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Gaston, L and Dixon, L

**A want or a need? Exploring the role of grassroots gay rugby teams in the context of inclusive masculinity.**

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### Article

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**A want or a need? Exploring the role of grassroots gay rugby teams in the context of inclusive masculinity**

There is a long history of researching the ways that the roles and conceptualisations of gender and sexuality are entwined within sport (Anderson 2005, 2011b). More recently, there has been an argument within sociology that homophobia is decreasing across Western sports, supposedly reflecting a decline of homophobia across society more generally and crucially, in a way that suggests cultural spaces have been opened up in which ‘inclusive’ conceptualisations of masculinity can be performed (Anderson, 2009, 2011, 2012). This project adds to these debates, by bringing inclusive masculinity theory into conversation with research that has begun to recognise the plurality of (particularly urban) gay spaces for the first time (Ghaziani, 2019). It does so by exploring the motivations behind gay men joining (what was at the time of writing), the most recently formed grassroots UK gay rugby team. The findings suggest that whilst players recognise more inclusive masculinities and a decline in homophobia across society more generally, it is in actual fact amongst the gay community itself that difficulties arise. Playing rugby in a gay-friendly team not only offers a safe space to perform inclusive masculinities, but to embody a more inclusive range of *homosexualities* as well.

## Introduction

A significant body of research has documented a decline in homophobia across Western sports, suggesting that this in turn, reflects the decline of homophobia across society more generally (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Bush et al, 2012; McGrath 2016; Nevis 2016). Anderson's research with US university soccer players (2011b), Cashmore and Cleland's exploration into incidents of homophobia with UK football supporters (2012), Bush et al's study of UK university athletics teams (2012) and Dashper's investigation into the attitudes towards homosexuality in equestrian sports (2012) - all found that homophobia was in decline, if not non-existent. Cleland et al (2018) also found significant lack of homophobic online communication from association football fans in relation to the 'coming out' of footballer Thomas Hitzlsperger. This research is supported further by recent attempts made by sporting leagues and teams to address the issue of homophobia in sport. In the United Kingdom, professional footballers wore rainbow laces in support of a campaign seeking to 'kick homophobia' out of football. In America, Major League Baseball teams, the New York Yankees and Los Angeles Angels promote LGBT+ issues through hosting 'Pride' events and public support for LGBT+ equality. In 2018, the New York Yankees announced the creation of the 'Yankee-Stonewall Scholarship Initiative' providing \$50,000 in academic scholarships to LGBTQ+ students. In addition, there has been an increase of high-profile *heterosexual* sportsmen such as rugby

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players Ben Cohen, David Pocock and Nick Youngquest publically supporting LGBTQ+ issues.

It has also been suggested that the widespread and highly positive media coverage of the 'coming out' of top-level sportsmen such as Tadd Fujikawa (Golf) Tom Daley (diving) Anthony Bowens (pro wrestling) Jason Collins (Basketball) Orlando Cruz (boxing) Gareth Thomas (Rugby), Steven Davies (Cricket) and Anton Hysen (Football), is also key evidence supporting this idea (Nevis, 2016:282).

Regardless of the cause, times have indeed changed significantly since the dark days of the 1980s when UK football's first openly gay top flight player, Justin Fashanu's career as a professional athlete was effectively ended because of his public disclosure of his sexuality (Gaston et al 2018). And yet, the picture is not necessarily quite as simple as it may at first appear. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, for example, has recognised homophobia as an important problem currently facing football (DCMS, 2017). Although there are openly gay sportsmen in the UK as noted above, there is still no openly gay top-flight footballer. The landscape is perhaps then, slightly more complicated.

Nonetheless, there is a long history of researching the role and conceptualisation of sexuality within sport (See for example: Anderson, 2011b; Caudwell 2011; Connell 1990; Pringle 2005). Often, sexuality is explored in direct relation to issues of gender, not least because:

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3 “in both representational forms and in lived practices, sport is one of the cultural  
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6 spheres that most explicitly generates, reproduces and publicly displays gender  
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9 identities and difference, and justifies the existing hierarchical gender order” (Nevis  
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12 2016:285).  
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16 Sport is an arena in which existing hierarchical gender orders are performed, embodied and  
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18 legitimised not only to differentiate between genders, but *between men themselves too*, in  
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20 what is referred to as “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt,  
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22 2005). In recent years, gay athletes and sports clubs for gays and lesbians have experienced  
23  
24 greater visibility (Krane and Waldon, 2000; Pronger, 2000; Waitt, 2003; Matthews and  
25  
26 Channon 2019). The call for the creation of gay sporting space was the result either that gay  
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28 men and women had been made to feel unwelcomed or they had self-excluded themselves  
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30 from mainstream sport (Matthews and Channon 2019). Thus gay sports teams were created  
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32 to challenge to heteronormativity of traditional sporting spaces with the creation of a ‘gay  
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34 sports spaces’ (Caudwell 2007; Drury 2011 2019; Whitehouse 2019 ). Additionally, Ferez et  
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36 al (2006) and Price and Parker (2003) found that the creation of gay clubs provide additional  
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38 options from the gay bar/club scene or LGBT political causes which has typically been the  
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40 nucleus of the LGBT community.  
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56 Recently however, this idea has begun to be challenged. In particular, Anderson has  
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58 suggested that a theory of hegemonic masculinity – a defined cultural understanding of  
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maleness or *what makes a man, a man* – can only exist when defined via negation, opposed to deeply homophobic understandings of traits deemed to be (non-masculine) symbols of homosexuality (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Anderson and McGuire, 2010). Instead, contemporary society needs to speak in terms of “inclusive masculinities”, which incorporate a larger number of traits and behaviours that are not seen to be implicit markers of homosexuality as they perhaps were in the 1980s/early 1990s (Anderson, 2011a). In short, being a ‘man’ or ‘maleness’ is a far more diverse concept allowing for wider interpretation and acceptance.

At the same time, there is an increasing recognition of a tendency within academic research to emphasise the singularity of (particularly urban) gay spaces themselves, with a subsequent theoretical focus on inclusion/exclusion within those spaces (Ghaziani, 2019). As a result, more recent research has begun to explore the diverse ways that gay communities are being formed instead, both within and outside of the context of sport (Ghaziani, 2019; Wignall, 2017). Here then for the first time, the emphasis is placed on understanding this plurality through the lens of inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson and McCormack, 2018).

To do so, this paper draws on primary research undertaken amongst the first generation players of the newest grass-root, gay rugby team formed in the UK, The Liverpool Tritons, in relation to three key research questions. Firstly, it explores whether the motivations behind gay men joining a gay rugby team challenges the possibility of 'inclusive masculinity' (Anderson, 2009), or whether it actually reinforces hegemonic conceptualisations of gender

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3 and sexuality. Secondly, it investigates whether the existence of gay rugby teams reflects,  
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5 or challenges diminished cultural homophobia in sport and in society more generally.  
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8 Finally, following Elling et al (2003) and Wellard (2002, 2003), it asks whether the existence  
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10 and popularity of gay rugby teams is based on offering a social haven away from the  
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12 expectations of the heteronormative mainstream, or whether they are based on  
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15 “conventional sporting values” of winning and competition (Nevis, 2016:286).  
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18 To do so, the paper begins by outlining the origins of gay rugby clubs within the UK, before a  
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20 brief discussion of the methodology used to collect the data upon which the article is based.  
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24 The main body of literature concerning ‘inclusive masculinities’ (Anderson, 2009, 2011a,  
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26 2011b; Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Anderson and McGuire, 2010) is reviewed,  
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28 followed by a discussion of the way that Triton players described a clear sense of  
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30 progression in relation to how their sexualities were perceived and understood in  
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32 mainstream society. Players’ beliefs in the key role that sporting institutions can play in  
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34 fostering an acceptance of homosexuality is then discussed before finally (Jarvis 2015;  
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36 McCarthy 2010; Willis 2015) turning to the importance of a gay rugby club such as the  
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38 Tritons, creates an arena for gay male sociability outside more traditional male homosexual  
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40 venues.  
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## 56 **Reviewing the Theory**

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There is a supported argument that substantial shifts in attitudes towards homosexuality in British society more generally, are reflected particularly prominently within the materially changed contexts and dynamics of male team sports (Anderson, 2009, 2011b; Clements and Field 2014; Smith 2011; Twenge et al, 2015). This shift has been theorised most significantly in the seminal work of Eric Anderson and his theory of ‘Inclusive Masculinity’ (Anderson 2009, 2012). Just as homosexuality was socially (and legislatively) outlawed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anderson argues that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, homosexuality has reached levels of unrivalled acceptance (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). Now, he suggests, sportsmen see homophobia as being so out-of-step with contemporary progressive attitudes that it is subsequently rejected, almost to the same extent that homosexuality and the homosexual was rejected previously (Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Bush et al, 2012; McCormack and Anderson, 2014).

The roots of this change for Anderson were initially found in shifts in intimate behaviours between men within both the UK and USA, which have been increasingly well documented (C.F. Anderson, 2014). Such research shows that young men who identify as heterosexual are now not only more likely to interact socially with gay peers, but they are also more likely to be both emotionally and physically intimate with one another, whether heterosexual or otherwise (McCormack and Anderson, 2014). This, Anderson suggests, is both contextually and historically specific, citing geographical places where such intimate behaviours between



men exist *alongside* socio-culturally, legislatively and institutionally normative homophobia (Anderson, 2009. See: Hamdi et al 2016). Instead, he argues, the shift towards inclusive masculinities in Western society needs to be understood against a backdrop of what he terms 'homohysteria' (Anderson, 2009).

The concept of homohysteria is used to refer to the 'fear of being socially perceived as gay', which can be applied equally to an individual, as well as to a culture (Anderson, 2009).

Three key criteria can be used to judge whether a culture can be defined as being homohysterical:

- a) the culture maintains antipathy towards gay men
- b) there is mass awareness that gay people exist in significant numbers in that culture;
- c) the belief that gender and sexuality are conflated

Consequently, within homohysterical societies, male behaviour is determined through perceptions of a hegemonic masculinity that is defined in opposition to a stereotyped homosexuality, which is itself of necessity, both feminised and subsequently therefore, repositioned within a hierarchy of gender as socially devalued (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Nevis 2016). It is precisely this oppositional positioning that Anderson argues is now challenged, so that as homosexuality has become socially and legislatively normalised (Author B; Weeks, 2010) and homophobia has become increasingly rejected,

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homophobia has therefore decreased (Anderson, 2009). The way that genders are conceived has subsequently become less hierarchical, so that society incorporates a multiplicity of masculinities that are more equally valued (Anderson 2009). As a result, male interaction and intimate behaviour has become more expansive and less coded, as gender and sexuality are slowly cleaved apart (Anderson 2009). It is in this context that gay rugby clubs have expanded across the globe.

**The Growth of Gay Rugby Clubs**

Sport has been recognised as a privileged space for heterosexuals and an environment that has promoted heterosexism and homophobia (Baiocco et al 2018; Cavalier et al 2017; 2011; Denison and Kitchen, 2015; Gill et al 2010; Gilbert, 2000; Plummer, 2006; Shang and Gill, 2012). Rivers (2011) stated that half of those who identified as a sexual minority experienced homophobic harassment during or in a sports associated environment. Due to the potentially negative experiences that many LGBT+ people might have had, or the fear that they might experience, it is reasonable to argue that LGBT+ people could/may feel excluded from participating in sport or they need to create an alternative environment free from heterosexism and homophobia. The first signs of the latter in terms of Rugby Union can be traced back to the 1980’s in the Southern Hemisphere when teams attempted to organise, but were unable to sustain any form of operational profile. It would not be until

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3 November of 1995 that the first officially registered gay rugby club would emerge in London  
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6 England, thus beginning the ability to track and monitor the development of gay rugby  
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9 worldwide. Since 1995, the formation of gay rugby clubs has grown steadily across the  
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12 globe, as seen in table 1:  
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23 Significant increases in the early 2000s may be attributed to the creation of The  
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26 International Gay Rugby Association and Board (IGRAB) in 2001. The creation of the IGRAB  
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29 provided an official resource to help interested parties in the creation, recruitment and  
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32 retention of gay rugby programmes across the globe. A spike also occurred in 2013 when  
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35 GayRugbyClubs.com (GRC), a website that provides an online community for gay rugby  
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38 players and clubs went live. The two support systems of IGRAB and GRC would eventually  
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41 merge to create International Gay Rugby Clubhouse (IGRC) in 2016. Consequently, 2016 also  
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44 experienced the greatest increase of gay rugby clubs since tracking began some twenty  
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47 years ago.  
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52 The growth of gay grassroots organised rugby clubs all occurred during times of greater  
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55 structural development or integration of formal support structures virtually and/or  
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58 physically. A central figure in the development of inclusive rugby clubs has also been the  
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Rugby Football Union (RFU). The role of the RFU and their openness to provide financial resources has significantly contributed to the establishment and support of gay rugby clubs. For the RFU the development of rugby union is the primary goal that one’s sexuality should not prohibit. Yet, while greater structural support has been a significant contributor to the growth of gay rugby clubs, this does not tell the whole story of motivation; in other words, the question of *why* people have a need or want to join a gay rugby club is relatively unexplored.

**Methods of Research**

The data collected for this exploratory study was completed by a focus group of the founding members of the Liverpool Tritons, the newest inclusive/gay rugby club established in collaboration with the RFU in the UK. As the research sought to engage in a discussion about the need or want for gay rugby clubs, a dialogue was needed amongst members allowing them to talk openly about and challenge each other over the topics of homosexuality, homophobia and inclusion.

The Tritons were selected specifically and purposefully as the club of interest because they are, at the time of writing, the most recent established gay club in the UK. Those participating in the research would be from the original founding members group thus

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3 providing a unique perspective and understanding on the original motivations behind the  
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6 creation of the team. Speaking to the first generation of the club will provide a better  
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9 understanding of the contemporary motivations behind forming a gay rugby club in an era  
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12 of decreased homophobia, rather than speaking to a team that is well established and  
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15 generations removed from those who created the club.  
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23 Using the team's website, the Tritons were contacted about participating in the research.  
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26 After several e-mail exchanges and a phone conversation with the team's president, he let  
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29 the team know about the project. After several weeks of recruitment, it was agreed that  
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32 the interested team members would participate in a focus group following a weekly practice  
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35 session. The two and half hour session took on the feeling of a group of friends chatting at  
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38 the pub rather than a formal focus group data gathering exercise. As a result the fifteen  
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41 players, including the two men who worked with the RFU to establish the team, discussed  
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44 openly about why they joined the club, their views about the gay community and  
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47 homophobia. The honesty of their stories spurred respectful disagreements, playful laughter  
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50 and support.  
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54 Keeping with the tenets of a focus group, the researchers acted as facilitators of the  
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57 conversations (Krueger & Casey 2014). The focus group was recorded and transcribed. The  
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60 transcript was then coded separately by each researcher. Employing the 'Constant

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Comparative Method’ (Bakeman and Gottman 1997) each researcher identified and coded the dominant themes (Strauss and Corbin 1994). The two sets of independently identified themes were then merged to establish a collaborative understanding of the dominant themes expressed by the participants (Emerson et al 1995).

Through the coding procedures, there is a recognition of the complexity as well as the difficulty of determining true meaning. We wanted to reflect the dominant discourses as expressed by those who participate in this gay rugby team, firstly through the examination of shared experiences of why they decided there was a need to establish an inclusive/ gay rugby club and secondly, why they decided to participate in an inclusive/ gay rugby club. As this research is exploratory in nature, the sample population is limited to one club. The small sample size is useful in this exploratory study as it allows investigating the attitudes of the participating players in detail. It also allowed everyone to speak and engage in the conversation and address any cases of a dominant voice or a participant being over influential (Smithson 2000).

Due to the small sample size, the generalisations from the findings are limited, but provide an honest insight into the views of those who are a part of the most recently established gay/inclusive rugby club in the United Kingdom. As previously identified, the literature on grassroots gay rugby is lacking. This work adds to the limited body of knowledge as well as

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3 providing one of the first contributions into the topic using the inclusive masculinity lens.  
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6 The employment of the focus group allows the research to accomplish the goal of  
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9 discovering the motivations behind the creation of the Tritons and the members  
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12 understanding of modern masculinity and contemporary social attitudes towards  
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15 homosexuality.  
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### 23 **Has UK Society become more tolerant and masculinity more inclusive?**

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27 Recent years have documented how sporting attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted  
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30 significantly into acceptance (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Anderson and McCormack,  
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33 2018). It is perhaps unsurprising that Triton players also documented this acceptance, as  
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36 one player put it:  
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40 **‘...in Liverpool, the teams we’ve played against have been incredibly welcoming**  
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43 **and they want to get as many people involved and so it comes down to the**  
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46 **personal barriers.’**  
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50 Another player spoke about overt overtures received from teams to welcome them to the  
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53 rugby community:  
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56 **‘You know, we’ve had sort of the first team captain of [a mainstream rugby team],**  
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59 **come over and bring us a couple of pitchers of beer, just to sort of say, well done,**  
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**you know. Just a little gesture to sort of almost just include you...And the feedback from some of the other straight teams has been great because of what we've done.'**

The team agreed that the RFU has played a critical role allowing for the development and inclusion of gay rugby teams as one player stated,

**'I think rugby through the RFU have made huge strides, certainly in the ten years since I've been playing senior rugby and involved in officiating senior rugby, as well so...for me I don't think there is as much need for an inclusive side as there once was...'**

Several other players echoed the sentiment of gay inclusion by recognising how much has changed since the advent of gay rugby teams highlighting further the evolution and integration of gay sports clubs. **'When Manchester [Spartans] started, gay players weren't allowed in the changing rooms, people refused to play with them, genuinely, for the fear of catching AIDS from them...'**

They players all spoke of the supportive nature about the RFU's involvement and agree that because of the RFU's active participation, Rugby Union is further along in the promotion of LGBTQ+ equality,



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3 **'...you compare football to rugby union and you look at the examples, I don't think**  
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6 **football has any clear examples...'**  
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10 Another player responded to the lack of 'out' players in football;  
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13 **'Well it doesn't have any 'out' persons playing the game actively in the Premier**  
14  
15 **League or in the football leagues. You look at the Premiership and the rugby,**  
16  
17 **you've got Nigel Owens who is clearly the banner waver, doing well. And look**  
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19 **what happened, the incident in New Zealand two years ago where you had some**  
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21 **incidents of homophobia at Twickenham. And you had those culprits severely**  
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23 **reprimanded and fined. And that's a clear statement that homophobia is not part**  
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25 **of our game.'**  
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36 The fact that bad behaviour was punished and that there were high profile gay players and  
37  
38 referees, rugby offered themselves as a sporting environment for homosexual players. For  
39  
40 Triton players, the accepting environment of the RFU enabled institutional development:  
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44

45 **...the investment and the, and the amount of help that the RFU have put into this**  
46  
47 **club, the other clubs, even the established clubs. I don't think the FA do that half as**  
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49 **well as the RFU have done to set up inclusive or, or whatever, football sides.'**  
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55 Which was added to with:  
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**‘I think it’s an intrinsic part of Rugby Union that it’s all about getting people playing the game of Rugby Union...I think that it is a genuine ‘let’s get people playing rugby’ ...Erm, certainly in Liverpool, there’s three gay referees, there are two gay referees in the Premiership, who are about to come out, so I think it’s there. So compared to football, we are poles apart and I think it’s a genuine belief for improving the game of rugby.’**

This progressiveness towards gay players was crucially, understood by Triton players as being intrinsic to rugby itself, but not solely towards gay people; it was part of a larger project towards widening participation more generally amongst *all groups* who might not have traditionally played rugby:

**‘I’ve sat on a number of meetings where it it’s not a token, it’s not all gay people, they’re, those meetings I’ve sat in, it’s they’ve started with how can we outreach to communities which we aren’t currently reaching? And we’re one of them. And it includes erm, immigrant communities is a big one as well as other able communities, mixed disability communities and just non-rugby regions. So, that from what I’ve seen at the very top is their driver.’**

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3 The key point being made here by Triton players is that around twenty years ago, the power  
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6 of homophobia and subsequent rejection of homosexuality in the UK resulted in a level of  
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9 discrimination that required an entirely separate team in order to enable gay men to play  
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12 rugby. Yet because of greater inclusive levels of sexuality, the once hard barriers that  
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15 existed separating heterosexual and homosexual men have diminished (Anderson and  
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17  
18 McCormack, 2018; Anderson and McGuire, 2010). The key question becomes then, why join  
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21 a 'gay' rugby team at all?  
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### 29 **Is the Motivation for Joining a Gay rugby Team a 'Need', or a 'Want'?**

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32 Given the participants' assertions of improved cultural attitudes towards homosexuality,  
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34  
35 one might question their motivations behind joining a gay sports team. The overwhelming  
36  
37  
38 sense was for Triton players that attitudes towards homosexuality and how they  
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40  
41 experienced their identity had shifted significantly, there was also a concomitant feeling  
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43  
44 that in some cases, this might be overtly true, but that all homophobic sentiments had not  
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46  
47 been fully eradicated:  
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51 **'...for me, cus I've played straight rugby for years now, like I came out at 16 at**  
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53  
54 **school and I was playing rugby then and I carried on playing, I played for a uni and**  
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57 **played in local teams in the North West before and the reason I joined [the**  
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**inclusive team], was literally because like you said about that kind of ‘latent  
homophobia’ ...’**

This latent homophobia and stereotypes was particularly manifest, according to the majority of Triton players, in a fear that they would somehow be seen to be less ‘strong’ and therefore, less capable of playing rugby – seen to be a necessarily strength-based pursuit. A player described it as,

**‘I think it’s more it’s more that it’s that fear, well, not fear, but concern that you  
just naturally think that they’re [straight people] not going to think that you’re  
good enough, to play against them because they’re straight, they’ll have been  
playing it for years, you know, they, in their mind-set, they’ll be stronger than us,  
because obviously we’re gay.’**

Players suspected that being gay would influence the perception of Triton by other non-gay rugby players firstly, because of the assumption that straight men will have played rugby for a lot longer, but secondly, that gay players would somehow been seen as being weaker. In other words, not seen as possessing the ‘strength’ traditionally associated with playing rugby and consequently, as a key space for the enactment of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For some players then, there was a worry that if they were to play in a ‘mainstream’ team, they might experience some more covert or ‘latent’ homophobia, or a kind of ‘unconscious bias’. Similarly to that suggested

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3 above then, playing against ostensibly 'mainstream' rugby clubs offered a potential way for  
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6 Triton players to challenge such latent homophobia and in the process, playing rugby as out  
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9 gay men offered them a space in which to perform traits seen traditionally as being 'non-  
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11  
12 gay' specific too. That rugby offered this space for gay men was seen by Triton players to be  
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14  
15 in direct opposition to other mainstream sports and in particular football, not least because  
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18 rugby at the professional level has a number of high profile people who are out as  
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22 homosexual.

### 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 **The Exclusivity of the Contemporary Gay Scene**

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32 Whilst it was clear that Triton players had a fundamental belief that broader social attitudes  
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35 within the UK had shifted significantly, they nonetheless offered an important yet surprising  
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37  
38 caveat to this point; that the current problem lies within the gay community:  
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42 **'I think it's the gay community that's the problem [general agreement murmured].**

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44  
45 **Particularly with the youth that I see [in a professional capacity] I don't think they**

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47  
48 **are as diverse and accommodating. You can see that you know, particularly in the**

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51 **trends that they will go for, the types that they will go for. You know, there's**

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54 **blatant racism in the younger gay community. I think that's the issue. I don't think**

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3 the issue is as much with the heterosexual community anymore and I think that's  
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6 what drives me away.'

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10 'This was responded by, **'Same here'** in a group agreement. Followed by a powerful  
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12  
13 statement of **'It drives me away from being in the gay community.'**  
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20 What these players were suggesting was that alongside experiencing a sense of diminished  
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23 cultural homophobia outside the gay community, there was a sense that the exact opposite  
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26 was happening within the gay community, which was seen to be becoming more divisive. In  
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29 particular, Triton players argued, there was an increasing emphasis on ways of 'being gay'  
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32 becoming more tightly defined to the extent that some had even felt 'driven away' from  
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35 more traditional places associated with gay sociability. Being part of a gay/inclusive rugby  
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38 team offered an outlet to meet and socialise with other gay men in ways that reached  
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41 beyond (the especially sexualised) spaces that they equated with the gay community. One  
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43  
44 participant stated that there was a difference between homophobia and not being  
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46  
47 interested in the 'gay community, **'There's something called homophobia, but there's also**  
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49  
50 **just realising that in order to be gay, you don't have to be a part of that.** A fellow player  
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54 agreed and provided additional clarification,  
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3 **'But it's also the understanding that...if somebody in the club is interested in that**  
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6 **[referring to drag or leather, which had been identified as examples by the group],**  
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8  
9 **then that's fine, it's just we as a team are there to play rugby and that's, when**  
10  
11  
12 **we're together, it's really about rugby. Yeah, we'll have a giggle about other things,**  
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14  
15 **but we're not, it always comes back to the rugby and then everybody's got their**  
16  
17  
18 **own different interests and things like that, but...'**  
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26 As another player agreed, being part of the Tritons had actually made him more accepting –  
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29 of other and crucially, those he defined as being *different*, types of gay men:  
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33 **'It's one of the best bits about it being an inclusive team. It's that you do socialise,**  
34  
35  
36 **not just with different types of gay men, but just different types of men in general.**  
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38  
39 **Cus we have all got some similarities, but we've also got a lot of differences...we're**  
40  
41  
42 **probably more accepting...'**  
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49 This sentiment was overwhelming agreed by the team members stating;  
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53 **'I definitely mix with more people who traditionally before joining I would never**  
54  
55  
56 **have mixed with...'**  
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59

60 And;

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2  
3 **'Because it's a different way for people to meet than like the classic way that**  
4  
5  
6 **everyone's like, oh well why don't you have gay friends and basically it's like well**  
7  
8  
9 **I've shagged them off Grindr, or I found them on Stanley Street or Canal Street or**  
10  
11  
12 **whichever city you're in. So it's a different space where it's not focused on sex.**  
13  
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15

16 Playing rugby offered a way to socialise and to experience their sexual identity in a new way,  
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18  
19 and perhaps even more importantly, to do so in a way that they felt it was important to  
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21  
22 model to the 'next generation':  
23  
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25

26 **'Well, it did start off with, no it did grow on me within the years to say, ok we're**  
27  
28  
29 **actually setting an example of what it should be. I mean look at the table here,**  
30  
31  
32 **we've got thin, thick, thin, small, er ugly, beautiful [laughter] erm old, old!'**  
33  
34  
35 **(Pointing a finger at people around the table)**  
36  
37  
38

39 There was a strong support that the Tritons provided a 'different way of gay'. Others around  
40  
41  
42 the table echoed similar supportive statements agreeing that they personally are 'not the  
43  
44  
45 stereotype' of what it means to be a gay man.  
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49 **'We're not the stereotype, I mean we have feminine people in the team, I mean**  
50  
51  
52 **look at [he pointed to another player]! [laughter] I mean this in a positive way,**  
53  
54  
55 **let's say ten years ago I would have never talked to [the player he pointed to]**  
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3 **because he acts like that, I kid you not. Now, because of through the rugby and all,**  
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6 **I've seen different sides of...[Player being referred to above]'**  
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9

10 This player is admitting to his own internalised homophobia, that he avoided interaction  
11  
12 with other gay men who displayed what he thought were overly feminine traits or  
13  
14 behaviours. It was the structure of the Tritons that allowed interaction to occur. Within the  
15  
16 discussion, it was unclear if the club was an illustration of the diversity of the gay  
17  
18 community to the outside heterosexual world or if the club was a product of gay men who  
19  
20 rejected the 'gay community' or felt that they were rejected from the 'gay community'. Their  
21  
22 dual mission is summed up in the following statement;  
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32 **'But it highlights quite an important point of like, another role of the club except**  
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34 **from being a space where we all gather it's one where we can go forward, and**  
35  
36 **we're not just representing this as what gay men can do to straight rugby clubs,**  
37  
38 **we're also representing to like *gay younger people* and people who are maybe still**  
39  
40 **closeted. It's like look we're all sizes and shapes, probably a bit more round than**  
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42 **we need to be, but like you can do this, you aren't limited by that.'**  
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## 55 Discussion

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As with all exploratory research, there are a number of interesting avenues that could be pursued further. In particular, by undertaking a comparison behind the motivations for becoming involved with this kind of gay/inclusive rugby team as outlined above, with members of gay/inclusive rugby team across the UK. That is not to say, however, that the findings here are not important in and of themselves. In many ways it both answers and complicates the research questions stated above. Firstly, Triton players felt that their experiences playing rugby against those clubs regarded as being implicitly non-inclusive did reflect both the idea of diminished cultural homophobia in sport – their own sport of rugby, in particular – in a way that reflected progressive attitudes (and therefore diminished cultural homophobia) amongst men in wider society more generally.

This supports the idea of ‘inclusive masculinity’, not only in the sense of contemporary masculinity being more tolerant of traits and behaviours that are not seen to be implicit markers of homosexuality when displayed by heterosexual men, but in the inverse sense as well: gay men are not necessarily solely tied to embodying specific traits/behaviours either.

Both straight and gay players could share a beer after a game, following a competitive ‘fight’ on the pitch (Anderson, 2011a). As a result, one player even commented that the need for ‘inclusive/gay teams’ was actually no longer necessary, as those pioneering gay rugby clubs have accomplished the goal of inclusion rendering the need for gay teams un-necessary.

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3 The continued development of gay rugby clubs supports the idea of inclusive masculinity  
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5  
6 (Anderson, 2009, 2011). Gay men are now playing alongside heterosexual men. As shown  
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8  
9 in previous quotes, Triton members expressed how the straight rugby teams have accepted  
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11  
12 them. From the players' responses, the Tritons are embraced and supported by the RFU and  
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14  
15 the wider rugby union, regardless of sexual orientation. No outward homophobia, such as  
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17  
18 teams refusing to play against then because they are gay team were reported. As a result of  
19  
20  
21 a wider understanding and acceptance of homosexuality, gay men are becoming more  
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23  
24 comfortable in engaging in activities in which at one time they felt they were previously  
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26  
27 excluded.  
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31 It was clearly important to all of the players that this was driven from an institutional point  
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34 of view, a process enhanced by the fact that the game at the professional level had a  
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36  
37 number of high profile gay men who were able to act as significant role models. So the  
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39  
40 possibility to join a gay rugby team did not represent a 'need' in the same that it had done  
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42  
43 twenty years ago, in an era of homophobia, but it did provide a space for all men, straight  
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45  
46 and gay, to enact and embody inclusive masculinity. The institutional drive behind the  
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48  
49 project of gay inclusivity within rugby union, was understood by players to clearly reflect a  
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52 sense of broader diminished cultural homophobia – one that Triton players felt other  
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55 sporting bodies, particularly football, could learn from. Intriguingly however, there was an  
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even greater need that the club offered – a refuge from the contemporary gay community itself.

The Triton rugby players use their group as a way to separate themselves away from the ‘gay community’. The creation of the Tritons provided a sense of belonging for those who felt that the Liverpool ‘gay community’ is too narrowly defined. Following Ghaziani, Triton players themselves recognised the confines of the singular gay space (Ghaziani, 2019). The players identified this gay community in Liverpool as having a number of problems, specifically identifying the lack of ‘diversity’ and ‘accommodation’ and claiming ‘blatant racism’ amongst younger members of the gay community. There is a shared feeling that the current gay community rejects them or as previously stated, **‘It drives me away from being in the gay community.’** In its singularity it is, in other words, both homogenous and homogenising. Importantly, by playing competitively as out gay men, Triton players felt that they represented not only a challenge to hegemonic stereotypes of masculinity and therefore a tangible example of inclusive masculinity to the heterosexual men they played both against and alongside, but also to gay men themselves. The creation of the Tritons is also a rejection of perceived over-sexualisation within the gay community, and the rugby team offered a new space that allowed players to develop friendships removed from the sexually charged, singularised environment.

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2  
3 Triton players felt that the alternative space created through being part of the club enabled  
4  
5  
6 them to mix in new ways, with different types of gay men. This use of sport is a neo-tribal  
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8  
9 action that members of the gay community can use to develop a level of belonging and  
10  
11  
12 connectedness (Vorobjovas-Pinta 2018). The emergence of tribes can be used as a tool to  
13  
14  
15 explore shifts and trends within the queer community (Greteman 2018). As a tool, the  
16  
17  
18 development of tribes can document gay assimilation into mainstream society as well as  
19  
20  
21 indicate movements or separation within the wider gay community (Ghaziani, 2019;  
22  
23  
24 Plummer 2015).  
25  
26

27  
28 It was clear from the discussion around the table, that this sense of inclusivity the Triton  
29  
30  
31 players found within rugby was important, both because it reflected a sense of the most  
32  
33  
34 progressive areas of society, in which cultural homophobia had diminished (Anderson, 2009,  
35  
36  
37 2011a, 2011b; Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Bush et al,  
38  
39  
40 2012). Because of historical societal associations of rugby with traditional notions of  
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42  
43 masculinity, it also offered a means through which gay rugby players could challenge latent  
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45  
46 homophobias and in the course of that, to offer a space in which they could perform a  
47  
48  
49 different aspect of their own masculinity as well. Rugby offered the Triton players a space in  
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51  
52 which to do 'being a *gay* man' differently. They could be strong and competitive in other  
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54  
55 words, in an arena against which hegemonic masculinity had traditionally been measured.  
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In other words, the need for gay/inclusive rugby clubs was doubly important in this sense, because it also challenged dominant narratives that overlapped gender and sexuality in relation to what being gay, meant to gay men. This was seen to be so important because Triton players felt that although cultural homophobia had diminished in mainstream society, the opposite had happened within the gay community itself. Players suggested that they experienced the gay community as being internally divisive and with limited spaces in which sociability was defined in non-sexual ways. Playing for the Tritons therefore offered a means to interact with groups of gay men they might not otherwise have spent time with. Rather than offering a social haven away from the heteronormative mainstream, in many ways playing for this rugby team offered a social haven away from the pressure and demands of the homogenous gay community. In so doing, players hoped that if Triton were to have any legacy at all, it would be to offer a new way of being to the next generation of young gay men, one that has its basis in inclusivity instead.

The club reduced emphasis on sexualisation that many stated they explicitly associated with gay socialising and more importantly, offered this inclusivity to all gay men, regardless of who they were or what they looked like – even for those men who had yet to come out. Being a Triton player offered a place to explore maleness and masculinity safely, but crucially here not away from the heteronormative mainstream, but from the pressures and expectations of the gay community itself. Thus, these groups are needed to both bridge and

1  
2  
3 bond the gay community. They help forge new bridges of inclusion into 'straight' society by  
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5  
6 providing further evidence of 'inclusive masculinity'. Gay rugby teams can challenge prior  
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9 notions of the abilities and interests of gay men. The gay rugby team also provides a  
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12 bonding force for those gay men who want to create a level of belonging through the  
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15 establishment of new gay spaces.  
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Table 1

