

# SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, AND SEXUALITY IN SPORT

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** To explore the relationship between contemporary sport, social media, digital technology, and sexuality. This chapter explores the historical context of sport and sexuality, before then outlining the decline of homophobia in recent years. Despite this, however, perhaps the most ubiquitous way we might see the manifestation of homophobia is through social media.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This chapter synthesizes a range of academic literature to chart how – despite improving attitudes toward homosexuality in sport – abuse and discrimination is still prevalent on social media.

**Findings:** Eric Anderson's (2009) Inclusivity Masculinity Theory (IMT) has been the most useful theoretical apparatus to underpin the changing nature of sport, gender, and sexuality. While this has been used in a variety of sporting contexts, these are primarily focused on gay male athletes in the West. Accordingly, there is a gap in knowledge around the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and trans athletes, as well as those outside of the Western context.

**Originality/value:** Although there has been some literature to document discrimination on social media, very little focuses specifically on the manifestation of homophobia. Accordingly, this chapter provides an important contribution by being one of the first to tie together the literature on improved cultural attitudes toward homosexuality whilst simultaneously focusing on the prevalence of discrimination on social media.

**Keywords:** sport, sexuality, homophobia, masculinities, social media, discrimination

# **Social Media, Digital Technology, and Sexuality in Sport**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sport has typically been a hostile environment for sexual minorities (Curry, 1991; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990). This is because competitive team sports – such as association football (soccer), rugby, American football, and so on – have traditionally created a culture in which a hegemonic form of masculinity is (re)produced, defined, and celebrated (Connell, 1995). Accordingly, perhaps unsurprisingly, gay male athletes – or even those suspected of being gay, by a failure to adhere to orthodox notions of masculinity – have, historically, faced rejection, abuse, assault, and general exclusion from participation in sport (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990; Wolf-Wendel, Toma & Morpew, 2001).

More recently, however, since the turn of the millennium, attitudes toward sexual minorities in Western Europe, North America, and Australia have improved significantly (e.g., Kranjac & Wagmiller, 2021; Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2016; Watt & Elliot, 2019). Indeed, as perhaps best evidenced by the legalization of same-sex marriage, sexual minorities now enjoy greater social and legal privileges than ever before. Interestingly, despite frequent claims to the contrary (e.g., Kaelberer, 2020; Stonewall, 2016), research has shown that gay male – and lesbian and bisexual (LGB<sup>1</sup>, combined, hereafter) – athletes are now accepted, embraced, and celebrated (Anderson, 2011; White, Magrath & Morales, 2020). The increased number of elite-level LGB athletes coming out of the closet in recent years is testament to this change (Magrath, 2019).

Despite these changes, discrimination on social media remains a significant problem in sport (e.g., Farrington, Hall, Kilvington, Price & Saeed, 2017; Sanderson & Weathers, 2020). Elite-level athletes, for example, are frequently targeted with hate speech – whether it be racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, and so on – by online trolls. Thus, in this chapter, we explore the relationship between sport, sexuality, and social media. To do so, we first examine the historical context of sport, masculinities, and sexualities, before outlining the decline of homophobia in recent years. We then detail a similar shift in the media reporting environment and the importance of the internet in creating safe spaces for LGB communities. Finally, we document the use of social media by athletes, sporting organisation and fans and highlight recent campaigns to highlight online abuse. We provide details of the as yet limited number of studies that have examined the extent of this abuse and identify the gaps in our understanding of the subject, particularly around the need to extend research in this area to the non-Western world.

## **SPORT, MASCULINITIES, AND SEXUALITIES: A VALUABLE AREA OF STUDY**

### **SETTING THE SCENE**

The antecedents of contemporary sporting culture can be traced back to the late 19th and turn of the 20th Century (Anderson, 2010). It was then that the organization, codification and regulation of most dominant sports occurred across the Western world (Guttmann, 1978). During this period of industrialization, these dominant sports became disassociated from links with rough popular games, instead taking on various different qualities (Burstyn, 1999). For example, football – or ‘soccer’ – was codified in 1863 as a sport for ‘gentlemen’—those educated in public or grammar schools (Taylor, 2008). Naturally, of course, this largely

excluded both women and people from lower social classes, thus standing in stark contrast to its strong working-class roots (Giulianotti, 1999).

Around this time, the value of men's competitive team sports was bolstered due to the establishment of the modern gay male identity, which was associated with men's softness and weakness (Kimmel, 1994). Because heterosexuals cannot definitively prove their sexuality, men had to socially prove and reprove that they were not gay by aligning their gendered identities with an extreme form of masculinity—whilst simultaneously denouncing same-sex desire (Anderson, 2009). Thus, according to Polley (1998, p. 109), the male sporting body was seen as an, “idealised, orthodox, heterosexual sign.” Men, desiring to be thought straight, had to demonstrate their heterosexuality through repressing pain, concealing feminine and (homo)sexual desires, and behaviors, while committing acts of violence against oneself and others (Pronger, 1990). It was, therefore, through sport that boys and men could demonstrate what Burstyn (1999, p. 4) describes as “hypermasculinity”—so much so that masculinity effectively became synonymous with homophobia (Kimmel, 1994).

In this gender-panicked culture, competitive team sports were thought to provide a mechanism to reverse the apparent softening of boys' masculinity in Anglo-American cultures (Radar, 2008). Indeed, Carter (2006, p. 5) wrote that sport presented a “clear hierarchical structure, autocratic tendencies, traditional notions of masculinity and the need for discipline.” During this period, with Western societies shifting from predominantly agrarian economies to industrial societies (e.g., Riess, 1995), for the first time in history the majority of the population migrated into cities. Cancian (1987) shows that during this epoch, the social structure of work changed significantly, requiring men to sacrifice their physical health in dangerous factories or coal mines for the wellbeing of their families. Thus, sport served as the primary mechanism for the indoctrination of boys into manhood (Anderson, 2009).

Against this backdrop is unsurprising that participation in early modern sport was made nearly or fully compulsory for young boys, and was epitomized by celebrated violence (Dunning, 1999). Interestingly, in many education establishments, participation in sport often took precedence over classical or more academic studies (Crosset, 1990). Sport was culturally valued for providing sufficient masculinization for the prevention of feminized or homosexual boys (Chandler & Nauright, 1996). Hence, men who played sport were not thought likely, or even possible, to be gay. Thus, sport has served to privilege not all men, but specifically heterosexual men (Anderson and McCormack, 2010). Accordingly, Anderson (2005) writes that this exclusion of gay men and women leads sport to promote an “orthodox” form of masculinity. However, the purpose of sport began to change in the mid-1980s—as we examine in the next section of this chapter.

## **THE APEX OF HOMOPHOBIA**

Sport in the 1980s took on renewed cultural significance for boys and men; a means of developing and emphasizing orthodox masculinity in a culture of extreme homophobia. While the United Kingdom’s (partial) decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967, and its removal from the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) list of mental illnesses in 1973, resulted in a steady yet slow tolerance of attitudes, these capitulated throughout the 1980s. Indeed, by the 1980s, the advent of a new and deadly virus – HIV – became intimately associated with the gay community. The virus killed tens of thousands of gay men, and this drew increased attention to homosexuals’ existence in large numbers in the general population (Anderson, 2009). There was also an increase of biphobia – hostility against the bisexual community – as bisexual people were erroneously held responsible for the spread of HIV from gay men to straight men (Anderson & McCormack, 2016).

As a backlash against the spread of HIV, the growing influence of fundamentalist Christian movements stirred up hatred against the gay community. In the United States, this also became entangled with strong conservative politics; ex-movie star Ronald Reagan's Republican presidency was a prime example of this. Reagan's silence on the issue was indicative of his administration's contempt for homosexuality (Bosia, 2013). Similar trends also emerged in the United Kingdom, with Reagan's closest ally, Margaret Thatcher, and her Conservative government's treatment of homosexuality as a threat to traditional British family values. This was best evidenced by the introduction of Section 28, in 1988, which prohibited the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools—effectively erasing any discussions whatsoever (Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Evidencing the broader cultural antipathy toward homosexuality around this time, social attitude surveys also document an increase of intolerant attitudes. The British Social Attitude Survey (BSAS), for example, showed that the number of adults who believed same-sex sex was either 'always wrong' or 'mostly wrong' increased almost 15% —from 62% to 76%—between 1983 (when it was first asked) and 1987 (Watt & Elliot, 2019). In the United States, these figures were even higher: Twenge, Sherman and Wells' (2016) analysis of this data shows that, in 1988, around 80 per cent of adults believed homosexuality was 'always wrong'. These data led Anderson (2009, p. 89) to conclude that "1987 or 1988 seems to be the apex of homophobia in both countries."

Given this hostile environment, research in sport conducted around this time also documented deleterious attitudes toward homosexuality. Pronger (1990, p. 26) wrote that the gay men he interviewed were "uncomfortable with team sports." Similarly, Messner (1992, p. 34) describes the level of homophobia in men's sport at this time as "staggering" and argued that "to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one's heterosexual status is not acceptable." And Curry (1991, p. 130) found that, among American

male team sport athletes, “Not only is being homosexual forbidden, but tolerance of homosexuality is theoretically off limits as well.” In Europe, while there was less research, Hekma’s (1998) analysis of attitudes in the Netherlands found that “gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and macho enterprise” (p. 2).

This is further supported by the fact that so few elite-level athletes also publicly came out of the closet during this time. Notably, Barret (1993, p. 161) wrote that, “Most gay professional athletes keep their gay lives carefully hidden out of a fear that coming out will destroy their ability to maintain their careers.” Those who did come out around this time typically received abuse from spectators, faced rejection from teammates and coaches, and found their careers in jeopardy. This is, perhaps, best evidenced by British soccer player, Justin Fashanu, who, after coming out in 1990, saw his career deteriorate (Gaston, Magrath, & Anderson, 2018). Such rejection was a contributing factor in his suicide in 1998 (Magrath, 2017a). As we approached the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, sport across the world continued to be a dangerous and hostile space for LGB athletes.

## **SPORT AS AN INCLUSIVE SPACE**

Since the early part of the new millennium, attitudes toward sexual minorities have improved considerably in the West. Keleher and Smith’s (2012) analysis of multiple social attitude surveys in the United States leads them to conclude that we are, “witnessing a sweeping change in attitudes toward lesbians and gay men” (p. 1324). Indeed, two-thirds of American adults now believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society (Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2016). Similar statistics are apparent in the United Kingdom: the most recent British Social Attitude Survey data, in 2019, shows that only 12% of those surveyed believed homosexuality is ‘always wrong’ (see Watt & Elliot, 2019). Data from the Pew

Research Center has also consistently documented the advance of positive attitudes toward homosexuality across numerous countries.

In sport, this acceptance has also become apparent. In the first-ever research with ‘out’ gay male athletes, Anderson (2002) documented more positive experiences than reported in previous research. Prior to disclosing their sexuality to teammates, each of these athletes reported that they were anxious about being socially excluded, verbally abused, and physically beaten. However, post-coming-out, these concerns were not realized for the majority; these gay athletes instead regretted not coming-out sooner. When this research was replicated almost 10 years later, Anderson (2011) found even greater levels of social inclusion for gay athletes. This included a decline of the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ culture, inclusion of athletes in team activities, and the welcoming of their same-sex partners to social events. Other, similar research has also documented the support of gay athletes in a variety of sports (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Jarvis, 2015).

Support from heterosexual peers toward the presence of LGB people in sport has also improved considerably (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). Bush, Anderson, and Carr (2012), for example, found that while athletic identity was connected with homophobia among undergraduate sports students upon arrival at university, that link eroded for those students upon leaving higher education. Moreover, research with elite young soccer players found that unlike older research at this level of play (see Parker, 1996), these players were broadly supportive of sexual minorities, as well as their participation in elite soccer, and equal marriage (Magrath, 2017a, 2017b, 2021b; Magrath, Anderson, and Roberts, 2015). Even athletes socialized into strong religious environments – which have typically been more conservative in their tolerance of homosexuality – have espoused positive attitudes toward homosexuality, and acceptance of gay male teammates (Adams and Anderson, 2012; Magrath, 2017b).

This inclusivity has also extended to the media (Magrath, 2019). Indeed, Kian, Anderson, Vincent, and Murray (2015) show how ostensibly heterosexual sports journalists espouse positive attitudes toward homosexuality, as well as a greater willingness to work with a gay journalist. Magrath's (2020) research with gay male sports journalists corroborates these findings, with each of the men in his sample reporting positive coming out experiences—despite the persistence of a heteronormative environment. This is also evident in media coverage of sexual minority athletes. Sport media in the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, have been broadly positive in their discussion of out, elite, gay male athletes in recent years (see Billings & Moscovitz, 2018; Cassidy, 2017; Cleland, 2014; Kian & Anderson, 2009; Kian, Anderson, & Shipka, 2015; Magrath, Cleland, & Anderson, 2017). Only very limited research focuses on lesbian and trans athletes' coverage, however (c.f. Lucas & Newhall, 2019; Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2019).

Online media also plays an important role in the inclusion of sexual minorities as they allow individuals to access resources, explore their identity, and find likeness as part of a process of digitally coming out (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Outlets such as Outsports also provide the opportunity for LGB athletes to share coming out stories – positive and negative – on their own terms. In their analysis of gay male athletes' narratives, White, Magrath and Morales (2020) show that, despite attempting to maintain heteromasculine identities, these athletes' narratives were characterized by acceptance and inclusion by heterosexual teammates. Chawansky (2016) also documented how Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) player, Brittney Griner, used information on the internet to discover more about who she was, and could be, as a Black lesbian.

Kozinets (2010), a pioneer of studying online communities, highlights that the internet empowers people to gather together in groups based on a wide range of social affiliations and cultural interests. Ceatha *et al.* (2019) argue that communities such as these

play a central role in the promotion of mental health and social wellbeing for LGB communities. However, while we see much benefit in these communities, we must also note that access to the internet or at least the content that can be accessed via the internet is in some countries, such as Pakistan and Russia, controlled by governments who wish to limit the exposure of its population to LGB rights issues (DeNardis & Haki, 2016).

Scholarly work on the increasingly accepting attitude towards sexual minorities in sport has typically been situated within Eric Anderson's (2009) theoretical lens, inclusive masculinities. This has been the most prolific theory in framing improving attitudes toward sexual minorities, as well as the subsequent impact this has had on young men's expression of gender (e.g., Anderson & McCormack, 2015; Anderson, Adams, & Rivers, 2012; Robinson, Anderson, & White, 2018). Interestingly, while the theory's focus was initially restricted to young, middle-class, university-educated men, research has since expanded beyond this demographic.

Of particular relevance to this chapter, for example, this even extends to research on sport fandom. Sport fans exist as a community that share a sense of identification with each other and with the team or object of adoration (Parry, Jones, & Wann, 2014). The sense of belonging to this group is communicated through their words and actions, in ways that are both tribal and ritualized and often framed in relation to other fan groups or sections of society that are antithetical to the fans' ideals, which have been typically based in working class, (hyper) masculinity. 'Formalized' mass chants and songs in addition to more individual shouting and gestures are commonplace at many sport stadia and have been a traditional fan-related practice for many years. Research which now stretches back almost a decade has uncovered shifting patterns in the attitudes of fans towards sexual minorities. For instance, Cashmore and Cleland's (2012) large-scale research found that 93% of 3,500 soccer fans were supportive of the hypothetical notion of an out gay male elite player. These fans instead

believed that a player's on-field performance should be the only significant factor on which they should be judged (see also Cleland, Cashmore, Dixon, & MacDonald, 2021). And, most recently, Magrath's (2021a) analysis of gay male soccer fans' experiences documented authentic notions of fandom, a sense of place, and a positive overall experience in attending matches.

However, research has also documented that large modern sports stadia are now sanitized environments where behavior is regulated and abuse has decreased (e.g., Cleland & Cashmore, 2016; Hill, Canniford, & Millward, 2016). They, therefore, draw attention to the relationship between online realities and supporter communities and call for new digital-sociological studies of online fandom to better understand modern fan behaviour.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES**

Social media has profoundly impacted the way that organizations communicate and connect with consumers (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2015). In a broad sense, organizations are now able to promote their products or services, convey tangible and intangible features of them to their audiences, deal with complaints, and remain in touch with their customers. Social media networks can, therefore, be seen to have created unparalleled opportunities for organizations and businesses. Global COVID-19-enforced lockdowns have further shifted the reliance of business and organizations on social media. This move has accelerated the revolutionizing of traditional marketing communication models through digital technologies (Datta, Sahaym, & Brooks, 2018). In 2020, online, interactive environments, such as those offered by social media platforms, became the most common meeting place for consumers, where information is exchanged and content created (Fenton, Keegan & Parry, 2021). It is within this environment that sports fan communities are now operating.

Sport clubs have historically aimed to create cultural, global, and social connections and have long since relied on the media to communicate with their fans. The trend of online fandom was accelerated during 2020 and 2021 as COVID-19 prevented fans from attending venues in person and further pushed communication and engagement to online platforms. Virtual spaces and communities have filled the void for many fans and do provide many of the benefits that physical spaces afford sport fans. They have also facilitated communication between fans around the world (Mastromartino *et al.*, 2020) and allowed clubs to reach new audiences, and engage with existing audiences in new ways (Fenton, Keegan, & Parry, 2021). These spaces have, in particular, enabled fans to take a more ‘active’ role in following their team by engaging in discussions every day about sport-related topics (Cleland, 2014; Gibbons & Dixon, 2010). Twitter has arguably become the most popular social media source in the sports industry, as it allows fans to interact with a chosen athlete and give an illusion that they have direct ways to talk to their sporting heroes (Price, Farmington & Hall 2013). Social media and digital technologies have, thus, not only expanded communication practices but have created virtual spaces for people to interact directly with each other and also with organizations (such as their favourite team or player).

The use of these technologies also has the potential to circumvent national restrictions (as we discussed above) and this is especially important as sports teams and elite athletes make use of social media in large numbers (or they have until recently). Kassing and Sanderson (2010) identify the principal uses of social media by athletes as self-presentation of a desired image; expressing dissent towards governing bodies or government legislation; to counter unfavourable press; and to express their views on a variety of topics. Pertinent for this chapter, social media, and particularly image-based social networks such as Instagram allow athletes to challenge intersectional invisibility, such as race and sexuality as was the case for Brittney Griner (Chawansky, 2016). Social media, therefore, has the potential to

redress the lack of coverage that traditional forms of media have afforded to minority groups “and even contest and rework normative gender and sexual identities in sport” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 28). Indeed, Chawansky describes the social media posts of athletes such as Grinner as ‘digital activism’ in that they are designed to be socially impactful.

This digital activism has also been evident in the emergence of LGB(&T) networks for sports fans. In British football, for example, social media – and Twitter, in particular – has been pivotal for LGBT Fan Groups, which have risen exponentially in recent years. Indeed, since the Gay Gooners emerged in 2013, over half of the 92 elite league clubs in English football now have an officially-sanctioned LGBT group—and numerous others in Scotland, too. A list of these is provided on Pride in Football’s (the overarching organization to which these groups are affiliated) website (Pride in Football, 2020). Their general purpose has been to provide a counterspace to English football’s traditionally hypermasculine and heteronormative atmosphere, and provide LGBT fans with an inclusive and safe space. Accordingly, Magrath (2021) argues that they provide greater visibility and a sense of belonging and community for sexual minority fans in an environment from which they have traditionally been excluded. This situation is not only confined to British football and these fan groups are common in countries such as Australia and in sports as diverse as Australian football and cricket (Storr *et al.*, 2019)

However, the tribal disposition of sport fans (and fans in other areas of culture) is carried over into virtual spaces. Indeed Kozinets (2020) describes online communities as ‘tribes,’ each with their own language and customs. The already tribal nature of fandom is, thus, amplified through the interactive nature of social media. Although this ‘new’ communication model does allow unparalleled access to sports teams and players, Coles and West (2016) point towards online trolling on social media sites and suggest that they offer a platform for ‘fruitless argumentation’ and other nefarious communications activities. More

so, the ability to create an anonymous account has emboldened individuals to comment negatively on social media platforms without being held personally accountable (Parry, Cleland, & Kavanagh, 2019).

A recent report suggests abuse based on sexual orientation is rising in association football (KickItOut, 2020), although the extent of this abuse remains unclear. Indeed, the same report indicates that although there were 117 reports of abuse received during the 2019/20 football season there was a rise in the reporting of abuse. According to Magrath and Stott's (2019) analysis, this may be evidence of fans' greater willingness to tackle antisocial behavior. Despite the increase, these statistics also fail to account for multiple reports of the same incidents. The use of social media for abusive behaviors, however, particularly toward footballers (see Kilvington & Price, 2019), has also received considerable media attention—as we discuss in the following section.

### **RELEVANT WORK**

In April/May 2021, English football organisations responded to a perceived increase in online abuse by boycotting social media for a weekend (during one of the busiest playing periods of the football season). The boycott involved “clubs across the [English] Premier League, EFL [English Football League], WSL [Women's Super League] and Women's Championship switching off their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts” (Premier League, 2021). The aim of this collective stance was to combat online abuse and discrimination by pressuring the social media companies, who they see to blame for the ongoing nature of this abuse, into action. At the time of writing, it remains to be seen how effective this protest will be.

Taken together, these reports are suggestive of a climate where online abuse towards sexual minorities is rife and especially within communities of sport followers. However, whereas the media and advocacy groups paint a negative picture in terms of acceptance of

sexual minorities in sport and despite the anonymity of posting onto online forums, empirical evidence for a more inclusive online environment is growing. Research has found that online discussions of sexual minorities have been largely positive in the context of sport. Indeed, Cleland's (2015) analysis of football fan forums in the United Kingdom found a near-complete rejection of posts containing homophobic sentiment. Similarly, Cleland, Magrath and Kian's (2018) research on fans' online responses to the coming out of German footballer, Thomas Hitzlsperger, found overwhelming inclusivity, with the small number of negative posts described as being "outdated views" and belonging in "a previous generation."

While there are few or no openly gay, bisexual or transgender males competing in elite sports, such as the English Premier League, it can be easy to over-generalize antipathy toward LGB people from a few to the whole. While it is possible to find examples of high-profile professional athletes that make a homophobic comment on social media (see Thompson & Muller, 2021), or a small group of fans chanting homophobic abuse (Magrath, 2018), at this point, there is no evidence that athletes or fans maintain higher rates of antipathy toward gay male athletes than the population at large. Therefore, there is a danger that the media and wider society focus on a small number of cases of discrimination and miss the broader picture of support for LGB rights – the tyranny of small numbers.

It is worth acknowledging the criticism of Parry et al. (2021) of those sporting organizations taking to social media to claim their support for social movements but who are then not able to provide tangible evidence for positive measures taken within their organisation. However, their criticism is largely focussed on the managers/administrators of sporting organisations who make the promotion materials and policies or entrenched executive level members and are not indicative of the whole organisation. In the main, sporting organisations are now using their significant online presences to support the

inclusion of sexual minorities in sport and wider society, influencing the views of their followers. The significance of this explicit support should not be undersold.

On a wider level, in addition to creating communities around cultural products and organisations, social media can be used to achieve behavioural change or to conduct market research (Campos, Anagnostopoulos, & Chadwick, 2013). Increasingly, social media influences consumer views and attitudes and so businesses have invested time and money to engage with them in these environments. The interactive nature of social media platforms makes them a timely and cost-effective medium to both provide and collect information and for gaining feedback (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Organizations can gain knowledge and insights into communities and their attitudes towards topics and the organisation itself. For this reason, sporting organizations are increasingly using their social media accounts to express their support for social movements, including the support for sexual minorities. For instance, Parry et al. (2021) identified that a variety of Australian sporting organisations made use of Twitter to proclaim their support for same-sex marriage in the country's 2017 referendum. They found that these organisations made use of popular hashtags, 'rainbowed' their logos, and linked to statements in support of same-sex marriage but did conclude that these efforts may have been due to a "desire to bask in the capital of the larger social movement episode concerning sexual and gender minorities and increasing cultural equality" (Parry et al., 2021, p. 18). In addition to organizational support, Parry et al. identified that a number of prominent players spoke out in support of same-sex marriage – many more than those that campaigned against it – further affirming that players are progressive in their attitudes and actions in support of sexual minorities.

Indeed, there is also a growing number of examples of LGB athletes receiving support on social media. When Jason Collins became the first active male member of a professional North American team to come out as gay in 2013, Billings *et al.* (2015) described the

response on Twitter as overwhelmingly positive. Their analysis of 7,556 tweets identified sixteen coded themes with the most frequent being links to the civil rights movement, voices of general support, coupling the announcement with religion, and celebrity support. The aforementioned basketball player Brittney Griner has similarly found support on social media. In particular, she received over 10,000 likes on an Instagram post of a picture of her wedding to fellow WNBA player Glory Johnson (Chawansky, 2016). Another recent study has provided greater understanding of institutional use of social media to support sexual minorities in a sporting context.

Hansen et al. (in press) looked at the online response to the English Premier League's (EPL) 'Rainbow Laces' campaign in support of LGB(&T) advocacy. They identified that negative comments on posts from the EPL on this topic accounted for only .000001 percent of their 25 million followers and .01 percent of those who engaged with the tweets. Citing a similar response rate for other social movements (such as anti-racism campaigns), they note 24,997 'likes' of four tweets posted by the EPL as explicit evidence for support of the campaign, and thus support of LGBT people.

### **FURTHER INVESTIGATOIN AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Most research on sport, masculinity, and sexuality is, at present, restricted to studies in the United Kingdom, United States, and, to a lesser extent, Australia and Canada. While social attitude survey data continues to show that attitudes toward sexual minorities across the Western world are improving, as we acknowledged earlier in this chapter, some sports research in Europe continues to observe homophobic attitudes and/or behaviors. Hartmann-Tews, Menzel, and Braumüller (2020), for example, concluded in their analysis of 5,000 LGBT individuals, that "homo- and transnegativity are still present in sport in Europe and are potent problematic influences on the sporting experiences of LGBT+ people" (p. 13). In the

Netherlands, Smit, Knoppers and Elling-Machartzi (2020) show a growing acceptance of homosexuality in sport, while also acknowledging the pervasive use of homophobic language. Finally, Piedra, García-Perez, and Channon (2016) describe the Spanish sporting context as being between homophobia and inclusivity, denoting what they describe as a “pseudo-inclusive climate, characterized by...partial tolerance towards sexual diversity, which is distinct from full acceptance and inclusion” (p. 1307). Accordingly, this is evidence that it is important to remember that declining homophobia is an uneven social process and can differ across time and space.

Related to this, analysis of the English Premier League’s support of the anti-homophobia movements on social media documented a strong influence of international hostility. Hansen et al. (in press) highlight that even though most non-UK-based fans were not moved to respond to the EPL’s tweets, those that did comment on the posts were, generally, not in support of the campaign and displayed negative attitudes towards LGBT communities. In this particular study, negative comments deflected attention away from LGBT rights (claiming that other human rights movements were of greater importance) or were often couched in religious doctrine. As was noted by Billings et al. (2015), discussions of sexual minority rights often intersect with religiosity and this meeting can be negative when religious views are intolerant towards LGB communities. It is, therefore, worth noting that as social media allows sporting organizations to reach fans around the world – as part of the wider process of globalization in sport – it affords them the opportunity to promote sexual minority rights in those sport-following countries where cultural and legal discrimination against sexual minorities is still present. This process can, however, also result in discriminatory online behaviour when these cultural views clash.

Outside the United Kingdom, broader research on sport, sexuality, social media, and digital technologies is scant. We do know, however, that LGB people face significant

challenges in countries that are or remain socially conservative, such as those entrenched in religiosity. Hamdi, Lachheb, and Anderson's (2017) examination of gay athletes in Tunisia, for example, concluded that, "Same-sex relations are religiously taboo and legally prohibited. There is [therefore] no public discourse about homosexuality in sport in this context" (p. 688). The need for research in this area serves as an important reminder that, as we have acknowledged throughout this chapter, declining homophobia can vary according to a range of factors—including age, gender, education, religion, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so on (e.g., Keleher & Smith, 2012).

Recognizing the impact of these factors also reminds us of the need to investigate the contemporary relationship between *global* sport, sexuality, social media, and digital technologies. At present the extent to which online environments mitigate against decreasing homophobia is not well understood. A conflicting picture is present with reports suggesting that abuse is rife in these spaces while the limited number of empirical studies have questioned the degree of abuse based on sexual orientation. Given the increased use of social media to promote sexual minority equality by sports organizations (Parry et al., 2021) it is also important that attention is paid to the online responses to these campaigns and the degree to which the factors listed above shape these. In particular, research should focus on whether those from countries where cultural and legal discrimination against sexual minorities is still present are more likely to engage in abusive online behaviours. More so, we see a fruitful avenue for research in examining the extent to which social media campaigns or campaigns that utilize digital technologies in support of social movements can shape attitudes and beliefs in these countries. In those nations where there is no public discourse about homosexuality or the inclusion of sexual minorities in sport, athletes and sporting organisations have the ability (or potential) to disrupt this status quo. The importance of this broad programme of research

cannot be underestimated, and we therefore call on scholars to include this in their future research agendas.

There are also, perhaps, more nuanced challenges which we continue to face. Indeed, in areas where changing attitudes have undoubtedly occurred, there remain more implicit microaggressions which are, oftentimes, harder to tackle. Needed interrogation might include focusing on the homosexually themed (or homophobic) language in online spaces, irrespective of its intentions, and assessing the ongoing heteronormative environment that remains omnipresent but unspoken and little acknowledged in many sporting contexts (Magrath, 2020). Indeed, while there is undoubtedly evidence of considerable improvements in the sporting climate, intransigent issues such as these still remain. There is, therefore, more research needed to further explore the ever-changing relationship between sport, masculinity, and sexuality.

Over a decade ago, Anderson appealed to “graduate students and young scholars...[to] investigate the intersection of inclusive masculinities in other arenas” (2009, p. 160). While this appeal was answered, as evidenced by the substantial body of work cited in this chapter, we again reiterate the call for further research—particularly in the context of social media and digital technologies. As we continue to see improved cultural attitudes toward sexual minorities, this medium allows hate, abuse, and discrimination to flourish.

## Key Readings

1. Chawansky, M. (2016). Be who you are and be proud: Brittney Griner, intersectional invisibility and digital possibilities for lesbian sporting celebrity. *Leisure Studies*, 35(6), 771-782. In this article, Chawansky analyses Instagram posts by professional basketball player, Brittney Griner in light of the intersectional invisibility of Black lesbian sporting celebrities. In particular, posts related to her romantic relationship with fellow basketball star, Glory Johnson, were deemed to potentially support, inspire and comfort a variety of young followers. This analysis reveals a positive response to Griner's posts with picture of her wedding to Johnson receiving 10,700 likes.
2. Cleland, J., Magrath, R. & Kian, E.M. (2018). The internet as a site of decreasing cultural homophobia in association football: An online response by fans to the coming out of Thomas Hitzlsperger. *Men and Masculinities*, 21(1), 91-111. Examining comments on both football fan message boards and in response to a Guardian newspaper article, this article reveals a supportive response to German international footballer, Thomas Hitzlsperger, publicly come out as gay in January 2014. The authors find that only 2 per cent of comments contained pernicious homophobic intent.
3. White, A.J., Magrath, R. & Morales, L.E. (2020). Gay male athletes' coming-out stories on Outsports.com. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (Online First). This article examines 60 published coming-out narratives on the world's first website dedicated to the LGBT+ community's experiences in sport, Outsports.com. The study finds that most of the athletes experienced acceptance and inclusivity from

their teammates when they came out, which, alongside a change in homosexually themed language in men's sports teams, resulted in improved health and wellbeing for the athletes. The importance of platforms that allow athletes to share their coming-out stories is also highlighted.

4. Parry, K.D., Storr, R., Kavanagh, E.J. & Anderson, E. (2021). Conceptualising organisational cultural lag on marriage equality in Australian sporting organisations. *Journal of Sociology*. Here, the authors develop a theoretical framework, organisational cultural lag, to understand the institutionalisation of sexuality. Through an analysis of the support for marriage equality and sexual minority inclusion by 13 Australian sporting organisations it is concluded that organisations draw cultural capital from this support but fail to promote internal inclusion. While areas for improvement are identified, it is noted that positive shifts have been made in attitudes towards lesbian and gay rights in Australia.
  
5. Toffoletti, K. & Thorpe, H. (2018). Female athletes' self-representation on social media: A feminist analysis of neoliberal marketing strategies in "economies of visibility." *Feminism & Psychology*, 28(1), 11–31. Addressing an underrepresentation of female athletes across traditional and online media outlets, this paper examines the social media use of five female athletes and the extent that such platforms allow them to contest or rewrite normative sexual and gender identities in sport. They note that female athletes continue to follow hypersexual representations of female sporting bodies and that those bodies that do not conform to 'heterosexy norms' remain invisible.



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<sup>i</sup> Although 'LGBT' (and variants of this, such as 'LGBTQ' or 'LGBT+') are commonly used, we prefer here to use 'LGB', on the basis that we refer only in this chapter to sexual minorities—not gender minorities. While this does not denigrate or deny the importance of gender minorities' experiences in sport, these narratives are beyond the scope of our analysis.