (Kane 1995). If this type of continuum was embraced, it may encourage people to see less of the differences and more of the similarities between male and female athletes thus providing a space that would be more inclusive of all genders

It can be argued that gender segregation in sport is grounded in hegemonic masculinity whereby male dominance is seen as the norm and the physical advantages of men validate the need to segregate sports to level the playing field (Wellard 2016; Griffin 2012). Hegemonic masculinities represent idealised forms of masculinity that adhere to traditional gender norms, emphasising binary and heteronormative constructs. These ideals prioritise attributes such as physical and emotional strength, often marginalising individuals who do not conform to these norms. As a result, hierarchies of gender are created, impacting people's experiences and learning (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Connell 1995). The concept of gender hierarchies derived as a result of the violence and prejudice heterosexual men inflicted on homosexual men as they were seen to be in a position of subordination to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Connell (1995) proposed four categories of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginalised. It is important to look at these masculinities in relation to one another as opposed to strict categories for personality. The hegemonic position refers to the currently accepted male ideal within a specific culture at a specific time. Complicit masculinity alludes men that accept that there is hegemony and enjoy the benefits that it entails such as the subordination of women and other non-complicit men in order to avoid subordination themselves. Subordinate men are viewed as men who present differently to the practice of the hegemonic system, such as gay and effeminate men (Connell 1992). Men in positions of complicity will often target subordinated men to increase their status in a social situation by affirming their position in the masculine hierarchy. However, this is not to say that subordinate men do not also enjoy the economic and social privileges from the overall subordination of women (Connell 1992). Marginalised masculinity much often refers to groups such as men of colour and men with disabilities who, in most western cultures, struggle to attain hegemonic status.

It is known that gender hierarchies can lead to divisions among people within a sporting context (Joy et al. 2021). This is seen in the creation of women's sporting categories to provide an equal access for women in sport. However, it can be argued that the segregation of men's and women's sport has only reinforced hegemonic beliefs of male dominance in sport proving problematic to those who fall outside of the gender binary (Braumüller et al. 2020). This is also evident in sporting organisations whereby men's sport generally receives more funding and

access in comparison to the women's side. For trans* athletes this divide poses challenges in terms of where they fit within the structure of the gender and masculine hierarchy. Trans* athletes are seen "as outsiders or others, because their gender identity did not match the institutionalised ways that sport has been traditionally organised" (Cunningham 2012 p.9) meaning that they are often subject to ostracisation in sporting contexts as they challenge the "superiority of male physicality, distinct gender binaries and the level playing field impede or complicate inclusion" (Braumüller et al. 2020) p.3). This is particular to trans* women who are often subject to prejudice due to so called unfair physical advantages they possess over cis women, which is commonly as a result of assumptions of gender binary and heteronormativity (Braumüller et al. 2020); Cunningham and Pickett 2018; Devis-Devis et al. 2018; Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

Gender Identity in Sport

Transgender individuals experience prejudice and stigmatisation in many parts of society and sport (Cunningham and Pickett 2018; Buzuvis 2012). This can be both structural and individual stigmatisation. Structural stigma is a cultural phenomenon that refers to laws, procedures, and patterns of organisation that favour cisgender people while oppressing trans* people (Herek et al. 2009) and is prominent in some sports organisations through the regulations and policies surrounding trans* participation in sport. Individual stigma is experienced through violence, harassment, social isolation and discrimination (Beemyn and Rankin 2011). According to Hargie et al. (2016), trans* athletes in the United Kingdom have been marginalised, excluded, and ostracised by people in locker rooms, teammates, and recreational sport staff. This is detrimental because this lack of social support further deters trans* athletes from participating in physical activity and sport (Muchicko et al. 2014). When athletes are restricted or cannot gain access to locker rooms that correspond with their gender identity, it discourages them from participating as well as increasing the rate of attempted suicide (Seelman 2016). This stigma not only invalidates gender identity, but it also excludes trans* athletes from an environment that usually promotes team bonding and camaraderie, further ostracising them from physical activity (Cunningham et al. 2018). For transgender youth, this culture of exclusion pushes individuals to conceal their identities ultimately resulting in social and mental difficulties

ranging from low self-esteem to suicidality (Hellen 2009).

Regardless of their gender identity or expression, most people in locker rooms favour seclusion from others (Owen 2007), Gelbach 2018 talked about facilities using “cabana style” locker rooms that offer a combination of open changing areas and enclosed showers and toilets that can be used by any gender. While this design may be effective in public leisure centres, it may be less effective in team sport environments where the culture is to typically get changed as a team in one area. In an ideal world, changing facilities would be designed to offer inclusive and individual changing areas that provide privacy to all athletes as well as, spaces that can be used without having to pass through sex-specific locker rooms (Cunningham et al. 2018). However, with most sports facilities and clubs having pre-existing club houses and changing facilities it may make it harder and costlier to create single changing areas in the existing space. It is important that moving forward, new changing rooms should be designed with this in mind and existing changing facilities should look at how they can best accommodate inclusive changing areas.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a lack of inclusive and comfortable conditions is one of the biggest obstacles to transgender involvement in sport and physical activity. The high amount of fear and anxiety experienced by transgender people in regard to changing rooms, where transgender bodies are vulnerable to social stigma, is a recurring theme in the literature (Caudwell 2020; Greey 2020; Stewart 2020; Elling-Machartzki 2017; Hargie et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2016; Caudwell 2012; Lucas-Carr and Krane 2011; Sykes 2011). However, current research rarely examines how transgender people perceive trans* inclusive tactics or how these strategies affect trans* wellbeing in changing rooms (Greey 2020). It poses the question: how can we expect trans* people to feel comfortable and safe in a space they had no say in creating? Conversations of safety rarely orientate toward the safety of trans* people but more so toward the safety of cis girls and women despite there being no empirical evidence to suggest trans* people pose any threat to cis women and girls (Borrello 2016). With reports of transphobic hate crimes being quadrupled over the last 5 years (BBC News 2020), it could be argued that it would be beneficial to turn our attention to protecting trans* people from threat and scrutinising the effects cisnormativity has on trans* and gender non-conforming individuals

than worry about threats that cease to exist.

Cisnormativity is the society assumption and expectation that everyone identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth and that this is the 'natural' or 'normal' way of living and being, thus privileging those whose gender expression aligns with their gender assigned at birth (Robinson 2022). As someone who is cisgender, before starting this project, I was unaware of how much the sporting world was influenced by cisnormativity and the affect this has on not only trans* people but cisgender people too where there have been many instances of women being scrutinised for not adhering to the 'norms' of what a woman is supposed to be or look like. In relation to the effects of cisnormativity in physical activity, Greey (2020) interviewed trans*people in Canada who stated that when swimming, in many cases, the only access to the pool was through male or female changing areas preventing several interviewees from participating in aquatic activities. This is a common occurrence in sporting facilities with staff lacking knowledge and being under- trained in trans* accessibility needs. For an outsider in a position of privilege, this is something that you may not have considered an obstacle. Stewart (2020) also found that during a trans* inclusive swimming session there was a lifeguard who was unaware of the needs of the group i.e., clothing being allowed, leading to questions of whether this lifeguard was informed about the group prior to working with them. This disconnect between ground staff and management is also evident in Greey's (2020) work whereby interviewees talk about how often staff in managerial positions receive trans* inclusive training, but it is not always passed onto ground staff. The interviewees also stressed the desire for cis people to educate themselves as the "emotional labour required to educate cisgender people in a binary-gendered locker room [is] exhausting" and the "expectation to perform this type of emotional labour was a barrier to accessing these spaces" (Greey 2020 p.212). This shows that trans* people want the opportunities to access sport and physical activity without the need of explaining their identity to staff and so facilities should be designed to allow for freedom of movement for trans* people.

Challenging the Binary

Transgender athletes are frequently criticised for challenging the binary sex-segregated structure of elite and recreational sports. Trans* athletes, especially transwomen, are often accused of having an unfair physical advantage which brings to the foreground questions of fairness and the level playing field for athletes in sport (Braumüller et al. 2020). While some may argue that men do have athletic advantages in many areas of athletic performance due to experiencing a testosterone driven puberty (Hilton and Lundberg 2020), recent research has found that transwomen demonstrated a lower performance on a number of laboratory based metric tests compared to cisgender women (Hamilton et al. 2024) suggesting that hormone therapy impacts performance on some level. However, there is still limited research on the direct impact this would have on athletic competition (Jones et al. 2016) when taking into account sport specific training. In recent months media coverage of trans* athletes competing in sport at an elite level has been expanding, particularly coverage surrounding the eligibility and fairness of transgender athletes' involvement in elite competitions. As espoused by athletes such as former tennis player Martina Navratilova and former Olympic Swimmer Sharron Davies, these discussions have featured allegations of competitive advantage, unfair physiology, as well as going as far to say that women's rights in sport are being eradicated (Barras 2019). This alongside comments from JK Rowling only drives hate toward trans* people, especially online. Taha-Thomure et al. 2022 noted that trans* powerlifter Mary Gregory was subject to an array of virtual violence including accusations of cheating and stealing places from "biological women" when she competed in competition. These narratives are not only damaging to trans*people but also female athletes who do not match the cisnormative ideal of being a woman such as Imane Khelif. Imane Khelif who competed in the Women's Welterweight boxing at the recent 2024 Paris Olympic Games was subject to cruel comments from the public due to her appearance and the misinformation about her being transgender being spread online. While Khelif herself is not transgender, the way her case was handled points to a broader context where athletes' bodies, particularly those who do not conform to cisnormative ideals of femininity, are scrutinized and regulated in ways that can be seen as transphobic. This creates a climate where athletes whose bodies deviate from the norm face

suspicion and exclusion in the name of "fairness."

The dialogues taking place regarding the participation of trans* athletes in elite sport are reverberating into broader discussions about trans* inclusivity and equality in everyday sport and physical activity (Barras 2019). Due to the often-antagonistic nature of these discussions, the experiences trans* people have with everyday sport and activity is being negatively impacted (Barras 2021). And while the concern is primarily focused on cisgender fairness and safety in sport, the current debates neglect to acknowledge the barriers it is creating for transgender people to participate in sport and how this has an effect on their physical and mental wellbeing (Barras 2019).

Competitive Sport Policy

By adhering to binary sex-segregation in sport, and hormone testing, rather than taking gender identity or other competitive categories such as weight and height into account, this systematic exclusion of transgender athletes reinforces negative connotations or associations of sport to transgender people ultimately deterring future sport participation (Jones et al. 2016; Devís-Devís et al. 2018; Semerjian 2019). Current research in the UK focuses mostly on barriers to participation and trans* experiences in school/ university level sport (Phipps 2019; Caudwell 2012) as well as, experiences of using leisure facilities (Caudwell 2020, Stewart 2019). As this research is centred around competitive sport participation (participation in sports competitions, tournaments or leagues governed by a national governing body) as opposed to ungoverned leisurely activity (gyms, leisure centres, fitness classes) it is important to discuss the policies that affect a person's opportunity to compete in that sport.

Many sports, align their transgender eligibility policies with that of the now outdated International Olympic Committee (IOC) Consensus Meeting on Sex Reassignment and Hyperandrogenism (2015) which is that for transmale athletes there are no restrictions to compete in the male categories, and transwomen are eligible to compete in the female categories if they:

1. Declared their gender identity as female for a minimum of four years
2. Have a total testosterone level of below 10 nmol/L for at least 12 months prior to her first competition
3. Her testosterone level must remain below 10nmol/L throughout the competition
4. Be compliant to monitored testing throughout the competition or risk being suspended for 12 months

In 2021 the IOC released a framework titled “IOC Framework on Fairness, Inclusion, and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations" which provides guidance and support on how to promote a safer and more welcoming environment in sport, while acknowledging the need for eligibility criteria in some sports to fit with separate men’s and women’s competing categories. In the new framework, the IOC does not suggest specific eligibility requirements to be adopted by all sports like the 2015 document. Instead, it suggests that governing bodies should develop a criterion that fits their sport, supported by evidence and considers the following principles: inclusion; prevention of harm; non-discrimination; fairness; no presumption of advantage; evidence-based approach; primacy of health and bodily autonomy; stakeholder-centred approach; right to privacy; periodic reviews. Instead of a blanketed approach, the IOC has put guidance responsibility on to the governing bodies.

For sports like rugby, this has been detrimental to trans* athletes because World Rugby do not allow for transwomen who transitioned post-puberty to compete in any contact competition (World Rugby 2020). On announcement of this in 2020, the English Rugby Football Union, Scottish Rugby and Welsh Rugby Unions all rejected World Rugby’s call for transwomen to be banned from competing but have all now retracted their positions and adopted the guidelines of World Rugby (Scottish Rugby 2023; Rugby Football Union 2022; Welsh Rugby Union 2022). Not only does this prevent transwomen from competing at elite level but also at grassroots level. As well as, having negative implications for transwomen in the sport, hindering future participation due to lack of role models and the automatic assumption that they are not accepted in the sport. This may also discourage some players from coming out as trans* for fear of losing their ability to participate and consequently leading to social and emotional issues such as low self-esteem and suicidality (Hellen 2009).

World Rugby's argument for banning transwomen is "because of the size, force and power-producing advantages conferred by testosterone during puberty and adolescence, and the resultant player welfare risks this creates" (World Rugby 2020 p.2) which is supported by Hilton and Lundberg (2020) who found that the performance gap is particularly larger in sporting activities that rely on muscle mass and explosive strength in the upper body, concurrent with the game of rugby. However, this research largely compares the strength of cis men and cis women, and cis men and transwomen. Yet despite calling for organisations to consider their research when forming sporting policies, their research does not compare the strength of transwomen and cis women thus not providing consistent evidence that transwomen hold significant advantages over cis women. It is important to note that at time of writing this paper there has been zero recorded incidences of transwomen causing injury to cis women while playing rugby prior to the ban. Nevertheless, World Rugby decided the theoretical risk of injury to cis women is too high. In a letter to World Rugby Joanna Harper and Dr. Derek Glidden express their dissent toward the guidelines and suggested that the theoretical increase of risk to cis women would only be approximately 1% (Harper and Glidden 2020), wholly debunking World Rugby's claim that the risk of injury is 'too great'. Sports like rugby are praised for being inclusive of people of all shapes and sizes whereby there are often disparities in height and strength between players. It is one of the few sports that embraces a plethora of body types, and with that, there will always be bigger and smaller players with the smaller players being usually at more risk when being tackled. It is unclear whether transwomen as a demographic are any bigger or more powerful than cis women when playing rugby.

The FA's Policies on Trans People in Football*

The Football Association (FA) is the governing body for football in England. It is responsible for regulating the participation of athletes in competitive football competitions from grassroots to elite level. For many people, football is used as a way to keep physically fit through enjoying recreational competitions and has been proven to positively affect mental health (Lamont et al. 2017) especially in lower-level competitions (Jewett et al. 2018). Currently, the FA transgender

guidelines state that transmen and women must complete hormone therapy (or gonadectomy for transwomen) to ensure blood testosterone is within the natal range for that sex (FA 2015). See *Figure 1* for full requirements.

Requirement	Evidence
Transsexual male (female-to-male transsexual person)	
• **Hormone therapy results in blood testosterone levels within natal male range**	• Individual case-by-case review • Medical information/records demonstrate hormone therapy administered in a verifiable manner • Blood testosterone within range for an appropriate length of time so as to minimise any potential advantage • Hormone treatment to be verified annually • Proof of ID required is identical to that required of all players i.e. passport or driving licence.
Transsexual female (male-to-female transsexual person)	
• **Hormone therapy** OR • **Gonadectomy** **results in blood testosterone within natal female range**	• Individual case-by-case review • Medical information/records demonstrate hormone therapy administered in a verifiable manner • Blood testosterone within natal female range for an appropriate length of time so as to minimise any potential advantage • Hormone treatment to be verified annually • Proof of ID required is identical to that required of all players i.e. passport or driving licence.

Figure 1: The FA's transgender hormone requirements

These regulations are only applicable to those over the age of 18 as the FA handbook states, “a child in the age groups Under 7 to Under 18 inclusive may play in a match involving boys and girls” (FA 2023 p.139). This was put into place in for the 2015/16 season, the same year the FA’s Policy on Trans People in Football was released (Sussex FA 2015). While there is no public record or information about trans* children in football, by allowing young people to play mixed football, it gives them the opportunity to play for a team that best suits them and their identity. Hormone regulation is enforced after Under 18 level when children enter into adult football. The FA’s Policy on Trans People in Football was curated in 2015 and further guidance for leagues, clubs and players was released in 2016 by the FA and Gendered Intelligence. When reading the policy documents, the 2015 document uses the term ‘transexual’ as opposed to ‘transgender’ which is a term that is typically used in research regarding medical transitioning

and is now largely outdated (Thelwall et al. 2022). When the revised 2016 guidelines were released in partnership with Gendered Intelligence, the term 'transsexual' was replaced with 'transgender' and 'trans'. These terms are "more general, encompassing all people that experience a gender identity differing from their birth-assigned sex, irrespective of whether they wish to medically transition" (Thelwall et al. 2022 p.12), and therefore generally more inclusive. From this the FA has shown that they have worked with trans* professionals to review their policies, however, the policies have not been updated since then.

Research Rationale

There are many recorded experiences of transgender athletes in sport, however they are mostly of experiences in school, college and university sport as well as, participation in leisure activities such as swimming (Caudwell 2020; Pérez-Samaniego et al. 2019; Phipps 2019; Stewart 2019; Devís-Devís et al. 2018; Oakleaf and Richmond 2017). The basis of this research is to provide a platform for transgender athletes to speak about their personal experiences in organised competitive football in the UK. This is a topic that has received little attention in sporting literature thus far. Currently the FA permit mixed gender competitions in youth football up until Under 18 level and then trans* players need to declare themselves in order to play in the adult game. With little data available regarding trans* involvement in football in the UK it is an area that is clearly under researched. The rationale for the focus on this topic area is to build on previous knowledge of trans* experiences in sport (Barras 2021) and create knew knowledge around trans* people's personal experiences within competitive football in the UK. As well as, how far governing bodies, in this case the FA, are supporting trans* involvement and inclusion within football.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

The overall aim of this study was to explore the experiences of transgender footballers in competitive football the UK. In order to capture experiences and develop a deeper understanding of these experiences, a narrative case study approach was adopted. Four narrative interviews were conducted with participants who currently or have previously competed in FA governed competitions during or post transition. This chapter will examine the rationale behind the research approach and the justification for the methodologies chosen.

Research Philosophy

All research begins somewhere, whether that be an idea sparked from an observation, something that you have heard about, or from something that arises through personal experience. All of these ideas evoke curiosity and as humans, our need to seek information is what serves as a basis for great research. Relating this to theory, Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) talked about the *theory-before-research model* which suggests research begins with an idea and then attempts to disprove this through tests of empirical research (Popper 2002). However, some would argue that theory comes after research as research may refine existing theories or create new ways of thinking about pre-existing theories (Lune and Berg 2017). Both of these approaches are very rigid and linear and as a qualitative researcher you know that qualitative research is never really that simple. Lune and Berg (2017) proposed an alternative approach to qualitative research in the form of a *Spiralling Research Approach (figure 2).*

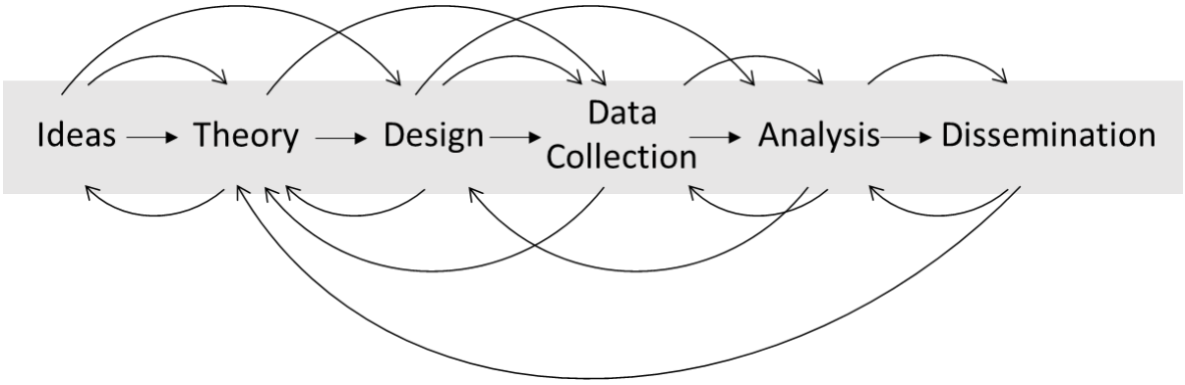

Figure 2: Spiralling Research Approach (Lune and Berg 2017)

This approach starts with an idea, then to gathering theory and information, you then go back and refine your idea with the new information gathered, examine possible research designs, re-examine the theory and refine the theoretical assumptions and idea if needed. Once that is done, then you can start looking at data collection, analysis and dissemination (Berg 2010 p.26). This approach allows some fluidity in the research process and suggests that you should keep examining and refining your theory as you progress as this will ultimately shape the research aims and questions.

A researcher's philosophical attitude toward a subject will ultimately underpin the approach to which they carry out their research (Jones et al. 2015). Research is usually steered by one of the dominant theoretical paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism (Guba and Lincoln 1994). A paradigm is a set of basic beliefs that guide a research project and are based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions which are summarised in *figure 3*. When referring to ontology, Crotty (2003 p.10) defines it as "the study of being" and it relates to "what kind of world we are investigating" in relation to the nature of existence and the structure of reality. Epistemology on the other hand, is a way of understanding and explaining the nature of the relationship of how we know what we know (Crotty 2003; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Methodological assumptions refer to the way we go about finding out what we believe to be known (Guba and Lincoln 1994). This is achieved by

using certain research methodologies and designs to gather information and data relating to the research questions or hypothesis.

Basic Beliefs	*Positivism*	*Postpositivism*	*Critical Theory et al.*	*Constructivism/ Interpretivism*
Ontology	Naïve realism – one "real" reality but apprehendable	Critical realism – one known reality within a specified level of probability	Historical realism– reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values; crystallized over time	Relativism – local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities. Multiple, socially constructed realities
Epistemology	Dualist/ objectivist; findings true; detached researcher role	Modified dualist/ objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true. Researcher manipulates and observes in an objective manner	Transactional/ subjectivist; value-mediated findings	Transactional/ subjectivist; findings created as the investigation proceeds
Methodology	Experimental and manipulative – research questions and/or hypotheses are stated in a proposal and then are tested in carefully controlled conditions; only quantitative methods	Modified experimental/ manipulative – predominantly quantitative methods; some qualitative methods	Dialogic and dialectical; naturalistic highly interactive; creating transformation (dialect) through transactional discourse (dialogical); predominantly qualitative methods	Hermeneutical/ dialectical; naturalistic, highly interactive uncovering meaning through text and words; only qualitative methods

Figure 3: Dominant theoretical research paradigms

This research is rooted in the meanings trans* people make of their experiences in football and a way of understanding these experiences is to construct meaning from their narratives (constructivism). By holding a relativist ontological belief that social reality is humanly constructed thus there being no one true reality (Sparkes and Smith 2014), this study will adopt the epistemological viewpoint that the researcher (myself) and the object of investigation (trans* footballers in the UK) are interactively linked so that findings are created as the investigation progresses and can be understood from the lived experiences of the athletes (Schwandt 2000; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Adopting a Qualitative Approach

To achieve research aims and objectives a researcher must decide whether a qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods approach would be best suited. Qualitative research aims to understand the social reality of individuals, groups and culture through exploring the behaviours, perspectives and experiences of people in their daily lives (Sparkes and Smith 2014), whereas quantitative research is more focused on experimentally measured research in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The word qualitative emphasises the way in which entities are processed and given meaning. Given that reality is socially constructed, qualitative researchers seek to understand or interpret phenomena through the meanings given to them by those involved in said phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Qualitative research is open ended in nature and situated in the "real world", meaning an interpretative lens is needed to capture meanings and qualities such as feelings, thoughts and experiences that are often non-quantifiable (Jones et al. 2015; Rudestam and Newton 2015; Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Qualitative researchers complete research using methodologies that allow for a collection of a variety of empirical materials such as through ethnography; phenomenology; case study; grounded theory; life history and narrative; critical or openly ideological research (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). With this in mind, this research will adopt a qualitative perspective when it comes to data collection and will use a combination of narrative inquiry and case study methodologies.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry as a form of qualitative research in sport and exercise is something that is still relatively new in academia despite having much to offer the field (Smith and Sparkes 2009). However, with it being supported by the philosophical assumptions of constructivism (Smith and Sparkes 2009) narrative inquiry focuses on meanings and interpretations rather than causality and statistical investigation (Josselson 2012). The term 'narrative' is often used synonymously with 'story' despite there being distinguishable

differences between the two (Frank 2000). Frank (1995) refers to stories as tales told by people, whereas narratives on the other hand can be described as continuous stories, intertwined with other people with connected events including a plot, problem, and characters who have impacted a personal story (Smith 2010; Holloway and Freshwater 2007). Central to how we conceive ourselves, narratives are used to create stories of ourselves to establish our identity, associate our actions and separate ourselves from others (Josselson 2012). Contextually speaking, the people involved in the narratives are often "viewed as unique individuals with particularity in terms of social location" (Josselson 2012 p.871) meaning narrative inquiry can illuminate experiences and stories from people of specific socio-cultural backgrounds highlighting the way in which they navigate sport and exercise (Smith and Sparkes 2009). When thinking analytically Smith (2010) suggests numerous potential benefits of conducting narrative inquiry (*figure 4*). These factors let me to decide to adopt narrative inquiry for this research.

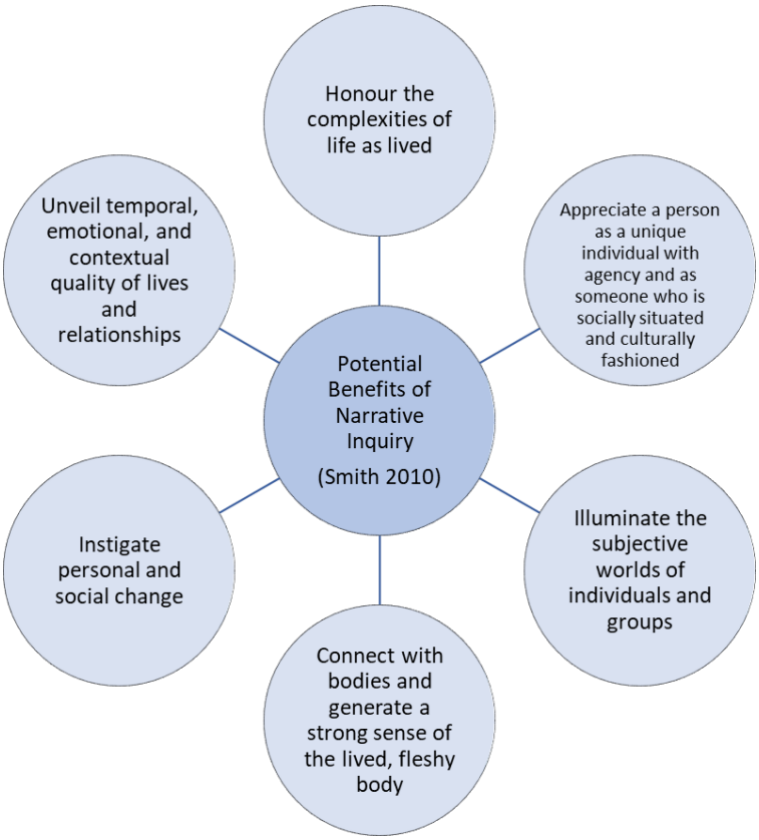

Figure 4: Benefits of conducting narrative research (Smith 2010)

Research Design: Narrative Case Study

Case study research as a methodology aims to explore in depth an individual, group or event situated in the real-world to understand a contemporary phenomenon through descriptive, exploratory or explanatory means (Yin 2018; Lune and Berg 2017; Sparkes and Smith 2014). This approach allows for a phenomenon to be explored through a variety of different perspectives adding to the credibility of the case (Baxter and Jack 2015) and they often involve the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (Grogan Putney 2012).

The use of a bounded system ensures that there are limits or boundaries to what you are researching to keep the subject concise. The bounded system is split into natural and artificial whereby natural bounding involves participants that are together for a common purpose such as pupils in a particular classroom or a football team, whereas artificially bounded entities are bounded through criteria set out by the researcher relating to a specific issue (Grogan Putney 2012; Merriam 1998). Merriam (1998) describes qualitative case studies as intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon characterised through particularistic, descriptive and heuristic means. However, this is just one way to look at case study research.

Stake (2010) describes case studies as the study of a single case in detail and understanding the case in relation to its circumstances. These are often characterised through holistic, empirical, interpretive and emphatic means. On the contrary, Yin (2003) sees case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates cases by addressing the “how” and “why” of a phenomenon. Stake (1995) describes cases as an object rather than a process and believes it would be more beneficial to study programmes and people rather than events and processes which is concurrent with the views of Yin (2003) who also believes that case study research is a best fit for programme evaluation. However, the way in which Yin investigates a case is meticulous in comparison to the way Stake (2010) and Merriam (1998) explore a case because he believes that every move or decision should confront the logic and theoretical propositions and characteristics of the case (Yazan 2015). Whereas scholars like Merriam (1998) suggest

that “reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality” (p. 22) meaning that cases should not be constricted to strict logical analysis because it does not mimic that of real-world interactions.

A subjective single entity such as cases about people, programmes, groups, policies and so on with boundaries presents a broader definition to case study methodology as it allows for flexibility when using qualitative methods (Yazan 2015). So, for this reason, I will be adopting a research methodology similar to that of Merriam (1998) and Stake (2010) as these provide more flexible definitions and research designs than that of Yin (2003) and fall within a similar epistemological viewpoint (constructivism) as myself.

The rationale behind this is that by using only case study methods or only narrative inquiry I fear I will not capture the depth of the topic I am researching. So, for that reason I am proposing an integrated methodology in the form of a narrative case study as this will provide a more in-depth study of the experiences of the participants as well as, explore the phenomenon through a variety of different lenses. Narrative case studies can be defined as “the intensive examination of an individual unit, although such units are not limited to individual persons” (Brandell and Varkas 2010 p.377). When studying the experiences of occupational therapists, Sonday et al. (2020) used narrative case study research which allowed them to gather data from many sources as well as gain narrative stories from the occupational therapists working in specific areas. They did this because they realised that conducting only case study research was not going to provide the understanding and meaning behind the experiences of the occupational therapists and so by using a combination of both case study and narrative inquiry, they were able to understand how things were experienced as opposed to just what was experienced.

When it comes to designing a case study, Stake (1995) identifies three frameworks: (1) the intrinsic case, (2) the instrumental case and (3) the collective case. The intrinsic case is recognised as a researchers intrinsic need to study a case in order to gain a greater understanding of it as a whole. Intrinsic cases are often cases that are particular and unique and are studied with the case itself being the primary interest in the exploration and aim to

seize the intricacy of specific cases (Mills et al. 2012a). Instrumental case studies are used to provide an insight or develop theory around a particular issue or to redraw generalisations around and understand something separate to the case (Mills et al. 2012b; Stake 1995). The collective case study is essentially an extended instrumental study in that instead of studying just one case, several cases are being studied to investigate a common phenomenon. Comparably, Yin (2003) proposed a paradigm for case study design that involved both single and multiple-case designs which can be seen in *figure 5*. By using a collective or multiple-case study design, the evidence collected is often more compelling and robust as there are multiple cases to describe the phenomenon as opposed to one (Stake 2010).

This study will follow a collective/ multiple-case study design (Type 3) when collecting data as I will be studying several cases relating to a common phenomenon. Although I will be conducting a collective case study, it is imperative that each case is treated as its own individual entity and studied in-depth to capture the true experiences of each individual. I can then cross-compare the cases to find commonalities and differences among the cases (Mills et al. 2010).

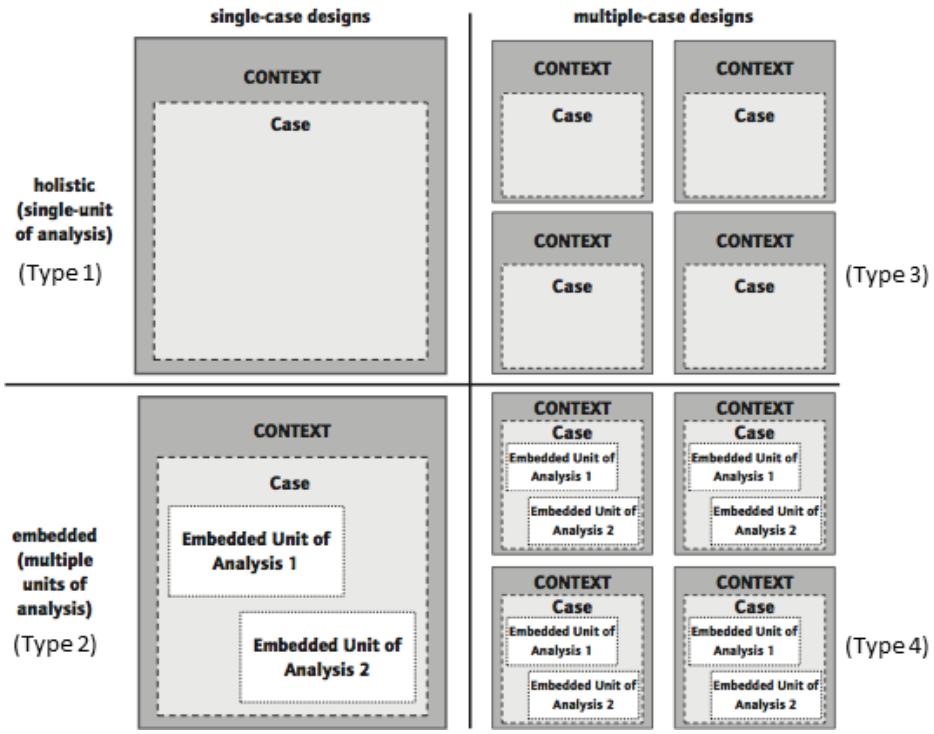

Figure 5: Case study design paradigm (Yin 2003)

Sampling and participants

The participants of this study included four amateur footballers between the ages of 24 and 37 (mean = 29). All participants self-identify as being trans* and have previously competed in FA regulated football competition in the UK. The participants consisted of three transmen and one transwoman. Further information regarding the participants can be found in *table 2*.

Table 2: Participant pseudo name, gender and footballing experience

Pseudo Name	Age	Gender	Footballing Experience
Aaron	24	Male	Played for an FA affiliated girls' team – now plays for non-FA affiliated LGBTQIA+ team
Gerard	24	Male	Played for an FA affiliated women's team – now no longer plays
Michael	32	Male	Played for an FA affiliated men's team – now plays recreational 5-a-side
Alice	37	Female	Played for an FA women's team – now plays for non-FA affiliated LGBTQIA+ team

There are several reasons why adult amateur footballers were chosen for this research. Firstly, the FA regulations on trans* participation in football only apply to players over the age of 18 and playing adult football in England (FA 2015). Secondly, adult participants are more likely to

have had access to gender affirming care, meaning their experiences differ to younger participants. Thirdly, amateur footballers were chosen as there are currently no trans* professional football players in the UK. The rationale behind the inclusion of both transmen and transwomen in this sample was to ensure that there was a blend of experiences. Transmen and transwomen encounter different experiences concerning identity, socialisation, discrimination and access to spaces in sport. With much discussion centered around transwomen's participation in sport, transmen are often neglected in the conversation around access and engagement in organised sport. Including both groups in the study will help to fill gaps in current literature and complete a more balanced and complete body of knowledge, as well as leading to more effective and equitable policies and practices that address the specific needs of both groups.

Participant sampling is something that is important when designing research and needs to be planned to determine the method of study. The sampling process is split into probability and nonprobability sampling. Probability sampling involves methods that allow the findings to be generalised to the whole population, such as simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling and cluster sampling. Whereas nonprobability sampling involves carefully selected participants that are readily available to the researcher. These methods include convenience sampling, purposeful and quota sampling (Naderifar et al. 2017). For this research, convenience sampling was used to obtain the first participant. As he was close to the case (the researcher), and the inspiration for the research it was natural to start with him. However, as an outsider in the trans* community it was difficult to sought participants beyond the person I knew as he too did not know any trans* footballers. Eventually, I used twitter to promote the research and posted an advert recruiting participants (Appendix A).

Twitter was created to serve as a platform for public discussion and exchange of ideas (Forgie et al. 2021) quickly via the 'retweet' and tagging functions. To gain attention from a larger audience, I tagged trans* sport related accounts with a high follower count in the hopes of being retweeted by them thus ultimately putting my tweet on the timeline of trans* sports

people. This worked and the tweet was retweeted 56 times, quote tweeted three times, and liked 33 times. From this I was contacted by two participants who were interested in participating.

Using Twitter as a method to recruit participants facilitated a sort of snowball-type sampling effect due to the retweeting of content onto other pages; which is a successful method to recruit participants who may be difficult to access (Parker et al. 2019). The last participant was recruited via Twitter messenger after an interaction on an online workshop hosted by a well known professional football club's LGBTQIA+ football team.

To take part in the research, the participants needed to meet the criteria set in order to maintain research integrity (*table 3*). Once initial contact was made, each participant was sent a link to an online survey (*figure 6*) to determine whether they met the criteria for participation

Table 3: Participant criteria and rationale

Participant Criteria	***Rationale***
Participants should be over 18 years of age	the FA regulations on trans* participation in football only apply to players over the age of 18 and playing adult football in England (FA 2015)
Participants should identify as trans*	The research focuses on Trans* experiences, to recruit participants who do not identify this way will nullify the objective of the research
Participants should currently compete or have competed in FA regulated football in the UK at any point during or post transition	This excludes those who participate in recreational LGBTQIA+ leagues as they are unregulated by the FA's transgender policy

Jisc Online surveys

The Lived Experiences of Transgender Footballers in the UK

Response ID	Completion date
896087-896069-94833786	11 May 2022, 18:46 (BST)

1	Please confirm you are over the age of 18	I am over the age of 18
2	Please select the option that relates most closely with you	I identify as transgender
2.a	If you identify in another way, please specify:	
3	Please select an answer that most closely relates to your current footballing situation	I no longer play football but I did play football in a league regulated by a governing body post-transtion
3.a	If you selected Other, please describe your current footballing situation:	
4	The purpose of this research requires in depth conversations about personal experiences and this is best done through face-to-face interviews. However, I know this may be difficult for some people so I can offer interviews over messenger or phone call if this is preferred.	I am happy to participate in a phone interview
5	If you are happy to participate please provide your name and contact email	
6	I agree to be contacted by the researcher (Terri Harvey) using the information given in this survey	I agree

Figure 6: Participant online criteria survey

The purpose of a case study is to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of complex issues that may not be fully captured by a large pool of participants. Due to the nature of the research at hand and the specificity of participant required for the study, it was only natural that the sample size was small. According to Sears (1992), the strength of qualitative data does not reside in the numer of participants in a study but rather in its capacity to provide a deep understanding of a small number of individuals within their specific cultural contexts. Qualitative research enables us to describe, interpret and understand experiences (Holloway and Wheeler 2010) and provide the capacity to explore complexities and processes within a subject area. Although this research has a relatively small sample size than generally adopted

in qualitative research, for case studies, a lower sample often proves informative and relevant when gathering in-depth perspectives of hard-to-reach communities (Boddy 2016). Therefore, for the purpose of this research, four participants were adequate in terms of gathering initial information of trans* experiences of footballers in the UK.

Gaining entry and Building Rapport

Successful research is dependent on the way in which a researcher develops relationships and builds rapport with their participants (Suzuki et al. 2007) According to Harrington (2003), gaining entry means obtaining authorisation from participants before conducting a study and entry to the research environment is often achieved through a gatekeeper (Peticca-Harris et al. 2016). Gaining entry for this study was initially through someone I know who sparked my interest in the topic to begin with. This process was trouble free and in honesty, made me assume that recruiting more participants would be easy. However, I was an outsider and did not know any other trans* people, let alone trans* footballers. Like mentioned in the preceding paragraph I took to Twitter to recruit participants and was allowed access to their space through common interests on Twitter. Entry was ultimately gained through the participants contacting me after seeing the research advert on Twitter.

Once entry was gained, rapport needed to be made to ensure the participants were comfortable talking about their experiences with me and therefore providing an enhanced depth of data being recorded (Okumus et al. 2007). To do this, I allowed the participants to choose their preferred method of interview: face-to-face, video call or via instant messenger. This was to grant the participant autonomy to build trust and engagement in the interview (UK Statistics Authority 2022). Prior to the interviews I introduced myself to each participant through instant messaging to talk about my personal connection to the research and how I was appreciative of their involvement in the study. The initial contact before the interview was to connect with the participant to begin to build a rapport with them and meant that we were not speaking for the first time on the day of the interview.

Conducting the Interviews

After receiving approval from the Bournemouth University ethics panel (ethics ID 36717), participants were contacted through Twitter direct messages where they then provided an email contact. The participants were emailed a copy of a participation information sheet (Appendix B) and an informed consent form (Appendix C) which outlined the research aims, objectives and study information. Once participants were confirmed, arrangement of interviews could take place. The data were collected through narrative interviewing which is a technique used in qualitative research data collection whereby a story is created through interviewing (Allen 2017a). With the nature of the research being conducted, narrative interviewing allowed me to collect data holistically through free-flowing storytelling from the participants (Jones et al. 2012).

Each participant was given the option to be interviewed face-to-face, via video call or via instant messenger. One participant opted for face-to-face, two opted for video call and one participant chose to be interviewed via instant messenger. While face-to-face interviewing is generally deemed the ideal method of data collection there are numerous practical advantages to conducting interviews digitally, such as providing convenience and a comfortable space for the participant to speak in (Mason and Ide 2014). Gibson (2020) found that using instant messaging to interview participants gave them the freedom that face-to-face interviews did not. This included not having to travel, being able to take a break without disrupting the conversation, and being able to adjust the timing of the interview at a shorter notice to fit with the participants' needs. The same can be said about video interviews (Deakin and Wakefield 2013). Gibson (2020) also found that most of the participants found it difficult to talk about sensitive issues face-to-face and instant messaging provided a great alternative for them. Narrative interviews require minimal structure and questions are only used to probe further details regarding the participants' story. I started by using the opening statement and question: "*Please tell me a bit about yourself, how did you get into football and how long have you been playing for?*" By doing this I gave the participant the opportunity to formally introduce themselves and begin their story in a way that was truthful to their own experience.

Despite the convenience of digital interviews there has been concerns of obstacles such as connectivity issues and the reduced ability to read body language and non-verbal cues, especially with instant messaging (Gibson 2020; Seitz 2015). When conducting the interviews, especially the one over instant messenger, if I struggled to understand the tone of the message I followed up with a reply of "*how did that make you feel?*" to gauge the undertones of the message. Also, by using follow-up questions such as "*how did that make you feel?";* or *"that's an interesting point, could you explore that further?"* provoked further elaboration and depth into the narrative being told. Having some structure but not too much is important in narrative interviewing as to keep the holistic nature of the data collection and by structuring it in the way described above provides an "effective means for soliciting a rich and well-developed narrative" (Allen 2017a p.1073).

In total, the participant interviews lasted on average 65 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded using an audio-recording device and fully transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The data were analysed using thematic analysis as it provides the researcher with an understanding of an experience through bringing together pieces of information and organising it to reveal patterns and relationships between them (Allen 2017b; Brewer 2002).

Data Analysis

The analysis phase of qualitative research starts nearly immediately after data collection so that the researcher can become familiar with the content and be prepared to interpret meaning from it (Lester el at. 2020). Qualitative data analysis involves exploring, managing and interpreting data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon (Jones et al. 2013), often using inductive reasoning to do so. Inductive research allows the researcher to develop broader generalisations or theories based on findings and observations (Walters 2001).

This research began with observations of someone I know and his personal experiences of navigating football as a trans* person. From this and initial research into trans* policies in sport I came to a generalisation that his experiences may be similar to other trans* people in the UK. And whilst I did not set out to prove that his experiences were the same as others, I did notice

patterns of similarities between his experiences and those in existing literature in other areas. Leading me to conduct this research with the intent of gathering data of other trans* footballers experiences to identify themes between them and develop theory based on the findings.

Once this was done I was able to use thematic analysis, as suggested by Sparkes and Smith (2014) to identify, organise and interpret key themes that emerge from the data collected. This method allowed for a comprehensive exploration in the data, enabling a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Thematic analysis goes beyond merely identifying repetitive patterns, it focuses on revealing the inherent meanings embedded within the data (Van Manen 2023). Themes are then derived through the researcher's interpretation of the data and giving meaning to the identified themes. Although themes hold significance on their own, it is important to acknowledge that interpretation is essential for providing a deeper understanding and meaning to the data (Ho et al. 2017).

To explain and support the thematic analysis process, Lester et al. (2020) proposed a seven-phase approach. I have adopted this method to justify my analytic process:

Table 4: Thematic analysis process (Lester et al. 2020)

Thematic Analysis Phase	***Description and Implementation***
1. Preparation and organisation of data for analysis	Collecting, converting and securely storing all auditory and physical data into a structured electronic format
2. Transcribing the data	To ensure a precise record of dialogue, all four audio recordings were transcribed verbatim
3. Familiarisation	Gaining an understanding of the data by making a note of significant experiences shared by participants during the interviews
4. Memoing the data	Creating notes that provide initial thoughts on the data, noting similarities between interviews to serve as an invitation for further analysis

5. Coding the data	*Three phases of coding data:* *Phase one*: General coding to identify significant experiences and reduce data corpus *Phase two:* Return to phase one codes to further code and connect experiences by segmenting the quotes into broad meaning interpretations *Phase three:* Sections of quotes were labelled corresponding with the meanings given to them
6. Codes to categories to themes	Finding shared meanings across the sub-sections and organising them accordingly served as the basis for developing themes. The themes were later renamed to include all underlying categories
7. Making the analytic process transparent	A thematic map is produced to demonstrate information regarding the analytic process

Ethical Considerations

In relation to sport and exercise research, Harriss et al. (2019) presented a set of ethical principles that consist of fundamental rules to protect participants. This includes an ethical review of the research methodology, informed consent, participant information and conduct (Harriss et al. 2019). Due to the telling of personal experiences, the ethics of this study were carefully considered.

To ensure the research was ethically sound I followed the 12 ethical principles articulated by Henrickson et al. (2020), known as the Montreal Ethical Principles for Inclusive Research. These twelve ethical principles demonstrated by Henrickson et al. (2020) are specifically designed for those pursuing gender and sexually diverse social, health and related research, which is why I have used these as reference for my own research topic. These principles are as follows:

Table 5: 12 ethical principles, definitions and how they are implemented into the research

Principle	***Definition***	***Implementation***
Respect the dignity of all research participants	Respecting the dignity of the research participants involves respecting the participant as a person and not just a data source	Using the correct pronouns of the participant and involving them in all stages of the research process, to ensure that all information was respectful and relevant to the research
Engage with the taxonomy and language of the participants	This principle refers to the way in which members of a certain community identify themselves	As an outsider of this community, I followed the language and taxonomy of those in the transgender community rather than assume the language and terminology used as to respect the participants
Examine assumptions about who is and is not in the sample population	Not assuming the gender or sexuality of the participants. Assuming this may be offensive to the participant and may cause distress to the participant by enticing dysphoric thoughts	I asked the participant beforehand of their pronouns and appropriate language I should use when interviewing them. I also asked members of the community to read through the research to ensure the language I have used is suitable

Assume that binarized cisgender heteronormativity will have an impact on the lived experiences of gender and sexually diverse research participants	The impacts of binarized cisgender heteronormativity such as trans* and homosexual people being in danger due to their gender or sexuality may have an impact on the information shared to the researcher	To overcome this, I kept all data relating to the participants private and used pseudonyms for all names and clubs mentioned in the interviews
Recognize intersectionality and its impact, including indigeneity, race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, age, language, culture, colonization, dis/ability, and more	Understanding how intersectionality impacts the way some people are treated	I had to consider the effects of intersectionality when collecting data and analysing it. For example, my research participants are all White British, so I am unable to generalise their experiences across all trans* people because I have only interviewed a specific group of trans* people, albeit not by choice but by availability at the time
Acknowledge multiple epistemologies	Each person is different in the way they come to understand themselves and their experiences and research questions will always mean different things to different people, and this depends on their own personal experiences (Henrickson et al. 2020 p.8)	As someone who is a sexually minority, the way in which I understand and ask questions may be different to those who are heterosexual because our ways of knowing and being are subjective to our experiences. This will be the same for people of the trans* community, so this is something I have had to bear in mind while completing my research
Appreciate that information from gender and sexually diverse persons and communities act indigenously	This principle refers to involving participants or cultural advisors to ensure that what has been written is respectful and accurate in meaning as to represent the	This was done through involving the participants through every stage of the research project

	participants in the way the research intended	
Avoid problematising or pathologizing the lived experiences of gender and sexually diverse research participants	Completing research in fields that include gender or sexually diverse individuals should avoid identifying problems only found within these communities but work towards generating an interest around the research topic and using this to feed back into the participating communities	This research does that by not only giving trans* people a platform to share their experiences but also using these experiences to challenge the current policies in football in the UK
Interrogate researcher assumptions and experiences (whether or not the researcher is an insider or outsider in the community)	It is important to be reflective about the ways in which cis- and heteronormative assumptions impact the research process, or in my case cis- homonormativity. Social researchers are often grouped into either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in relation to the group being studied. This ultimately impacts the way in which the research is completed	As an outsider to the trans* community I needed to be aware not to generalise my findings to the whole of the trans* community and avoid homonormativity and internalised heteronormativity in the research
If a participant is (legally) a young person or other dependant person, prioritise the informed and voluntary consent of the research participant over the need for the consent of a guardian	Research information should be presented in an age-appropriate way so that it is fully understandable to the young person participating. Due to the nature of research involving gender and sexually diverse people, it is not always safe for young people in these communities to participate after gaining consent from a guardian. When presented in a way that's age appropriate the	Not applicable to this research

	participant can consent without a guardian	
Ensure adequate compensation for the time participants commit to the research project	"Participants are experts in their own lives" (Henrickson et al. 2020 p.9) and so should be recognised and compensated, if possible, for their time	Participants were thanked for their time. No formal compensation was given
Generate theory from the lives of the research participants	Generating theory from the lives of the research participants is important, especially when the research involves those who are gender diverse	There is no research exploring the experiences of trans* people in competitive football in the UK meaning that this research can be used to shape and expand knowledge in this topic area

Ethical approval was gained and accepted by the Bournemouth University ethics panel (Ethics ID: 36717) and ethical procedures were paramount throughout the duration of the data collection process. Prior to scheduling the interviews, the participants were informed of the study's objectives and potential emotional risks connected with the interview and were sent a participation information sheet via email which relayed the project purpose, objectives and how their data were going to be collected and stored (Appendix B). Only when the participants agreed they were comfortable with proceeding with the research was an interview date and time set. Participants were reminded of the interview structure and the goals of the research. On the day of the interview, they were asked to sign a letter of informed consent (Appendix C) confirming their participation in the study. It was explained to the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point up until the data had been transcribed and anonymised.

None of the participants withdrew consent or experienced any difficulty while participating in the interview. Due to the nature of the research, it was important to provide aftercare for the participants if it was needed. At the end of each interview the participant was thanked and

given a debrief information sheet which included support services such as helplines and local support groups (Appendix D).

Judging the Quality of Qualitative Research

When conducting research, it is crucial that it be valid, reliable and accurate. Both qualitative and quantitative research have a set of judgment criteria that researchers must follow when completing a study to ensure a rigorous standard of research is produced. It has been proposed that because qualitative and quantitative research are conducted in separate paradigms, resulting in various sorts of information, there should be different evaluation standards for each approach (Mays and Pope 2020).

In qualitative research, rigor is achieved through the criteria of reliability, credibility, and authenticity, whereas quantitative research focuses on reliability, validity, and generalisability. Quantitative researchers establish rigor by demonstrating that their study can be replicated with consistent results using the same methodology and a larger sample (Jones, 2015; Mays & Pope, 2020). On the contrary, qualitative researchers ensure rigor by prioritising not only reliability but also credibility and authenticity. The concept of reliability differs between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as the subjective nature of qualitative research means that replicating a study may yield different outcomes. For example, if another researcher were to replicate the thesis, they might follow the same materials and procedures but obtain different findings due to the topic being subjective to individual interpretation and experience. Nonetheless, such replication would contribute to expanding knowledge about trans* experiences in sport. To ensure the quality and rigor of my work, I have justified the methodology employed in my research, employing constructivism to derive meaning and understanding of the experiences of the participants, thereby enhancing credibility and authenticity.

Reflexivity

As a researcher it is my responsibility to make sense of the narratives and are morally responsible for what I write and how I write because I am implicated in the construction of knowledge and what counts as the truth (Smith 2010). According to Finlay (2002) the importance of personal reflexivity is crucial in qualitative research. It relies on the intentional effort of the researcher to recognise their own involvement in the study and the unintentional bias they may have. Each researcher has a distinctive lense in which they view the social world, which is shaped by their own personal experiences (Rossman and Ralis 2017). Ultimately this will be present within the analysis, interpretation and write up of the research.

For me, my personal involvement as a trans* ally and footballer have shaped the choice of this topic and the aims and objectives of this study. Having someone in my life who is trans* has given me a new perspective of the struggles some people face in order to play the sport they love, something I have very much taken for granted my entire life. Naively this connection to this person as well as being someone who personally identifies under the LGBTQIA+ collective led me to assume my position was relevant and shared with those who are trans*. Like Stewart (2020) I quickly acknowledged my privilege as a cultural outsider in that although I identify under the LGBTQIA+ collective, my experiences as a cisgender gay woman are completely different to that of trans* men and women, especially in football.

Reflexivity has been a crucial self-evaluation tool, allowing me to address my concerns as an outsider not only to the trans* community but also my position as an outsider researcher. It has been necessary to reflect on the way I position myself as a researcher and as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community as to represent the participants in a compassionate but non-biased way while also securing credibility, trustworthiness and non-exploitative qualitative research (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2018).

Summary

This chapter described and justified the use of an interpretive, qualitative research design that adopted a combination of narrative inquiry and case study methodologies as collect data. Four narrative interviews were conducted and analysed thematically to find meaning to the experiences of the participants. From the analysis, two main themes emerged: For the Love of Football and Beyond the Binary: Finding a Place in Football which are shown in the thematic map (*figure 7*). The next chapter will bring meaning to the data collected and will be interpreted to portray the lived experiences of transgender footballers in competitive football in the UK.

Figure 7: Thematic Analysis

Chapter 3: Analysis

This chapter will present 2 themes based on the thematic analysis of data: For the Love of Football and Beyond the Binary: Finding a Place in Football. While these themes are important to look at individually, it is necessary that we understand that these are not isolated but interconnected and constantly overlapping. Before delving into the data, I invite the reader to understand and acknowledge the individual journey of each athlete within the research and how each story creates a narrative of what it is like to be a transgender person involved in football in the UK.

Table 6: Participant background

Name, pronouns, identity, region	**Background**
Michael (he/him) Transmale Northwest England	Michael is 32 years old and started playing football at around 8 years old. He played locally for a girls Sunday league team as well as the school team until he was 14. He stopped playing after unfortunately suffering an anterior cruciate ligament injury which left him unable to play for a "good few years". He then did not begin to play football until he was in his mid-twenties, post transition. His footballing journey continued when he moved back to a big city where he played regular 5-a-side with his friends. This motivated him to join an FA affiliated 11-a-side LGBTQIA+ team in the city, however, he recalls this not being "the best experience" and left the team following a transphobic incident after a couple of weeks. He now has returned to playing 5-a-side with friends.
Alice (she/her) Transfemale Eastern England	Alice is 37 years old and has been an avid football fan and player since her youth. She played football locally and during lunch times as a child but never really got the chance to play in a team. In her late teens she was involved in competitive paintballing, so football took a backseat in her life until her daughter was born. She was re- introduced to football a couple of years later by her stepdad who played casually and then stopped playing after she moved away. After 8 years of not playing and thinking she had lost her chance to play football due to her transition, her love for the game was re-ignited. She was inspired by trans* athletes New Zealand weightlifter Laurel

	Hubbard and Canadian footballer Quinn at the 2020 Olympic Games showing her that she could be involved in football again. She has been playing women's football since the start of the 2021/22 season and has made appearances for a well-known trans* football team.
Gerard (he/him) Transmale Southeast England	Gerard is 24 years old and started playing football at 6 years old. He grew up playing football in the garden with his siblings and neighbours and joined a girls' team around age 7. He played there until his late teens and then joined a local women's team where he played until he stopped at age 20. He was forced to stop playing due to his transition. Being part of a "football mad" house, quitting was not an option for him. He took on a coaching role at his club so he could still be around his friends and tried to play with the men's team at the club. However, shortly after he gave up completely because he "wasn't physically strong enough" to play on the men's team which ultimately left him feeling like he had nowhere to go. Gerard now is not involved in football.
Aaron (he/him) Transmale Southeast England	Aaron is 24 years old and has been playing football for most of his life. Growing up he played for a local boy's team run by one of his dad's friends as well as the mixed team at school. He recalls his dad offering to defend his right to play in the boys' team as a child if anyone "kicks up a fuss" that he'll "deal with it". However, he stopped playing football at the age of 13 when he realised he was trans* and didn't feel comfortable playing for a women's team and "knew I (he) wasn't going to get onto the boys' team" at school because "they wouldn't let me (him)" play. He then did not play football competitively for the next 10 years because he felt as if he wouldn't be welcome in a "general" men's team. Since then, he has moved to a big city where he joined an LGBTQIA+ team.

Whether you're participating, watching or just thinking about it, sport can generate a sense of belonging and have an emotional impact on those involved (Burrmann et al. 2017; Walseth 2006). However, for some trans* athletes this sense of belonging is taken away from them as they are forced to give up the sport they love because of regulating bodies. Each of the above stories begins with a love for football, yet each of them has had to face their own set of challenges as a trans* person accessing football in the UK. This chapter will take you on a journey through the eyes of these four trans* footballers navigating playing competitive football in the UK.

For the Love of Football

"*I still loved playing, but something wasn't right*": Gender Dynamics and Growing Up Trans*

Each participant began by recalling early memories of how and when they first were introduced to football. For each participant, the story begins at school or at home with mentions of playing in the garden with siblings or playing at lunch times or school teams. For Aaron it was earlier than that:

> "*I've sort of always been into football. My mum likes to jokingly blame me being trans on my dad wrapping me in France '98 World Cup stuff and making me watch the whole tournament as like a three-month-old baby. So, it's just something that's always been a huge part of my life*".

The early years were remembered as being mostly centered on fond memories of being involved in football and spending time with family. Gerard noted that he had "*been around football most of my (his) life*"; playing football in the garden and on the street with his siblings and neighbours:

> "*we'd play out most evenings, set up goals between cars parked on the street that type of thing. We'd have to come in when the streetlights came on but even then, me and my sister would play in the garden until we'd have to go to bed. It was constant in our house*."

Similarly, Michael played as a child up into his teenage years until he suffered an anterior cruciate ligament tear which stopped him playing. On the contrary, although Alice has been involved in football from a young age, she "*never really had the opportunity to play in a team as a kid*" like the other participants. She mostly watched her stepdad play and played football with the other children there with their dads. It wasn't until after her daughter was born that she began playing casually with her stepdad; "*I joined up with my stepdad playing casually with other veteran players and that went on for a couple of years until I moved away*".

These quotations underline the importance that family had on their initial engagement in football in their early years. For children to want to engage in sport from an early age it is

imperative to have a good environment to do so in the formative years of life (Coulter et al. 2019). Each of the participants speaks about their experiences as a young person engaging in football in a positive manner, therefore in theory setting them up for lifelong engagement in sport and football. Primary school is an environment that is majority of the time mixed gender, including mixed gender PE meaning trans* children need not worry about being bound to such a strict gender binary unless they play for clubs outside of school. Aaron spoke about playing for a boys' team when he was a child (pre-transition);

> "*I used to play for sort of a boys' team as a child, because it was run by one of my dad's friends. And so, he was like, if anyone kicks up a fuss, you know, I'll deal with it, and I played for like a mixed team at (primary) school*".

Aaron insinuates that his coach felt the need to be protective over him when playing for a boys' team, this is likely due to the stigma girls would experience when playing football in the mid-2000s. In 2007 Clark and Paechter conducted a study on gender dynamics in playground football and found that boys often took ownership over football in the playground, hence the need for Aaron to be 'protected' in the male environment. Despite have no problems playing football at primary school, when the participants reached adolescence their engagement in football dropped. Gerard, Aaron and Michael all stopped playing football in their teens to early twenties which for Aaron and Gerard corresponds with when they began their transitions. In the late 2000s, mixed football was banned at Under 12 ages meaning that when Aaron was starting secondary school football became gender segregated and this had a distinctive impact on him that led to him discovering that he was trans*;

> "*When I got to secondary school, it was then had to be sex segregated. And that was when my relationship with football kind of changed. Because obviously, I still loved playing, but something wasn't right because I played for a womens' team. And then when I learned what trans was, I was like right, that's the problem. So, I had to give up playing then because I knew I wasn't gonna get onto the boys' team, because they wouldn't let me. But I also didn't feel comfortable playing for a girls' team either. So, I stopped playing at 13*"

Due to enforced gender segregation in secondary school Aaron realised how out of place he felt in a girl's football team. He was also not allowed to play for the boys' team either leaving him with no other option but to stop playing. This quote highlights the difficulty that trans* athletes

face when trying to navigate gender segregated spaces. Similarly, Gerard also stopped playing due to his transition;

> "*My transition stopped me because I could no longer play for the women's team. And I wasn't, like, physically strong enough to play on a men's team. So, I sort of just didn't really have, anywhere to go. So, I just sort of just stopped...I wanted to stay with the team for as long as I could, but my T (testosterone) levels were too high even though I hadn't physically changed yet*".

Aaron talks about this uncomfortableness with playing with the girls' team whereas Gerard felt the opposite and wanted to stay in his female team environment. Perhaps the main difference in these two experiences is the age in which Gerard and Aaron began their transitions. Gerard transitioned in his early twenties and was already playing in an established women's team with his friends whereas Aaron started his transition in his early teens and only played in a boys' team before the transition into secondary school. Coming out as trans* at school was something Aaron's parents did not want him to do out of fear of being bullied. Children and adolescences are often more vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination from peers (Hatzenbuehler 2009) so it would be understandable that his parents wanted to protect him. However, Aaron explained that it is "*not really something that you can keep to yourself. Once you know, once you figure out what's wrong, it's very painful*". Aaron experienced bullying at school because of his identity which, in turn, led to his decrease in playing sport. In comparison to Gerard who came out as an adult and in an environment where "*everyone was very on board with it*", he was able to keep playing football for as long as he could.

"*I thought I had lost the chance when I transitioned*": The Importance of Role Models and Positive Trans* Narratives

For Aaron and Michael, they did not get back into football until their mid-twenties and Alice not until her thirties. Alice talks about how she thought she had "*lost the chance*" to play football after transitioning and seeing trans* athletes in the Olympics inspired her to start playing again;

> "*It was the Olympic games that got me really into gunning to play football as I thought I had lost the chance when I transitioned. Seeing both Quinn and Laural (Hubbard) at the*

> *games, I looked into the FA regulations around trans people and l started the process applying for clearance just before the season start*."

Role models can serve to dispel prejudices and challenge negative opinions of specific groups, promoting greater diversity and inclusion in the sporting world. It is vital for marginalised groups, like trans* people to have role models in sport because they often face a lot of adversity. Seeing someone who shares similar experiences and has achieved success may be extremely empowering and validating, which is evident in Alice's case. Transgender people have long participated in sports, but recent policy changes and increased media coverage have brought the transgender athlete to the forefront of public consciousness. The visibility of transgender athletes, particularly Canadian soccer player Quinn and New Zealand weightlifter Laurel Hubbard at the Tokyo Olympics, and American swimmer Lia Thomas in the NCAA, has sparked significant national and international public debate. For most people, "the primary way consumers learn about sports news" (Wolter, 2020 p.724) is through various forms of media consumption, meaning the media can influence the way in which these consumers view transgender athletes. Michael believes that misinformation in the media makes it "*difficult for the general public to make up their own minds*" about trans* people in sport. He goes on to add;

> *"The TERFS (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) are so vocal and powerful it can be difficult to see the good in things sometimes... and with people like Caitlyn Jenner, former athlete, giving their perspectives against transwomen in sport, she's in such a powerful position for us and is just punching down essentially"*

There is a lot of negativity around transwomen in sport that stems from the societal believe that men are stronger and faster than women and to protect women's sport, transwomen need to be banned from competing against cisgender women. Despite there being no consistent evidence that transwomen have a biological advantage over cisgender women in elite sport (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport 2022), this still seems to be the main argument when discussing especially transwomen's involvement in sport. The idea that transwomen are men trying to access women's spaces because of ulterior motives is routed in transphobia and fear. Michael explains that people think the way they do is because of the way trans* people are portrayed to them;

> *"I think people believe transwomen are men trying to infiltrate women's spaces and in football or other sports that women are in danger of 'being hurt' because they believe that rhetoric. If that was true, and they believe that transwomen are men trying to be in those spaces, then the same applies for transmen and they should be worried about us getting our legs broken in an FA Sunday league game, but they don't care about that, because they know that their arguments aren't logical and are actually just transphobia"*

Michael makes an interesting point, if transwomen are assumed to be men, then this ideology must assume transmen are women and then why are they, 'as women', not being protected. This further reiterates that women's sport is a lot more policed than men's sport and because of hegemonic beliefs, anyone that is a transmale can play men's sport without much pushback from policy makers. Whereas transwomen, will often deal with greater pushback from policy makers and the media because they are accessing women's sport which is argued as needing to be protected. However, some would argue that there are bigger problems in women's sport such as sexual harassment and abuse, unequal salary and resources, and a paucity of women in leadership positions (Sullivan 2022). Aaron talks about how he feels like more people need to understand what being trans* encompasses before making judgement about trans* people's involvement in sport;

> *"I think just further education on what being trans is, in general, because there's obviously, there's a lot of media coverage of trans women and women's sports at the moment, and there's a perception that, you know, you can just identify as female and then show up and be selected for women's Olympic team. Like, you know, that's how it works (sarcasm). So many people do genuinely believe that at an elite level, you can just be a man who's won 110 gold medals or whatever and decide that you're going to come out as a woman and then immediately start competing as a woman. So there needs to be sort of an effort to combat this misinformation, because I don't think trans women are going to feel truly welcome in sport, unless there is an effort to do so"*

What Aaron says here supports the notion of a lack of education the public have on trans* rights in sport and people should be more aware of the regulations and hormone levels that athletes need to meet in order to play competitive sport.

"*I just wanted to play football*": Access to Football

The process of applying for clearance to play in FA regulated competitions and leagues is a rigorous one, that for all four participants struggled with. Finding information about the FA's trans* policy was a challenge and some didn't know they had to declare themselves and disclose medical information to the FA in order to continue playing as a trans* person Michael states; *"I didn't realise that those rules existed for trans players, to be honest I just wanted to play football".* Having to find and check the eligibility criteria for a sport can be dubbed an automatic barrier for trans* participation in sport (Phipps 2019). Alice mentioned that "*it wasn't easy to fine and there was very little information and the contact details to apply also wasn't easy to find*" which was repeated in Gerard's account;

> "*I had to do a bit of digging for it. I couldn't find anything online. But my friend in the team at the time managed to find information because she works for the NHS. So, she found a link to it and sent me it and that's where I found it. There wasn't really much information on that actual link anyway."*

These accounts suggest that the information provided by the FA is not readily accessible to those who need it and in Gerard's case he was only able to access this information through someone who was informed about healthcare. This was reiterated by Aaron who said, "*you have to know people who know where it is*". Not having information readily available is a major barrier to trans* participation in football. Unlike mainstream football, access to LGBTQIA+ football spaces are few and far between. When Aaron returned to playing football as an adult, he did not feel comfortable with joining a mainstream men's team and sought out joining an LGBTQIA+ team instead however struggled to do so;

> "*I didn't feel there was a space for me, because we didn't have any provision really, for LGBT stuff in general, let alone like specific sports stuff and like, even when I like started hormones, and was medically transitioning, I didn't feel like sort of a general men's team would likely be okay with me just showing up. So, I just sort of waited until I moved and then found an LGBT team where I knew that I would be okay*".

Aaron talks about his lack of access to LGBTQIA+ provision in his area, which is common in areas outside of big cities. The lack of access to these spaces in sport is detrimental to participation

among those in that community. Gerard experienced something similar coming from a small town, he "*didn't really know much about it until my (his) sister mentioned that there are LGBT clubs out there."* However, Aaron suggests that even though there are LGBTQIA+ teams out there, "*they're not exactly easy to find*". People who are new to the community may find it more difficult as they may not have access to gatekeepers to help them. He mentions the use of websites like Pride Sports to find LGBTQIA+ clubs but;

> *"you have to know one, that Pride Sports is a thing and two, there's no guarantee there's going to be a club near you because there aren't LGBT football clubs in every city... it shouldn't have to be that difficult cause you know, cisgender straight men can just rock up to a random field on a Saturday and somebody will be playing that you can join in with whereas for trans people it's perhaps a lot more difficult".*

For Gerard and Aaron accessing LGBTQIA+ teams were something that was not possible for them at the time due to location prompting the need for not only more LGBTQIA+ teams in areas away from big cities but also encourage mainstream teams to be equipped with information to help LGBTQIA+ players find clubs if they need to. Alice expresses the need for clubs to be educated on trans* players so if a trans* player approaches them to play for their team they will understand the process in which they need to go through to play in FA regulated competitions;

> "*Clubs in general need to make sure that the managers are clued up on how to approach a trans player wanting to play. I have always been upfront with every club I have trained with that I am trans, I have had to educated some of them. We just want to play football, and it is hard enough finding a team, let alone a team that we can play in*".

What Alice says about clubs needing to be more educated on trans* inclusion concurs with the literature published by Greey (2020) in that it should not have to be the job of the trans* person to educate cisgender people on trans* inclusion. This is something that the FA attempt to do through the Stonewall Rainbow Laces campaign.

Rainbow Laces is one of the most prominent LGBTQIA+ campaigns in football which involves footballers and clubs wearing rainbow laces to show their support to the LGBTQIA+ community in football and beyond. However, some of the participants would argue that despite this

campaign raising awareness, it only really raises awareness for the LGB community. Aaron feels as if trans* people are often forgotten during these campaigns;

> "*it's something that sort of annoys me about football in general is sort of when you know that they do Pride Month celebrations and LGBT History Month celebrations, and stuff is always focused on the LGB aspect of it... it would be nice if when the FA and England and all the premier league clubs are doing these campaigns whether they could mention you know trans people are involved in the LGB community as well, that'd be nice*."

The idea of campaigns like Rainbow Laces is that clubs and players can show their support to all of those within the LGBTQIA+ community but some feel that this is tokenistic (Letts and Magrath 2022). Many clubs and NGBs use Rainbow Laces to make themselves equality-proof without helping to engage in organisational issues that need changing (Spurdens and Bloyce 2022).

Otherwise known as rainbow washing. Michael expresses that he thinks the campaign is tokenistic;

> "*it's great that it's there but it just feels like a token gesture, there's still so much homophobia, transphobia, and racism in the game, you can wear rainbow laces etc for the duration of your playing years but ultimately it's your actions that are important.*"

This circles back to what was discussed in the literature review whereby trans* people are often grouped with LGB research (Henrickson et al. 2020; Caudwell 2012) and while campaigns like Rainbow Laces are opening positive conversations around LGB people in sport, trans* and queer people are unfortunately being forgotten and presumed to have the same support and access as LGB people in sport. Aaron goes on to add;

> *"Rainbow laces is run by Stonewall, and they are very very trans inclusive, so I think they just need to push more on the side that you know it's not just about just cis gay people, because like you rarely even hear about cis bi people. It's like rainbow laces seem to be entirely focused on making cis gay men feel welcome in football. And they need to be, football is very intimidating to cis gay men a lot on the whole, but you know we need to divert resources towards everybody and make sure that nobody is left behind in this push for education. On the whole, I think football is moving in the right direction on LGB stuff like Jake Daniels got an overwhelming positive response when he came out but there isn't the same level of education about trans issues, and those moments are opportune to try and teach people about it, and they choose not to and go for the easier side that*

people on a whole are more educated about so don't necessarily need the same level of information".

Aaron talks about the comfortability of the public's perception of gay people and how it has become increasingly easier for gay people to 'come out' or be present figures in sport due to people being generally more educated on gay issues. Whereas trans* issues are something that a lot of people lack education in and are only learning through damaging misconceptions and stories in the media, much like how gay people were treated in the 1980s. Aaron again, mentions the need for further education around trans* participation in sport and how that will come when people better understand that trans* people are people above anything. However, this needs to come from those in positions of influence like governing bodies and not only trans* people.

> *"I think there needs to be more of an effort from sporting bodies on the whole to combat this because they're not you know? The media aren't going to, they've got no interest in doing so. It's down to the professional body saying actually, no, that's not how we do things. And you know, not give into it like British Cycling have with (Emily) Bridges"*

Aaron believes that governing bodies should be doing more to promote trans* inclusivity and combat misinformation around their policies. Nevertheless, sport's governing bodies, in this case, the FA tend to shy away from involving themselves in transgender discourse due to fear of alienating their supporters. This is detrimental to the trans* people who are involved in football as they again may feel like they do not belong there.

Beyond the Binary: Finding a Place in Football

"*I didn't want another thing in my life centred around being trans*": Belonging in Football

Whether you are participating or watching it, sport can generate a sense of belonging and have an emotional impact on those involved (Burrmann et al. 2017; Walseth 2006). However, for some trans* athletes the sense of belonging is taken away from them as they are forced to give up the sport they love because of regulating bodies.

The sense of not belonging is something both Gerard and Aaron both experienced which can be attributed to the lack of support from the FA and other services. When speaking about his experience of gaining FA clearance to play Gerard said he was left "*a bit in the dark to whether I can play football... it was either you can, or you can't play football*". Gerard sounded defeated when he spoke this sentence, his ability to play football was in the hands of the FA and he had no say in the matter. The FA policies state that to compete in FA regulated competitions transmen need to have their testosterone levels within a "male natal range" and transwomen within a "female natal range" (FA 2015) but the policy does not explicitly say what the natal range is for either category. This is a problem as the policy does not give clear guidelines for trans* people to access. In a podcast Natalie Washington, a transfemale footballer, mentioned the same barrier when she was applying for clearance from the FA. She mentioned that when she sent her information the first time, her testosterone was too high, and she needed her blood testosterone level to be 1.5nmol/L. After reaching that level and being confirmed by the FA, she then had to keep it at that level for one year before being cleared to play in competitive FA football (in a Counter Pressed Spotify podcast titled: Football v Transphobia Special 2023). It would have been an easier process for Natalie if the FA had stated specific "natal ranges" within their policy. It would have also been more informative for Gerard who was informed by the FA that his testosterone levels exceeded the "female natal range" but was under the "male natal range" not permitting him to play for either a men's or women's side He explains that when he

submitted his blood, he was unsure of what the "natal ranges" were he just submitted his tests and waited for the result;

> *"When I was being questioned by the FA, I think they asked for like, my blood tests and testosterone levels, and then they said whether I could play or not, so I wasn't quite sure what levels they needed to know."*

This left him feeling in limbo with nowhere to play. Gerard recalls feeling frustrated that he couldn't play as his *"body hasn't fully changed yet"*. He goes on to explain further:

> *"I had like a three-month period where my testosterone was average of a guy, but my body was still as a woman. So, I was like, I could technically still play women's football because I still wasn't developed a guy but obviously, my testosterone levels told me that I couldn't".*

With limited playing options, Gerard's club offered him a position as a coach and began to look at getting him his qualifications but ultimately, he wanted to play football not coach so with *"nowhere to go"* he *"just sort of stopped".* This not only shows very clear flaws in the policies set by the FA, but also the struggles Gerard and other trans* athletes must overcome to play competitive football in the UK. For Michael the process of submitting blood tests to the FA was a major deterrent;

> "The coach *said that I had to submit my bloods... they don't ask other players to do that, other cisgender players might have much higher levels than where 'they should be' or lower for that matter, so I don't think they can argue it's to make things fair."*

The notion of fairness is something that is discussed regularly when it comes to trans* participation in sport often when discussing trans* women eligibility to compete in women's sporting categories. For most sports, there is a policy that restricts trans* women in some way from competing in women's competitions notedly based on their testosterone levels (McLarnon et al. 2023). Michael argues that "*it's not inclusive if you treat one group of people differently than others*" which he feels that he shouldn't have to feel "*singled out*" and there should be some provision for him to play without the restriction of having to declare himself to fit the binary in sports teams, or, there needs to be a system where every player is subject to

the same treatment. Ultimately, this was the reason he stopped playing football within FA regulated competitions;

> "*I decided not to go back. everything else about my life is usually about medical transition, treatment etc. I didn't want another thing in my life centred around being trans... I think it's so important for trans people to have opportunities to engage in sport for lots of different reasons, the mental health of the community I believe is at an all-time low, access to sport might help with that, we all know the benefits of exercise but it's not always accessible for everyone.*"

This sense of not wanting their life to centre around being trans* is valid for some people who do not want to be categorised or labelled as a 'transperson'. It is clear to see the impact this has had on him and his ability to continue playing football competitively. As a transwoman, Alice was subject to the same process as Michael. Alice expressed that she found the regulations "*tough and hard to find*" and she compared them as being "*harsher*" than the 2015 IOC regulations. She was asked to send anthropometrics, biometrics and blood test results to the FA medical team for verification and she too felt like the process was long winded with "*slow correspondence*" which occurred over email. "*I wanted the joining of a team to be as straightforward as possible, I did not know what to expect",* this process is something trans* footballers must complete every season to continue to play competitive football in England. Suggesting the need for a more accessible process to those who must use it.

Despite the regulations, the opportunity to play for a mainstream men's team was there for Gerard and Aaron but both men felt intimidated by the idea of being in an environment unknown to them. Mainstream men's football has a reputation for being typically unwelcoming to both women, queer people and those who do not typically fit in with the lad culture of the game. For Gerard, one of his fears was the culture of men's football and the changing room environment:

> *"When I was in the women's team, we heard stories of the men's team, and they would just walk around butt naked so as someone who was born female, going into that sort of environment is a bit... To me feels intimidating and very scary and I feel like for one; I wouldn't be able to join in, because obviously, my body's completely different to theirs and yeah, especially coming from someone who's transitioned later on, like, I didn't transition as a child, I've transitioned as a teenager. So, I've sort of grown up in a*

> *woman's body, you know, having grown up as a woman is very different. Yeah, going from that to the guys is very, very different."*

For Aaron, he *"didn't feel like a general men's team would likely be okay with me (him) just showing up"* and like Gerard, he speaks about his body and the fact that *"on a whole men tend to be more transphobic than women".* While there is no direct research that proves men are more transphobic than women, there is research supporting the claim that cisgender, heterosexual men are typically more hostile toward sexual minorities than their female counterparts (Clayton & Humberstone 2006), which is concurrent with claims made by both Gerard and Aaron that they do not feel as if this environment is welcoming towards them. This could be due to hegemonic systems within male environments and the effect this has on the way men treat their female counterparts or sexual minorities.

"*It's very performative*": Hegemonic Masculinity in Male Football Environments

To maintain hegemony within a group, often those with considered subordinate masculinity, I.e., gay and/or effeminate men (Connell 1995), are subject to ridicule or exclusion as they do not fit the typical mould of what a man should be. This is often present in hypermasculine environments like sports teams. And while in recent years, homophobia in football has seemingly decreased (Cleland et al. 2021), there are still strong notions of hegemonic masculinity within male environments. Aaron and Michael both played in predominantly cisgender gay male football teams, and while they were deemed LGBTQIA+ friendly teams, the environment was not what both men expected. When speaking about the relationship he had with his teammates, Aaron explained that "things could be better" and went on to add:

> "*it's been more sort of pub culture afterwards. That because everybody is a cis gay man, they like to make comments about sex and stuff. And that's fine, I'll join in sometimes. But often it is accompanied by disparaging comments about other types of genitalia. I raised it with the manager, like you know, I've got no problem with talking about sex and that kind of thing you don't necessarily need to be interested in sleeping with trans people fine, but I don't see the need to make disparaging comments about other people's genitalia, because personally, it makes me uncomfortable. It makes me feel excluded, because you're talking about something that I am unfortunately, in possession of, it makes me feel weird. And like the person I raised it to said that it's not something*

that he'd noticed, obviously, if he's a cis gay man and he's joining in with it. And he was like, okay, so that's something that I don't know whether we're going to be able to change because that's not specific to the club, that is cis gay men culture in general... So, I don't know whether we will achieve any type of change with that. But it is something that I feel I need to raise because it got me particularly down last week, because somebody that I quite liked made a comment about it."

Aaron talks about the comments made by his cis gay teammates about female genitalia and whilst the comments are not inherently transphobic toward Aaron, they do make him feel uncomfortable in what he presumed was a safe LGBTQIA+ environment. The interest in talking about sex within a group is not out of the ordinary, especially for those in a tightknit sports team. Pascoe (2021) uses the terms 'compulsive heterosexuality and 'compulsive masculinity' when talking about how boys often reassure others of their own heterosexuality and masculinity through sexual objectification of female bodies and sex talk. And while the group Aaron discussed are not heterosexual, they are displaying a form of compulsive or forced homosexuality to reassure their homosexuality to "fit in" and assert their status within the group. Aaron also spoke about the similarities of this situation as a reflection of heterosexual male culture;

"*it's very performative. Because some people I've heard made comments about that kind of thing. (mimicking) "Like, why would I know anything about that anatomy" And that to me - I know that they had girlfriends before they came out. So, they do know about that anatomy and they're just choosing to present it as if they don't to try and fit in. I was talking about this with a trans guy who plays for the team that I was like, is it just me, or does it bother you too? And he was like, "yeah, bothers me"... but it's really interesting, that they're choosing to make these comments and lying about it. Like, that's a very interesting aspect of it. But yeah, it's definitely reflective of straight male culture that's sort of turned on its head sort of*."

Much like compulsive heterosexuality, misogyny and homophobia are catalysts for asserting hegemonic dominance in heterosexual male environments. From Aaron's comments, like straight male culture, gay male culture can exhibit notions of hegemonic masculinity and sexism toward female bodies. Not only is this a toxic environment, but it is also damaging or demeaning to those who may be transgender or bisexual people who date women. Michael speaks about his experience in a predominantly cis gay team;

> "*I joined that team about 2 years ago, thinking it would be inclusive, went for a couple of training sessions and got picked for the B team. We went down to London to play a match; it was mainly cisgender gay men that were playing. The game was great, no one batted an eye lid at me being there as I 'pass' now. There was a transwoman on the other team and one of our team members was speaking to them after the game in bar, the guys that I were with started saying some awful stuff about her that was very transphobic. I tried to challenge it but got shot down so left it. We were supposed to have a night out because it was such a long drive and that was why I'd joined; I love that Sunday league culture of a game of footie and a pint kind of thing. But because of what happened re the transphobia I decided to drive back home instead. The other 4 lads wanted to come back home with me (I was hoping they'd stay but they didn't) On the drive back they'd started talking about the woman again and were just disgustingly transphobic. I again tried to challenge it but to be honest was a bit scared, I was in a car with 4 other transphobic blokes, and I was trans."*

Michael's experience in this environment was challenging as his defence of trans* people was quickly shot down by others in the team. At the time of this, Michael's teammates did not know he was trans*. Their freedom to voice their transphobia was due in part to Michael being able to "*pass"* as a cis male and their assumption that he would think the same way as them;

> "*they definitely didn't know that I was trans - and I'd joined that particular club for that very reason. I couldn't let go of what happened especially because it was an LGBT club - you can't do things like that in a club that is for the LGBT community."*

Michael recalls feeling "*worried*" about reporting these players to the club as they "*were big lads and clearly people with no boundaries*" and so reported the incident without revealing names. The club responded by putting a message in their team group chat, which was agreed by all players. However, was not followed through outside of the group chat;

> "*the guys that were saying the things they said (transphobia) were all saying in the group chat in front of the chair that they agreed, it should be a safe space etc all the while posting transphobic things on Facebook on their own pages".*

This supports the idea that there is still a hierarchy of masculinity and compulsive masculinity present in LGBTQIA+ teams. Homosexuality appears dominant in the sexual imaginary because it is centrally naturalised within the team. As a result, people who are trans* and/or a woman are automatically positioned as problematic in relation to the dominant homosexual males and are

subject to transphobia and misogyny from the group Much like when heterosexuality is naturalised, homosexuals are subject to homophobia and misogyny from straight men to reassure their masculinity.

"*I felt more comfortable and more, like, accepted in the women's team than I would have in a men's side*": Acceptance in Women's Football

Alice and Gerard both navigated playing for women's teams during and post transition and had more positive experiences than Aaron and Michael. Alice who has been playing women's football since the start of the 2021/22 season, feels as if "*women's game is very LGBTQ+ friendly and I (she) haven't had more than one bad word spoken about me (her)*" the whole season. Gerard, while transitioning at a women's club also said that "*everyone was on board with it, they respected my name change, pronouns and everything like that*". When he was no longer able to play for the women's team, Gerard trained with the men's team at the club. Taking physiological factors like strength and speed away, Gerard speaks about the general acceptability of the women's team compared to the men's;

> "*Like I felt more comfortable and more, like, accepted in the women's team than I would have in a men's side because it's all football, getting drunk, women. That is pretty much it. That's what I got from the two. The two training sessions that I had with the men's team is that it's pretty much just that testosterone fuelled environment*"

Further supporting the claims that the women's game is more welcoming of LGBTQIA+ athletes. Despite not having any bad words said against her, Alice did experience some situations with her team that were unfavourable; "*that team kept using the excuse they didn't have a kit to fit*
me, yet wouldn't even let me try on a kit. So, I wasted 6 months with a false promise of getting a kit to play in". She then goes on to explain that she felt as if there may have been some instances of transphobia within the team;

> "*before Christmas the team was desperate for a 11th player with me just sitting there and wanted to field an injured player over me and I was fully fit... I bit my tongue and waited until January to see if things would improve as new kit was meant to have arrived*

by then but in my leaving email to the club secretary, I made an effort to let them know that I wasn't happy".

However, Alice was optimistic and just wanted to play football, whether it be at that club or elsewhere.

> "*I did report some other irregularities that have been dealt with internally by the club. The irregularities weren't because I was trans, but because I was conscious of the fact I wasn't playing and want to play. I still have a relationship with the club and attended their trials for this season. They had 2 teams last season. It may be I try to find good in people or FOMO (fear of missing out). But something had to give. If I was younger I could of stuck it out but not at my age and this coming season probably being my last chance to have a crack at competitive football... It was a shame, the club defended me against the only bit of transphobia I have experienced."*

The accounts of the four individuals tell us that no two experiences are the same when navigating football in the UK as a trans* person and it is not as straight forward as just joining and playing for a team. For Aaron and Michael, both men experienced transphobia and misogyny within their male environments whereas Alice and Gerard had mostly positive experiences in their female environments. With female football environments having a greater lesbian presence (Caudwell 2007), the accounts in this section concur with recent research that bar trans* and non-binary people, lesbians are the most welcoming and supporting of trans* people compared to other LGBTQIA+ identities (Just Like Us 2023) which may be why Alice and Gerard had more positive experiences than Aaron and Michael.

Arriving at themes for the discussion was simple as I was naturally guided through the participants life beginning with their experiences of growing up and the challenges of being transgender within their respective spaces. The analysis revealed the reasons behind having to stop playing football and highlighted the impact that the media has on the opinions of others in regard to their participation in sport. In turn, affecting their ability to access football and compete in competition due to policy, cisnormativity and stigmatism however, they continued to pursue football for the pure love of it. However, in all four cases it created a profound sense of not belonging, even in spaces that are supposed to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. With regulations and policy to compete in FA regulated competition the participants felt deflated trying to navigate beyond the binary space of competitive football leading to all participants

either no longer playing in FA affiliated leagues or football altogether.

Chapter 4: Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to capture the lived experiences of transgender individuals as they navigate playing competitive football in the UK, through three objectives: explore the current policies on transgender inclusion in football in the UK, shine a light on the real-life experiences of transgender footballers in competitive football in the UK and make recommendations to the FA regarding their current transgender policy and inclusiveness. Through writing this thesis I experienced a unique glimpse into the lives of four transgender footballers and was provided with a deeper understanding of their experiences from their own perspectives. The data presented in this research revealed a wealth of rich and significant accounts exposing the multifaceted realities faced by trans* people in the sporting world. It became evident that gender segregation, cisnormativity and prejudice pose significant challenges for transgender footballers, often resulting in unpleasant encounters and barriers to participation.

Prior to this research, existing literature focused mainly on trans* experiences within school, university or leisure settings (Caudwell 2020; Phipps 2019; Stewart 2019; Devis-Devis et al. 2018; Caudwell 2012). While these accounts are valuable in terms of discussing how trans* people experience everyday sport and physical activity they fail to mention the explicit process that athletes endure to be able to participate in their chosen sport. This research provides personal accounts of those who are governed by transgender policies in football giving an insight to how real people are affected by the policies imposed against them. The data analysis revealed how individuals navigate their gender identities within the context of football with some of the participants experiencing a loss of self or belonging due to the imposed policies of the FA. The findings highlight that participants' experiences and their responses to the footballing environments are influenced by the wider social order. For example, Aaron and Michael having negative experiences in men's teams due to hegemonic masculinity whereas Alice and Gerard had positive experiences and felt more accepted in women's teams where there is no masculine hierarchy. Understanding the interplay between individual experiences and the societal context is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote inclusivity in football and address the specific needs of transgender individuals.

Furthermore, this research emphasises the need for policy changes and educational initiatives aimed at not only challenging the existing gender binary but also educating clubs about general trans* inclusion. All of the participants in this study no longer play in competitions governed by the FA proving that the FA's policies have been less than inclusive. It is evident from the data that the FA need to do more in terms of furthering inclusion and campaigns like Rainbow Laces do not offer much in terms of trans* inclusion. The use of the Rainbow Laces campaign lacks in trans* specific inclusion as it tends to only focus on the LGB issues. As well as this, the FA's transgender policy is largely inaccessible to the people who need to access it. For one, it is outdated having not been reviewed since 2016 and two, all participants struggled with accessing the information online. Moving forward it would be beneficial for the FA to review their current policies and continue to work with trans* charities on how they can be inclusive at lower-level football. Also, it is recommended that the FA push for trans* inclusion by explicitly including trans* people in campaigns and not generalising them with LGB experiences. This would not only promote trans* inclusiveness in football it would also generate positive media around trans* inclusion which is something that is lacking in current media.

It is essential that future research continue to build upon the insights gained from this study. By amplifying the voices and experiences of transgender individuals, we can foster a deeper understanding of their needs and aspirations within the realm of competitive football and other sports. It is through such research endeavours and collaborative efforts that we can strive towards greater inclusivity and equality in sports, creating spaces where transgender athletes can thrive in sport. Following the completion of this thesis, I intend to publish this work and eventually share it with the equality, diversity and inclusion team at the FA. Prior to that I want to work with my local FA to develop a pilot project of incorportating the learnings of this research in coach education sessions that they run and embed it into future coaching courses. I have discussed this with a local FA coach mentor, and it is something that he is interested in. The next steps would be to develop a training session to deliver to FA tutors and mentors through my links with the local FA to firstly gauge their understanding of trans* eligibility and experiences in football and secondly make them aware of how policies and culture affect those trying to engage in football. From this we can hopefully work together to implement training courses for local clubs and coaches to attend to educate the people on the ground on how best

to support and signpost trans* footballers at their clubs.

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the challenges and experiences of transgender individuals participating in competitive football in the UK, providing a platform for their voices to be heard. By acknowledging and addressing the barriers they face, we can work towards a more inclusive future where all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, can fully engage in and enjoy the sport they love.

Limitations

While this study offers a unique and valuable contribution to gender studies and theoretical discussions surrounding the lived experiences of transgender footballers in the UK it is important to acknowledge and address the limitations of this study.

Firstly, this research was conducted with a very small sample size, all of which were White British living in England. With there no available data on the number of trans* people playing football in the UK I had to rely on word of mouth and social media to recruit participants. The criteria for participation selection were on the basis of being over the age of 18, identifying as transgender and currently play or have played FA regulated football during or post transition. As a result of this, the research may not be generalisable to the experiences of trans* people of colour or trans* people living in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. It could have been possible to specifically recruit individuals from more diverse ethnic backgrounds or those from the remaining countries in the UK but due to resources available, recruitment was difficult.

Secondly, it is important to note that while the findings discussed in this study have provided new perspectives on the lived experiences of transgender individuals in football and the barriers they face, the scope of these findings may still be limited. All of the participants in this study no longer play FA regulated football so did not overcome the barrier of the FA's policies. It is important to note that while the lived experiences of these participants are crucial in understanding the existing barriers it does not represent the experiences of those trans* players who still play in FA regulated competitions.

Reflections and Closing Remarks

I went into this research project wanting to give a voice to someone I know who decided to quit playing football due to the lack of support he received from the FA when he transitioned. Each participant in this research began by recalling how and when they first were introduced to football. Each of them recalling happy memories of football. I think going into this research I was naive in thinking that other trans* people would have the same experiences as eachother but as the interviews progressed, I soon realised that each story was unique and encapsulated what it meant to be a trans* person in football in the UK. When Alice spoke about how inspired she was by seeing trans* athletes in the Olympics I realised how important it is for these stories to be told and how important it is that trans* athletes are portrayed in a positive light. By conducting this research, I hope to shed a light on how policies affect non-elite footballers and raise the question of whether these policies should exist for non-elite sport. Football provides so much joy to those who play it, and it is clear from the research that the FA policies are outdated and not accessible. This is something that is easily attainable, and I hope that this research will uncover what needs to be altered in the future to ensure football is accessible for all.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Advert

The Lived Experiences of Transgender Footballers in the UK

Current research has shown that transgender athletes are constantly under extreme scrutiny when it comes to participating and competing in sport. With a strict gender binary in most competitive sports and transgender policies in sport often excluding trans participants, it is difficult for trans athletes to compete in sport as their identified gender.

The purpose of this research is to capture the lived experiences of transgender individuals in organised competitive football in the UK. This will be done by completing three research objectives:

- Objective 1: explore the current policies on transgender inclusion in sport
- Objective 2: capture the lived experiences of transgender athletes in club-level football in the UK
- Objective 3: make recommendations for training and education in sports clubs toward understanding and supporting transgender individuals in their clubs

Participant Criteria:

- Participants should be over 18 years of age
- Participants should, in some way identify as transgender or gender non-conforming
- Participants should currently compete or have competed in organised competitive football in the UK (overseen by a national governing body) at any point during or post transition

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@terriharvey_13

If you are interested in being a part of this research, know anyone who may be interested or have any questions regarding the research please do not hesitate to contact me.

– Terri Harvey (she/her)

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

The title of the research project

The lived experiences of transgender footballers in the UK

Invitation to take part

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the project?

The purpose of this project is to bring to light the real-life experiences of transgender athletes in club-level football in the United Kingdom. By doing so I hope to help contribute to the lack of literature in this area and help football clubs become more understanding and supportive of transgender athletes at their clubs. As well as this, I will be critically analysing current policies on transgender inclusion in football in the UK.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen for this project as you meet the requirements of being a transgender person who currently competes or has previously competed in organised competitive football in the UK (football that is organised/ run by a national governing body i.e., the FA).

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a participant agreement form. We want you to understand what participation involves, before you make a decision on whether to participate.

If you or any family member have an on-going relationship with BU or the research team, e.g. as a member of staff, as student or other service user, your decision on whether to take part (or continue to take part) will not affect this relationship in any way.

Can I change my mind about taking part?

Yes, you can stop participating in study activities at any time and without giving a reason.

If I change my mind, what happens to my information?

After you decide to withdraw from the study, we will not collect any further information from or about you.

As regards information we have already collected before this point, your rights to access, change or move that information are limited. This means that you can withdraw your data such as the use of interview data up until the point it has been transcribed and anonymised. After this point, the data will be anonymous and will not be possible to withdraw from the analysis. Any personal data such as emails and names will have been destroyed at this point ensuring your anonymity.

What would taking part involve?

Taking part will involve you answering a series of open questions regarding your experiences as a transgender footballer in a semi-structured interview lasting for at least one hour. A semi-structured interview involves the researcher asking only a few pre-determined, and open-ended questions while the rest of the questions are based on the responses given by the interviewee, allowing for a more natural discussion to take place. The interviews will take place either in person or over Zoom/ Microsoft Teams and only audio will be recorded using an audio recording device.

What are the advantages and possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will create a topic for discussion among academics and people involved in football in the UK as well as, providing you with a platform to discuss your personal experiences in football.

Whilst we do not anticipate any risks to you in taking part in this study, you may find some of the questions and data in use triggering and/or upsetting. You have the right not to answer any questions or topics that you deem upsetting or triggering. All participants will be given debriefing materials that include signposting for support services including helplines and information regarding finding local support groups which can also be found below:

- **Mindline,** Trans+ Helpline – 03003305468
  Mondays & Fridays 8pm – Midnight
- **Switchboard**, LGBT+ Helpline – 03003300630
  Every Day 10am – 10pm
- LGBT Foundation Helpline – 03453303030
  Weekdays 9am – 9pm
- Gender Identity Research & Education Society, TranzWiki
  https://www.gires.org.uk/tranzwiki/
- Trans Unite
  https://www.transunite.co.uk/
- Stonewall, What's in my Area?
  https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/whats-my-area

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

The information sought from you, the participant, will bring to light your experiences in football and give you a platform to discuss your involvement in football. This information will allow me to contribute to the lack of current research in this field of study and use your experiences in the critical analysis of current policies.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and the transcription of the recording(s) for illustration in conference presentations and lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

How will my personal information be managed?

Bournemouth University (BU) is the organisation with overall responsibility for this study and the Data Controller of your personal information, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it appropriately. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest, as part of our core function as a university.

Undertaking this research study involves collecting and/or generating information about you. We manage research data strictly in accordance with:

- Ethical requirements; and
- Current data protection laws. These control use of information about identifiable individuals, but do not apply to anonymous research data: "anonymous" means that we have either removed or not collected any pieces of data or links to other data which identify a specific person as the subject or source of a research result.

BU's Research Participant Privacy Notice sets out more information about how we fulfil our responsibilities as a data controller and about your rights as an individual under the data protection legislation. We ask you to read this Notice so that you can fully understand the basis on which we will process your personal information.

Research data will be used only for the purposes of the study or related uses identified in the Privacy Notice or this Information Sheet. To safeguard your rights in relation to your personal information, we will use the minimum personally-identifiable information possible and control access to that data as described below.

Publication
You will not be able to be identified in any external reports or publications about the research without your specific consent. Otherwise your information will only be included in these materials in an anonymous form, i.e. you will not be identifiable.

Security and access controls
BU will hold the information we collect about you in hard copy in a secure location and on a BU password protected secure network where held electronically.

Personal information which has not been anonymised will be accessed and used only by appropriate, authorised individuals and when this is necessary for the purposes of the research or another purpose identified in the Privacy Notice. This may include giving access to BU staff or others responsible for

monitoring and/or audit of the study, who need to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations.

All data collected will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be used where appropriate within the write up of the project.

All data will be stored in a personal One Drive that is password protected and only accessible by me, the researcher.

Sharing your personal information with third parties
As well as BU staff working on the research project, I may also need to share personal information in non-anonymised form with Adi Adams, my tutor.

Further use of your information
The information collected about you may be used in an anonymous form to support other research projects in the future and access to it in this form will not be restricted. To enable this use, anonymised data will be added to BU's online Research Data Repository: this is a central location where data is stored, which is accessible to the public. It will not be possible for you to be identified from this data.

Keeping your information if you withdraw from the study
If you withdraw from active participation in the study we will keep information which we have already collected from or about you, if this has on-going relevance or value to the study. This may include your personal identifiable information. As explained above, your legal rights to access, change, delete or move this information are limited as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. However if you have concerns about how this will affect you personally, you can raise these with the research team when you withdraw from the study.

You can find out more about your rights in relation to your data and how to raise queries or complaints in our Privacy Notice.

Retention of research data
Project governance documentation, including copies of signed **participant agreements**: we keep this documentation for a long period after completion of the research, so that we have records of how we conducted the research and who took part. The only personal information in this documentation will be your name and signature, and we will not be able to link this to any anonymised research results.

Research results:
As described above, during the course of the study we will anonymise the information we have collected about you as an individual. This means that we will not hold your personal information in identifiable form after we have completed the research activities. All audio recorded data will be destroyed after transcription as to further anonymise the data.

You can find more specific information about retention periods for personal information in our Privacy Notice.

We keep anonymised research data indefinitely, so that it can be used for other research as described above.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact myself, Terri Harvey tharvey1@bournemouth.ac.uk or Adi Adams: aadams1@bournemouth.ac.uk

In case of complaints
Any concerns about the study should be directed to the Deputy Dean for Research & Professional Practice, Professor Michael Silk at researchgovernance@bournemouth.ac.uk.

Finally

If you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of the information sheet, a signed participant agreement form and participant debriefing information to keep.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project.

Terri Harvey
Master by Research, Faculty of Management
tharvey1@bournemouth.ac.uk

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Participant Agreement Form

Full title of project: The lived experiences of transgender footballers in the UK
Name, position and contact details of researcher: Terri Harvey, MRes Student, tharvey1@bournemouth.ac.uk
Name, position and contact details of supervisor: Adi Adams, Lecturer in Sport, aadams1@bournemouth.ac.uk

Section A: Agreement to participate in the study

You should only agree to participate in the study if you agree with all of the statements in this table and accept that participating will involve the listed activities.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet and have been given access to the BU Research Participant Privacy Notice which sets out how we collect and use personal information (https://www1.bournemouth.ac.uk/about/governance/access-information/data-protection-privacy).
I have had an opportunity to ask questions.
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop participating in research activities at any time without giving a reason and I am free to decline to answer any particular question(s).
I understand that taking part in the research will include the following activity/activities as part of the research:
• Being audio recorded during the project in an interview format
• My words will be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs without using my real name, place of work or nature of work or sport you may refer to. Pseudonyms will be given for all.
I understand that, if I withdraw from the study, I will also be able to withdraw my data from further use in the study **except** where my data has been anonymised (as I cannot be identified) or it will be harmful to the project to have my data removed.
I understand that my data may be included in an anonymised form within a dataset to be archived at BU's Online Research Data Repository.
I understand that my data may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.
I understand that some of the questions asked throughout the study may be of a sensitive nature that could potentially lead to emotional stress or anxiety

I understand that if I disclose any unspent criminal activity within the data I provide that it is the right of the researcher to report this to the police	
	Initial box to agree
I consent to take part in the project on the basis set out above (Section A)	

Name of participant
(BLOCK CAPITALS)

Date
(dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature

Name of researcher
(BLOCK CAPITALS)

Date
(dd/mm/yyyy)

Signature

Appendix D: Participant Debrief Sheet

Participant Debrief Information

The lived experiences of transgender footballers in the UK

Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this research, by doing so you are helping to bring to light the real-life experiences of transgender athletes in club-level football in the United Kingdom. This ultimately will contribute to the lack of literature in this area and help football clubs become more understanding of transgender athletes at their clubs.

As you are aware, you can withdraw from the study at any time as per the terms in stated in the Participation Information Sheet. If you have any feedback to give regarding the questions and/or terminology used please feel free to email me (Terri) at tharvey1@bournemouth.ac.uk.

If this research has been in any way triggering and you feel like you need support, please refer to the information provided below.

Support Services information:
Helplines:

- **Mindline,** Trans+ Helpline – 03003305468
  Mondays & Fridays 8pm – Midnight

- **Switchboard**, LGBT+ Helpline – 03003300630
  Every Day 10am – 10pm

- **LGBT Foundation,** Helpline – 03453303030
  Weekdays 9am – 9pm

Access Local Support Group Information:

- Gender Identity Research & Education Society, TranzWiki
  https://www.gires.org.uk/tranzwiki/

- Trans Unite
  https://www.transunite.co.uk/

- Stonewall, What's in my Area?
  https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/whats-my-area

Once again, thank you for your participation and please contact me if you are interested in reading the final paper.