“I Wear Dresses and Makeup”: Experiences of Female Sexual Minority Collegiate-Athletes

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There is a culture of silence for lesbians in sport, fearing being negatively labeled which may lead to stigmatization, negative recruiting, being outed, or job termination (Mann & Krane, 2019; Satore & Cunningham, 2009). Women in sport are often seen as invaders (Coakley, 2014), violators of patriarchal ideals, and are the target of discrimination and stigmatization (Melton, 2013; Waldron, 2016). The “lesbian label exists within sport’s heterosexist and heteronormative context as a means to subvert women’s status, power, influence, and experiences” (Satore & Cunningham, 2009, p. 289).

According to Waldron (2015), ideologies in sport regarding lesbian athletes validate social inequalities through institutional practices. Studies suggest female athletes are automatically assumed to be gay (Kauer & Krane, 2006; Waldron, 2016). Such beliefs stabilize lesbianism in the display of masculinity, failing to acknowledge gender and sexuality as performative acts. Exclusion, marginalization, and silencing of the LGBTQ+ community in sport is validated through institutional practices (Waldron, 2016). Consequently, female athletes often compensate by overemphasizing femininity and accentuating traditional femininity, distancing themselves from sexual minority athletes to avoid being labeled a lesbian (Krane, 2011). Physicality and appearance often serve as a source of stereotypes for sexual minorities (Kauer & Krane, 2006). According to Sartore and Cunningham (2009), “gays and lesbians continue to suffer a bleak and complex existence in sport, as heteronormative ideology, gender norms, and gay and lesbian stereotypes remain prevalent and influential in the decision-making process” (p. 110). Despite the progress in attitudes toward and experiences of sexual minority athletes, discrimination toward the population is still very prevalent in the sporting world. Additionally, as “understanding lesbian experiences in sport is rife with tension and contradictions,” there is a need for further inquiry into the lived experiences of this population (Mann & Krane, 2019, p. 88).

Informed by the Homosexual Lifespan Development Model (D’Augelli, 1994), the purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of NCAA female sexual minority collegiate-athletes. Specifically, this study investigated the experiences of female sexual-minority collegiate athletes while participating in NCAA-sanctioned intercollegiate athletic programs. Employing purposeful sampling, nine female collegiate athletes participating throughout the NCAA membership (Division I, II, III) participated in this study. The present study utilized phenomenological methodology (Van Manen, 2015) and a semi-structured interview method (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The researchers used a combination of inductive and narrative analyses during the data collection and analysis processes (Creswell, 1998). Findings revealed eight higher order themes: (1) relationships, (2) climate, (3) validation, (4) norms, (5), misunderstandings and misconceptions, (6) negotiating identities, (7) risk, and (8) gender ideology and assumptions.

This research strives to better understand the lived experience of female collegiate-athletes that identify outside of the heterosexual majority. Although results of the present study are not generalizable, we hope that the results are transferrable and can inform inclusive practices to improve the experiences of sexual minority collegiate athletes. Further, this study will create awareness regarding the obstacles female sexual minority collegiate-athletes encounter on college campuses and within the setting of intercollegiate athletics.