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'Yes, I'm an Elite athlete and I'm Gay': Experiences of elite gay male athletes in Spain

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Abstract

There is a broad academic consensus that sexual minorities have been marginalised in sports culture. The present research is the first to explore the experiences of gay male elite athletes in Spain. Drawing on 11 semi-structured interviews with these athletes, this paper focuses on the experiences of being gay in elite sport. Guided by Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and the process of individualisation, our findings show that all the athletes have experienced or witnessed homonegativity, but at the same time have been empowered by sport. These athletes are paving the way for a more diverse masculinity in sport and making male homosexuality more visible. For continued improvements, it is important to implement more effective, inclusive sports policies and to introduce specific training for stakeholders.

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Introduction

Historically, sexual minorities have been marginalised in sporting cultures and their experiences are underrepresented in the academic literature (Krane, 2019). Geographically, where cultural differences or similarities can be considered in the analysis, literature analysis notes that most studies are from Anglo-American countries and the 'global west'. Therefore, literature reveals that the experiences of elite gay male athletes remain largely untold, particularly in non-Anglospheres. Although some recent quantitative research has emerged from diverse European cultures (Braumüller et al., 2020; Hartmann-Tews, 2022; Piedra et al., 2017; Pistella et al., 2020), there remains a significant lack of qualitative studies on their experiences. As more and more gay men are coming out in sport, it is important to document their stories and contextualise them in Spanish society and high-level competition. To help fill this gap in the literature, this paper is one of the first to explore the experiences of elite gay male athletes, focusing specifically on a group in Spain. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, it aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences of gay elite athletes in relation to their sexual orientation, athletic careers and personal lives.

Literature review: being gay in elite sport

Research on this topic has revealed both complex and controversial issues. Some studies have suggested that homonegativity and sexual prejudice towards gay men are decreasing in the Western sporting world (Adams and Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2002, 2009, 2011; Bush et al., 2012; Cleland, 2018; Kian and Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012; White et al., 2021). These initial situations were described by Anderson's studies, where gay athletes experienced homophobic episodes, but in a tolerant climate where they could contribute to winning (Anderson, 2002). These experiences were updated some years later in further research with gay athletes (Anderson, 2011), which not only confirmed a decrease in homophobia in male sports in the USA but also highlighted improved team cohesion and increased acceptance of gay athletes by their teammates. This research underscored the evolving dynamics within team climates, showing a more inclusive atmosphere overall. Recent longitudinal studies in the UK reveal improved attitudes towards gay men among rugby, hockey and student-athletes, showing increased acceptance of homosexual behaviours (Anderson et al., 2012; Magrath et al., 2022).

Conversely, recent research has also described a still-hostile, discriminatory and non-inclusive environment for gay men in sport (Baiocco et al., 2018; Denison et al., 2021b; Fenwick and Simpson, 2017; Greenspan et al., 2019; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; Mullin et al., 2018). Various surveys undertaken in recent years have identified homonegativity. In 2015, Denison and Kitchen, through a large-scale online survey covering the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and Ireland, reported that 54% of gay men felt unwelcome in sport.

Whilst reports of physical abuse have decreased over the last decade (Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Symons et al., 2010), the use of hostile language to harass and bully sexual minorities is a common form of both witnessed and experienced homonegativity (Baiocco et al., 2020; Kaelberer, 2020; Rosenberg et al., 2017). As Gough (2007) asserted, gay athletes are often exposed to 'subtle, indirect prejudice' from sports peers, 'which may be veiled by superficial acceptance and seemingly innocuous joking' (p.172). Current literature offers various interpretations. Some argue that homophobic discourse, regardless of its use, is laden with intentions and therefore produces a culture that discriminates against gay men, whatever of the intentions behind the language (Van der Bom et al., 2015). Another way to interpret this is to use a model developed by McCormack (2011), which suggests that a complex set of dynamics determines how language is used and understood. Originally ascribing this to cultural lag, he argues that the meaning of language is determined not only by the presumed intent but also by the social dynamics of the context, including whether there are socially agreed norms about sexuality in that context (McCormack, 2011). That is, words such as 'puff' may not be homophobic, depending on the values and understanding of the people involved. However, regardless of the intention, it will be important to know how the athlete experiences it when they hear it.

As Shaw and Cunningham (2021) state, 'given the negative psychological and behavioural outcomes associated with the heteronormative climate, sport remains a space where few boys or men feel able to be frank about their sexuality' (p. 366). This is particularly the case in traditionally masculine sports such as football and rugby, where hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity dominate. Unsurprisingly, most gay men remain closeted in these contexts (Cavalier, 2019; Vilanova et al., 2020), and in some cases, those who have come out have not achieved the sporting success expected of them because they were unable to exist within a larger structure of heteronormative values (Brody, 2019). At the same time, heterosexual men who participate in traditionally feminine sports are presumed to be gay (Cavalier, 2019).

Although there is limited research exploring the inclusion and exclusion of gay elite athletes in sport, emerging evidence shows contradictory findings. Some authors have reported an increasing attitudinal openness towards homosexuality (Anderson et al., 2016; Magrath et al., 2015), whilst others report persistent homonegativity and heteronormativity (Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Hartmann-Tews, 2022). Undoubtedly, there is a need for more qualitative work on how gay men experience exclusion and inclusion in sport.

Theoretical framework

According to Connell (1987, 1995), hegemonic masculinity was understood as a specific form of masculinity within a given historical and social setting that legitimises unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity and among other masculinities. As Connell (1987) points out, hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities (gays, men from ethnic minorities, etc.) as well as in relation to women. This concept has been critiqued for not being truly hegemonic in its application (Howson, 2006), for ignoring the ways that marginalised men contribute to hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou, 2001) and for reducing the complexity and nuances of what the subjects of masculinity (often, men) actually do (Moller, 2007).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have challenged the criticisms by reformulating the notion of hegemonic masculinity and proposing a more dynamic version. According to Messerschmidt's review (2018), hegemonic masculinities are routinely fluid, contingent, provisional and temporary. He considers the importance of intersectionality and how, as a result, hegemonic masculinities differ due to their interrelation with other inequalities. Versions of hegemonic masculinities vary according to local, regional and global contexts and as such differ from each other. Messerschmidt (2019: 89) notes, 'hegemonic masculinities are configurations of social practice that produce simultaneously particular social relations and social meanings, and they are culturally significant because they shape a sense of what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" gendered behaviour' in this case for elite Spanish athletes. In this sense, contemporary research on hegemonic masculinities confirms the continued relevance of the concept.

In addition, we will take into account that individual members of society are also undergoing a process of 'individualisation'. For Bette (1995), this process gives a person greater autonomy in the face of influence from social institutions. All social systems, whatever their structure, have norms that change according to the different circumstances and people (with their differentiated behaviours) that interact in them. These changes force individuals to define themselves progressively, beyond the values and norms traditionally established by social institutions (Soler, 2007, 2008).

In this context, to understand the gendered experiences of men and women in sport, as Soler (2007, 2008) points out, it is not enough to theorise about social and cultural reproduction through social institutions. This is a broad theory that must be combined with other perspectives such as poststructuralist theory that offer explanations for the multiple and contradictory situations that people, as gay men, experience in sport (Soler, 2007, 2008).

Hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and homonegativity remain persistent in sports (Braumüller et al., 2020; Filiault et al., 2012; Hartmann-Tews, 2022; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; Pistella et al., 2020; Rollè et al., 2022). However, to understand and explain an increasingly complex and diverse reality, it is necessary to move beyond studies focused on the reproduction of gender relations in sports, where gay men are seen as subordinated. In addition, we should examine sports as spaces of resistance and transformation (Hall, 1996). Sport can be a powerful tool for challenging and resisting these relations and contributing to the physical and political empowerment of all members of society (Camargo, 2016). Not only does sport have a deterministic structure, but it also creates situations and interactions that contribute to resistance and change (Soler, 2007, 2008). Athletes are not simply passive recipients of meanings and sport policies, but they can also be agents of change. Considering this theoretical framework, it is necessary to simultaneously analyse the lived experiences of gay elite male athletes from two perspectives: as spaces of reproduction and perpetuation of traditional gender roles and sexuality and as spaces of resistance and change to those hegemonic models.

The Spanish context

Spain has witnessed major advances in social, political and legislative recognition of gender and sexual minorities over the last 15 years. Landmark laws include Law 13/

2005, which allows same-sex marriages; Law 1/2015, which expands the range of attitudes and actions that constitute hate crimes; and Law 19/2007 against violence, racism, xenophobia and intolerance in sports, which includes a ban on singing songs or displaying humiliating or intimidating messages against any person based on their race, ethnicity or sexual orientation (Gil-Quintana et al., 2022). The more recent Sports Law 39/2022 expressly includes LGBTQI phobia as an issue to be eradicated in sport. On a social level, research suggests that Spain has one of the highest acceptance levels of homosexuality, with 89% public approval (Pew Research Center, 2020). One of the most positive changes in recent years has been in the media, a mirror of political tendencies, with the Spanish press increasingly giving voice to oppressed groups and helping to build pluralism by offering a stage on which to be heard (Pineda et al., 2022). This does not mean, however, that discrimination and social prejudice against sexual minorities have disappeared. In 2023, hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation and gender identity represented 23.3% of all hate crimes in Spain (Ministerio del Interior, 2023). Although the influence of ideological traditionalists and the Catholic Church needs to be considered (Todd, 2021), Spaniards have largely been found to no longer hold conservative views on LGBTQI issues (Worthen et al., 2017).

Four Spanish elite athletes have recently disclosed their (homo)sexuality in public, including ice skater Javier Raya and water polo player Victor Gutiérrez in 2016. In an interview, Gutiérrez stated that his coming out was met with overwhelmingly positive responses from the media and support from teammates, trainers, managers and supporters (Vilanova et al., 2020). Other athletes followed suit, including the Olympic swimmer Carlos Peralta in 2018 and the Olympic racewalker Marc Tur in 2021. There is, however, limited research exploring gay athletes' experiences of coming out in Spain. With the exception of Gutiérrez's case study (Vilanova et al., 2020), the situation of gay Spanish elite male athletes remains understudied. The current research aims to fill this gap by exploring the personal and sporting experiences of a group of gay elite male athletes in Spain.

Method

This study is part of a larger nationwide project entitled 'Homosexuality in Sport in Spain' designed to break the silence and invisibility of homosexual people in physical education and sport by describing their diverse experiences and exploring the potential of training programmes to equip professionals working in this field with the necessary skills and sensitivity to promote respect and change. The focus of this paper and its findings are drawn from the qualitative stage of the research.

Participants

Eleven Spanish elite male athletes participated in the study (Table 1). To be eligible for inclusion, the men had to be cisgender current or former elite or professional athletes who were aware that they were gay when competing. In Spain, an elite athlete is defined as someone who has participated in the ADO programme (a national programme providing scholarships to selected athletes and coaches who are likely to compete in the Olympic

Table 1. Characteristics of study participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Degree of visibility	Years out	Sport	Maximum competition level
Sebastián	21	Closeted	-	Team	National championships
Diego	26	Selectivity out	-	Team	National championships
Manel	26	Selectively out	-	Individual	International championships
Andrés	29	Out	5	Individual	National championships
Pascual	18	Out	6	Individual	Regional championships
Jordi	51	Out	19	Team	Regional championships
Mateu	33	Out/role model	19	Individual	International championships
Camilo	27	Out/role model	5	Individual	Olympic Games
Juan	32	Out/role model	17	Individual	National championships
Jaume	30	Out/role model	7	Individual	Olympic Games
Vicente	31	Out/role model	8	Team	International championships

Games), competed in high-level events (e.g. a world championship) and/or enjoyed sustained success at the highest national level. The sample was composed of Spanish athletes (mean age = 28.7; SD = 8.6). One of them had been born in Latin America and migrated at an early age to Spain, another had been born in France and another had lived in North America for several years. Their sports were swimming, fencing, football, taekwondo, rhythmic gymnastics, track and field, ice skating, roller hockey, trampoline and water polo. The participants came from four regions in Spain. One was still in the closet and no one knew about his homosexuality (closeted), two were out with some members of their family and close friends but not with the rest of their acquaintances (selectively out), three were out with their circles of friends and acquaintances (out) and five were out with their family, circles of friends, peers, media and on social media, where they served as role models (out/role model).

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, the study participants were recruited through research advertisements placed on university social media channels and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the athletes to gain detailed insights into their experiences.

Interviews lasted between 55 min and 1 hour and 35 min (mean = 67 min). Semi-structured interviews use predetermined open-ended questions to guide the discussion whilst giving participants some flexibility to express their opinions. The interviews began by asking the participants how they had become involved in sport and when they had first realised they were gay. Questions then moved onto issues related to coming out to teammates and coaches and about lived experiences as a gay athlete. Interviewees were also allowed to raise any relevant issues not covered by the interview script.

Before each interview, the purpose of the study was explained, all ethical procedures were outlined and participants' informed consent was obtained. Interviewees were informed that they could stop the interview at any time without explanation and that

they did not have to answer all the questions. They were also reassured that all identifiable information would be removed from the transcripts and that pseudonyms would be used. Some athletes explicitly mentioned that no confidentiality measures were needed, but pseudonyms were used in all cases. Nonetheless, as the cases are so unique, the athletes are potentially identifiable.

Five of the interviews were held in person, at a location of the athletes' choosing, and the rest were held online (Zoom).

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were sent to the participants to confirm their accuracy. All the athletes agreed that the transcribed data reflected their experiences and suggested no changes.

Prior to submission, the draft of this manuscript was sent to the participants to give them an opportunity to check its accuracy and view our interpretations of the findings of this study. They were thanked for their cooperation and invited to contact the research team if they had any further feedback or requests.

Data analyses

We analysed the data iteratively and inductively using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). The flexibility offered by RTA allows us to identify the main patterns across the dataset without the restrictions of a predefined coding scheme (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

To increase familiarisation with the data, the interviews were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after data collection. The first author re-read the transcripts, made handwritten code labels on the printed data and maintained handwritten reflection notes to record personal interpretations of the data. She also started reading and stopped when she thought she had spotted something relevant to addressing the research aim. For example, at first, she identified situations/actions such as 'insults', 'being alone', 'don't give hand', 'support' and 'hug'. To enhance reflexivity through the analysis, the first author provided the second author and the fourth author with transcripts, and we decided to code independently and accurately three interview transcripts. Then we shared and discussed our individual interpretations of the data, which enhanced the richness of our interpretation. The first author developed semantic and latent open codes iteratively. Latent codes were generated upon reviewing interview transcripts and notes several times and by discussing the interpretations with co-authors online. Codes were revisited to identify patterns and to begin to interpret meaning across the data. For example, as we worked through the dataset, it seemed that some actions/situations made participants 'feel good' and some made participants 'feel bad'. These, at the beginning, we thought it may capture a pattern of meaning and could be the basis for a theme. At this point, the first author needed someone to talk face-to-face and frequently discuss the data. Hence, the third author, from the same institution as the first author, joined the team. This process enabled the initial theme development.

During this analytic process, we created thematic maps that were constantly reviewed and revised. We also reflected upon the core of each central organising concept to develop theme definitions and names, aiming to construct an informative narrative that reflected the data. For example, a pattern of codes seemed to be 'a positive context', but upon

revisiting, we identify that a central organising concept in relation to this idea was empowerment; hence, the label of the second theme was reframed as 'context that empowers'.

Finally, to facilitate the writing phase, we selected appropriate participant quotes reflecting various aspects of each theme and contextualised our findings concerning relevant literature.

Reflexivity

Researchers must engage in critical reflection regarding their power, positionality and privilege. Reflexivity involves the practice of critically reflecting on one's role as a researcher and one's research practice and process (Braun and Clarke, 2022). As heterosexual researchers investigating gay men, we are aware of the privileges associated with our heterosexual identity and the potential biases they may introduce. For this reason, we engaged in constant dialogue with two gay colleagues throughout this study. The first is a former student whose experience as a gay elite athlete prompted us to embark on this research and the second is a former athlete who is a member of our research group. They both helped challenge our perspectives and provided feedback on the accuracy of our decisions and interpretations. We consider ourselves allies and, with our research, advocate for LGBTQI rights.

Findings

Homonegativity that constrains

All the interviewed athletes recounted different homonegative episodes they had experienced throughout their lives and in different contexts (e.g. school, club, competitions and daily life). Homonegative expressions range from jokes and chants to physical aggression, although coinciding with previous reports (Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Kaelberer, 2020; Symons et al., 2010), physical assaults in our group of athletes were less common. Pascual (18 years old, out) highlighted one recent experience: 'a few months ago I was beaten up for being gay (…) in the city'. Although this was one of the most serious episodes reported by the athletes interviewed, they had all experienced and witnessed different homonegativity episodes in their personal lives and in sport, both in the past and continuing into the present, especially in the form of insults, jokes, comments and gestures.

As reported by Diego (26 years old, selectively out) 'the word faggot is always present [nowadays] "hey, don't be a faggot; hit the bag hard"' or Mateu (29 years old, out/role model) 'I have been called a faggot several times in competition [some years ago], once I was already out of the closet'. Homonegativity can also be expressed through jokes like those experienced by Jordi (51 years old, out) when he was 38 in the locker room when he was openly out 'don't stand in front of him' or 'don't drop the soap'. These experiences occurred more often with peers, but coaches and managers were also involved. Camilo (27 years old, out/role model), for example, reported the following: 'When I was 11 or 12, a coach told me that I looked like a faggot; it was a bit wow!

I didn't even know what I liked!'. These experiences demonstrate how language is still used in Spanish sport settings as homophobic language (McCormack, 2011). The experiences described were assumed by the athletes at that time as pejorative and negative, where the aggressors intended to attack them directly or the collective.

Similar to female sport (Fink et al., 2012), coaches working with male athletes clearly reinforce the gender order through their words and behaviour. Containing negative or biased attitudes and increasing the sensitivity of coaches to issues of diversity and inclusion is important for creating safe spaces. Notwithstanding, both Vicente (31 years old, out/role model) and Camilo (27 years old, out/role model) mentioned hearing a similar comment from their coaches at a very young age: 'I'd rather have a son with Down's syndrome than a gay son'. Such comments can cause athletes to distance themselves from the possibility of being gay. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), comments and behaviours of this nature serve as 'mechanisms of hegemony' to subordinate gay identity as an inferior form of masculinity. To challenge these mechanisms, sociologist Eric Anderson (2002) explained that elite gay athletes need masculine capital, which means that gay athletes need to prove themselves before coming out. In their case study, Mullin et al. (2018) explained how a gay volleyball player lost his athletic identity when he came out. Mechanisms of hegemony can make the process of acceptance hard. As Camilo (27 years old, out) explained:

> Yes, I have really, really bad memories [of the process]. I, for example, thought that I couldn't be gay because that wasn't associated with being the best and I wanted to be the best. It's an association that your brain makes because of small words you hear like "faggot comes last". (Camilo, 27 years old, out)

Three of the athletes, once they were older and selectively out, changed clubs because of the treatment they had received, showing how homonegativity language and fag discourse in sport settings had consequences. As explained by Andrés (29 years old, out), 'the last coach I had treated me in a very degrading way, with comments that I might be that way inclined [gay]. He was one of the reasons I decided to leave'.

These findings are consistent with research by Baiocco et al. (2018), Fenwick and Simpson (2017), Pariera et al. (2021), Smits et al. (2021), Toomey et al. (2018) and Vilanova et al. (2020) on homophobic discourses and bullying among male athletes. Two recent systematic reviews (Denison et al., 2021a; Rollè et al., 2022) confirmed the existence of discrimination in sport settings, which maintain a forceful link with homonegativity and a culture rooted in heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (Rollè et al., 2022). Expressions or comments such as those mentioned by Andrés (29 years old, out) were reported by all the interviewees and were particularly common among peers (classmates, teammates and opponents).

Gay athletes who participate in traditionally female sports, such as artistic swimming or rhythmic gymnastics, face a combination of sexual orientation and gender identity issues. As stated by Juan (32 years old, out/role model), 'it wasn't easy to deal with because of the typical things, comments from colleagues, insults, people teasing me… [always during their sport career]'. For example, some homonegative episodes arose in 2021 because Juan exerted his (non-hegemonic) masculinity in his own way: 'having to put on make-up, glitter, and make movements that might have been a bit feminine'.

In such cases, social discrimination or attacks can come from two fronts: the gay athlete front and the non-hegemonic masculinity front. As Juan said, 'when they are interested, I can be the faggot who does rhythmic gymnastics or the man who does gymnastics'. It would thus seem that homonegativity in such cases is influenced as much as by being gay as by not conforming to gendered norms in sport.

Context that empowers

The athletes interviewed stressed the importance of an open, tolerant, respectful environment and the benefits this had on both their personal and sporting lives (Fink et al., 2012; Vilanova et al., 2020). Supporting previous findings for gay athletes (Fenwick and Simpson, 2017; White et al., 2021), there were many positive stories. Vicente (31 year old, out/role model) said:

> The first person I told was my best friend, when I was 17, he was on the national team with me, also a classmate, and he took it very well and that gave me a lot of support, a lot of self-esteem, and then little by little, I took the step with other friends and whenever I told them, I received affection, support…that really lifted me up. (Vicente, 31 years old, out/role model)

Positive experiences helped the athletes to gradually accept their sexuality, so much so that in some cases they came out on social media and to the media. For Stott (2019), the media, although not entirely above reproach, has an important role in the visibility of gay athletes and is becoming increasingly inclusive.

Coach attitudes and behaviours are also important for creating an inclusive climate. As stated by Halbrook et al. (2019), 'due to their leadership role, coaches may be the single most influential individual for developing safe and inclusive team environments for LGB athletes' (p. 841). Similar experiences were mentioned by the athletes. Juan (32 years old, out/role model), for example, said: 'When I changed teams, I got support from my two new female coaches; they were my mainstays for moving forward. They've been clearing my path as an athlete, as a person and as a coach'. Jaume (30 years old, out/role model), in turn, stated '[the coach] is a nice guy; he's against any form of discrimination'. As stressed by Ensign et al. (2011), coaches and clubs must provide an open training environment for all athletes.

Families who created supportive environments also had a very positive influence on the experiences of athletes (Anderson et al., 2023), particularly those who are publicly out and talk freely about their sexual orientation (Vilanova et al., 2020). As Jaume said: 'I've felt enormously lucky to have the support of my parents' (Jaume, 30 years old, out/role model).

Once gay athletes accept themselves, they begin to feel more confident (White et al., 2021). As stated by Stoelting (2011) in a study of lesbian athletes, 'self-acceptance has also been identified as a goal of disclosure, and thus serves as a reason why individuals with stigmatised identities choose to disclose' (p. 1196). Mullin et al. (2018) described how athletes are less able to tolerate and normalise homonegativity once they disclose their true identities. In our study, Camilo (27 years old, out/role model) stated: 'Over time I accept and tolerate less, I mean, at the beginning, you don't feel so confident, and you tolerate things. Now if someone says something to me that might be LGBTQI-phobic, well, I

don't keep quiet'. Despite the homophobic language and discourse in sports, the creation of a supportive environment for gay athletes enables them to challenge discriminatory practices and homophobic language with confidence.

Although sport has been described as a place where female athletes from sexual minorities can find room for personal development and empowerment (McGannon et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2024), only Mullin et al. (2018) have described the benefits of coming out as a gay elite athlete. These benefits are supported by our findings, as the athletes interviewed repeatedly stated that sport was a space of empowerment and freedom for them, a positive climate that gave them satisfaction and a context in which to express themselves. For example, Camilo stated:

> The best thing I would say is the sense of freedom and satisfaction in the water. With time, I have realised that this is a sensation of power to be able to express yourself, to be able to free yourself, move. (Camilo, 27 years old, out/role model)

In some cases, sport even offered refuge, a place where the athletes found the tolerant, respectful climate they needed and could work on building their sporting capital. The research of Mullin et al. (2018) explains, from a psychological perspective, the relationship between coming out and improved sporting performance:

> I never hid myself […] I never had to tell my teammates and they always really respected me, but again, because of the nature of my sport, they appreciated me as a human and an athlete […] many of my schoolmates went to the club, it was a type of refuge. (Mateu, 29 years old, out/role model)

Being good at sport earns athletes respect and reduces the likelihood of discrimination (Anderson and Bullingham, 2015). As Vicente (31 years old, out/role model) pointed out, 'the better you are at something or the more important you are, the more they respect you and the less they make fun of you'. Several of the athletes interviewed got very good marks at school, they were student representatives and they were all good at sport. Again, as Vicente said: 'I protected myself by focusing on being the best at what I did'. As evident in the above comments, being the best earned the athletes the recognition and affection they were sometimes unable to give themselves.

Paving the way for future generations

The sample included active and retired athletes aged 18 to 51 years old. Contrasting with previous findings in Spain (Vilanova et al., 2024), the athletes' experiences differed depending on their age and the time at which they were competing as elite athletes. Athletes who were in their 30s or older at the time of the interview reported that when they discovered their sexual orientation, they felt lonely, alone or outside the norm (Fink et al., 2012) and in some cases even thought that they had a disease:

> At the beginning, I thought it was a phase, that what I had to do was experiment with a girl, that it was something that was going to pass. At one stage I even thought that I was sick, there were people saying this on TV and that it could be treated. (Vicente, 31 years old, out/role model)

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there were no gay role models in Spanish sport. The role models that did exist were from television, and they served to reinforce stereotypes of subordinated masculinities, clearly linked to what was traditionally considered female and with very little (or no) relationship with traditional competitive sport (Filiault et al., 2012). If a gay athlete wanted to form part of the sporting world, he had to embrace the hegemonic masculinity model (Connell, 1995), which generated feelings of internal conflict and a loss of identity. Some of the participants in our study were the first athletes to come out in Spain, and they were and still are role models for younger people (McDonald and Eagles, 2012) who, for them, were the first gay male athletes they knew. As indicated by Fink et al. (2012) in their study of lesbian and bisexual female athletes, those who took this first step 'represented vital trailblazers […] provided a window into what would be on the other side' (p. 90). Here, Sebastián (21 years old, closeted) explained: 'I met an athlete on social media who was in a very similar situation, and he helped me a lot. He is one step ahead of me; this person is a role model for me'.

The social changes that occurred in Spain in terms of improved tolerance, respect and equality are important (Gil-Quintana et al., 2022), as they made visible the first gay elite athletes in our country, which is a key factor for change (Gough, 2007). 'As more and more gay men come out in sport, the potential for greater support and acceptance is enormous' (Gough, 2007: 167). Nonetheless, as indicated by Moscowitz et al. (2019), greater visibility in the media has not always helped in the fight against homophobia.

Social media may be one of the main drivers of changes in social attitudes (Kavoura and Kokkonen, 2021). These new socialisation tools have opened up a world of possibilities for younger generations, greatly facilitating the experiences of athletes with diverse sexual orientations (White et al., 2021). Previous generations did not have access to gay role models, contrasting with the current situation in which it is much easier to contact these people directly and learn more about coming-out narratives (Stott, 2019). As explained by Mateu (29 years old, out/role model): 'I'm contacted by a load of people on social media who can't pluck up the courage (to come out)'. Social media facilitates visibility and networking between leading gay athletes and younger generations who are in the process of discovering their identity and sexual orientation.

Although the younger athletes in our study seem to have had it easier, supporting previous reports (Cavalier, 2013; Fenwick and Simpson, 2017; Vilanova et al., 2020), they still expressed feelings of insecurity about coming out in public. They recognised that they were pioneers, but it is not always easy to manage such situations and the risks of the steps to be taken (Anderson et al., 2023). Sebastián explained the following:

> In [his team sport] I don't know a top player who has come out. Not having a marked path makes things more difficult (…) when you have to be the first, the doubt or the uncertainty of what will happen is always what holds you back [from coming out]. (Sebastián, 21 years old, closeted)

Other significant milestones in Spanish sport in 2021 were the first sanctions for homophobic abuse and the first awards for the promotion of inclusive sport. Other authors have called for the need for better regulations and policies in this respect (Denison et al., 2021b). One of the athletes in our study, Vicente (31 years old, out/

role model), lodged an official complaint about insults received during a match, and it was the first time in Spanish sport that a national federation applied a sanction for homophobic behaviour. Reactions to his case were ambiguous:

> I had 100% support from my club and my teammates, they all took a firm stance against this type of behaviour, I am very grateful. I can't say the same for the rest of my colleagues and the rest of sport. In the end people are allies with gay people as long as you don't bother them and don't make noise or publicly report a situation like this. (Vicente, 31 years old, out/role model)

Furthermore, Mateu (29 years old, out/role model) created the first federated LGBTQI club in his sport in Spain and received an award for diversity in sport at a gala dinner for his sport in 2021. Referring to the moment he went up to receive the award in ZZ, Mateu said: 'When I started to speak, a lot of people left [the hall]', although the president of the federation came up to him the same day and said: 'Don't worry; it's going to be like this for a while, but it is what it is; they either accept it or they accept it'. Mateu's experience shows the contrast between inclusion and persistent homonegativity.

It is also important to highlight that homonegative language sometimes ceases to be used after a change in context. As Vicente (31 years old, out/role model) explained: 'in the club, once I had come out, all jokes and comments disappeared completely and I think this is a sign of respect, of not wanting to offend me with certain things. This was not the case with the national team'. Vicente's comments find support in the work of Fenwick and Simpson (2017), who claimed that coming out changes the relationship between gay athletes and their teammates. Furthermore, this experience serves to reinforce the notion that when a cultural context (in this case, Spanish sports) undergoes a transition from an intolerant to an inclusive culture, language patterns undergo a corresponding change (McCormack, 2011).

The means in which gay athletes pave the way for change also varies according to sport. These differences are highlighted in the review by Kavoura and Kokkonen (2021), who stated that 'gender stereotypes and rigid perceptions of masculinity and femininity are the antecedents of homophobia and transphobia in sport' (p. 19). Our study shows the persistence of gender stereotypes and prejudices linked to masculinities and femininities in sport (Piedra et al., 2020; Rollè et al., 2022).

In the collective Imaginarium, there remains a strong association between traditionally 'feminine' sports and subordinated masculinities. In these settings, society has certain preconceived ideas about the sexual orientation of male practitioners. As explained by Manel (26 years old, selectively out), who practices a sport associated with femininity, it is generally assumed that male practitioners are gay: 'In a sport where you are judging something artistic, it's normal to find guys who are, first feminine, and second, gays'. By contrast, traditionally 'masculine' sports are typically linked to hegemonic masculinity (Willis, 2015). Jordi (51 years old, out) participated in one of these sports and his experience when he was 39 shows how individual athletes can pave the way for change:

> They used to say that I did not match the image they had of a gay guy, which was a more effeminate guy, another type. And me for example in [his team sport], I was more like rough, tough, I

> wasn't afraid to attack, fight, quite the opposite, I was the first. And that really confused them. So I think that I helped the gay community a lot, as they saw that a gay guy could fit perfectly into a [his sport] team. I opened their minds a bit. (Jordi, 51 years old, out)

As Vilanova et al. (2020) pointed out in their analysis of the first openly gay male team sport athlete in Spain, and in line with the narratives analysed in this paper, homonegativity exists in Spanish sport, and there is a long way to go before true respect is achieved. However, at the same time, the narratives of the gay athletes interviewed do show the existence of respectful and supportive people and climates. It's like a polyhedron; there are different faces within the same figure.

As Kaelberer (2020) argued in the case of German soccer, there is a paradoxical situation where both positive and negative experiences coexist.

Conclusions

We have examined the personal and sporting experiences of 11 gay men who are currently competing or have competed in elite sport in Spain. The contribution of this research is that it shows that male homosexuality in elite Spanish sport is gradually becoming visible in small social circles as well as in traditional and social media. This is thanks to the empowerment of a number of gay athletes who have contested the hegemonic masculinity encountered throughout their lives and sporting careers. Some elite athletes in particular have become agents of change and role models (McDonald and Eagles, 2012). As more individuals contest and redefine traditional masculine norms, new models of masculinity can emerge, challenging the previously hegemonic ones (Messerschmidt, 2018).

A number of the athletes interviewed are proud of themselves and have joined the fight against discrimination by making visible other forms of masculinity and creating new masculinities within sport. Our findings also support previous reports from other cultural contexts (Braumüller et al., 2020; Hartmann-Tews, 2022; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; Pistella et al., 2020; Rollè et al., 2022) showing that sport remains a masculinising, heteronormative and homonegative context.

Throughout their sporting careers, the gay athletes interviewed experienced and continue to experience homonegative incidents, particularly in the form of jokes, insults and scorn. In some cases, this behaviour (especially jokes) was normalised by the athletes, but the narratives also show that as the athletes became more empowered, they ceased to see this homonegative behaviour as tolerable and started to contest it.

For many of the athletes, coming out during their sporting careers was not easy. Our findings clearly show, however, that they are progressively defining themselves beyond the values and norms traditionally set by social institutions and can contribute to change. The empowerment of gay athletes, thanks in part to the support of their close environment, including family, friends and coaches (Anderson et al., 2023; Fenwick and Simpson, 2017; Fink et al., 2012; Halbrook et al., 2019), is beginning to create more inclusive spaces.

Our findings also note that it is fine for athletes to be openly gay as long as they do not react against or criticise the system. When they do, they are received with a mixture of

support and opposition, highlighting the paradoxical situation of experiencing inclusion and rejection at the same time. As Gough (2007) said, being gay in sport is acceptable, but acting gay is not.

Supporting previous research (Cavalier, 2019; Kavoura and Kokkonen, 2021; Piedra et al., 2020; Rollè et al., 2022; Willis, 2015), our data points out how heteronormativity is taken for granted in traditionally masculine sports, just as homosexuality is taken for granted in more artistic sports. Openly gay athletes in traditionally masculine environments feel that they are in some way educating those in their environment, as they themselves say, 'helping to open minds'. Gender stereotypes and roles still exist and these athletes are helping to combat them.

Another key finding in our data is the generational difference observed. Gay athletes born in the 1980s felt alone, as if they were the only ones, and in some cases as if they had a disease. Those born 10 years later recognise the existence of spoken and unspoken cultural heteronormative expectations (Anderson et al., 2023), but have role models to follow. These situations and interactions contribute to change (Soler, 2007, 2008). The first generation of gay athletes who come out in sport, especially those who do so in (social) media, are helping other athletes who are in the closet, encouraging them to follow in their footsteps in the future, demonstrating that it is possible to be gay and be and remain in the elite of sport. In this sense, this helps to vary the version of hegemonic masculinity reshaping what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' (Messerschmidt, 2019).

There are several limitations to this study. First, we used a mix of face-to-face and online interviews. Face-to-face interviews were preferred as they offered a richer social experience and allowed for more direct observation of body language and other non-verbal cues. However, online interviews provide greater flexibility and accessibility, two key factors for being able to interview some of the participants. Second, because our research focused specifically on elite gay male athletes, our findings cannot be extrapolated to other levels of competition or other sexual minorities. Our findings are also limited by a lack of diversity. Since all the participants were white, intersectional issues such as the confluence of race and sexual orientation remain largely unaddressed.

Further research is needed to delve deeper into the generational differences observed and the potential value of role models. Furthermore, as suggested by Fink et al. (2012), new perspectives must be integrated into research to better understand the intersection of professional sport and sexual orientation with other social factors such as race and ethnicity.

The results of this study have important implications for coaches, managers and policymakers, who have the power to transform sport into an inclusive, safe environment for gay athletes. Coaches and stakeholders in general need to be trained on how to stop perpetuating a heteronormative, homonegative system and to create a positive sports culture that offers a safe, welcoming space for all athletes.

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