A Descriptive Analysis of Barriers Faced by the LGBTQ+ Community in Relation to Organized Sport Participation in their Youth

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Abstract

Background: Participating in organized sport plays an important role in youth development. The sport environment may exclude different minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community, because they do not fit within societal norms. Most of the research has focused on the lack of participation from LGBTQ+ youth and has not offered any solutions.

Purpose: (1) To conduct a pilot study in which the LGBTQ+ community identifies constraints faced when participating in organized youth sports. (2) To connect the identified constraints to the benefits of using recreational therapy as a treatment modality to lessen or eliminate said constraints. The research questions asked were: (A) What are the perceived constraints that the LGBTQ+ community face? (B) How do perceived constraints impact the participation in the organized sport for the LGBTQ+ community?

Methods: (1) The pilot study is a qualitative e-survey designed to assess the perceived constraints the LGBTQ+ community face in organized youth sports. (2) A thematic analysis was conducted following the survey, organizing the qualitative data into themes.

Results: Four themes were produced following the thematic analysis: sports experiences influenced by others, personal view of self in relation to sport, the benefits of the environment to well-being, and the feeling of an inclusive environment.

Conclusion: The LGBTQ+ community continues to face constraints when it comes to leisure, in particular with organized sports. This study found that while the LGBTQ+ community faced several constraints through their experiences with organized youth

sports, they would still be interested in playing sports if playing alongside others within the community. This study also found that while the LGBTQ+ community faced constraints, they also found ways to receive the benefits of participating in organized youth sports. Recreational therapists should use the results of this study to continue researching ways recreational therapy can benefit the LGBTQ+ community who continue to face constraints.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ Community**,** Sport Participation, Constraints, Recreational Therapy, Homophobia

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Introduction

With resources, such as support groups and campaigns, continuing to increase for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, or another diverse gender identity (LGBTQ+) community over the years, it is not surprising to see an increase in those sharing their sexual orientation openly at a younger age. While support systems may be increasing, homophobia and discrimination continue to occur throughout the United States, especially the southeastern United States. The world of sport is built around this idea of masculinity, and that people prefer to play and watch more masculine sports (Anderson, 2015). Homophobia and discrimination towards the LGTBQ+ community within the United States stem from society's views on masculinity and femininity, along with its religious beginnings (Anderson, 2015). LGBTQ+ youth are more vulnerable to suicide, eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, difficulties in school, forced sexual interactions, homelessness, and violence because of the homophobia and discrimination that they either directly face or see within society (Higa et al., 2015).

The negative impact homophobia and discrimination has on the LGBTQ+ community can be attributed to one or more of the three categories of constraints: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural outlined by Crawford and Godbey (1987). In terms of leisure, constraints may limit the areas people can visit, the activities they choose to engage in, and decrease overall satisfaction (Stodolska et al, 2020). It is important to note that constraints are likely to be reported by participants and non-participants of an activity (Kay & Jackson, 2018). Bullying within sport may not only

force LGBTQ+ youth to drop out of sport, but it may also prevent them from ever starting (Baiocco et al., 2018).

There is still a lack in understanding as to why some people can navigate constraints while others continue to remain unable to pursue the leisure of their choosing (Stodolska et al, 2020). A need exists to evaluate the use of recreational therapy (RT) as a treatment for the LGBTQ+ community facing perceived constraints in sport. The field of RT aims to treat and maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of clients by attempting to reduce depression, levels of stress, and anxiety, while building clients' confidence and social skills through activity-based interventions (NCTRC, 2023). Recreational Therapy uses sport as one of its activity-based interventions for clients. These interventions may be in direct response to lessen or eliminate barriers, or, for the sake of this study, constraints, that clients face in their daily lives. The LGBTQ+ community faces several constraints that will be addressed throughout this article. The use of RT treatment modalities of organized sport and community integration may be one strategy to lessen the constraints the LGBTQ+ community face when it comes to organized sports. Though this is the case, there have been little to no studies done on how RT and sport could benefit the LGBTQ+ community.

Problem Statement

Participating in organized sports plays an important role in the development of youth (Kulick et al., 2018). Participation in organized sports is associated with lower rates of anxiety, depression, and amounts of stress, higher self-esteem and confidence, a reduced risk of suicide, fewer risky behaviors like substance abuse, increased cognitive

performance, creativity, and life satisfaction, and improved psychological and emotional well-being for individuals with disabilities (Cardinal, 2020). The environment of organized sport, however, has the potential to exclude marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community (Kulick et al., 2018). Efforts have been made, however, to increase representation within the sport environment for women, people with disabilities, and people of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Denison et al., 2020). The LGBTQ+ community has received limited efforts, funding, and attention when it comes to organized sport (Denison, et al., 2020) These limited efforts have caused the environment to be seen as unsafe for the community (Clark & Kosciw, 2021). In recent years, professional athletes like Patricio Manuel, Fallon Fox, Carl Nassib, and Adam Rippon, have faced backlash from the public for disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity to others or publicly; otherwise known as "coming out" (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). As a result of such circumstances, youth that self-identify with the LGBTQ+ community may not pursue athletics due to the social stigmas and discriminatory views of people around them.

Purpose

There have not been many studies related to recreational therapy for the LGBTQ+ community, especially when it comes to organized sports. Recreational therapists are trained professionals that help treat and maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of clients by attempting to reduce depression, levels of stress, and anxiety, while building their clients' confidence and social skills through activity-based interventions (NCTRC, 2023). Activity-based interventions include using sport as a

treatment modality, making recreational therapists an important piece to the treatment plan of LGBTQ+ youth who face barriers in sports. Most treatment plans for LGBTQ+ youth involve individual therapy sessions, family therapy sessions, and the use of prescribed medications. What recreational therapists can offer that others may not is assessing the interests of their clients and using them in therapeutic settings. For someone who enjoys sports but feels excluded, recreational therapists can create a therapeutic environment in which the client can experience this interest while also learning techniques to improve their overall physical, mental, and emotional health.

The National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC) defines recreational therapy as, "a systematic process that utilizes recreation and other activity-based interventions to address the assessed needs of individuals with illnesses and/or disabling conditions, as a means to psychological and physical health, recovery and well-being" (2023). Recreational therapists use a variety of treatment modalities and techniques, including arts and crafts, games, animal-assisted, dance and movement, music, drama, community outings, and sports, to create treatment plans based on the interests of their clients (NCTRC, 2023). The purpose of this study is the examine the perceived constraints members of the LGBTQ+ community face in relation to organized sport participation in their youth. Through this understanding, the researcher provides linkages to how recreational therapy can be used to support the LGBTQ+ community.

Significance

LGBTQ+ youth experience a higher percentage of negative health and mental health outcomes, with suicide attempt and ideation rates four times higher than those of heterosexual and cisgendered youth (Rhoades et al., 2018). Along with suicide, LGBTQ+ youth are also more vulnerable to eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, difficulties in school, forced sexual interactions, homelessness, and violence (Higa et al., 2015). With LGBTQ+ youth having higher percentages of negative health and mental health outcomes, such as suicide attempts and ideation, eating disorders, and sexually transmitted diseases, recreational therapists can use organized sports, exercise, games, community integration, etc., to provide LGBTQ+ youth with coping skills and techniques that they can use to avoid potential relapses (Rhoades et al., 2018). With sports potentially excluding the LGBTQ+ community, especially LGBTQ+ youth, using recreational therapy modalities like organized sports and community integration, may provide a sport environment in which they feel accepted and safe. Recreational therapists creating this environment gives these individuals a way to partake in their own interests without experiencing the perceived barriers to sport. Recreational therapy not only provides the environment to potentially lessen barriers, but also teaches those that partake a variety of life skills, such as problem solving, self-awareness, communication, and empathy. Outcomes of recreational therapy include lessening or eliminating barriers people may face when it comes to leisure, teaching and practicing resiliency and coping

skills, and using these skills to allow people to engage in leisure outside of the therapeutic environment (NCTRC, 2023).

Research Question

The research questions used in the current study were:

1. What are the perceived constraints that the LGBTQ+ community face?
2. How do perceived constraints impact the participation in the organized sport for the LGBTQ+ community?

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Chapter 1

A Descriptive Analysis of Barriers Faced by the LGBTQ+ Community in Relation to Organized Sport Participation in their Youth

Abstract

Background: Participating in organized sport plays an important role in youth development. The sport environment may exclude different minority groups, including the LGBTQ+ community, because they do not fit within societal norms. Most of the research has focused on the lack of participation from LGBTQ+ youth and has not offered any solutions.

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Results: Four themes were produced following the thematic analysis: sports experiences influenced by others, personal view of self in relation to sport, the benefits of the environment to well-being, and the feeling of an inclusive environment.

Conclusion: The LGBTQ+ community continues to face constraints when it comes to leisure, in particular with organized sports. This study found that while the LGBTQ+ community faced several constraints through their experiences with organized youth

sports, they would still be interested in playing sports if playing alongside others within the community. This study also found that while the LGBTQ+ community faced constraints, they also found ways to receive the benefits of participating in organized youth sports. Recreational therapists should use the results of this study to continue researching ways recreational therapy can benefit the LGBTQ+ community who continue to face constraints.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ Community**,** Sport Participation, Constraints, Recreational Therapy, Homophobia

A Descriptive Analysis of Barriers Faced by the LGBTQ+ Community in Relation to Organized Sport Participation in their Youth

With resources, such as support groups and campaigns, continuing to increase for the LGBTQ+ community over the years, it is not surprising to see an increase in those sharing their sexual orientation openly at a younger age. While support systems may be increasing, homophobia and discrimination continue to occur throughout the United States, especially in the southeastern United States. The world of sport is built around this idea of masculinity, and that people prefer to play and watch more masculine sports (Anderson, 2015). Homophobia and discrimination towards the LGTBQ+ community within the United States stem from society's views on masculinity and femininity, along with its religious beginnings (Anderson, 2015). LGBTQ+ youth are more vulnerable to suicide, eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, difficulties in school, forced sexual interactions, homelessness, and violence because of the homophobia and discrimination that they either directly face or see within society (Higa et al., 2015).

The field of recreational therapy (RT) aims to treat and maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of clients by attempting to reduce depression, levels of stress, and anxiety, while building clients' confidence and social skills through activity-based interventions (NCTRC, 2023). These interventions may be in direct response to lessen or eliminate barriers, or, for the sake of this study, constraints, that clients face in their daily lives. The LGBTQ+ community faces several constraints that will be addressed throughout this article. The use of the recreational therapy treatment modalities of organized sport and community integration may be one strategy to lessen the constraints the LGBTQ+ community face when it comes to organized sports.

Literature Review

Homophobia and Discrimination

Homophobia is defined as an irrational fear, hatred of, and/or negative attitudes towards people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community (Renzetti & Edleson, 2008). Homophobia and homophobic views may then lead to discrimination. The American Psychological Association (2022) defines discrimination as "the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or sexual orientation." Negative attitudes towards members of the LGBTQ+ community has been seen throughout history and continue to be an issue, particularly in the southeastern United States. Culturally, traditional gender roles, definition of the traditional family, religious beliefs, lesbian baiting, and anti-gay jokes enforce the prejudice towards this community (Renzetti & Edleson, 2008).

Youth are exposed to homophobic language and actions through their social relationships, schools, religious sermons, government legislation, within the media, and in sport. "Homophobic bullying is the exploitation of an individual's actual or perceived sexual orientation with the intention of belittling and denigrating, often with the intention of inflicting mental or physical harm" (Baiocco et. al, 2018). A history of homophobic bullying has the potential to manifest itself as internalized homophobia in members of the LGBTQ+ community. Renzetti and Edleson (2008) define internalized homophobia as the belief by members of the LGTBQ+ community themselves that being homosexual is perverted, wrong, and lesser than their heterosexual counterparts. Internalized homophobia may be expressed as bullying other LGBTQ+ members to preserve one's

own identity. Internalized homophobia plays a role in a person's coming out. Repression and secrecy prevent members of the LGBTQ+ community from living their own lives (Renzetti & Edleson, 2008). Coming out risks losing friends, family, jobs, and even safety (Renzetti & Edleson, 2008). Internalized homophobia stemming from outside factors, along with the perceived risks involved, prevent many LGBTQ+ members from coming out at a younger age, if even at all.

Prejudice towards the LGBTQ+ members occur not only in the social context of their community but in some cases within one's own family. "Gay people are being punished within the family structure even though we have not done anything wrong" (Schulman, 2009). Heterosexual families tend to hide a family member's homosexuality from others as a way of self-preservation (Schulman, 2009). To self-preserve means to survive (Patrick, 1984). In context with the LGBTQ+ community, families may attempt to preserve how others view them by hiding a family member's identity. LGBTQ+ members may also preserve themselves to avoid backlash. LGBTQ+ members risk losing family members if they decide to come out and must deal with the attitudes and behaviors of those family members. How a member of the community perceives their family will react to their coming out can determine if they even decide to come out. Without proper intervention, familial homophobia can not only be a factor on a gay person's life but also a way that gay people treat one another (Schulman, 2009).

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam each have strong homophobic elements that are embraced by members of their denominations (Ahlberg & Cholbi, 2017). There are many verses within scripture that address homosexuality. For example, Leviticus 20:13 says "If

a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." Passages like these have the potential to incite violence on members of the LGBTQ+ community by members of religious denominations that follow this scripture (Sheard, 2000). Whether or not violence occurs, verses still create homophobic beliefs that spread through generations. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community feel that they must abandon their religious faiths and beliefs in order to accept their sexuality (Wagner et al., 1994). Contrary to that, they may continue to deny their sexuality as a means to keep the peace with religious denominations and family members. This denial may also be seen in organized sport.

Homophobia in Organized Sport

Similarly to what is experienced within families and religions, prejudice towards the LGBTQ+ community occurs within organized sport. According to Eric Anderson, sport only tolerates gay athletes as long as they are valuable to winning (2015). An example of this is NFL player Carl Nassib who, in 2021, became the first openly gay player to play in a game. Many football players that were open about their sexuality before being drafted by an NFL team would not go on to make a team. A well-known example of this is Michael Sam. Michael was drafted by the St. Louis Rams in 2014, becoming the first openly gay player to be drafted. He and the NFL faced a lot of backlash when he was drafted and he would go on to be cut from the team before the season began. Western sport has been used to produce hegemonic masculinity by turning boys away from feminine or homosexual qualities, attempting to teach them how to be

heterosexual, masculine men (Anderson, 2015). Bullying within sport may not only force LGBTQ+ members to drop out of sport, but it may also prevent them from playing at all (Baiocco et al., 2018). Youth are susceptible to bullying, especially in their younger teenage years. The thought of potentially being bullied is enough to keep youth from pursuing interests, including sport. Physical assault and verbal harassment are just two ways gay men in sport are discriminated against (Anderson, 2015).

According to Pharr, heterosexism is another form of discrimination that LGBTQ+ athletes face in sport (1997). It is based on the idea that heterosexuality is noble and right and all other forms of sexuality are immoral and inferior (Pharr, 1997). Heterosexuality is the norm within the United States, as it is across the globe. Defined gender roles in the context of masculinity and femininity play out in the world of sport. Men are not supposed to want to play sports that may be seen as feminine, like volleyball, just as women are not supposed to want to play sports that may be seen as masculine, like football. In men's' sports, masculinity is linked with heterosexuality and seen as vital to the sport's success (Anderson, 2015). Friends and family may play a role in what sport(s) someone chooses to participate in. This occurs not only for the LGBTQ+ participants but also for heterosexual participants. This may play itself out as a parent wanting their child to pursue a sport they once played or, for LGBTQ+ members specifically, a parent wanting their child to pursue a sport that fits into society's traditional views on what is masculine and what is feminine. Promoting inclusivity would mean rejecting traditional views on masculinity and femininity.

Constraints and Leisure

One way of understanding leisure is through John Kelly's (2009) typology which organizes leisure into four categories: unconditional leisure, recuperative leisure, relational leisure, and role determined leisure. Role determined leisure is a way of satisfying others' expectations, almost like an obligation (Kelly, 2009). Out of the four, role determined leisure has the potential to become a constraint for the LGBTQ+ community due to the gender-stereotyping of activities by society. For example, football is more masculine, and cheerleading is more feminine. As a way of satisfying their parents, many LGBTQ+ youth adhere to the gender norms society has placed on them. This is why we see professional athletes, such as Carl Nassib, decide to come out later in life.

Russell (2020) defines constraints as "that which inhibits a leisure pursuit once an interest for it has been formed" (p. 234). The hierarchical leisure constraints theory breaks constraints down into three categories: intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints, and structural constraints (Crawford et al., 1991). Intrapersonal constraints are psychological attributes that prohibit someone from participating in desired leisure (Crawford et al., 1991). These may include personal beliefs about one's abilities, religious beliefs, or prior socialization from others (Crawford et al., 1991). Interpersonal constraints come from social interactions with family, friends, and others (Crawford et al., 1991). Finally, structural constraints are architectural, economic, or societal barriers (Crawford et al., 1991). These may consist of the cost for participating in a leisure activity, the lack of time to participate in an activity, problems with the leisure facilities,

and the location of these facilities (Jackson, 2005). These must be handled in the order in which the theory breaks the categories down for someone to participate or continue to participate in leisure (Godbey et al., 2010). Constraints are likely to be reported by participants and non-participants of an activity (Kay & Jackson, 2018). Constraints, or perceived constraints, have the potential to prohibit someone from engaging in a leisure activity. As discussed above, these perceived constraints can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, or any combination of the three. It is important to note that while a constraint might not prohibit one from pursuing a desired leisure activity, it may lead to less engagement over time (Kay & Jackson, 2018).

As mentioned above, prejudice attitudes and discriminatory views from members of society may lead to internalized homophobia, which, according to the hierarchical leisure constraints theory could be classified as both intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints (Crawford et al., 1991). While the homophobia is internalized with the individual, outside factors like interactions with others reinforce that belief. Religious beliefs, also an intrapersonal constraint, may also lead to less engagement in leisure for the LGBTQ+ community because of one not wanting to surround themselves with beliefs that go against their lifestyle. Linkages to Kay & Jackson's work on leisure constraints can be found at the structural level and include lack of civil rights protections, including marriage, and former policies such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (National Archives Foundation, n.d.) enforce prejudice attitudes and discriminate against the LGBTQ+ community (Renzetti & Edleson, 2008).

RT and the LGBTQ+ Community

The lack of engagement over time or choosing not to participate at all in a leisure activity, in particular sport, can be attributed to the environment surrounding that activity (Kulick et al., 2018). Research involving RT and the LGBTQ+ community has produced a similar result of recreational therapists needing to create a welcoming environment. The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA) makes suggestions on how to make spaces more inclusive including the display of LGBTQ+ individuals and issues on printed materials and having professionals, including recreational therapists, engage in gender identity discussions and model respect for LGBTQ+ individuals (Schneider et al., 2019). Adams and Page suggest that recreational therapists should create a safe environment and feeling for their clients during treatment while also fostering a trauma-sensitive approach (2020).

Programming plays an important part in RT, as Romijnders et al. found in a study on LGBT youth. They reveal that a drop-in social program throughout the week increased confidence and self-esteem, promoted a sense of belonging, and empowered the participants and kept them at a lower risk of negative mental health outcomes and away from potential constraints (2017). Perceived constraints may not allow the LGBTQ+ community to achieve some or all of the benefits described in the study above without having help from RT. RT aims to lessen or eliminate constraints clients face through the use of activity-based interventions (NCTRC, 2023). While perceived constraints of the LGBTQ+ community have been researched in past studies, there continues to be limited research on constraints in organized sport and how RT could lessen or eliminate these

constraints. This study aims to examine the perceived constraints members of the LGBTQ+ community face in relation to organized sport participation in their youth by asking these research questions:

1. What are the perceived constraints that the LGBTQ+ community face?
2. How do perceived constraints impact the participation in the organized sport for the LGBTQ+ community?

Methods

Participants

Fourteen members who identify as being part of the LGBTQ+ community participated in the study. Most of the participants identified as cisgender male (*n* = 9), followed by cisgender female (*n* = 4), and nonbinary (*n* = 1) and ranged in ages from 21 to 60 years old. Most participants were Caucasian (*n* = 12), followed by African American (*n* = 1) and Hispanic (*n* = 1). These participants were randomly recruited through the "Tennessee LGBTQ+" Facebook group and LGBTQ+ organizations based within the state of Tennessee. These organizations were the Knox Pride Center, the Tennessee Equality Project, and The Pride Center at the University of Tennessee.

Instrumentation

A 21-question qualitative e-survey, created by the researchers, was administered to collect data on the perceived constraints the LGBTQ+ community faces in sport. The questions were broken up into three different categories: demographics, questions

regarding sport participation, The demographic section included questions on age, location, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, 'out' status, and religion. 'Out' status was formatted as an open-ended question that allowed participants to answer at their own discretion. Following the demographic questions was a series of sport-related, open-ended questions for both participants that played organized sports in their youth and those that did not. The sport participation section contained the following questions: *What were some of the reasons that you played organized sports when you were younger; Describe your comfort level in playing organized sports while you were younger and what impacted it; How did your teammates/coaches influence your sports experience?; How did your experience with organized sport in your youth influence your sport participation now?.* The section addressing challenges faced during or that prevented sport participation involved questions like: *What were things that kept you from playing an organized sport that you desired growing up?; How did your family influence your organized sport participation during your youth?; What barriers would have to be removed in order for you to participate now?).* Following the three categories of questions, participants were asked: *Would you play a desired sport if other members of the LGBTQ+ community were involved?* and *would you join an inclusive sport league with other members of the LGBTQ+ community?* The online format allowed the survey to be shared with organizations across the state, along with social media support groups, allowing for a more convenient survey that reached more of the intended population (Evans & Mathur, 2005).

Data Collection

Following IRB approval, the e-survey was circulated via a flyer containing a QR code to the Knox Pride Center, the Tennessee Equality Project, and the Pride Center at the University of Tennessee, with the location of posting left up to the discretion of the organizations. The flyer containing the e-survey was also posted directly to the "Tennessee LGBTQ+" Facebook group. The survey remained open for three weeks, with each organization receiving reminder emails following the 1st and 2nd weeks to repost or redistribute the flyer. The first question on the e-survey was a screening question asking if the participant was at least 18 years old. If the participant was under the age of 18, they were not allowed to complete the survey and was taken to a 'thank you' screen. Before the survey began, there was an opening paragraph that included information regarding the Institutional Review Board (IRB), along with key terms and definitions related to the LGBTQ+ community. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted following the completion of the survey.

Results

Data Analysis

All data analyses were performed by two researchers using QDA Miner 6. Out of 18 respondents who started the survey, 14 completed it in its entirety. The results of the survey were broken down into themes using a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report patterns (or themes) that appear within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive thematic analysis is a flexible

research tool that provides a detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the data was independently coded by the researchers and common themes were created. The researchers then collectively reviewed the themes and generated a final list of agreed upon themes. Each of the researchers then independently recoded the data using the final list of themes. The intercoder reliability was 89.5%.

Sample

Study respondents described their sexual orientation as lesbian (*n* = 2), gay (*n* = 7), bisexual (*n* = 2), queer (*n* = 2), and other (*n* = 1). Most respondents were Caucasian, cisgendered males (*n* = 8), followed by Caucasian, cisgendered females (*n* = 3), African American cisgendered males (*n* = 1), Hispanic cisgendered females (*n* = 1), and Caucasian nonbinary (*n* = 1). Respondents either played organized sport growing up (*n* = 10) or they did not (*n* = 4). Among the respondents, soccer was the most played sport (*n* = 6), followed by softball (*n* = 3), track (*n* = 2), dance (*n* = 2), and swimming (*n* = 2). It is important to note that these were not the only sports mentioned by the respondents, just the most common among the sample. Details on the demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 1 (shown in the appendix). Details on the respondents and the sports they played can be found in Table 2 (shown in the appendix).

Findings

Four themes were revealed once the data analysis was completed: 1) Sports experiences influenced by others, 2) Personal view of self in relation to sport, 3) The

benefits of the environment to well-being, and 4) The feeling of an inclusive environment.

Sports Experiences Influenced by Others

The first theme that occurred pertained to how a respondents sport experience was influenced by other people such as the positive and negative interactions between the respondents and their family members, friends, teammates and/or coaches either leading up to their participation in sport or while they were participating in sport. For example, parents signing a respondent up to play a sport or forcing them to play a sport they may not necessarily like. Other examples include how they were treated by their coaches and teammates, or how they started playing a sport because of a friend. Out of the respondents who played sports growing up (n = 10), four of them mentioned that they were either pressured, signed up by someone other than themselves, or forced by their parents to play. It is important to note that the respondents did not clarify if they were signed up without their consent or knowledge. Their responses included: “They continued to put pressure on me,” and, “Father forced me to play the more masculine sports.” Four respondents also mentioned that their teammates and/or coaches had negative impacts on their sport experience stating, “They always made it worse,” and “My…team discriminated against and bullied me after I was outed.” When asked to describe their level of comfort in playing organized sports while they were younger and its impact, Suzie said, “After experiencing bullying and discrimination, I had to leave the high school softball team.” While there were negative experiences, six respondents, including some also with negatives experiences, mentioned how they also had some positive

interactions with coaches and/or teammates. Some of their responses include: “Everyone got along,” “Teams were amazing support groups”, and “I had supportive coaches and teammates.”

Personal View of Self in Relation to Sport

The second theme that emerged revolves around how the respondent views themselves in relation to sport. This included physical traits, personality traits, or traits regarding to their identity (masculinity vs. femininity), and how these impacted their sport participation. For those respondents that did not participate in sports in their youth (n = 4), three mentioned how they lacked athletic ability or were smart and nerdy, having interests in reading or video games instead. Reese mentioned how their family thought they were being too much like a guy and thus took on that belief. When asked about the things that kept them from playing an organized sport they desired growing up?”, Chris responded with a definitive, “I was gay.” When asked to describe their level of comfort in playing organized sports when they were younger and what impacted it,” Robert said that they were slightly less comfortable when they were coming out.

Benefits of the Environment to Well-Being

The third theme that emerged revolves around the benefits the sport environment created for the respondents’ well-being. Increased physical activity and social interactions and relationships are examples of benefits to sport participation. Two respondents mentioned how they got into sports because of their friends and continued to make friends throughout playing sports growing up, increasing their social interactions.

Will mentioned his improved soccer skills increased his overall confidence, not only in sport. When asked how their family influenced their organized sport participation during their youth, Suzie responded with, “I often played on multiple teams at a time, so I had to spend less time at home in my abusive and then extremely discriminatory house.” Suzie also mentioned how softball and marching band created a support system for them while they were living at home.

The Feeling of an Inclusive Environment

The fourth and final theme involves the idea of an inclusive environment. The feeling of an inclusive environment describes how respondents felt when participating in organized sports in relation to their identity. More specifically, how comfortable they were they able to feel with their identity around teammates and coaches. Suzie said that their high school team “wouldn’t even let me change in the locker room without causing a big deal. I almost quit playing all together due to this.” John said that they “didn’t like the crowd, they teased me and were generally unfriendly.” Kyle mentioned that the “macho culture” and the “fear of being outed and/or treated poorly” were things that kept them from playing organized sports. Robert said that “there was a definite undercurrent of homophobia” and that “the perception of male sports being a toxic environment has not helped.” When describing their level of comfort, Will said that “there were other gay kids on the team which made me feel more comfortable playing.” When asked if they would play a desired sport if other LGBTQ+ members were involved, respondents said: “I love the sense of community it would build”; “Yes, I hate feeling alone”; “I would

love to play with folks like me"; and "It would be nice to play with people that I have a lot in common with."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived constraints members of the LGBTQ+ community face when it comes to participating in sports in their youth. Recall that constraints inhibit leisure pursuits once someone has formed an interest for them (Russell, 2020). The respondents of this study identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, ten of which having participated in organized sport(s) growing up. It is important to remember that constraints can be reported by participants and non-participants of an activity (Kay & Jackson, 2018), so while ten respondents participated in organized sport in their youth, the four that did not faced constraints as well. Four themes emerged from the analyses: sports experiences influenced by others, personal view of self in relation to sport, the benefits of the environment to well-being, and the feeling of an inclusive environment. The sections below will discuss linkages to Leisure Constraint Theory and how RT interventions can be used within each theme.

Sports Experiences Influenced by Others

Many respondents mentioned that they started playing organized sport at a young age because of the influence of someone close to them. A few of the respondents mentioned how they felt pressured or forced into playing certain sports because of their family's desire. In Kelly's (2009) typology of leisure, role-determined leisure is described as a way of satisfying others' expectations, almost like an obligation. This is a

common occurrence among youth and not just specific to the LGBTQ+ community. More specifically for the LGBTQ+ community; however, is the parents' desire for their child to play a sport that fits within society's gender norms, which becomes an interpersonal constraint when the child does not want to play the sport their parent wants but goes along with it to satisfy them. Many LGBTQ+ youth, as mentioned by some of the respondents in this study, feel the need to play a sport that fits with their assigned gender. This may look like gay men playing football because it is more masculine or lesbian women becoming cheerleaders to look more feminine. This intrapersonal constraint emerges from societal views.

Teammates and coaches make a huge impact on the sports experience. As mentioned previously, bullying within sport may not only force LGBTQ+ members to drop out of sport, but it may also prevent them from playing at all (Baiocco et al., 2018). Many of the respondents either quit playing sports because of bad experiences with coaches and/or teammates or did not play at all because of the potential for bullying and discrimination. What RT has the potential to provide in these circumstances is an environment in which the LGBTQ+ community is the main population for the sport. Having a professional that can foster a therapeutic relationship with a LGBTQ+ client in a setting, such as sport, in which the client does not feel comfortable may allow for a more positive experience (Adams & Page, 2020). Using sport as an activity-based intervention may allow the community to experience the sport without having to deal with the bullying and discrimination from their heterosexual peers.

Personal View of Self in Relation to Sport

How someone chooses to express themselves is a normal part of development, especially in their teenage years. Different types of expression can lead to isolation and bullying if it is not seen as typical. Most respondents had what can be viewed as typical responses in relation to sport. They were just not interested in sport and chose to spend their leisure time doing other things, such as videos games or reading. Three respondents; however, mentioned something regarding their identity. The families of respondents who were assigned as female at birth said they were being too much like a guy, thus taking on that belief of themselves. Another was not as comfortable playing sport while they were coming out. The simplest yet most powerful response was, "I was gay." This respondent said what a lot of LGBTQ+ youth feel when it comes to sports in just three words. The environment of organized sport has the potential to exclude marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community (Kulick et al., 2018). This goes back to the idea that heterosexuality is noble and right (Pharr, 1997). Masculinity is seen as being vital to sport and anything that goes against that is outcasted (Anderson, 2015). This respondent, as with many LGBTQ+ individuals across the globe, felt that they could not partake in sport because they were gay. This personal attribute connects to Crawford and Godbey's intrapersonal constraint, meaning because they are gay, they believe they cannot participate in sports (1987). Organized leisure programs play an important part in providing opportunities for youth to develop their identities (Theriault & Witt, 2014). Recreational therapists creating these organized leisure programs not only allows the community to participate but also fosters crucial development.

Benefits of the Environment to Well-Being

Participating in organized sports plays an important role in the development of youth (Kulick et al., 2018). Organized sports allow youth to learn and improve communication skills, how to work with a team, and create relationships. Some of the respondents that participated in sports mentioned how they made more friends and felt comfortable within a team setting. Another mentioned how participating in sport improved their overall confidence. One mentioned how participating got them out of their abusive household and created a support system. LGBTQ+ youth experience a higher percentage of negative health and mental health outcomes (Rhoades et al., 2018). Family can have a detrimental impact on the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. The negative environment surrounding sports for the LGBTQ+ community can be attributed back to the people they interact with, or an interpersonal constraint (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Having an environment in which they feel comfortable and can escape that negativity, like with one of the respondents, may improve overall well-being. Structurally, there is a lack of programming that involves just the LGBTQ+ community, causing a lack of choice for leisure resources (Page et al., 2022). A lack of programming means potential participants are not receiving the same life skills and benefits that others do, increasing health and mental health problems, impacting their overall well-being (Rhoades et al,, 2018). Recreational therapists creating a space and building a therapeutic relationship in which the community can feel comfortable enough to work through their perceived constraints is crucial when there is a need for but also a lack in programming (Adams & Page, 2020).

The Feeling of an Inclusive Environment

As mentioned previously, the sport environment can exclude marginalized groups. Respondents of this study mentioned how the sport crowd and culture made them feel uncomfortable. Poor social interactions with teammates made the environment uncomfortable. The respondents' personal feelings and social interactions made for both intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. When it comes to interpersonal constraints, the lack of a supportive environment can lead to isolation and difficulty managing relationships with others (Page et al., 2022). Structurally, a lack of programming makes it difficult for the LGBTQ+ community to get involved in an inclusive environment (Page et al., 2022).

One important factor that a respondent mentioned is how they felt more comfortable playing sports with other gay people. More LGBTQ+ leagues are being created throughout the United States to create a more inclusive environment for the community. Most of the respondents said that they would love to play a sport or in a league that involves the LGBTQ+ community as its main population. Recreational Therapy can provide this through sport-based interventions. This may look like workshops or classes on how to play a sport all the way up to a LGBTQ+ friendly league that promotes an inclusive environment and skills that the participants can use in their daily lives. Recreational Therapy can work on improving communication, problem-solving, teamwork, critical thinking, and leaderships skills through activity-based interventions including sport (NCTRC,2023). The key with this, as with the other themes, is the fostering of a therapeutic relationship in which the client or participant feels safe

(Adams & Page, 2020). Recall that GLMA made suggestions on how recreational therapists can make spaces more inclusive, including the display of LGBTQ+ individuals and issues on printed materials and engaging in gender identity discussions and model respect for LGBTQ+ individuals (Schneider et al., 2019).

Limitations

While every effort was made to avoid limitations in this study, there are several challenges that were present. One limitation of this study was the small sample size and under representation of sexual identities. The respondents were either members of the "Tennessee LGBTQ+" Facebook group or affiliated with or following the Knox Pride Center, the Tennessee Equality Project, or The Pride Center at the University of Tennessee on social media. The researcher cannot be certain that the organizations post the flyers on social media accounts nor control how and when they posted, adding to this limitation. Organizations were emailed the flyers and received follow-up emails every week as reminders to continue distributing them to participants. Most respondents identified as gay, with no respondents identifying as transgender.

Another limitation of this study was the lack of detailed responses to questions. Respondents would only answer the questions with a couple of words and move on to the next or would not respond to questions when prompted. The inability for the respondents to follow up on their responses and provide more details made it difficult to interpret some of the results. The study relied on self-reported measures of constraints participants faced in youth sports. The participants may or may not have understood each question

and recall of past experiences may have made answering the survey questions more difficult.

One last limitation of this study was the sensitivity of the topic itself. This study aimed to examine participants who identify with the LGBTQ+ community that currently reside in the state of Tennessee. Tennessee being in the Southeastern United States, which is known to be more homophobic and discriminatory, may have made the respondents feel more uncomfortable and vulnerable giving out such personal information about themselves.

Future Research

Future research should replicate this study with a larger sample size beyond the East Tennessee region to determine if similar constraints are found throughout the LGBTQ+ community in relation to youth sport participation and explanations as to why these might occur. To replicate this study, researchers should ensure partnerships with organizations (if desired) are made in advance and that they distribute the survey materials to the population of interest.

Future research, including interview-based studies, should also explore more in depth the perceived constraints the LGBTQ+ community face when it comes to sport participation. Asking more in-depth questions and for a respondent to expand on their answer could lead to more perceived constraints and more importantly, ways to combat them. It should also focus on using recreational therapy modalities and research to make more connections between RT and the LGBTQ+ community. Future research should expand the study from sport to include other recreation activities. Future research should

also implore more quantitative measures to more accurately quantify the data to make comparisons between different populations.

Implications for Practice

Current research suggests that there have not been many studies regarding the LGBTQ+ community, sport, and RT. This study found that members of the LGBTQ+ community are interested in playing sports with others within the community and joining inclusive sport leagues with members of the community. With limited parks and recreation agencies having diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) activities, recreational therapists within these agencies can use responses such as clients wanting to surround themselves with those of the same community to look at creating a more inclusive environment for organized sports through programming (Meerts-Brandsma, et al., 2024). The lack of programming for LGBTQ+ youth within parks and recreation agencies can be attributed to the lack of DEI initiatives and cultural competency trainings (Meerts-Brandsma, et al., 2024).

Parks and recreation agencies can start making their spaces more inclusive first through LGBTQ+ inclusive nondiscrimination policies (Athlete Ally, 2022). Most parks and recreation agencies have nondiscrimination policies; however, most of these policies usually only address race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Krane, et al., 2021). Athlete Ally suggests that agencies should have a policy that covers gender identity, sexual orientation, gender expression, and sex characteristics (2022). This would not only protect LGBTQ+ individuals under a nondiscrimination policy but also show those

individuals that the agency aims to support them. Agencies can also show support with inclusive, appropriate dress codes that allow for expression, and codes of conduct that they must adhere by when it comes to homophobia and transphobia (Athlete Ally, 2022).

Transgender youth are at a disadvantage when it comes to sports as many programs do not allow those that identify as transgender to participate and if so, they must participate in their assigned sex's division. This means that those who transition from male to female would have to play in a boy's league, which presents a higher chance for violence and bullying (Litwiller, 2024). For those transitioning from female to male, they are likely not going to be allowed to participate. This has been seen in collegiate sport policies including the NAIA banning transgender women from participating in women's sports and the NCAA facing backlash for allowing transgender women to participate. For agencies, putting in inclusive transgender policies, as well as reporting policies, may help combat some of the attitudes created by policies like the NAIA ban (Athlete Ally, 2022). Reporting policies help lay out a clear way for individuals who face discrimination to report such incidences and outlines different disciplinary actions that may be taken by the agency (Athlete Ally, 2022).

It is imperative for RTs to be culturally competent when working with the LGBTQ+ community which may require additional training and workshops. RTs being culturally competent is important because LGBTQ+ youth anticipating violence from being in an environment, such as sport, may lead to them not participating at all (Litwiller, 2024). Furthermore, sport leagues where the LGBTQ+ community can participate with others like them while also fostering therapeutic relationships and

treatments may create a more inclusive environment and lessen the constraints they may currently face and faced in their youth. Inclusive leagues must stem from the administrative side of agencies, where policies as stated above are put into practice to not only help protect members of the LGBTQ+ community but also create an environment in which they feel comfortable enough to participate.

Conclusion

Since its creation in 1987, the hierarchical leisure constraints theory has been used to categorize constraints that people face when it comes to leisure opportunities into three different categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The results of this study highlight the three different categories of constraints by addressing the perceived constraints that the LGBTQ+ community face in relation to organized youth sport participation. All three categories, whether alone or combined, were mentioned by respondents of the study. Recreational therapists have a responsibility to provide therapeutic leisure opportunities to help decrease and navigate constraints for individuals who cannot advocate for themselves (Stodolska et al., 2020). Recreational therapy should not only provide therapeutic leisure opportunities to potentially lessen barriers, but also teach those that partake a variety of life skills, such as problem solving, self-awareness, communication, and empathy (NCTRC, 2023). While the LGBTQ+ community faced several constraints through their experiences with organized youth sports, there is still an opportunity that recreational therapists can provide within parks and recreation agencies that would allow them to play sports alongside others within the community.

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Appendix

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants (*n* = 14).

Characteristic	*N*	*%*
Age		
20-30 years	6	43.0
30-40 years	2	14.0
40-50 years	4	29.0
50-60 years	2	14.0
Race		
Caucasian/White	12	86.0
Black/African American	1	7.0
Hispanic/Latino	1	7.0
Identity		
Cisgender Male	9	64.0
Cisgender Female	4	29.0
Nonbinary	1	7.0
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian	2	14.0
Gay	7	50.0
Bisexual	2	14.0
Queer	2	14.0
Other	1	7.0
Religion growing up		
Catholic	5	36.0
Protestant	1	7.0
Pentecostal	1	7.0
Baptist	1	7.0
Lutheran	1	7.0
Non-denominational	1	7.0
Mormon	1	7.0
Other	1	7.0
Not religious	2	14.0
Currently religious		
Yes	3	21.0
No	11	79.0
Play organized sport		
Yes	10	71.0
No	4	29.0

Table 2. Study Respondents, Sexual Orientation, and Sports

Pseudonym	Sexual Orientation	Sports Played
James	Gay	None
John	Gay	None
Michael	Gay	Soccer, bowling, rugby
Shawn	Bisexual	Track, soccer, dance, cheer
Reese	Other	Marching band, cross training, ballet
Kyle	Gay	None
Suzie	Queer	Softball, track, marching band
Chris	Gay	None
Angelica	Lesbian	Soccer, softball, marching band
Brittany	Lesbian	Soccer, softball, basketball
Lee	Gay	N/A
Robert	Queer	Swimming
Will	Gay	Soccer, baseball, football
Austin	Bisexual	Swimming, soccer

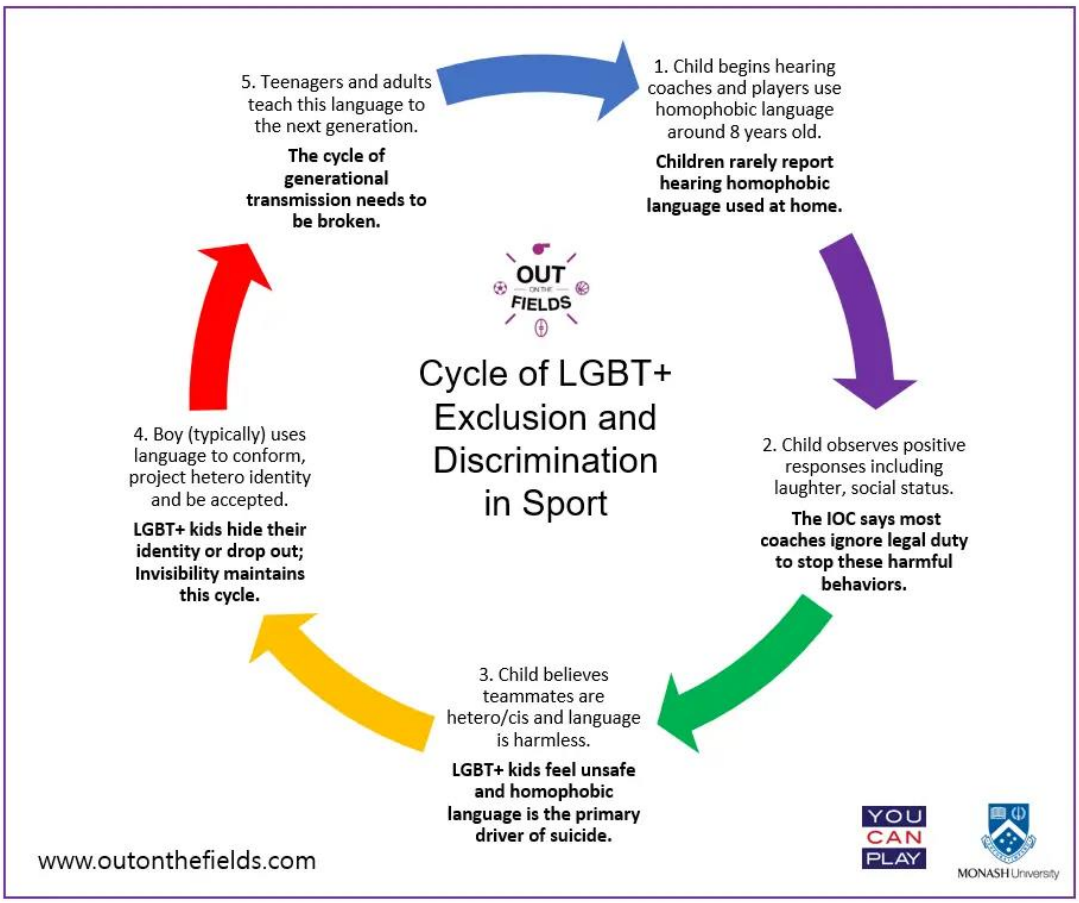


Figure 1. Cycle of LGBT+ Exclusion and Discrimination in Sport

Default Question Block

Are you at least 18 years old?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Opening Paragraph

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: A Descriptive Analysis of Barriers Faced by the LGTBQ+ Community in Relation to Organized Sport Participation in their Youth.
Researcher(s): Jay Hoppes, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Angela Wozencroft, Ph.D, CTRS, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

We are asking you to be in this research study because you self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. You must be age 18 or older to participate in the study. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

Why is the research being done?
The purpose of the research study is to look at challenges the LGBTQ+ community faces when it comes to playing organized sports in their youth.

What will I do in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, you will complete an online survey. The survey includes questions about demographics (i.e., age, race, sexual orientation, etc.), organized sport participation, and challenges faced when playing organized sports. and should take you about 30 minutes to complete. You can skip questions that you do not want to answer by typing "N/A".

Can I say "No"?
Being in this study is up to you. You can stop up until you submit the survey. After you submit the survey, we cannot remove your responses because we will not know which responses came from you. Your decision to not participate in this study will not affect your relationship with The University of Tennessee.

Are there any risks to me?
Possible risks include some of the survey questions being personal in nature and may make you feel uncomfortable to recall past experiences. To minimize these risks, you may type "N/A" for questions that you are not comfortable answering.

Are there any benefits to me?
We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about challenges faced when it comes to LGBTQ+ youth participating in organized sports. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

What will happen with the information collected for this study?
The survey is anonymous, and no one will be able to link your responses back to you. Your responses to the survey will not be linked to your computer, email address or other electronic identifiers. Please do not include your name or other information that could be used to identify you in your survey responses. Information provided in this survey can only be kept as secure as any other online communication. Information collected for this study will be published and possibly presented at scientific meetings.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?
You will not be paid for being in this study.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?
If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Jay Hoppes, jhoppes@vols.utk.edu, 828-855-4519; Angela Wozencroft, awozenc1@utk.edu, awozenc1@utk.edu, 865-974-1289.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

I have read this form, been given the chance to ask questions and have my questions answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By selecting "I Agree" below, I am providing my signature by electronic means and agree to be in this study. I can print or save a copy of this consent information for future reference. If I do not want to be in this study, I can select "I Do Not Agree" to exit out of the survey.

- ○ I agree to participate
- ○ I do not agree to participate

Key Terms & Definitions

Key Terms & Definitions

Organized Sport: Sport activities that are run by a school, business, community, or club (school sports, club sports, YMCA league, Little League, etc.)

Coming Out: The process of accepting your sexual orientation and sharing that openly with other people.

Homophobia: The fear, hatred, or discomfort with lesbian, gay, or bisexual people.

Transphobia: The fear, hatred, or discomfort with transgender or genderqueer people.

Prejudice: Negative attitudes towards another person or group that are formed in advance.

Discrimination: The unfair treatment of people or groups based on characteristics (race, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.).

Demographics

How old are you?

In what city/state did you spend most of your youth?

What is your race/ethnicity?

- ○ American Indian/Alaska Native
- ○ Asian
- ○ Black/African American
- ○ Hispanic/Latino
- ○ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- ○ White
- ○ Other

How do you identify?

- ○ Cisgender Male
- ○ Cisgender Female
- ○ Transgender Male
- ○ Transgender Female
- ○ Nonbinary
- ○ Gender-fluid
- ○ Other
- ○ Choose not to respond

What is your sexual orientation

- ○ Lesbian
- ○ Gay
- ○ Bisexual

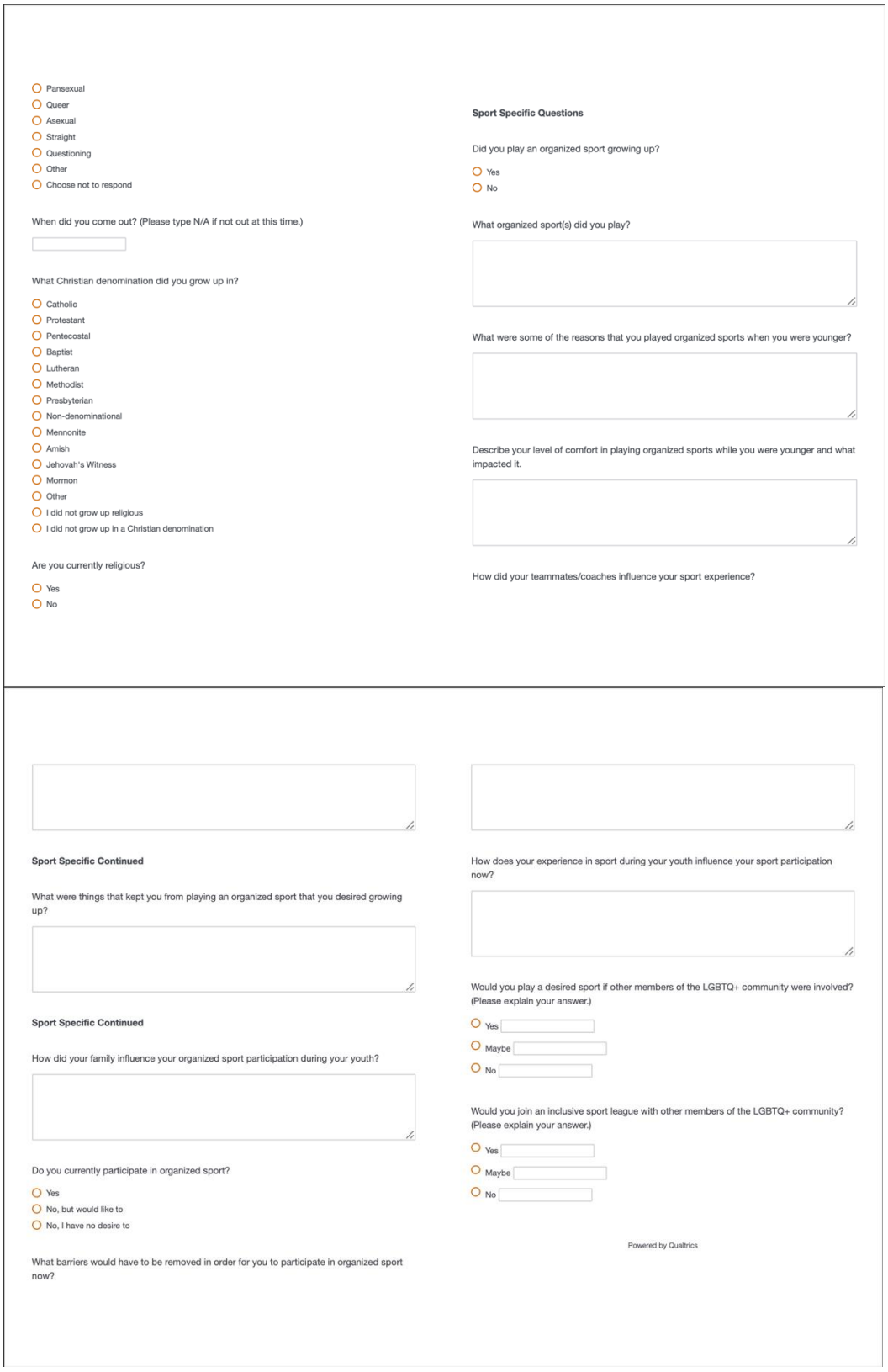


Figure 2. Survey Instrument

Vita

Jay Hoppes was born and raised in Statesville, North Carolina. After graduating high school, he attended Western Carolina University before transferring to Appalachian State University. There, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology. He chose to attend the University of Tennessee, Knoxville to pursue a Master of Science degree in Therapeutic Recreation. His research interests include studying the benefits of recreational therapy for minoritized communities and the impact of physical activity on symptoms of depression.