**Queer Strength: The Lived Realities of LGBTQ+ Fighters in Heteronormative Arena**

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**Abstract**

Combat sports are deeply intertwined with societal and cultural constructions of masculinity, and individuals who do not conform to these norms often face marginalization. While numerous studies have examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes in various sporting contexts, limited research has specifically focused on their participation in highly heteronormative spaces such as combat sports. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of exclusion, the influence of identity on participation, and the coping strategies employed by LGBTQ+ athletes in combat sports. Using semi-structured interviews with nine LGBTQ+ athletes, the study uncovered themes of bias and social exclusion, dual-edge construct of identity, and resilience through self-motivation, discipline, and support. Anchored in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10, which advocates for reducing inequalities, the findings highlight the urgent need to foster more inclusive sporting environments that fully embrace gender diversity and expression.

Keywords: *Heteronormative, LGBTQ+, Combat Sports, SDG 10, Hegemonic Masculinity*

## **1. Introduction**

Combat sports have been traditionally structured around the binary understanding of sex and gender. It strictly categorized athletes as male and female in accordance to the biological sex assigned at birth to ensure fairness and safety as it believed that physiological differences confer to advantage in competition (Handelsman & Bermon, 2025; Hunter et al., 2023). Combat sports also align closely with societal and cultural constructions of masculinity, which emphasize traits such as aggression, strength, and dominance (Braumüller et al., 2020; Martínková et al., 2022). Thus, those who do not conform to these expectations, may face challenges or be judge for not aligning with these norms. This contributes to the creation of gendered spaces that privilege traditional male forms of masculinity and pose significant challenges for women and LGBTQ+ athletes, who must navigate stereotypes, rigid gender norms, and unequal treatment (Li et al., 2024; Kostorz & Sas-Nowosielski, 2021). Conversely, Channon and Matthews (2015) found early signs of a decline in cultural homophobia and the emergence of a more inclusive vision of masculinity within combat sports. However, more recent research by Moncal et al. (2024) indicates that LGBTQ+ athletes continue to face discrimination and limited opportunities for competitive participation, particularly when they openly express their gender identity. This suggests that, despite some progress, many LGBTQ+ athletes still navigate sports environments shaped by persistent heteronormative expectations, often without sufficient visibility, recognition, or institutional support.

The experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes have been extensively explored across various sporting contexts. However, their experiences within heteronormative spaces, such as combat sports, remain significantly underexplored. There is a pressing need to examine the complex realities faced by LGBTQ+ athletes in these environments. Thus, this study aims to uncover their experiences of exclusion, the influence of their identities on combat sports participation, and the coping strategies they employ. Such exploration will reveal the nuanced challenges these athletes face, as well as their mechanisms for resilience and adaptation. Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature that promotes inclusive and equitable practices in sports. Aligning with the Sustainable Goal Development (SDG)10, the study aims to reduce inequalities by centering the voices of LGBTQ+ athletes, provide valuable insights for coaches, policymakers, and sporting institutions on how to better support diversity, foster inclusivity, and dismantle discriminatory structures within combat sports.

**2. Methods**

This study used a qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach to investigate the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes in combat sports, focusing on exclusion, identity challenges, and coping strategies. Nine participants, selected based on specific inclusion criteria, took part in semi-structured interviews that provided rich, descriptive data for thematic analysis. Following ethical approval, interviews were conducted in safe environments, audio-recorded, transcribed, translated from Cebuano to English, and validated for accuracy. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify and interpret patterns within the data, offering deep insights into the discrimination faced by these athletes and how their gender identity influences perceived performance and resilience.

**3. Results and Discussion**

**Table 1. Lived Experiences of the LGBTQ+**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **THEME** | **CORE IDEAS** | **SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT** |
| **Bias and Social Exclusion** | Discrimination and Favoritism from coach and others | *“I could sense favoritism from my coach because of how I acted, which was a bit different from the other athletes”. (MAB001)* |
| Teasing and Bullying | *“I experienced being constantly teased by my coach or teammates about being attracted to women”. (FAB002)* |
| **Dual-Edge Construct of Identity** | Negative Effect to Performance | *“My father has toxic traits when it comes to gender. I feel like my performance during sports competitions is affected because of his toxic mindset”. (MAB001)* |
| Identity as a Source of Strength | *“Being LGBTQ+ boosted my confidence even more because I know I’m strong compare to my opponent”. (FAB002)* |
| **Resilience through Self-Motivation, Discipline, and Support** | Channel Discrimination to Motivation | *“When I feel bad, especially if I don’t get motivation from my coach or teammates, but I use that as fuel to show them that I am truly goal-driven in my sport. (MAB002)* |
| Internal Support | “*They encourage me to keep going and not listen to the negative things’ others say because I am the one who carries myself”. (FAB003)* |
| Self-acceptance, Success, and Ignoring Negativity | *“My confidence was low before because I was being bullied, but now it has boosted because of my achievements”. (FAB005)* |

**Bias and Social Exclusion.** The LGBTQ+ athletes in combat sports revealed that they face persistent bias and social exclusion which deeply affected their experiences inside and outside competition. Many recounts of feeling sidelined by coaches who shows favoritism towards heterosexual athletes and peers who prioritize traditional gender norms. These experiences foster feeling of alienation, unfair treatment, and diminished self-worth. Despite passion, these athletes often struggle with motivation and constant sense of being outsiders as they navigate environments that continue to marginalize and devalue their identities. This result align with various studies stating that LGBTQ+ athletes continue to face discrimination, exclusion, verbal harassment, sexism, and systemic barriers (Hartman-Tews et al., 2021; Denison et al., 2020; Herrick and Duncan, 2018; Pocaan, 2022). For example, 70% of female combat sports athletes reported experiencing sexual harassment rather than empowerment (Mathisen et al., 2022). These challenges negatively impact their emotional well-being and mental health (Pocaan, 2022; Xiang et al., 2023), contributing to higher suicide rates and discouragement from participating in sports (Denison et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2024). The ongoing adversity highlights how hegemonic masculinity dominates combat sports, enforcing exclusionary norms that marginalize those outside traditional heterosexual ideals (Flood & Pease, 2005; Everett et al., 2023). Addressing these systemic issues is essential to protect LGBTQ+ athletes’ well-being and to challenge inequalities in sports (SDG 10).

**Dual-Edge Construct of Identity.** LGBTQ+ athletes share contrasting perspectives on how their identity affects athletic performance. Some view their gender identity as a source of strength and confidence, while others face discrimination and exclusion that create hostile environments, negatively impacting mental health, sports participation, relationships, and performance (Xiang et al., 2023; Denison et al., 2020; Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Mukherjee & Mitra, 2025). Discrimination even within families further undermines confidence and competitive ability. Conversely, some athletes embrace their LGBTQ+ identity as a source of resilience and motivation, reframing adversity into empowerment, which supports participation, self-esteem, and pride (Schmitz & Tyler, 2018; Woodford et al., 2018). This highlights the protective role of identity strength and the need for inclusive, affirming environments where LGBTQ+ athletes can thrive without defending their identities.

**Resilience through Self-Motivation, Discipline, and Social Support.** LGBTQ+ athletes in combat sports demonstrate resilience, self-motivation, and the importance of supportive environments. Despite facing discouragement, bullying, favoritism, and negative comparisons, they transform adversity into strength, emphasizing perseverance, determination, and self-belief to succeed. Their gender identity and sexual orientation do not limit their ability to excel, and their experiences strengthen their character. Social support from friends, teammates, and family plays a crucial role in reducing stress, boosting performance, increasing resilience, and enhancing well-being (Irandoust, 2023; Wooton et al., 2024; Herrick and Duncan, 2023; Mira et al., 2023). The coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explains how LGBTQ+ athletes appraise stressful situations and develop coping strategies such as standing up for themselves, building supportive environments, and healing collectively (Herrick & Duncan, 2023; Asakura, 2017; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018). Their experiences reveal both the shortcomings of current sports environments and their remarkable strength and perseverance in personal growth and discipline.

## **4. Conclusion**

The complex experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes in combat sports reveal a persistent struggle against the norms of hegemonic masculinity, which privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes those who do not conform to these ideals. Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity theory, combat sports often become spaces where traditional masculine traits are not only celebrated but also rigidly enforced, resulting in the systemic exclusion and discrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals. The favoritism shown toward heterosexual athletes, the verbal assaults, and the social exclusion experienced by LGBTQ+ athletes underscore the deep entrenchment of these gendered power structures.

However, while hegemonic masculinity seeks to dominate and silence non-conforming identities, many LGBTQ+ athletes resist this oppression by transforming adversity into sources of strength and motivation. They cultivate self-discipline, develop resilience, and build supportive networks that enable them to thrive despite systemic barriers. Their narratives demonstrate that athletic excellence is not defined by conformity to traditional masculinity but by resilience, self-belief, and determination. These stories not only expose the inequities within combat sports but also challenge and redefine the very meaning of strength, success, and belonging in this domain. Ultimately, these findings call for the creation of a more inclusive sporting culture—one that fully embraces the diversity of gender identities and expressions—aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities and promote inclusion for all.

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