



Student-Athlete Attitudes Toward Gay, Ally, and Anti-LGBT+ Prospective Coaches

Travis R. Scheadler

The Ohio State University

Ninah A. Bertrand

University of Kentucky

Abby Snowden

Louisiana State University

Marc L. Cormier

University of Kentucky

The purpose of the present study was to explore the attitudes of student-athletes toward gay, ally, and anti-LGBT+ coaches. A total of 143 National Collegiate Athletic Association student-athletes completed surveys that contained a randomly assigned cover letter from either a gay coach, ally coach, anti-LGBT+ coach, or a non-identified coach (i.e., control). Results from a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance revealed student-athletes rated gay, ally, and non-identified coaches statistically significantly higher than anti-LGBT+ coaches. Opportunities to share thoughts in open-ended responses also revealed several strengths and weaknesses of each of the coaches. Namely, participants valued the ally coach for having an inclusive philosophy, whereas the homonegative values from the anti-LGBT+ coach and the sexual orientation of the gay coach were viewed as major weaknesses. Findings from this research may help us further understand the degree to which sexual prejudice is present within the elite sport community.

Keywords: sexual prejudice theory, LGBT+ sport, college sport, hireability, person-job fit

Although, some researchers have indicated lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBT+) athletes have positive experiences of coming out and inclusion within sport (e.g., Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Fink et al., 2012), others have noted homonegativity (i.e., purposeful and negative attitudes and behaviors—not an irrational fear—toward members of the LGBT+ community; Krane, 1996) and heterosexism (i.e., the institutionalized beliefs and practices of discriminating against non-heterosexual behaviors, identities, relationships, or communities; Herek, 1990) are still pervasive in sport (e.g., Doull et al., 2018; Gill et al., 2010). For example, in a recent study, 70% of student-athletes reported hearing homophobic (i.e., irrational fears of the LGBT+ community; Anderson, 2017; Melton & Cunningham, 2012) and homonegative comments from coaches and teammates (Toomey et al., 2018). Similarly, Denison and Kitchen (2015) revealed that 60% of the participants believed LGB athletes were just “accepted a little” if at all. Additionally, 84% of Americans in the study have witnessed or experienced homonegativity in sport. More recently, Denison et al. (2020b) studied homophobic language and norms among male rugby and ice hockey players and 53.8% of participants self-reported using homophobic language. The authors contend this type of language negatively affects their gay and bisexual male teammates. In another recent study, Denison et al. (2020c) revealed 41.6% of LGB youth athletes were targets of homophobic behaviors. Indeed, Denison and colleagues (2020a) reviewed the literature and insisted discrimination against LGBT+ people in sport continues to exist.

Though compelling, most research has focused on the experiences of and attitudes toward LGBT+ student-athletes (e.g., Cunningham, 2012), the lived experiences of LGBT+ coaches (e.g., Kane & Brown, 2005), or parental attitudes toward LGBT+ coaches (e.g., Cunningham & Melton, 2014). Yet, attitudes of student-athletes toward LGBT+ coaches have been minimally studied. This perspective is critical to our understanding of the LGBT+ sport community because the attitudes toward coaches are important in developing and sustaining a healthy and effective coach-athlete relationship to achieve optimal growth and performance (e.g., Jowett & Cockerill, 2002). Moreover, with the continued presence of social media and ever-changing sociopolitical climate, it is important to continuously examine trends of attitudes toward the LGBT+ community. Overall, it appears that the literature on LGBT+ athletes is mixed; therefore, it is important to continue to examine the experiences of and attitudes toward LGBT+ individuals in sport from varying perspectives. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to evaluate the attitudes athletes have toward gay, anti-LGBT+, and ally coaches.

LGBT+ Coaches

Although, coaching is generally a rewarding experience, LGBT+ coaches may not have the same opportunities and positive experiences as their heterosexual counterparts. LGBT+ athletes and coaches are commonly challenged by negative stereotypes and status loss in sport. LGBT+ athletes and coaches, for example, are often labeled as “the other” (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b) while gay male coaches may be perceived as less masculine and, thus, less fit for the job (Anderson, 2005; Gill et al., 2006). This is thought to be due to the ingrained masculinity and associated heteronormativity within sport (Cavalier, 2011).

Research has indicated various individuals can contribute (both negatively and positively) to the experience of LGBT+ coaches. For instance, parents (Cunningham & Melton, 2012;

Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a) and coworkers (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010) typically support homonegative and homophobic attitudes and behaviors. In addition, Cunningham and Melton (2014) revealed parents often used offensive and homophobic or homonegative language or vocally supported decisions to remove or demote LGBT+ coaches or to qualify the acceptance of LGBT+ coaches based on some other condition. Although some parents have indifference or unequivocal support toward LGBT+ coaches, others may qualify support for LGBT+ coaches as long as they fulfill their job duties, refrain from promoting their sexuality within the context of work, and are not sexual predators, implying an LGBT+ identity automatically makes one more likely to be a sexual predator and less likely to fulfill job duties. Similarly, Sartore and Cunningham (2009a) also found parents depended on stereotypes to justify distrust and disgust for lesbian and gay coaches. Moreover, the authors noted former and current young adult athletes were unwilling to play for a gay or lesbian coach.

Herek (2002, 2009), however, revealed most of the general public recognize that negative stereotypes (e.g., LGBT+ individuals are more likely to be sexual predators) are unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, many people still use these stereotypes as means to discriminate against the LGBT+ community. Interestingly, Herek (2009) explained that these unjustified conditions for approving an LGBT+ coach are usually not included when discussing heterosexual coaches. LGBT+ coaches, therefore, are at an automatic disadvantage by immediately being associated with negative stereotypes, impacting their perceived job qualifications.

Moreover, many lesbian coaches indicate being a lesbian is still challenging for coaches even though there are several lesbian coaches in sport (Krane & Barber, 2005). Findings also indicated some lesbian coaches are still not comfortable disclosing their sexuality to other coaches and coworkers because of the perception of homophobia and hostility in the sport industry. Coaches from opposing teams, for instance, will attempt to use the LGBT+ identity of a coach or player as a recruitment strategy to deter high school prospects from attending a rival institution. Krane and Barber (2005) also discussed hiring and evaluation practices, noting athletic directors and search committees prefer femininity over masculinity in female coaches. Further, lesbian coaches are often associated with masculinity and, once perceived as lesbian, are less likely to be hired or promoted and more likely to receive negative evaluations. Similarly, gay men claim they are also uncomfortable around others in the sport industry and experience status loss when their sexuality is revealed, as being LGBT+ is often not accepted in sport (Cavalier, 2011). After all, coaching is an innately competitive field and, therefore, any perceived infringement to one's coaching ability can threaten promotion, salary raises, job security, or other advancement. Although these findings are dated, other scholars continue to provide evidence indicating that, even though attitudes toward LGBT+ people are improving, discrimination against LGBT+ people still exists (see Amodeo et al., 2020; Krane, 2018; Nadal et al., 2016).

Comparatively, sport is ingrained within traditional masculinity, which is conducive to promoting heteronormativity and, thus, stereotypes about gender and sexuality, and expectations for how athletes and coaches should behave both in and out of sport (Anderson, 2005; Gill et al., 2006). In other words, greater identification with masculine norms and heterosexuality may be more desirable in men's sports, deeming a lack of masculinity and being gay as less desirable. On the contrary, the opposite holds true for lesbian coaches. Shang et al. (2012) explained while men are expected to express masculinity, women are expected to display femininity. In other words, greater identification with feminine norms and heterosexuality is more desirable in women's sports, and a lack of femininity and/or being lesbian is less desirable. Fink and

colleagues (2001) extended this idea by noting White, able-bodied, heterosexual men are the most dominant in the realm of sport. In other words, they are the ones with the most power and privilege. As explained by sexual prejudice theory, anyone who does not fit these identities (e.g., LGBT+ coaches) faces additional hurdles.

Sexual Prejudice Theory

The very premise of sexual prejudice theory (Herek, 2000) is that sexual minorities experience hurdles heterosexuals live without. According to compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), heterosexuality and male dominance serve as the norm, creating a heteronormative society where heterosexuality becomes the standard against which all other sexualities and genders become judged. A heteronormative society then assumes any deviation from the norm is abnormal and inferior (Jackson, 2006; Rich, 1980; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a; Wright & Clarke, 1999). In other words, LGBT+ identities are deemed less acceptable and perceived as less valuable. According to Herek (2007) and Rich (1980), this heteronormative structure consequentially leads to stigma, prejudice, and discrimination that may present itself in numerous ways.

Yang (1997), for example, noted heterosexual and cisgender Americans are unwilling to provide equal protections to LGBT+ people. Several researchers have noted that this unrelenting stigma, prejudice, and discrimination are grounded in religion, morality, and family values (Herek, 2000; Ragins, 2004), and more specifically in a lack of education and exposure to LGBT+ individuals (Bernstein, 2004; Herek, 2000) as evidenced by the fact that it took until 2015 for the United States Supreme Court to rule in favor of same-sex marriage and until 2020 to rule that employers could not discriminate against a person due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Indeed, other scholars have referenced sexual prejudice theory to help explain how discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation exists in sport. Amodeo and colleagues (2020), for example, found many Italian sport directors endorsed traditional male norms and that endorsing these norms was related to openly rejecting gay and lesbian people. Symons et al. (2017) even noted how experiencing homophobia and sexism in sport resulted in negative associations with sport. Specifically, the authors indicated these experiences increased feelings of sadness, anger, distress, and shame. According to Symons and colleagues (2017), these negative associations with sport made some LGB people avoid or contemplate leaving sport.

Moreover, Hebl et al. (2002) found employers presented such discrimination by speaking less with and more negatively toward applicants they presumed to be LGBT+. Likewise, Cunningham et al. (2010) found employers were more likely to find negative characteristics in applicants presumed to be LGBT+ despite recognizing their equal qualifications to heterosexual applicants. Therefore, the authors provided evidence that being LGBT+ negatively impacts employers' perceptions of a coach's person-job fit (i.e., job compatibility; Cable & Judge, 1996; Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001) and hireability (i.e., meeting the qualifications for the job and having the ability to be successful in it; see Sartore & Cunningham, 2007).

LGBT+ coaches, therefore, might risk facing stigma, prejudice, and/or discrimination when being considered for a position, regardless of their personality, attitudes, qualifications, and other relevant information. Nevertheless, a plethora of research insists coaches are some of the

most significant figures in athletes' lives (Becker et al., 1996; Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Zhang & Chelladurai, 2013) and have the unique opportunity to impact their intrinsic (Amorose & Horn, 2000) and self-determined motivation (Gagné, 2003), making it necessary to go beyond the hiring decisions of employers and consider the attitudes athletes have toward coaches.

Because coaches play a significant role in the lives of athletes, yet the literature yields mixed results on attitudes toward and experiences of LGBT+ personnel in sport, the present study aims to determine the attitudes athletes have toward LGBT+ coaches. In recognition that not all heterosexual individuals have stigma and prejudices toward and discriminate against LGBT+ individuals, the present study also aims to determine the attitudes athletes have toward ally coaches and anti-LGBT+ coaches. Therefore, the present study is guided by the following question:

RQ: Do college athletes have more positive attitudes toward prospective gay, LGBT+ ally, or anti-LGBT+ coaches?

Methods

Instruments and Procedures

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and then read a description explaining that there is a head coach vacancy in their sport and their athletic director would like their opinion on an applicant. Participants were instructed to believe the candidate met the minimum and preferred qualifications for the position. Then, they were instructed to read one of the four randomly assigned cover letters developed by the authors with consultation from a current gay coach. All four cover letters were identical, with one exception: in Condition 1, the applicant identified as gay ($n = 35$); in Condition 2, they identified as an LGBT+ ally ($n = 34$); in Condition 3, they identified as anti-LGBT+ ($n = 39$); and in Condition 4, they did not mention any relationship to the LGBT+ community (i.e., control group; $n = 35$). Coaches were perceivably male by being given the male typical name "Richard" and were perceivably gay (or some other sexuality besides heterosexual) by mentioning their husband whereas LGBT+ ally and anti-LGBT+ coaches were perceivably heterosexual by referring to their wife. The gay and LGBT+ ally coaches mentioned they would be excited to move to an area that is inclusive and where their children can be whoever they would like to be; meanwhile, the anti-LGBT+ coach mentioned their excitement to move to an area that shares their values about a traditional husband and wife family structure. The coach in Condition 4 made no reference to a partner and only mentioned their excitement to move to the new area. Please see Table 1 for an overview of the four different conditions.

After reading through the cover letter, participants responded to three items adapted from Sartore and Cunningham (2007) to measure hireability (e.g., "I would hire this person for the Head Coach position") and person-job fit (e.g., "This person seems to have the characteristics necessary for the job") on a 7-point Likert-type scale. In the present study, these scales had reliabilities of $\alpha = .93$ and $.92$, respectively. Finally, participants were asked three open-ended questions pertaining to the candidate's strengths, weaknesses, and other requested information, respectively.

Table 1

Conditions of the Cover Letter

Condition Number	Brief Description of Coach	Description of Condition
1	Gay	The coach made a reference to their husband and the importance of inclusivity
2	LGBT+ Ally Coach	The coach made a reference to their wife and the importance of inclusivity
3	Anti-LGBT+ Coach	The coach made a reference to their wife and the importance of traditional values
4	Control	The coach made a reference to their wife and no reference to inclusivity or traditional values

Participants

Participants initially included 152 student-athletes. Nine participants, however, were removed from the data for failing the manipulation check. Specifically, these participants incorrectly perceived the sexual orientation of the coach. A participant was removed if they perceived a coach's sexual orientation differed from the sexual orientation intended with the respective condition the participant was assigned. For example, a participant was removed if they perceived the coach as straight when the coach was gay. This manipulation check allowed the researchers to more accurately assess attitudes toward a prospective coach based on their sexual orientation. In other words, the manipulation check allowed the researchers to ensure the accuracy of the manipulation. Therefore, a total of 143 participants were included in the final analysis. They ranged from 18 to 23 years old ($M = 19.72$; $SD = 1.430$). These participants were male ($n = 31$) and female ($n = 112$) National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I ($n = 76$), Division II ($n = 29$), and Division III ($n = 38$) athletes. Student-athletes participated in a variety of sports, including softball ($n = 25$), volleyball ($n = 23$), swimming and diving ($n = 21$), soccer ($n = 16$), track and field/cross country ($n = 16$), lacrosse ($n = 8$), baseball ($n = 7$), tennis ($n = 7$), football ($n = 3$), and others ($n = 21$). Participants identified as mostly White/Caucasian/European American ($n = 129$) with others identifying as Latinx/Hispanic American ($n = 10$), African American/Black ($n = 9$), Asian/Asian American ($n = 3$), and other ($n = 1$). Two participants preferred not to respond. Please note, though, adding these subsamples together does not equal 143 because some of these student-athletes participated in more than one sport and/or identified as more than one race. Indeed, 4 student-athletes participated in more than one sport and 10 participants identified as more than one race. Notably, the participants were mostly heterosexual ($n = 128$) with others who identified as bisexual ($n = 8$) or gay or lesbian ($n = 5$). Two preferred not to respond.

Data Analysis

The main analysis of the present study was a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) where the condition served as the independent variable and person-job fit and hireability served as dependent variables. The six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were then used to analyze the data from the open-ended questions through an inductive approach. The first three authors began by familiarizing themselves with the data by

reading through each response without taking any notes. Next, these authors read through the data while taking notes. These authors then compared notes to create codes from the data. To identify codes, the first three authors engaged in conversation about their notes until consensus was reached. Next, the authors generated themes by finding consistency among various codes. When doing so, authors deliberated about the identification of themes and the grouping of codes into themes until consensus was reached. In step 4, the authors returned to the data to ensure the accuracy of the themes. During this stage, the authors engaged in discussion until consensus was reached on the themes. Upon agreement of themes, the authors labeled and defined each theme. Finally, themes were organized in a logical progression to share the results.

The inclusion of multiple coders in data analysis is one method of strengthening the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Patton, 2002). Other traditional forms of trustworthiness were unable to be included in data analysis. Unlike most qualitative studies, data in the present study were collected anonymously, preventing the authors from referring back to the original sources of the data (i.e., participants) to check for accuracy. Nonetheless, the fourth author of the present study was not involved in data collection. This researcher reviewed the themes and analyses to further strengthen the trustworthiness of the data analysis. Indeed, the inclusion of multiple researchers inevitably provides additional perspectives that decrease the threat of potential bias during data analysis (Patton, 2002).

Results

Quantitative Findings

The main analysis of the present study was a one-way MANOVA, which suggested the condition significantly impacted perceived hireability and person-job fit, $F(6, 276) = 14.319, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .582$, partial $\eta^2 = .237$. From this model, we can see the condition had significant effects on both hireability ($F(3, 139) = 32.102, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .409$) and person-job fit ($F(3, 139) = 26.012, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .360$). This suggests participants had significantly different responses to coaches in at least two different conditions.

Tukey's post hoc analysis for hireability then revealed significant differences between Condition 1 (i.e., gay coach; $M = 5.08, SD = 1.43$) and Condition 3 (i.e., anti-LGBT+ coach; $M = 2.60, SD = 1.63$), $p < .001$; Condition 2 (i.e., ally coach; $M = 5.15, SD = 1.11$) and Condition 3, $p < .001$; and Condition 3 and Condition 4 (i.e., control; $M = 4.99, SD = 1.05$), $p < .001$. No significant differences were found between the gay coach, ally coach, or the control. These findings indicate participants were more likely to recommend the gay coach, ally coach, and non-identified coach (i.e., control) for the head coach position than the anti-LGBT+ coach. Participants, though, did not have a preference for the gay coach, ally coach, or non-identified coach.

Tukey's post hoc analysis for person-job fit revealed significant differences between Condition 1 (i.e., gay coach; $M = 5.33, SD = 1.15$) and Condition 3 (i.e., anti-LGBT+ coach; $M = 3.28, SD = 1.55$), $p < .001$; Condition 2 (i.e., ally coach; $M = 5.27, SD = 1.08$) and Condition 3, $p < .001$; and Condition 3 and Condition 4 (i.e., control; $M = 5.30, SD = .97$), $p < .001$. No significant differences were found among the gay coach, ally coach, or control. These findings suggest participants were more likely to believe the gay coach, ally coach, and non-identified coach were better fits for the head coach position than the anti-LGBT+ coach. Participants,

though, did not report differences in person-job fit between the gay coach, ally coach, or non-identified coach.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, and other requested information revealed several unique themes for each condition. Given these data were collected from open-ended responses at the end of a survey and not through interviews, data were commonly collected as just one or few word(s) and not as lengthy statements or examples.

Strengths. Overall, themes identified as strengths included experience, motivation, honesty, holistic approach, inclusive, and direct. Participants in each condition identified experience as a strength of the coach with keywords and phrases such as “qualified for the position based on experience,” “extensive training,” “qualified,” and “experienced.” These comments suggest each coach was perceived to have the necessary skills and experience to be successful in this position. After all, participants were led to believe each coach met at least the minimum required qualifications.

Motivation was another common theme in all conditions. It included keywords and phrases such as “motivated,” “dedication,” “determination,” “goal-minded,” and “seems to want to be better.” This theme also included confidence and competitiveness with keywords and phrases such as “confidence,” “confident,” “wants to emerge them self in a winning culture,” and “competitive mindset.” These data suggest participants valued the coaches’ focus on winning. Not only did participants value these coaches’ experiences, but they also valued the coaches’ drive and belief that they can improve the success of the team.

Honesty was then a theme only for the gay coach. With keywords and phrases such as “open and honest with lifestyle,” we can assume participants were referring to the coach’s indication of sexuality. Participants, therefore, showed appreciation for the gay coach’s ability to be his authentic self. In other words, the participants saw it as a strength for the gay coach to openly disclose his partner is a man.

Interestingly, holistic approach was a theme in the ally coach and the control. This theme included keywords and phrases such as “wants athletes to prosper [*sic*] outside of sports” and “the coach believes that there is more to life than the sport.” Similarly, inclusive was listed as a strength, but only for the ally coach. In this theme, keywords and phrases included “inclusion” and “accepting of others for who they are.” These data suggest participants enjoy when coaches highlight life outside of sport. Student-athletes perceive it as a strength, specifically of the ally coach, to be supportive of unique identities. It is unclear why participants perceived the non-identified coach to have a holistic approach.

It is also worthy to note that participants indicated direct as a strength in the anti-LGBT+ coach. Keywords and phrases included “he is direct about his values,” “upfront,” and “he’ll take charge with power.” In other words, participants respected the abrasive honesty of the anti-LGBT+ coach.

Weaknesses. Overall, themes identified as weaknesses included overconfidence, hyper-competitiveness, lack of details, nothing, sexuality, and homonegativity. First, overconfidence was identified as a weakness for the gay coach, ally coach, and the control. Keywords and phrases in this theme included “he may be overconfident in his skills” and “cocky.” Similarly,

hyper-competitiveness was viewed as a weakness in the ally coach and included keywords and phrases such as “obsessed with winning” and “cares too much for winning.” Combined, this suggests participants devalued an extreme emphasis on winning. The heightened focus on winning, in other words, was perceived as a weakness.

Lack of details and nothing were then contradictory weaknesses in Conditions 1, 2, and 4 and Conditions 1 and 4, respectively, and mostly involved verbatim keywords and phrases. Lack of details also included other keywords and phrases such as “head coach experience unclear.” Although participants valued experience as a strength, this suggests participants still wanted clarity on the specific background of the coach. On the contrary, other participants specifically mentioned there were no weaknesses of the respective coach, suggesting these participants would not have any hesitation in moving forward in the hiring process with the gay or non-identified coach.

Sexuality, however, was considered a weakness in the gay coach. One participant said, for example, this coach “would not fit in well with the traditional Baptist background of the university and donors.” Another participant said: “I would not discriminate against this coach, but why is it necessary to state your sexual preference?” Whereas some participants explicitly mentioned the gay coach’s sexuality as a weakness, others raised questions about the gay coach’s sexual orientation. It is possible that each viewed sexuality as a weakness.

On the contrary, homonegativity was identified as the most prominent weakness and was only mentioned regarding the anti-LGBT+ coach. Participants offered several comments on this weakness. One participant said, for example, it was “absolutely intolerable to say something like this about sexuality.” Two participants even mentioned the effect this coach would have on athletes on the team. One participant said, “personal values and outward expression would create an atmosphere undesirable for my teammates and cause harm to our team.” Another participant added, “they may be too direct and traditional minded to be open to the new aspects that play a part in sports today. This could troubles [*sic*] between athletes and the coach and even others just in the athletic department.” These various data suggest participants have no patience or tolerance for homonegativity. Indeed, these participants recognized the potential harm homonegativity would bring to their team.

Other participants, however, recognized homonegativity as a weakness, but offered respect and understanding. One participant, for example, shared, “even though I believe the same thing, I would not put that in a letter to apply for a job.” Other participants said, “I respect freedom of speech” and “he talked about his beliefs about homosexuality. These should be left outside of volleyball.” These comments suggest the participants recognize homonegativity is not societally accepted. Nonetheless, these participants offer support for homonegativity. The first comment overtly expresses agreement whereas the second comment implies respect toward homonegativity. The last comment suggests while homonegativity does not belong in volleyball, it may be acceptable in other situations “outside of [sport].” Otherwise, the participant would have rejected homonegativity altogether and not just within sport.

Other Requested Information. When asked about what other information participants would like to know about the coach, participants consistently requested the coach’s résumé, regardless of condition. Participants also requested a coaching philosophy for the gay coach, ally coach, and the control. Thus, participants would like more information regarding the coach’s experience and philosophy before making a decision on whether or not to recommend the applicant for hire. The participants also provided further evidence for a lack of tolerance for

homonegativity; participants in Condition 3 (i.e., anti-LGBT+ coach) wished to have an opportunity to challenge the coach's personal belief system. One participant exemplified this by saying, "I would like to have a conversation with this coach and ask why he feels this way about the gay community."

Discussion

Prior research has argued the behaviors and attitudes of parents and coworkers affect the experiences of LGBT+ coaches (Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a, 2010). Despite extensive research emphasizing the role of a coach in an athlete's life (Amorose & Horn, 2000; Becker et al., 1996; Gagné, 2003; Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Zhang & Chelladurai, 2013), attitudes of student-athletes toward LGBT+ coaches remains a gap in the literature. The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to assess the attitudes of student-athletes toward gay, LGBT+ ally, and anti-LGBT+ coaches.

Student-athletes in the present study preferred coaches who embraced non-discrimination. Specifically, both the quantitative and qualitative findings revealed participants did not offer approval of the anti-LGBT+ coach, but they did for all other coaches. The quantitative analyses, for example, revealed preferences for gay and ally coaches over anti-LGBT+ coaches on both hireability and person-job fit measures. Many qualitative findings in the present study corroborate this. For example, homonegativity was a common weakness identified from participants in the anti-LGBT+ condition. It is worth mentioning, though, that participants in this condition did not identify many other weaknesses in this coach. It is possible participants overlooked other weaknesses because of the homonegativity presented from this coach.

These findings directly contradict prior research that suggested gay male coaches are perceived as less fit to be coaches (Anderson, 2005; Cunningham et al., 2010; Gill et al., 2006). The preference for a gay or ally coach over an anti-LGBT+ coach could be indicative of a cultural shift as LGBT+ identities are becoming more accepted. Indeed, some recent studies highlight positive experiences of LGBT+ coaches (e.g., Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Fink et al., 2012). Closer examination of the demographics of the sample in the present study may also help explain this finding. The majority of the participants were unintentionally women, who typically hold more positive attitudes than men do toward gay men (e.g., LaMar & Kite, 1998). Indeed, girls and women are usually more likely to have an awareness of heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege and are more likely to support LGBT+ individuals and causes (Fingerhut, 2011; Montgomery & Stewart, 2012; Poteat, 2015; Swank et al., 2013). Thus, an awareness of heteronormativity and heterosexual privilege may improve attitudes toward LGBT+ coaches and decrease tolerance toward anti-LGBT+ coaches. Future research is needed to examine this possibility.

Despite these positive attitudes toward gay coaches, especially when compared to anti-LGBT+ coaches, qualitative data suggest one's sexuality can still be perceived as a weakness by some student-athletes. Specifically, our findings indicate many participants failed to recognize the importance of visibility and authenticity. Instead, participants seemed to prefer LGBT+ identities to not be discussed within sport. Although the tone of the questions about why the gay coach disclosed his sexual orientation cannot be determined, it is possible participants were questioning the inclusion of a minority sexuality in sport. It is also possible, though, that participants may be uneducated about gender and sexual diversity and related microaggressions. In other words, these participants may be genuinely interested in understanding why one may

openly share their identity as LGBT+. Relatedly, it is possible some participants referred to sexuality as a weakness of the gay coach in terms of their university but not as a reflection of their own values. As long as a gay coach is less accepted or entirely unaccepted in any community or athletics department, though, there continues to be a need for more trainings and discussions that promote inclusivity.

Nonetheless, participants did not identify any qualms with heterosexuality. No participant, for example, questioned why the straight coaches mentioned their wives. This finding is unsurprising given an understanding of sexual prejudice theory. It is common, for example, for LGBT+ athletes and coaches to be recognized as “the other” when compared to their straight counterparts (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b). In fact, society—and sport more specifically—embraces heteronormative ideals (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Gill et al., 2006). Because being LGBT+ defies these ideals, LGBT+ people are often perceived as abnormal and inferior (Jackson, 2006; Rich, 1980; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009a; Wright & Clarke, 1999). This results in both micro- and macro-level stigmas, prejudices, and discriminations (Herek, 2007; Rich, 1980). For example, while participants in the present study valued the gay coach more than the anti-LGBT+ coach, there were still hesitations toward the gay coach because of his sexuality. Some participants, for instance, mentioned it was a weakness of the gay coach to mention his sexuality. The gay coach, however, only revealed his sexuality by indicating how he and his husband would be excited to move to the new area.

Meanwhile, the ally and anti-LGBT+ coach said similar things, but referred to wives instead of husbands. Nevertheless, participants did not consider the announcement of one’s partner—and, thus, implied sexuality—between a man and woman as a weakness. This form of discrimination suggests it is acceptable to be heterosexual in sport and to even discuss one’s heterosexuality, but it is not acceptable to discuss one’s sexuality if it deviates from the norm. As consistent with sexual prejudice theory, participants seem to not have an issue with sexuality more broadly, but do have an issue with minority sexualities. Specifically, the present study suggests being LGBT+ is considered abnormal and, thus, a weakness of a coach. Indeed, the more favorable open responses (i.e., greater strengths and less weaknesses) toward the ally coach, as opposed to the gay coach, contradicts quantitative results showing no differences regarding hireability or person job-fit. It is possible, therefore, participants would be less likely to hire the gay coach and more likely to hire the ally coach if given the option between the two. More research is needed to examine this possibility.

On the contrary, other participants did recognize the authenticity and visibility of the coach. Qualitative analyses revealed the theme of honesty only for participants who reviewed the cover letter for the gay coach. It is not surprising some participants considered the disclosure of his sexuality as a strength while others perceived it as a weakness. As noted above, this contradiction is indicative of a cultural shift of greater acceptance of LGBT+ identities in sport. It is simultaneously indicative of persistent homonegativity that remains in sport.

Moreover, despite sharing an identical focus on moving to a supportive and inclusive environment, the theme of inclusive was only recognized as a strength of the ally coach. The gay coach, however, used the same language in his cover letter as the ally coach. While this was identified as a strength for the ally coach, it was identified as a weakness for the gay coach. Participants understood the gay coach’s supportive and inclusive inclination as an expression of his sexuality. Identifying this as a strength for the ally coach and a weakness for the gay coach suggests participants would prefer coaches suppress their sexuality only if it violates social norms (i.e., heteronormativity).

Taken together, the present study provides further evidence for why LGBT+ coaches may still wish to not come out. Previous findings, for example, recognized homonegativity and heterosexism still exist within sport (e.g., Doull et al., 2018; Gill et al., 2010). Other scholars have also indicated some coaches have negative coming out experiences (Cavalier, 2011; Krane & Barber, 2005). In addition to fears that parents, coworkers, and employers will react negatively to one being LGBT+, a coach may also have to consider the reaction of their athletes. Not only could a negative reaction from the athlete harm the coach, but it has potential to also dismantle the coach-athlete relationship. Thus, it remains important to continue to explore and improve attitudes toward LGBT+ coaches.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

The present study is not without its limitations. First, sexuality is fluid; a coach may not be heterosexual, for example, simply by identifying as a male and having a wife. Similarly, a coach may not be gay simply by having a same-sex partner. Additionally, the present study focused on male coaches who were either perceivably heterosexual or gay. Several coaches, though, do not identify as male and several coaches may identify with a sexuality other than heterosexual or gay. Future studies, therefore, should explore attitudes toward coaches with more comprehensive gender identities and sexual orientations. This may be especially important as attitudes toward gay men and lesbian woman, among other identities, may differ among participants.

Moreover, the present study relied on cover letters as a manipulation. Cover letters are not an accurate representation of the full profile of a candidate for a head coach position. Cover letters also rarely include information regarding one's partner. Nonetheless, participants were instructed to believe the coach met the minimum qualifications for the position. Additionally, the cover letter was not the primary object of the present study; rather, it was a means to study the attitudes of the participants. Using just a cover letter also allowed for maintaining greater feasibility of the present study. After all, student-athletes have limited availability; we may not have been able to recruit as many participants if the methodology required student-athletes to devote more time to complete participation. Future studies should consider incorporating fuller and more accurate representations of coach applications.

Furthermore, participants primarily consisted of White female student-athletes. Because research already suggests women and girls have more positive attitudes toward LGBT+ people (Fingerhut, 2011; LaMar & Kite, 1998; Montgomery & Stewart, 2012; Poteat, 2015; Swank et al., 2013), future studies should focus recruitment on male student-athletes and student-athletes of color. Future studies should also continue to explore attitudes toward gay coaches and develop interventions to improve these attitudes.

Conclusion

Student-athletes in the present study rated the gay and ally coaches with greater hireability and person-job fit than the anti-LGBT+ coach. Participants also identified several strengths and weaknesses of the coach candidates. Most notably, the sexuality of the gay coach was considered a weakness during the application process according to the participants in the present study. In fact, despite using the same language as heterosexual coaches, participants perceived the gay coach was focused on his sexuality. The same language, but from the

heterosexual coach, led participants to perceive the heterosexual coach as inclusive and supportive. Several participants, though, refused to tolerate the discriminatory attitudes of the anti-LGBT+ coach. Indeed, the largest identified weakness in the present study was the homonegativity of the anti-LGBT+ coach. Future studies should continue exploring attitudes toward LGBT+ coaches and should develop interventions to improve these attitudes.

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