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Homophobia in football and group identity: an analysis of Northwest England football club fans

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ABSTRACT

Some recent literature suggests that homophobia may be declining within men's football in the UK. This may be due to increased internationalisation and internet use, together with the impact of feminism and LGBTQ+ prominence in the wider society. However, in contrast, the continued presence of homophobic language in some football-related settings suggests the persistence of indirect biases. This study aimed to develop an understanding of the circumstances in which homophobia might persist in modern UK football and add to the current body of research surrounding in-group bias and team identification. 105 participants who identified as supporters of Everton, Liverpool, Manchester United, Manchester City or another Northwest England football club, took part in a study measuring self-reported attitudes in a mixed factorial design. Participants demonstrated more negative attitudes towards homosexuality when asked about football-based than general life-based scenarios. Individuals also displayed more negative views towards perceived gay members of rival clubs than members of their own club, displaying in-group bias. Participants were significantly more likely to display negative attitudes by participating in homophobic chants inside football grounds, than sending homophobic messages *via* X/Twitter, suggesting that sports-based homophobic biases may be particularly prevalent in contexts of rivalry and anonymity.

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Introduction

Homophobia refers to prejudice, negative attitudes or beliefs towards gay people, including fear or dislike of someone because they are—or are perceived to be—gay (Stonewall 2025). The continued presence of homophobia and the stigmatisation that results from it has significantly worsened the lives of LGBTQ+ people around the world (Chard et al. 2015). Despite the ongoing expression of homophobia in some contexts, increased awareness and a growth of social acceptance have significantly decreased its incidence, particularly since the 1990s in many Western countries (Ahmad and Bhugra 2010; Kranjac and Wagmiller 2022).

To illustrate the growth of more accepting attitudes towards members of the LGBTQ+ community, a 1988 British social attitudes survey showed that over 60% of respondents' reported believing that homosexuality was wrong. An equivalent survey conducted in 2013 revealing that the aforementioned statistic had reduced to 20% (Clements and Field 2014). More recently, Magrath et al. (2022) reported on a 5-year longitudinal study examining English heterosexual undergraduates' attitudes towards homosexuality in sport and found significant reductions in homophobia over time.

While the overall prevalence of overt homophobia in the West may have reduced, there are significant settings in which homophobic disapproval and cruelty likely persist (Bartoş, Russell, and Hegarty 2020). A key example of this can be found in the treatment of LGBTQ+ people in sports environments, particularly in 'men's sports' such as football (Denison et al. 2021; Greenspan et al. 2019). In a study of 88 gay men and 120 heterosexual men in sports contexts, Baiocco et al. (2018), found the gay men were

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significantly more likely to be bullied as well as to leave sports groups due to fear of being mocked or abused. In a study of 1173 participants in 6 countries (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland) Denison et al. (2021) found that 42% of LGBTQ+ people had been targeted with homophobic abuse or bullying within a sports environment. Of individuals who had come out as non-heterosexual, only 20% had come out to the sports team in which they participated, suggesting that homophobia may have a greater prevalence in sports contexts compared with general life.

Homophobia in football

The presence of homophobia in sport is perhaps the most obvious in football (Cashmore and Cleland 2011). Association football is the most popular sport in many countries of the world (Goldblatt 2014), suggesting that homophobia in football can worsen the lives of millions. The strength of this homophobia is such that there have been no openly gay footballers in Europe's top five leagues since the tragic case of Justin Fashanu, who died of suicide in 1998. However, a growing number of openly gay or bisexual professional and semi-professional footballers have been met with support from team members as well as from fans (Gaston, Magrath, and Anderson 2018; Magrath, Anderson, and Roberts 2015). The Northwest of England, where this study is based, includes some of the most storied football clubs including Liverpool, Manchester United, and Everton. Local rivalries and passionate fans, often from a working class background, contribute to a football culture that might be intertwined with regional identity. This environment can sometimes perpetuate traditional masculine norms, including homophobic attitudes, as a means of promoting cohesion and group identity.

There is some evidence to suggest that homophobia may have decreased somewhat in modern football (Gaston, Magrath, and Anderson 2018; Magrath, Anderson, and Roberts 2015). Authors have linked to this to the growth of more inclusive forms of masculinity in particular contexts (Anderson 2010) as well as increased globalisation, internet use, feminism, and LGBTQ+ prominence in wider society. This work has informed the development of Inclusive Masculinity theory (IMT) (Anderson 2010), which proposes that in some settings, specifically in the USA, UK and some other western countries, gay men may be included in male peer groups displaying more open and positive attitudes towards softer gender roles. Cashmore and Cleland (2012) conducted a survey including 3,500 football fans from 35 different countries. Fully 93% of the respondents reported that a player's sexuality was irrelevant to their team's performance. In later work Cleland, Magrath, and Kian (2018) reviewed over 6,000 comments on UK football message boards in response to a *Guardian* newspaper article reporting that former premier league footballer Thomas Hitzlsperger (most recently player for Everton) had come out as gay. The results were encouraging as only 2% of the comments were negative, with many of the comments condemning the few homophobic posts. To counter the possibility that individuals may filter the offensive opinions they hold in order to avoid negative social and occupational consequences, Cleland (2014) conducted an anonymous version of the above study, finding similar results.

Subsequently, Hansen et al. (2023) examined over 1,500 comments about anti-homophobia campaigns in football in the UK and found only 10% of the comments could be classified as homophobic in character. However, this figure may be deceptive as the posts received close to 25,000 likes and it is likely that many fans may show their support by 'liking' a post rather than commenting on it. Sherwood et al. (2020) conducted a similar based study regarding an Australian football event designed to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ players within the sport. Of the 1,980 comments reviewed, 31% contained unsupportive content. Similarly, a Brazilian study reported 38% of comments in response to having openly gay players in an men's football team were homophobic (Nabono Martins 2023), many of which were particularly offensive, suggesting that homophobic attitudes may vary between different countries. A criticism of the above studies is their lack of generalisability to the European context, which is the provider of the most popular football competitions. Further research is needed to investigate these issues.

Recent studies have found that many football fans continue to believe that singing homophobic or other chants that might be interpreted as malicious or toxic, is acceptable (Cashmore and Cleland 2011; Cleland et al. 2023; Magrath 2018). This is a hugely important issue as homophobic slurs and chants have been found to have a negative impact of LGBTQ+ fans and players (Mazzie 2014). Magrath (2018)

conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with fans, all of whom showed acceptance for homosexuality in football. Despite this, 83% of participants admitted to singing homophobic chants aimed at rival team's players, many justifying this by claiming that doing so improved their team's chances of success.

Respondents in Magrath's (2018) study claimed they were not homophobic, yet admitted they might engage in homophobic chants aimed at rival players, displaying bias against those who belonged to an out-group. Similar findings have been noted in number of subsequent studies (Brewer 1979; Macrae and Bodenhausen 2001; Martin, Young, and McAuliffe 2020; Mullen, Brown, and Smith 1992) as well as in meta-analyses (Mullen, Brown, and Smith 1992; Pechar and Kranton 2017). Pechar and Kranton (2017) found that in-group favouritism was more prevalent when groups were in competition with one other, suggesting that the effect would be more common in sports settings. More recently, Newson, White, and Whitehouse (2023) found that age, gender, and exposure to out-group threat influenced ingroup behaviour among British soccer fans, with results suggesting that highly identifying fans were more hostile towards outgroup team-members than weakly identified fans, although all participants typically prioritised ingroup altruism over outgroup hostility.

While the literature surrounding in-group bias is plentiful, a focus on UK football fans, specifically in the Northwest of England, with respect to homophobia within football and social group identity has received relatively little attention. In particular, few studies have investigated whether homophobic abuse in football comes predominantly from rival fans as opposed to home teams. Informed by previous research, this study hypothesised that there would be a complex interaction between group identity and the level of homophobia displayed. More specifically, we predict that individuals might display homophobia across a variety of settings but primarily for occasions where the target was an outgroup football club member, suggesting that football group identity trumps other prejudices. Specific issues this study sought to explore were as follows.

- The likelihood for fans to express homophobic language depends on the context in which it is expressed (i.e. via social media, versus in stadium, versus in open conversation).
- The likelihood of fans accepting a gay football club member/player depends on the characteristic(s) of the player (e.g. whether they were a locally connected person, a player from abroad, or a football club manager).
- Both of the above effects – the likelihood of expressing homophobic language and the likelihood of accepting a gay player may be influenced by individual differences in how strongly fans identify with their home team/in-group and how strongly they dislike/denigrate a rival team/out-group

Methodology

Design

The study employed a four-way mixed ANOVA design. The within group variables included Group (ingroup_football/outgroup_football/non_football). We also investigated differences in Attack (twitter/stadium/ridicule¹), and Acceptance (friend/external/manager²). Between group variables included Identity (How strongly do you identify with your supported football club?) (high/low) as well as Denigration (How much do you dislike your rival club?) (high/low). The dependent variable in the first analysis conducted was the level of attack reported, and the dependent variable in the second analysis was the level of acceptance reported.

Participants

The use of G*power software with an effect size 0.15, power 0.95, and alpha 0.05, identified the need for a sample size of 84 participants in this study. A total of 153 people took part in it with the sample size being comparable to that used in similar factorial designs in this field (e.g. Fink et al. 2009). Participants were recruited using opportunity sampling from social media posts on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. There was a focus on recruiting participants from the North-West of England

including includes Liverpool and Manchester. The study was also advertised on online sports message boards in the Northwest (i.e. Liverpool football club, Everton, Manchester City, Manchester United). Participants were required to be 18 years or over and were not reimbursed for participating in the study.

Due to incomplete data entries (i.e. participants who started the study but then did not complete it), data from 48 participants' were excluded, resulting in a total of 105 participants being included in the analysis ($M_{age} = 30.98$; $SD = 11.76$). 102 of the participants were male.

Materials

Questionnaires³ were used to assess the studies variables. Each question was answered using a visual analogue scale with scores ranging from 0-100. The scale values were hidden from participants in order to detect subtle differences in participants' responses. Measures included:

- a. *The likelihood for fans to express homophobic language.* The variable 'Attack' was investigated by asking participants how likely they would engage in each of the activities in different contexts (i.e. sending abusive tweets/messages; negative chants; participate in ridicule and jokes) (0 = very unlikely to 100 = very likely).
- b. *The likelihood for fans to accept a gay football club member/player.* 'Acceptance' was investigated asking participants how positive they would view a gay person being an acquaintance, an external friend, a manager (0 = very negative to 100 = very positive).

The questions detailed in a) and b) about were then asked in relation to either an ingroup football team player, a rival football team player, or a person outside football.

Identity was measured with a single item: How strongly do you identify with your supported football club? (0=Slightly to 100=Very strongly). Denigration was measured with a single item: How much do you dislike your rival club? (0=Slightly to 100=Very strongly).

In the first two ANOVAs, Identity as well as Denigration were coded and treated as binary variables (high/low) using a median split. However, in a subsequent third analysis both were analysed as continuous variables.

Procedure

After providing informed consent participants completed the questionnaire online at home in at any time of their convenience. Note that the items were mixed so that the same question (for instance about likelihood of sending abusive tweets) did not appear consecutively for an ingroup versus an outgroup football club.

Ethics review

The study received ethical review by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee (PSYREC) at Liverpool John Moores University (PSYREP060223).

Findings

Table 1 below shows football club support by study participants

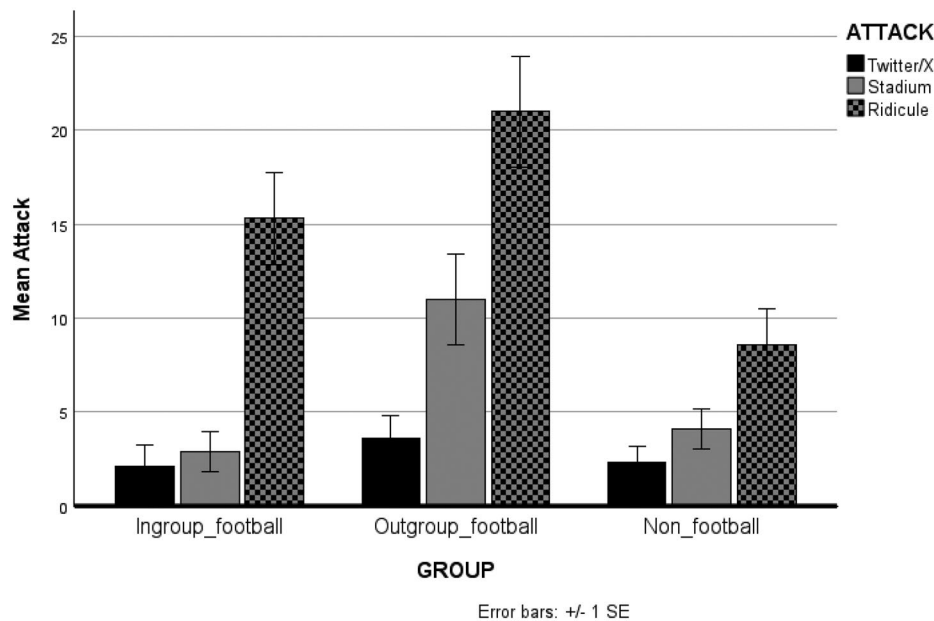
Analysis of the likelihood for fans to express homophobic language depending on context and identity

To investigate this issue, we conducted a mixed ANOVA with within group variables GROUP (ingroup_football/outgroup_football/non_football) and Attack (twitter/stadium/ridicule). Between group variables

Table 1. Football club supported by participants.

Club	N	%
Everton	29	27.6
Liverpool Football Club	36	34.3
Manchester United	35	33.3
Manchester City	3	2.9
Other	2	1.9

Note: Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

**Figure 1.** Effects of group identity on mean level of attack.

included Identity (high/low) as well as Denigration (high/low). Greenhouse-Geisser corrections to the degrees of freedom were used where the sphericity assumption was violated.

We found a main effect of Group $F(1.65, 166.57) = 15.75$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .14$. A post hoc one-way repeated measures ANOVA with Bonferroni corrections revealed that attacks were overall significantly higher for outgroup football clubs compared to ingroup football clubs ($p = 0.001$). In addition, attacks were significantly higher for outgroup football contexts compared to non-football contexts ($p < 0.001$). We also found a significant main effect of Attack $F(1.34, 135.13) = 26.92$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .21$. A post hoc one-way repeated measures ANOVA with Bonferroni corrections revealed that attacks were significantly more likely overall in a stadium compared to on Twitter ($p = 0.002$). In addition, ridicule was significantly more likely than both Tweets, and chants ($ps < 0.001$). There were no significant interaction effects or between group effects (Figure 1).

Analysis of the likelihood for fans to accept a gay football club member/player, dependent of player characteristics and identity

To explore this question, we used a mixed ANOVA. The within group variables included Group (ingroup_football/outgroup_football/non_football) and Acceptance (friend/external/manager) and between group variables included Identity (high/low) as well as Denigration (high/low). We found no significant main effect of Group but a marginally significant interaction of Group X Identity X Denigration $F(2, 202) = 2.94$, $p = 0.06$, $\eta^2 = .03$. When further decomposing the model by Denigration, we found a significant Group X Identity interaction $F(2, 102) = 3.39$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$ for the high Denigration group, but not the low Denigration group. Post hoc t-tests revealed a significant difference between high and low identity but only for the ingroup_football group ($p = 0.03$). Specifically, individuals in the high Denigration/high Identity group were most accepting of a gay player in their ingroup team only (Figure 2).

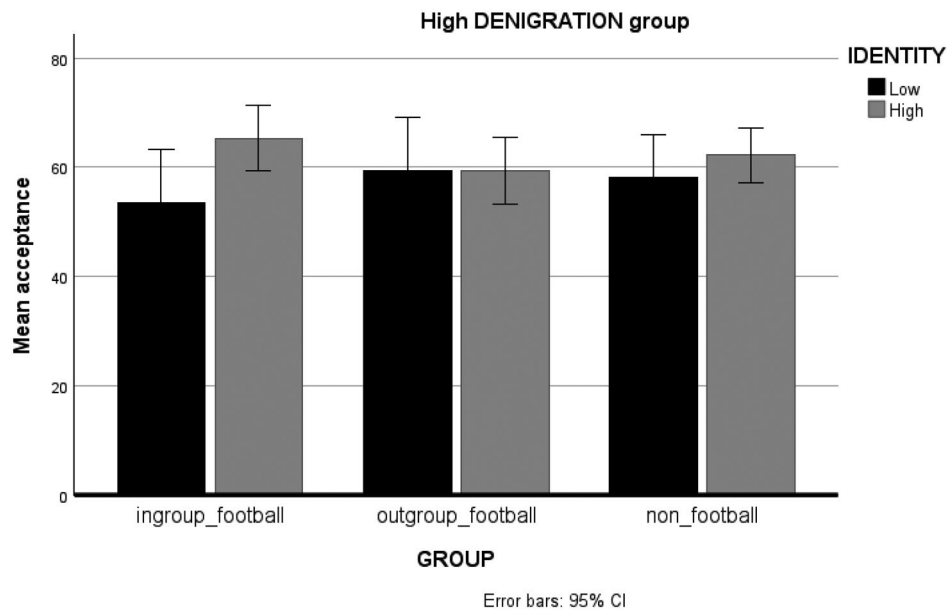


Figure 2. Mean acceptance for group and identity in the high denigration group.

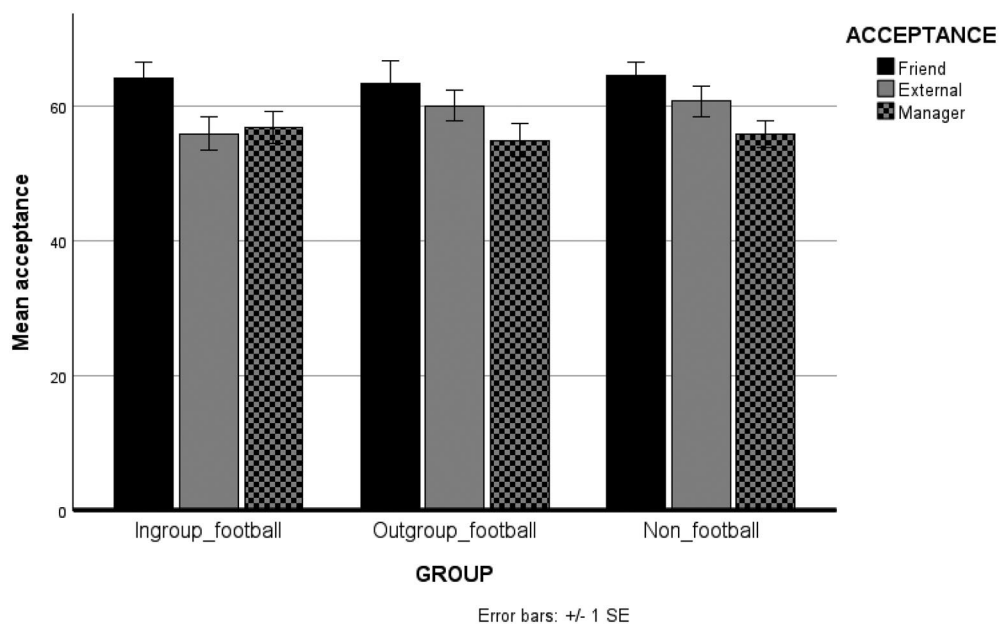


Figure 3. Mean acceptance level is associated with group.

In the mixed ANOVA, we found a main effect of Acceptance $F(2,202) = 18.63$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = .16$. Post-hoc tests revealed that participants were more likely to accept a gay individual as a friend than as an external ($p < 0.001$) or a manager ($p < 0.001$). No further effects or between group effects were statistically significant (Figure 3).

Analysis of the relationship between group identity and player acceptance

Table 2 shows the correlations between the continuous measures of Identity and Denigration and the three measures of acceptance. This analysis allowed us to investigate the full scale of identity values (i.e. the previous ANOVAs looked at in-group identity high versus low; this measure investigated them as a continuous variable using the full range of scale values) and was thus more refined than the previous ANOVAs. There was a significant positive correlation between ingroup identity and outgroup denigration.

Table 2. Correlations regarding identity and Denigration in association with acceptance.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Identity		.47**	.12	.22*	.08	.11	.26**	.15
Denigration			−0.03	.01	.08	−0.02	.41	−0.05
Outgroup Friend				.46**	.3**	.28**	.30**	.36**
Ingroup friend					.60**	.59**	.75**	.55**
Ingroup External						.71**	.51**	.46**
Outgroup Manager							.55**	.44**
Ingroup Manager								.57**
Outgroup External								

Note: * $p < 0.05$ (statistically significant); ** $p < 0.01$ (more significant). Outgroup refers to a rival football club member, Ingroup refer to their home club.

In addition, higher ingroup identity was associated with a higher acceptance of a gay player in the ingroup football team or as an ingroup football team manager. Outgroup denigration on the other hand was not significantly correlated with any of the acceptance measures.

Discussion

This study aimed to add to research regarding in-group bias and to further understanding of the types of homophobia that might be present in modern football and their effects. In summary, we found that participants:

- reported being more willing to use homophobic language in football compared to other sports contexts.
- reported being more willing to use homophobic language for rival as compared to home clubs.
- reported that they would be more willing to use homophobic language in personal conversation to their friends and in chants in stadiums, than in tweets.
- reported that they would be more willing to accept a gay team member as a home player in their team, than a gay player in their team from abroad (i.e. defined as external in the Acceptance category as described above in the results section), or a gay manager in their team.
- were most likely to accept a gay player in their home team if they strongly identified with their own club and highly disliked a rival team.

These findings are in line with the literature suggesting that homophobia remains prevalent in sport and in particular in football-based contexts in the UK (Cashmore and Cleland 2011). Our study found however that football fans displayed higher levels of homophobia towards members of rival football teams, than their own players, providing evidence of in-group bias, and contributing to the literature which has consistently found these constructs to be significant (Martin, Young, and McAuliffe 2020; Sherif 1961). Similar to Dietz-Uhler et al. (2002), we also found that individuals disapproved less when a gay player was a member of their own football club than when they were a member of a rival club.

Participants in this study reported that they might engage in homophobic language in personal conversation to their friends and in chants in stadiums. These findings are in line with those of Magrath (2018) how also found that participants reported engaging in homophobic themed chanting, mostly towards rivalry teams. Clark (2006) suggested that (homo)sexuality based chanting might be a means to differentiate one's own team from the other team through a process of denigration. This supports the idea that the intention of the fans may be been related to competition and rivalry.

Findings from the current study revealed that participants were significantly more likely to display homophobia by chanting inside the stadium, rather than in social media such as Twitter. The internet provides users with the opportunity to post hate speech in a more covert manner. However, an individual may still be identified by their internet address.

Our findings also showed that the use of homophobic language by participants in this study was context dependent, and more likely to occur if a setting was characterised by rivalry and anonymity. Therefore, whilst we might see a reduction in overt homophobia, implicit attitude biases expressed in the context of rivalry and anonymity may still prevail.

Limitations

There are limitations to the study. It is possible that social desirability effects were present in it. Despite data being collected anonymously, participants may have wished to give a positive impression of football (Dietz-Uhler et al. 2002) or they may not have fully recognised the anonymous character of the investigation, thereby reducing internal validity.

Beyond this, there was a lack of age diversity in the sample. This was perhaps due to the online nature of the study and the existence of a digital divide in online questionnaire research (Sparkes and Smith 2013). In addition, the sample size of the study was low. Both of these factors limit the generalisability of the findings. In addition, attitudes and cultural dynamics between football fans in Northwest England may differ significantly from those in other parts of the country. For instance, fans in areas with less well-established football cultures and/or different sociocultural histories and conditions may exhibit different forms and levels of homophobia.

Future studies may also find it helpful to use more indirect methods to assess homophobic attitudes and responses including behavioural observation in stadia.

Conclusion

This study offers insights into factors influencing the expression of different levels of homophobia in football. Past research has suggested that football fans protect their club's reputation across a range of settings. However, this trend has not been explicitly linked to homophobia in the modern game. The study's importance also derives from the location in which it was conducted – Northwest England – contributing insight into local football cultures.

Notes

1. Twitter=Homophobic tweets about the football player; Stadium=Homophobic singing/chants in a football stadium; Ridicule=Overtly ridicule/joke about the football player.
2. Friend=Gay friend; External=Gay person not related to you; Manager=Gay person in leadership position.
3. A copy of the questionnaire is available from the corresponding author of this paper upon request.

Disclosure statement

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AI use

AI was not used in the preparation of this manuscript.

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