

## **Athletes' perceptions of the sport climate for athletes with non- gender-congruent expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations in Taiwan.**

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this study was to explore athletes' perceptions of the sport climate for athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Surveys on attitudes/perceived climate, prejudiced incidents, and relevant institutional policies were completed by 130 male and 81 female athletes from college varsity teams in Taiwan. Repeated measures MANOVA results showed that male participants perceived the climate as more hostile for athletes with non- gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations than did female participants, especially when the target is a male. Male participants rated their own attitudes toward male athletes with non- gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations as more negative than those of teammates, coaches or sports in general, while female participants perceived their own attitudes as most inclusive and coaches' attitudes as most negative. The prevalence of negative comments, incidents of physical assaults related to gender expression or sexual orientation, and the lack of intervention or institutional protection is a call for action.

**Keywords:** athletes | gender expression | sexual orientation | athletics

### **Article:**

This study is a first step in a two-year research project on the relationship between sport climate and prejudice and discrimination toward sexual minorities. Although the general population's attitudes toward sexual minorities have become increasingly tolerant and accepting through the past two decades (Altemeyer, 2002), sexual minority individuals continue to experience considerable discrimination and hostility (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009). Even in school settings, the climate is still hostile for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and

Transgender/Transsexual) youth. According to the 2007 National School Climate Survey, nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students (86.2%) experienced harassment at school in the past year and 3 out of 4 students (73.6%) heard homophobic remarks often or frequently at school (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz & Bartkiewicz, 2008). One 11th grade student stated: "I have learned that harassment in schools is a norm. Kids would scream the term 'faggot' as they saw me in the halls. None of the teachers said a word, and that is what scared me" (p. 3). Although his statement suggests that social climate and the tolerance of discrimination by those witnesses' silence play roles in maintaining and conveying prejudice and discrimination, the influences of social norms and peer pressure on people's expressions of their attitudes or behaviors are understudied. Thus, the first stage in this research (the current study) is to explore athletes' experiences with sexual-prejudiced or gender-prejudiced incidents, and their perceptions of the climate in sport. Our guiding research question is: how do athletes experience and perceive the climate toward those with non- gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations in sport? Looking at both gender expressions and sexual orientations may provide a clearer picture of the sport climate for sexual minorities.

#### Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities

In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* devoted to research with sexual minority people, Mallinckrodt (2009) indicated that the journal had published only 26 articles on sexual minorities since 1956, and half of these articles appeared after 2001. Within sport studies, the lack of research is even more pronounced. Ram, Starek and Johnson (2004) analyzed the content of three major journals in sport and exercise psychology (*Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, and *The Sport Psychologist*) between 1987 and 2000, and found only 1.22% included references to sexual orientation. More recently, Kamphoff, Gill, Araki, and Hammond (2010) reviewed 5214 *Applied Sport Psychology (AASP)* conference program abstracts from 1986 to 2007. The results showed that only 10.5% (550 out of 5214) included discussion of a cultural diversity issue, with the majority addressing gender and almost no attention to sexual orientation (0.5%; only 28 abstracts).

Gill and her colleagues have conducted several studies on attitudes and the climate for sexual minorities in physical activity settings. In the initial work, Morrow and Gill (2003) found that most physical education teachers (61%) and both LGB and straight students (91%) witnessed heterosexist and homophobic behaviors. In subsequent research, Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey and Schultz (2006) surveyed undergraduate students on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians and other minority groups. The results showed that attitude scores were in the middle range; however, evaluation thermometer scores were markedly lower for gay men and lesbians than for other minority groups (e.g., ethnic minorities). In another study (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey & Schultz, 2010), they examined the perceived climate for LGBT youth as well as other minority groups in three physical activity settings (physical education, organized sport, and exercise). Consistent with national surveys indicating high levels of homophobic remarks and little intervention in physical education and sport settings, they found hostile climates for LGB people

in all physical activity settings, with sexual minorities and people with disabilities more likely to be excluded than other minority groups. Indeed, the characteristics of the sport setting, such as emphasizing masculinity (Messner, 1992), excluding female participants or any female attributes (Griffin, 1998), the group closeness, and the exposure of physical bodies (Herek, 1993), make the sport setting susceptible to heterosexism and sexual prejudice. Roper and Halloran (2007) assessed attitudes toward lesbians and gay men in relation to the student-athletes' gender, sport and contact experience. Results showed that male student-athletes were more negative in their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than female student-athletes, and student-athletes who indicated having contact with gay men or lesbians had more positive attitudes. More recently, Cunningham and his colleagues took one step forward to look at not only attitudes but also the influences of prejudiced attitudes on people's decisions. They found that prejudiced attitudes of current and former athletes predicted their unwillingness to participate on a gay- or lesbian-coached sport team (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). In another study, they found that male college students in physical activity classes gave poorer evaluations to sexual minority job applicants than heterosexual applicants in a personal trainer job application scenario, but there was no difference in female college students' evaluations (Cunningham, Sartore, & McCullough, 2010). In the current study, gender differences in personal attitudes and perceptions of sport climate are also examined.

Nearly all of this limited research has been conducted in North America or the UK. In Asian countries, and particularly in Taiwan, sexual minority issues have been ignored. Although no research has specifically examined attitudes toward sexual minorities within the context of sport in Taiwan, Hou et al. (2006) examined the attitudes toward homosexual individuals and intention to provide care among psychiatric nurses in southern Taiwan. They found psychiatric nurses who had higher education degrees, higher levels of knowledge about homosexuality, and homosexual friends or relatives had more positive attitudes and also had a higher intention take care of homosexual people in their nursing practice. Liao's (2007) master thesis explored the experiences and identity formation process of gay student-athletes in Taiwan. The participants in his interviews described attitudes within the sports organization as full of "misogyny," "homophobia," and "sissy-phobia." Shang, Liao and Gill's study (2009) is the first work exploring athletes' and coaches' attitudes toward homosexual athletes in the Taiwanese context (205 male and 185 female collegiate student-athletes; 56 male and 35 female coaches). The results indicated that generally attitudes of both athletes and coaches toward LGBT athletes were neutral and slightly positive. In the current study, we are interested in not only personal attitudes but also how athletes perceive other people's attitudes and the general sport climate.

### Social Norms

Research on prejudice and discrimination has focused on examining individual attitudes and characteristics associated with prejudiced beliefs, but group and social influences are seldom emphasized. In his classic book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954/1979) identified the powerful normative effect on people's prejudiced behaviors and beliefs by stating, "about half of

all prejudiced attitudes are based only on the need to conform” (p.286). In the same period, Sherif and Sherif’s (1953) Group Norm Theory also described the crucial role played by group norms on individual’s prejudiced attitudes. More recent approaches (e.g., social identity theory and social categorization theory) also emphasize the influence of perception of group membership on individual and social behaviors.

Some empirical research has highlighted the importance of social influence on people’s expression of attitudes or behaviors. Sechrist and Stangor (2001) examined the effects of perceived consensus (by telling participants their beliefs are shared with others) on individual’s attitudes and behaviors. They found low-prejudice participants who received high-consensus feedback sat closer to the African American target and reported a higher percentage of African American favorable stereotypical traits. Crandall, Eshleman and O’Brien (2002) also indicated that people express their own prejudice according to how much it is socially acceptable. People’s acceptance of discrimination was also highly correlated with perceived social norms. Results of a field study showed people report less prejudice about gay men after a non-prejudiced norm was made salient (Monteith, Deneen & Tooman, 1996). Poteat (2007) examined the long-term effect of peer group socialization in adolescents, and found peer group’s attitudes and behaviors toward sexual minorities predict individuals’ own prejudiced attitudes and behavior measured eight months later, even after controlling for individuals’ previous attitudes. The research just reviewed shows the powerful impact that social influence exerts on individual’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. However, less effort has been devoted to identifying specific group characteristics that may relate to group member’s prejudiced attitudes or behaviors especially in intimate and highly group-committed groups such as sport teams.

Several scholars argue that masculine culture in male peer groups is related to prejudiced attitudes and behaviors toward sexual minorities. For example, male adolescents and young adults have often described the climate of their peer groups as homophobic, and reported that homophobic behavior (e.g., name-calling) was used as a way to defend one’s own masculinity and strengthen normative masculine culture in their peer group (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Plummer, 2001). In sport, the emphasis on masculinity is particularly prominent. Male coaches and physical educators often send messages about the importance of displaying masculinity to boys. If some boys are weak, soft, or never develop any interest in sports, they are shunned, harassed, and ridiculed by peers, and labeled “sissy” or “faggot” (Whitson, 1990). Messner (1992) described the masculine athletic culture as leading all boys and men to conform to heterosexual or homophobic norms, or they might face ridicule, harassment or physical violence.

These existing studies suggest the powerful social influence of peer groups on individual’s prejudiced attitudes and behaviors, and describe the underlying group culture in sport and exercise settings. However, limited research looks at how individuals perceive other group members’ attitudes and group norms, and how the perceptions influence expressed attitudes and behaviors to LGBT people in sport. Thus, the aims of this study are (a) to explore athletes’

personal attitudes and perceptions of the sport climates for athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations, (b) to explore gender-prejudiced and sexual-prejudiced incidents and relevant institutional policies, and (c) to examine gender differences in attitudes and perceptions of sport climate.

## Method

### Participants

The athlete participants in present study included 130 male (M age= 21.71, SD=1.03) and 81 female (M age =21.63, SD=1.30) collegiate student-athletes in the top level, equivalent to U.S. NCAA Division I. Participants competed in 21 different sports, including tennis, table tennis, Judo, shooting, archery, softball, baseball, Tae kwon do, weight lifting, track and field, and gymnastics in three colleges. Nearly all (93.82%) male athletes self-identified as exclusively heterosexual (point 0 on Kinsey 7-point scale) while 32 (40.00%) female athletes self-identified as exclusively heterosexual, 9 (11.11%) self-identified as exclusively homosexual, and 16 (19.75%) self-identified as bisexual (point 3 on Kinsey 7-point scale).

### Measures

The questionnaire packet included a demographic form that asked participants' sex, age, and sexual orientation (Kinsey Scale 0-6; 0: exclusively heterosexual and 6: exclusively homosexual) and three measures assessing the climate for athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations, frequency of gender-prejudiced and sexual-prejudiced incidents, and institutional policies.

The climate for athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions. The climate for non-gender-congruent gender expressions was created for this study. The introduction to the item asked participants to: "think about athletes whose appearance or actions do not conform to expected gender roles (e.g., male athletes wear make-up or speak softly; female athletes are muscular or act manly.), and then rate the climate for that athlete in each of following settings." The dimensions included (a) among your teammates, (b) your coach, (c) other teams in the same sport, (d) sports in general, and (e) yourself. The measure used the same 5-point rating scale (1 = very inclusive/welcoming; 5 = very exclusive/hostile) for each of the five settings with separate ratings for male athletes and female athletes.

The climate for athletes with non-heterosexual sexual orientations. The same format was used to measure the climate for athletes with non-heterosexual sexual orientations. The introduction to the item asked participants to think about athletes who self-identity or are believed to be lesbian or gay man, and athletes who are or are believed to be bisexual and to rate the climate for those athletes in each of the following settings: (a) among your teammates, (b) your coach, (c) other teams in the same sport, (d) sport in general, and (e) yourself. Again, a 5-point response scale (1

= very inclusive/welcoming; 5 = very exclusive/hostile) was used, and male athletes and female athletes were rated separately.

Measures of incidents and policies. Participants were asked how often (a) they heard negative comments on athletes' gender expressions or sexual orientations, (b) physical assaults occurred, and (c) how often someone intervened in those incidents by checking one of the categorical responses (i.e., never, once, sometimes, often, usually, or always). The same questions were asked about gender expressions and sexual orientations. Items are provided in Table 3 and 4.

## Procedures

Individual coaches were initially contacted by the first author or colleagues who were also familiar with the purpose of present research. After attaining permission of coaches, questionnaires were administered to athletes who volunteered to participate in the 15 minutes before or after regular practice. First, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, that the questionnaire was anonymous, that responses were only used for academic research, and that participation was voluntary. Then the researcher explained the questionnaires and asked participants not to talk to each other or look at others' questionnaires while filling out the questionnaires. After completing the questionnaires, participants folded them and put them in a collection box.

## Results

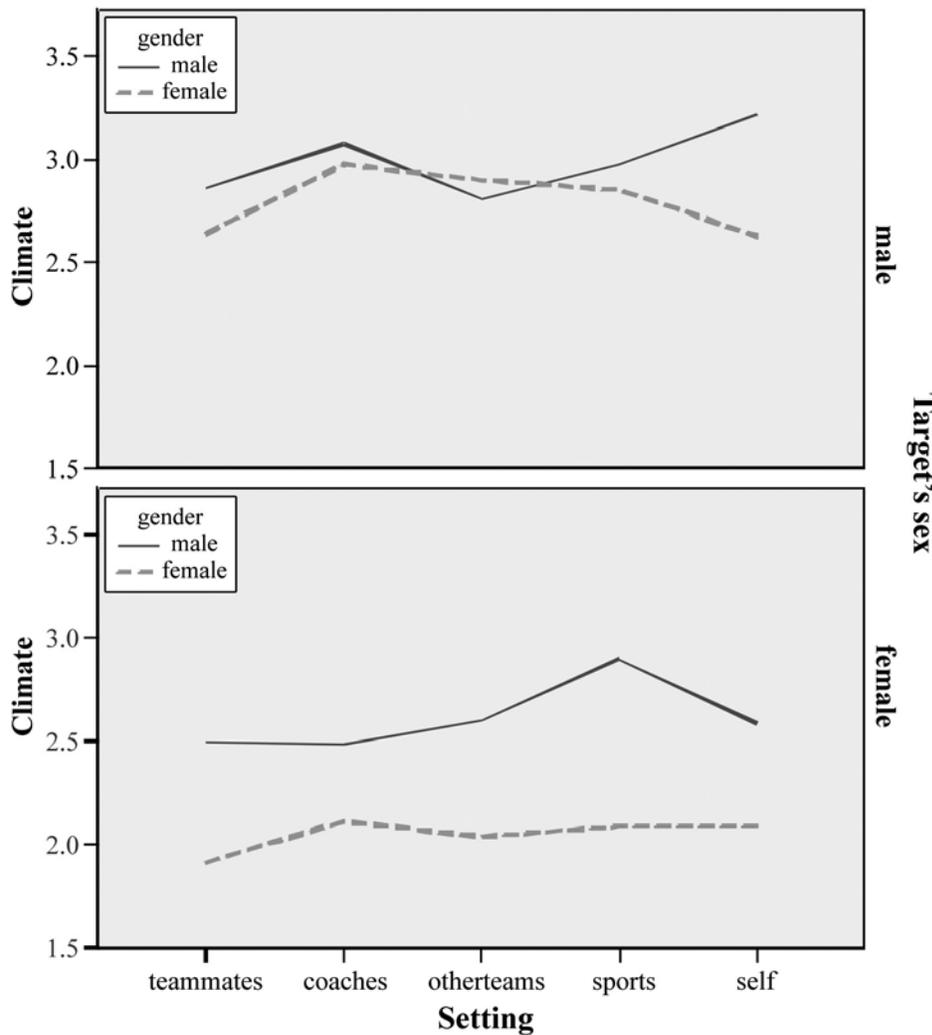
### The climate for athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions

A participant gender x target's sex x setting (2 x 2 x 5) repeated measures MANOVA analysis with participant gender as a between subjects factor was used to examine differences in ratings by target's sex, setting and participant's gender. The five settings are (a) among teammates, (b) the coach, (c) among other teams in the same sport, (d) sport in general, and (e) the participant's personal attitude. Figure 1 shows the main findings and Table 1 indicates detailed values. Generally, the sport climate for athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions was neutral and slightly welcoming (Grand M = 2.61, SD = .05). The main effects for target's sex, setting and participant gender were all significant. The sport climate for male athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions (M = 2.90, SD = .06) was more hostile than for female athletes (M = 2.32, SD = .06),  $F(1, 207) = 97.87, p < .001$ . Among the five settings, the climate of sports in general was most hostile (M = 2.70, SD = .07) while the climate among teammates was least hostile (M = 2.48, SD = .06),  $F(4, 828) = 6.01, p < .001$ . Overall, male participants (M = 2.80, SD = .07) were more negative in rating of the climate than female participants (M = 2.42, SD = .09),  $F(1, 207) = 11.83, p < .001$ . The interaction effects of target's sex x participant gender,  $F(1, 207) = 10.39, p = .001$ , and setting x participant's gender,  $F(4, 828) = 3.99, p < .01$  were significant. The 3-way interaction of participant gender x target's sex x setting was also significant,  $F(4, 828) = 5.39, p < .001$ . That is shown in Figure 1. The perceptions of male participants about sport climates for a female athlete with non-gender-congruent gender

expressions were more hostile than the perceptions of female participants, but there was no significant gender difference when rating the climates for a male athlete with non-gender-congruent gender expressions. Male participants rated their own attitudes toward male athlete with non-gender-congruent gender expressions as the most negative ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = .11$ ) while female participants rated their coaches' attitudes as the most negative ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = .12$ ).

Figure

1. Male and female athletes' perceptions of sport climate for male and female athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions



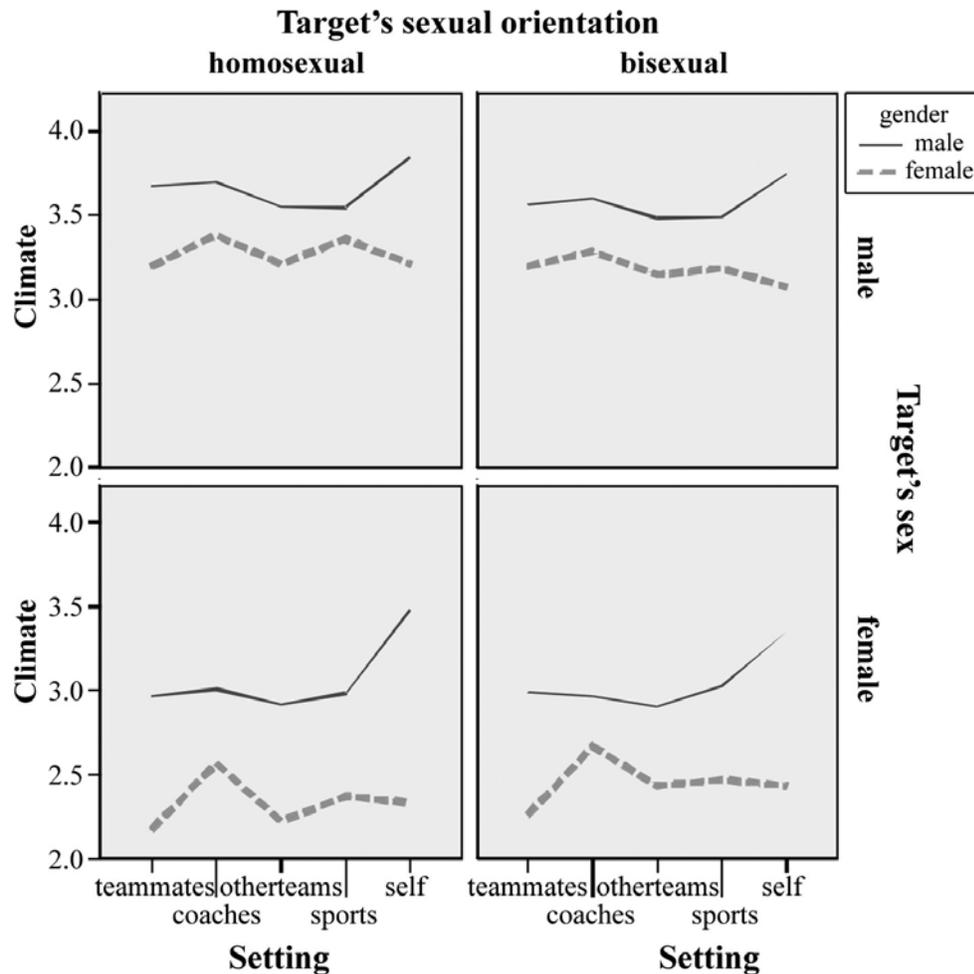
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The climate for athletes with non-heterosexual sexual orientations

A participant gender x target's sex x target's sexual orientation (homosexual/ bisexual) x setting (2 x 2 x 2 x 5) repeated measures MANOVA analysis with participant's gender as a between

subjects factor was used to examine differences in climate for homosexual and bisexual athletes by target's sex, setting and participant's gender. Figure 2 shows the main findings and Table 2 indicates detailed values. Generally the sport climate for athletes with non-heterosexual sexual orientations was neutral (Grand  $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = .05$ ). The main effects of target's sex,  $F(1, 207) = 169.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , setting,  $F(4, 828) = 6.44$ ,  $p < .001$ , and participant's gender,  $F(1, 207) = 26.30$ ,  $p < .001$  were significant, but there was no significant difference between ratings of the climate for homosexuals and bisexuals. The perception of climate for male athletes with non-heterosexual sexual orientations ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = .06$ ) was rated as more hostile than the climate for female athletes ( $M = 2.73$ ;  $SD = .06$ ). Male participants generally perceived the climates as more negative ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .07$ ) than female participants ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = .08$ ) regardless of the setting or for male or female homosexual or bisexual athletes. Among the settings, participants perceived the climate of other teams in the same sport as least negative ( $M = 2.99$ ;  $SD = .06$ ), and rated their own attitudes as most negative ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .07$ ).

Figure 2. Male and female athletes' perceptions of sport climate for male and female athletes with non-heterosexual sexual orientations



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The 2-way interaction effects of target's sex x participant's gender, setting x participant's gender, target's sex x target's sexual orientations, target's sex x setting, as well as the 3-way interaction of target's sex x setting x participant's gender,  $F(4, 828) = 2.91, p = .02$ , were significant. The 3-way interaction is shown in Figure 2. Female athletes perceived coaches' attitudes as most negative ( $M = 3.38, SD = .12$ ) toward gay athletes while male athletes rated their own attitudes as most negative ( $M = 3.85; SD = .10$ ).

#### Incidents and Policies

Table 3 shows frequencies of gender-prejudiced and sexual-prejudiced incidents. For both male and female athletes, more than 70% of athletes sometimes or often hear negative jokes, slurs, or comments about gender expression. In terms of sexual orientation, around one-third of male athletes more than often hear anti-gay jokes or comments in their teams. Even in female sports,

one-third of female athletes also reported sometimes hearing negative comments. It is worth noting that more than one-third of male athletes and one-fourth of female athletes reported that sometimes violence happened because of one's gender expression or sexual orientation. When these incidents happened, around one-third of male and female athletes reported that no one challenged the actions, and another one-third of male and female athletes reported sometimes someone intervened in those incidents.

**Table 3. Frequency (percentage) of gender-prejudiced and sexual-prejudiced incidents**

	Never	Once	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Always
How often do you hear negative jokes, slurs, or comment about gender expression among your teammates, coaches, or other staff?	11.5/ 8.6	4.6/3.7	44.6/49.4	26.2/23.5	9.2/12.3	3.8/2.5
How often have physical assaults or destruction of property happened in your team because of someone's gender expression?	47.7/64.2	8.5/8.6	33.1/14.8	9.2/9.9	.8/2.5	.8/0
When those incidents happened how often have other people intervened or challenged those actions?	31.5/39.5	7.7/2.5	28.5/32.1	17.7/13.6	8.5/7.4	4.6/4.9
How often do you hear anti-gay jokes, slurs, or comment among your teammates, coaches, or other staff?	41.5/44.4	3.8/7.4	26.9/33.3	16.9/7.4	5.4/6.2	5.4/1.2
How often have physical assaults or destruction of property happened because of someone's sexual orientation?	64.6/69.1	3.8/7.4	22.3/13.6	5.4/8.6	2.3/1.2	1.5/0
When that happened how often have other people intervened or challenged the actions?	44.6/51.9	6.9/8.6	25.4/18.5	10.0/9.9	7.7/6.2	5.4/4.9

*Note.* Responses of male and female athletes are presented as male/female

In terms of institutional policies, more than one-third of male athletes and almost one-third of female athletes reported there are some formal or informal rules requiring them to demonstrate masculinity and femininity (see Table 4). Around 10% of participants indicated that LGBT

athletes might be excluded from their teams because of formal or informal rules. Few participants indicated there are non-discrimination policies in their school or department.

**Table 4 is omitted from this formatted document.**

## Conclusions

Although this study is limited by participant numbers and exploratory methodology, the results provide information in line with previous studies done in Western countries. We found no gender difference when asking participants to rate the climate for male athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions. That is to say both male and female athletes perceived that the climate is hostile with male athletes expected to show corresponding gender expressions (i.e., masculinity). This result echoes Messner's (1990) view that sport plays an important role in delivering and teaching conventional gender roles. In particular, for male athletes, the achievement and force boys present in sport is usually recognized as a symbol of aggressiveness, masculinity and superiority over girls (Coakley, 2004).

Interestingly, male athletes perceived the climate of sports in general as more hostile for female athletes with non-gender-congruent gender expressions in comparison with other settings and female athletes' perceptions. That might imply the broader societal climate and expecting female athletes to show their femininity has not changed, as shown by media portrayals of female athletes as lady-like when they are off-court, or even sex objects (Daniels, 2009). More work is needed to examine and break the bond of athletics and masculinity for both male and female athletes.

Results showed that male athletes' perceptions of the climate were more negative for male sexual minority athletes than either female athletes' perceptions or for female sexual minority athletes. This finding is parallel with previous studies (Gill et al. 2006; Herek, 2002; Roper & Halloran, 2007). What is more interesting is that male athletes rated their own attitudes toward athletes with either non-gender-congruent gender expressions or non-heterosexual sexual orientations as more negative than how they perceived the climates among their teammates, coaches, other teams and sport in general. One likely explanation is that while male athletes perceive society getting more inclusive for people with non-gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations (via mass media), they do not have formal education or informal contact experiences with people (especially men) with non-gender-congruent gender expressions and non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Only one-third of male athletes had contact with homosexuals while 85% of female athletes had contact experiences in Shang, Liao and Gill's (2009) earlier study in Taiwan. Also, female athletes perceive their coaches' attitudes are more negative. Future studies could explore coaches' personal attitudes and the messages that coaches implicitly and explicitly send out about masculinity and femininity.

The results on gender- or sexual-prejudiced incidents suggest that negative verbal comments about gender expressions or sexual orientations are common, more serious physical aggression

did happen, and unfortunately seldom did anyone intervene in those incidents. Moreover, the institutional policies are not protective for athletes. Clearly, this is a call for action. In Taiwan, gender equality education has been addressed in the past 10 years; however, education about LGBT people is not widely disseminated, not to mention integrated into exercise and sport settings. Several national organizations, model programs and resources emphasizing inclusive practice for diversity people in exercise and sport settings are available in Western countries; scholars and practitioners could adapt those and develop suitable educational materials in consideration of cultural and historical factors in Taiwan. Despite the valuable information this study provided, there are some limitations in the study. The majority of participants were from two main sport-related colleges in Taiwan. It would be more informative if the traditions or values of each organization are taken into consideration. We asked if the participant's school or department has non-discrimination policies about sexual orientation and found out only a few participants (less than 5%), who were not all in the same college, indicated yes. However, we do not know if there is a LGBT-supportive club or organization in the schools. The 2009 National School Climate Survey indicated that having a Gay-Straight Alliance in school was related to less homophobic remarks and less victimization because of sexual orientation and gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Also, the measures used in this study are not standard measures but included several single-item measures of the climate in different settings to get descriptive information for this current stage of study. Future studies could use qualitative methods to explore how the different perceptions that a person has about different settings/levels influence his/her own attitudes toward various gender expressions and sexual orientations.

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