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# Exploring identity work of LGBT+ volunteers in sport through personas: the advocate, the community-minded and the sportsperson

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## ABSTRACT

**Research question:** Sport volunteering can be a valued and meaningful way to engage in sport beyond participation, but sport volunteers lack diversity in the UK. Specifically, there has been a lack of insight into experiences and identities of LGBT+ volunteers in sport. Therefore, this research explores how LGBT+ volunteers construct, negotiate and manage their identities over time and through the use of personas.

**Research methods:** Using identity work as a theoretical lens and from a social constructionist perspective, this study employs topical life history interviews of 16 sexually diverse sport volunteers to explore identity work strategies adopted by participants to navigate their volunteer experiences.

**Results and findings:** Using constructivist grounded theory analysis, the study identifies three personas (1) advocate, (2) community-minded and (3) sportsperson – through which identity processes are expressed, illustrating the shifts in these personas as participants navigate their volunteer experiences.

**Implications:** By acknowledging the fluidity of identity processes and the influence of socio-political contexts, sport organisations can create more inclusive environments that accommodate the varying needs of LGBT+ volunteers. Theoretically, the study contributes to the broader discourse on identity work by demonstrating how personas emerge as outcomes of this work and how they are sustained over time, offering a nuanced understanding of identity processes within sport volunteering.




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Volunteer recruitment and retention are pervasive challenges on a global scale with sport organisations relying on volunteers to deliver activities (Hallmann & Fairley, 2018). Volunteers also play a crucial role in the UK sporting landscape, but volunteer numbers have been declining. Sport England's Active Lives survey (Sport England, 2022) confirms this trend. The decline raises alarm as volunteers are widely considered the backbone of UK

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sports provision (Cuskelly et al., 2006). Furthermore, impact of austerity measures on public leisure facilities and services also renders volunteer contributions to civic society more important as state retracts resources (Downward et al., 2020; Lup & Booth, 2019; Stride et al., 2020).

Sports volunteers in the UK have been predominantly perceived as a homogenous group lacking diversity. For example, importance of social, economic and cultural capital for volunteering often means the sport volunteer majority come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, potentially excluding those from less privileged backgrounds (Hayton & Blundell, 2021). Experience, meaning and challenges of sport volunteering can vary substantially based on a volunteer's demographic background including older age (Hamm-Kerwin et al., 2009), disability (Dickson et al., 2017), gender (Stride et al., 2020) and ethnicity (Legg & Karner, 2021). To attract diverse volunteers, sport volunteering must also reflect various social and cultural groups (Storr, 2021).

Sport England has acknowledged a lack of diversity and taken an approach that highlights the value of sport volunteering to the individual, wanting to develop inclusive volunteering and hoping this will result in increased volunteer numbers and for more people to experience benefits of volunteering (Natale, 2022). Despite the need to consider the wider social context of marginalised groups' sport volunteer experiences (Hoye et al., 2019; Legg & Karner, 2021), a critical examination of traditionally marginalised and under-represented populations within sport has largely remained absent.

Sexual orientation is a legally protected characteristic (GEO, 2010). Although sexual orientation should not be a barrier to volunteering, research indicates that it can be so, due to persisting heteronormativity in sport (Englefield et al., 2016; Smits et al., 2021). Whilst research has sought to understand experiences of LGBT+ athletes (Cunningham, 2019) and paid staff (Melton & Cunningham, 2014), research on understanding experiences of sport volunteers who identify as LGBT+ has been limited (Storr, 2021; Trussell, 2020). Existing studies on LGBT+ volunteering in sport often focus on volunteers as part of broader sport engagement (Mock et al., 2022; Storr et al., 2022). However, studies with a closer inspection of LGBT+ volunteers as the primary focus are necessary to highlight the efforts of LGBT+ volunteers whose voices are seldom heard (Hartmann-Tews, 2022).

According to Strachan et al. (2011) and Warhurst and Black (2022), there is reason to believe that sport engagement is greater when an individual develops an identity associated with the activity, for example, an exercise identity. This may also be the case when an individual identifies with the team they support (Hyatt & Foster, 2015). Contrastingly, if an individual feels like there is no other people like them taking part in the sport or physical activity, that individual may not participate. Therefore, there is no chance for a meaningful connection that would allow the sport or activity to become part of an individual's identity. Hence, as Wegner et al. (2020) suggest, identity is a useful lens for understanding 'long-term engagement with sport and physical activity' (p. 455).

Within research on LGBT+ people in sport, an identity approach has often been used (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021, p. 5). Grönlund (2011) reinforces the importance of a focus on identity in a volunteering context, with volunteering being about expressing and providing a sense of identity. Given the importance of sexuality as a basis for identity and the 'challenges of living LGBTQ sexualities in everyday life' (Rumens, 2020, p. 555), a focus on how LGBT+ people make sense of their experiences in sport volunteering is inextricably linked to how they make sense of their identities in this context.

This paper aims to explore how LGBT+ sport volunteers construct, negotiate and manage their identities over time, using personas to understand these processes within the context of heteronormativity in sport (Müller & Böhlke, 2022) and the need for inclusive sport volunteering.

## Theoretical framework and literature review

### *Identity work*

Identity work (Watson, 2008) forms the theoretical framework for this study. Identity work is often used as a metaphor for 'identity formation' (Brown, 2015). Due to the plurality of the term 'identity work', empirical research may utilise identity work or related terms (Brown, 2015) such as 'identity construction' (Pratt, 2012), 'identity negotiation' (Swann, 1987) and 'identity management' (Watson, 2008). Identity work incorporates both personal and social identity and the ongoing relations between them in wider social contexts:

Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives. (Watson, 2008, p. 129)

Identity work serves as a framework for understanding and analysing the complex processes involved in identity formation and maintenance. It has been used in an organisational context of work identities to emphasise contradictions between personal and occupational identities (Brown, 2022), and the effort invested in creating personal meaning (Atewologun et al., 2017). Creed et al. (2010) studied Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) ministers navigating their minority sexual orientation and gender identity within Protestant denominations in the United States, highlighting the constant identity work ministers perform, balancing personal and professional selves. Similarly, Baker and Lucas (2017) noted, LGBTQ employees from a range of sectors (including education, government work and nonprofit) engage in 'sexual identity management' to avoid discrimination. Such employees often focused on being exceptional employees to counter stigma (Baker & Lucas, 2017). A better understanding of identity work can help organisations to improve engagement, build stronger teams and enhance overall organisational effectiveness (Brown, 2015, 2017, 2022). Brenner et al. (2010) and Cunningham (2011) note more generally on sexual identity management in the workplace that people who are comfortable expressing their minority sexual orientation openly are more productive, generally happier and make greater creative contributions in their organisations.

The application of identity work as a concept has been broadened to include other 'social arenas' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), including sport volunteering (Wegner et al., 2019, 2020). Wegner et al. (2019) illustrate the process of identity formation for volunteers in sport organisations and how this process is influenced by the organisation's culture and values. In another study, Wegner et al. (2020) used the example of 'Black Girls Run!' to uncover how organisational membership can help marginalised individuals overcome conflicts between their sport identity and their cultural/gender identities. Their findings suggested that organisational membership can provide a sense of

belonging and support for individuals enabling them to create an identity around organisational beliefs or values, which may help overcome this tension. Using the concept of identity work sheds light on how volunteers understand who they are (becoming) as reflected by others and how to interact with others depending on their social context (Weller et al., 2021).

Watson's identity work approach can be applied to LGBT+ volunteers in sport by examining the ways in which they construct, negotiate and manage their sexual and gender identities through their involvement in sport and volunteering. This approach recognises identity is not fixed, but rather a dynamic process shaped by individual experiences, social and cultural contexts, and personal goals and aspirations (Watson, 2008). LGBT+ people in sport may feel their identities are either devalued or respected dependent upon the environment within which they operate. Environments where LGBT+ identities are supported lead to identity affirmation (Mock et al., 2022) whereas if individuals feel they need to conceal their identities to fit in, there is a greater need to manage one's identity (Clair et al., 2005; Cunningham & Melton, 2014).

### **Personas**

As we aim to understand how LGBT+ volunteers engage in identity work, we draw upon Watson's (2020) concept of personas, a key part of his identity work framework, to elaborate on how individuals align their identities to cultural and social expectations. In this paper, we consider volunteer personas 'the various public and private selves which an individual presents to others in the various circles in which they mix' (Watson, 2020, p. 284). To be understood, personas must be viewed in the context of the society and time they belong as each persona has a unique backstory and presentation (Du Gay, 2007). In the ongoing process of identity construction, the connections between the past, present and future show that who individuals are, what they do and who they become changes over time (Kehily, 2009). Identity work is deemed unavoidable because individuals face a multitude of discursive pressures (diverse, competing and contradictory societal influences and cultural expectations, for example, on expressing their LGBT+ identity) and discursive resources (explanations for past and/or future behaviour directing individuals' interpretation of their experience) (Kuhn, 2006). Given this complexity, individuals are compelled to engage in identity work, resulting in adoption of personas as outcomes of their identity work (Watson, 2008). Understanding the relationship between the discourses present in the sports volunteering context and the identity work of these volunteers is crucial to this study. Personas help us understand how volunteers produce, navigate and maintain their self-identity in different settings.

Starting with sport participation, personas have been used to construct consumer profiles of charity sport event participants. These profiles (health junkies, legends, caretakers and promoters) teased out sport charity event participants' motivations for taking part and fundraising to facilitate success of charity sport events (Hendriks & Peelen, 2013). Focusing on sport volunteering, researchers have explored volunteer typologies and motivational profiles of sport volunteers (Cuskelly & Harrington, 1997; Engelberg et al., 2014; Nichols, 2005). For example, Engelberg et al. (2014) investigated the commitment and motives of volunteers at various stages in their career and created a typology of volunteers including 'mums and dads', 'specialists' and 'über-volunteers'. Similarly,

personas have been used in studies on ‘volunteer tourism’ (Rastelli & Nanjangud, 2023) where individuals undertake formal volunteering as part of their holidays (Wearing, 2001). Rastelli and Nanjangud (2023) conducted a study on the identity construction process of volunteer tourists on Instagram, noting how individuals adopted different roles or characters such as ‘the hero’, ‘the adventurer’ and ‘the green advocate’ to illustrate the type of content posted about volunteer experiences abroad. These personas can overlap and are not fixed, suggesting that individuals may fluidly transition between different aspects of their volunteer identity.

Fixed volunteer typologies and profiles omit broader social and cultural considerations, for example, changes in the political landscape of LGBT+ lives over time. Understanding the role of context and identity in volunteer engagement can be particularly important when seeking to promote diversity and inclusion within sports volunteering, ensuring individuals from different backgrounds and identities feel valued and supported in their roles.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

This paper is part of a wider study. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the university ethics committee with respect to the wider study. Participants provided their signed consent prior to the interview and were asked to confirm orally at the start of the interview. We highlighted the availability of post-interview pastoral care through LGBT+ and mental health charities when obtaining consent to reassure participants about their wellbeing and safety throughout the research process, particularly considering the potential for discussing sexual identity formation, to evoke emotional distress (Henrickson et al., 2020).

### ***Participants***

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants and pseudonyms were used to protect participants’ identities. Participants were recruited through various channels, including known personal network contacts, sport clubs, and regional sport organisations. Additionally, emails were sent to LGBT+-focused sport clubs, LGBT+ sport umbrella organisations, LGBT+ staff networks, and regional volunteer coordinators, and recruitment posters were shared on social media. Participants were also encouraged to nominate other volunteers, extending the sampling approach to snowballing, a frequently necessary method for data collection among populations with potentially stigmatised, invisible identities due to these populations’ concerns about prejudice and participation in research (Braumüller & Schlunski, 2022; Creed et al., 2010).

The study involved 16 participants, all aged 18 or over. Participants were sexually diverse but not gender diverse, as all participants self-identified as cisgender. Participants represented a diverse range of sports, volunteer roles, and varied levels of identification with the LGBT+ label. All participants were of white ethnicity, with no disclosed disabilities. The majority of participants were educated to a university level, with two participants not disclosing their education level. Volunteer experience varied from 1–5 years to over 30 years of involvement.

Volunteers with differing lengths of experience will have different perspectives depending upon the social context to their volunteering (see Appendix B). Through topical life history interviews, we explored these varied perspectives with longer-tenured volunteers having had more time to establish themselves within their volunteering environments whilst shorter-tenured volunteers were on a journey of doing so. All participants regularly volunteered in sport or had done so for at least a one-year period during the past five years. As such, participants had accumulated sufficient lived experience and knowledge of volunteering to take part in the study. For a detailed breakdown of participant demographics, please refer to [Table 1](#).

### Data collection

To uncover how individuals negotiated their identities over time, topical life history interviews were used. These interviews provided insights into how people's experiences fit into larger socio-political contexts (Cole & Knowles, 2001) and emphasised major life changes. A life history approach was chosen to facilitate a deeper understanding of identity in LGBT communities (Ceatha et al., 2019).

The interview guide, after two pilot interviews, was revised for clarity. Interviews commenced with a 'grand tour' question (Chen et al., 2020; Kuhn, 2006) – 'tell me about your volunteer experience'. Braumüller and Schlunski (2022) observe that researchers should not 'prime' gender and sexual minority participants to predominantly focus on negative experiences as this may skew the findings. For this study, interview questions were designed to probe the meaning participants gave to volunteering over time (e.g. what has it meant to volunteer overall during your lifetime?) and identity formation over time (e.g. how have you expressed your sexual identity when volunteering?).

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Birth cohort	Sexual orientation and gender	Length of total volunteer involvement	Current/ most recent volunteer role(s)
Colin	1960s	Gay man	20–30 years	County sport organisation board member, LGBT+ running club coach
David	1960s	Gay man	Over 30 years	Parkrun event director, LGBT+ running club coach
Joan	1960s	Lesbian woman	Over 30 years	Chair of regional LGBT+ sport organisation, trans swimming club coach
Gwen & Julie	1960s	Women with no label	Over 30 years	Orienteering club volunteers
Peter	1970s	Gay man	10–20 years	LGBT+ cricket club founder
Frida	1970s	Lesbian woman	Over 30 years	Lacrosse coach, tennis club volunteer
Niamh	1980s	Gay woman	5–10 years	Roller derby club board member
Gemma	1980s	Lesbian woman	1–5 years	Goodgym task force member
George	1980s	Gay man	10–20 years	LGBT+ football club committee member
Sophie	1980s	Lesbian woman	10–20 years	National softball and baseball LGBT+ network member
Liam	1990s	Gay man	5–10 years	LGBT+ running club vice chair and run leader
Beth	1990s	Asexual woman	5–10 years	Former basketball coach and referee
Kath	1990s	Bisexual woman	1–5 years	Hockey club secretary and treasurer
Lucy	1990s	Asexual woman	1–5 years	Sailing instructor
Sarah	1990s	Gay woman	5–10 years	Former horse riding event volunteer

The first author conducted both face-to-face and video interviews in accordance with the changing Covid-19 restrictions on in-person data collection. Fourteen participants participated in individual interviews. A couple, 'Gwen and Julie', who volunteered together, requested a joint interview, which was granted to avoid alienating these participants (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014; Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 2 hours and resulted in 23 hours of interview data and 250 pages of transcriptions. The first author also kept a reflective research diary to remain aware of her own thoughts and feelings as the data collection progressed. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed fully before proceeding to the next interview, enabling the inclusion of new categories in later stages of data collection. Data collection was stopped at the point of theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) when there was sufficient data from those who came forward to participate in the study. Stopping the data collection at the final sample size of participants was deemed sufficient to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation to ensure the study's timely completion.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected was analysed using initial, focused and theoretical coding to construct categories (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose of the coding was to distinguish between participants' explicit statements and implicit concerns within the data (Berdychevsky et al., 2013). Constructivist analysis was used to systematically categorise data on how individuals conveyed their understanding of the world. The coding process allowed us to evaluate participants' expressions of identity work and align them with the socio-cultural discourses that shape the volunteer personas, thereby reflecting the context in which they operate.

The first author performed the coding with the second and third authors providing comments and acting as critical friends (Tracy, 2010) during each coding round. Initial coding involved breaking down the data into codes that described the content of the interviews on an incident-by-incident basis. These initial codes helped identify patterns as to how volunteers expressed their identity construction, for example early cross-case analysis exposed how participants navigated challenges such as a lack of visible role models. Focussed coding centred on the initial codes authors determined the most relevant before developing these by engaging in an iterative process of reading existing literature and (re)analysing data. Constant comparison (Dowsett et al., 1998) allowed the authors to extract and exhibit the links between the most significant aspects of data based on how frequently the defined categories appeared within the data and how important the authors deemed them to be. Throughout the data analysis process, memos (see Appendix A) accompanied theoretical coding and facilitated the overall understanding of the data. As a final step, the first author employed theoretical coding to develop overarching conceptual categories that underpinned the creation and expression of volunteer personas through the lens of identity work. We devised personas as a lens through which to consider the most frequently occurring categories from within the data set by constructing patterns and connections between the focussed codes. These volunteer personas serve as conceptual categories to understand the underlying intentions held by individuals when developing a coherent and consistent sense of self during their volunteer experiences. For example, when some participants consistently discussed the importance of LGBT+ advocacy and activism in their volunteer work (i.e. 'uses sport volunteering

for activism’) we created a persona called ‘the advocate.’ For instance, the emergence of the ‘advocate’ persona highlights the socio-political imperative for LGBT+ individuals to advocate for their community’s rights and visibility within sports, reflecting broader struggles for LGBT+ inclusion and equality (Gates & Lillie, 2021).

### ***Researcher positionality and worldview***

It is important to be aware of subjective views as researchers as well as the views of the people under study, especially those who are marginalised or under-represented, and to take those perspectives into account when reading the findings of a study (Yuval-Davis, 2010). The three authors have firsthand experience as sport volunteers, ranging from grassroots sport to international events. The research team also has personal characteristics that align with under-represented sport volunteers, such as minority sexual orientation and/or female gender. However, we may be protected from further experiences of inequality due to our whiteness, absence of access needs, high education level, and middle-class status. These perspectives influence our worldview, shape our research and the approach taken within this study.

### **Findings and discussion**

As a result of a cross-case analysis, we interpreted the participants’ identity work as expressions of one or more of the following categories of personas: (1) advocate (2) community-minded and (3) sportsperson. With the presentation of the sportsperson persona, participants placed a significant emphasis on their passion for sports, valuing the opportunity to contribute to their chosen sport and aligning their identity closely with athletic pursuits. Community-minded volunteers viewed volunteering as an opportunity to make a difference in their local community through volunteering with sport happening to be their context. The advocate persona was characterised by a strong commitment to LGBT+ advocacy and activism in sport, seeking to create positive change for the LGBT+ community. We will now explore the relevance of the use of personas as part of the identity work process which we have further subdivided into identity construction, negotiation and management.

### ***Identity construction and emergence of personas***

In this paper, identity construction is taken to mean ‘how identities come to be formed’ (Pratt, 2012, p. 28). Participants are constructing and evolving their distinct identities through their engagement and involvement in various activities, shaping who they are and how they see themselves. Participants built their identities based on personal beliefs, past experiences, and their involvement in sport volunteering, leading to the presentation of personas. In the following sections, we will explore the relevance of personas in regard to participants’ identity construction.

### ***Sportsperson persona and identity construction***

The sportsperson persona is a translation of a sport participation identity into a sport volunteer identity, similarly to Cuskelly and O’Brien’s (2013) study on continuation

from being an athlete to being a sport volunteer. Beth decided to take on a coaching position for a junior basketball team because coaching felt like an extension of her identity as a basketball player – ‘I thought volunteering was also a way for me to improve my game and my understanding of the game’. As she continued in the role, the intrinsic rewards of coaching deepened. ‘Until this day, when I run into those girls on the street they’re super sweet to me, and tell me ... you taught us this, you taught us that.’ This ongoing experience allowed Beth to see coaching not just as an extension of her playing identity but as a distinct and fulfilling aspect of her overall identity in the sport – ‘... volunteering really opened up a part of myself that I wasn’t aware of ...’.

In comparison, Kath was more interested in learning about ‘behind the scenes’ at her hockey club – ‘I played for a year without knowing anything and then decided to just get more involved when we needed a new committee’. Kath’s desire to learn more about the inner workings of the club suggests a growing identification with the sport, where her volunteer identity began to take shape early in her involvement. Her growing experience helped solidify her identity as someone who not only participated in the sport but also helped sustain it through her volunteer efforts.

For Niamh, volunteering was a requirement for being able to play roller derby. ‘... things that can get you rostered ... for me it’s working on the board. Our league is volunteer-based. Everybody is expected to have a role’.

Niamh’s identity as a derby player was constructed first and foremost through playing but also through fulfilling volunteer roles within the league with volunteering becoming an inseparable part of her ‘derby player’ identity. The ongoing volunteer requirement in roller derby ensured that her identity as a sportsperson was consistently reinforced.

Beth, Kath and Niamh built their identities by extending their involvement in sports from active participation to volunteering roles. This transition reflects a deep connection to their sport, where volunteering becomes a natural continuation of their athletic identity.

### ***Community-minded persona and identity construction***

On the other hand, there were participants that were socialised into volunteering from a young age rather than as a result of life events during their adulthood. For instance, Colin and David witnessed their mothers helping out in a local charity shop and a swimming club, respectively. As a result, both David and Colin saw possibilities to volunteer as adults. Volunteering was also an integral part of Frida’s family life, something that was normalised and expected. This long-standing tradition of volunteering, modelled by her parents, provided Frida with a strong civic identity (Bekkers, 2007) from a young age. The sense of duty and emotional connection to volunteering as a value-based activity (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008) was ingrained in her from childhood. Her experience was one of continuity and reinforcement of these early values throughout her life, which was taken into account in her identity construction, as evidenced by her presentation of a community-minded persona.

A large number of those volunteering things came from the fact that my mum and my dad were both absolute sports volunteers all their lives ... I was definitely just following what was the normal expected activity ... we didn’t sit around doing nothing. We’d be helping, running, organising, doing, leading all the time. And ... therefore I don’t like to sit doing nothing. I’d rather help or make a difference if I can. (Frida)

With decades of volunteering experience, Frida's identity is well-established. The long-term nature of her involvement means her identity is less about active construction and more about the ongoing expression and reinforcement of values that have been part of her life for as long as she can remember.

Other participants looked at volunteering as a way to overcome issues in respect of temporary or ongoing illness. As a relatively new volunteer, Gemma was at the stage of building an identity as a volunteer, driven by her personal circumstances and her desire to find a meaningful way to use her physical energy.

When I saw [Goodgym] was coming to my city, I was excited but ... off work sick due to anxiety and a low mood ... thought it was a great idea to combine exercise with community work ... like improving parks, which I think is really cool. (Gemma)

The decision to join Goodgym reflects the foundational stage where Gemma defines 'who she is' within the context of volunteering – someone who values the combination of physical activity and community service to improve both her mental health and her local environment. Gemma actively shapes her identity through her experiences, with each volunteering act contributing to how she views herself as part of the Goodgym community.

### ***Advocate persona and identity construction***

Socio-political events factored into identity construction and became outcomes advocates wanted to achieve through sport. For example, Joan joined the LGBT+ Switchboard during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. She described her involvement as 'a really good way to get connected to the community.' This involvement helped her to define herself as part of a collective that shared her experiences and struggles, solidifying her identity as an LGBT+ advocate. Growing up in the 1990s, George and Sophie's primary reason for joining an LGBT+ sports club was, similarly to Callwood and Smith (2019), about identifying an LGBTQ+ subculture in sport to feel affirmed in one's sexual identity.

I used to play rugby. The atmosphere was quite aggressive and kind of jock ... intimidating if you were gay or different. (George)

I joined in 2006, which was when I moved back here and I was looking for a community really, an LGBTQ+ community that wasn't just based around socialising. That had something more to it. So I think that was sort of an important initial driver for my involvement. (Sophie)

Despite the differences in the era in which they began their volunteering, Joan, George and Sophie's involvement in their respective communities was driven by a need for connection and support within an LGBT+ space. Joan's advocacy was forged in the intense, politically charged atmosphere of the AIDS crisis, where the urgency of addressing life-threatening issues within the community shaped her role as an advocate with her long-tenured experience informing her volunteer roles in LGBT+ sport organisations from grassroots to international level. In contrast, George and Sophie's relatively shorter involvement in advocacy occurred at a time where societal views on LGBT+ issues had evolved and rights had been won, allowing George and Sophie to seek out and help build a community that was not solely defined by activism but also by shared cultural and social experiences.

Participants in this study built their identities through sport volunteering, which led to the emergence of distinct personas – sportsperson, community-minded and advocate. These personas were shaped by extending a sport participant identity into volunteering, developing a strong civic identity with a community wellbeing focus and furthering LGBT+ inclusion through volunteering.

### ***Identity negotiation***

Identity negotiation involves participants negotiating between different identities, more immediate adjustments to their behaviour and self-presentation to align with various expectations and contexts, seeking validation for their authentic selves (Swann, 1987). This may result in balancing and reconciling identity conflicts. Participants adjusted and renegotiated their identities in response to the social dynamics within their sports clubs and broader communities, resulting in the fluidity in personas based on situational factors.

### ***Reconciling sexual orientation in heteronormative contexts***

Participants navigated the negotiation of their sexual orientation by balancing the need to adapt their identity presentation within various contexts, ranging from downplaying or distancing themselves from their LGBT+ identity to fully embracing it as a central aspect of their role as volunteers and role models.

Beth, Lucy and Kath navigated their identities in environments where their identities were either misunderstood or not openly discussed. Beth's asexuality remained largely unspoken at her basketball club, similarly to Lucy at her sailing club – 'It's the one [sexual orientation] I am, tends to be not understood'.

With asexuality it's different because it's not like you have a girlfriend or a boyfriend of the same sex and people see that ... I don't remember talking about it to anyone but nobody ever asked. I never expressed it out loud but I don't think I needed to. I never felt isolated. (Beth)

Beth's asexuality was a non-identity in the public eye (Scott et al., 2016), making her present a sportsperson persona (and focusing on her role as a coach without the need to disclose or explain her identity). Similarly, Kath navigated her identity as a bisexual woman in a hockey club where conversations about sexual orientation were minimal and where the environment was predominantly heteronormative – '... it's all very closed door ... it's noticeable that a lot of people in the sport ... identify as straight. And there are a few people who identify as ... gay ... there could be people I don't know about ...'. While Kath was 'very proud' to be bisexual, she still faced the challenge of deciding when and how to disclose her identity, balancing openness with caution. Having only been with the club for a year, Kath was still establishing herself with other club members which may have influenced how much she felt comfortable sharing.

### ***Balancing sport participation and sport volunteering identities***

Participants also had to negotiate their own role within the community, experiencing tension between always being seen as a volunteer versus being 'just a participant'. Atewologun et al. (2017) refer to these experiences as identity conflicts. Joan emphasised how

important it was to get to swim in peace without always having to be the group leader. ‘Sometimes if you’re a little bit public, and people ask you a lot of questions, like oh please, just leave me. I just want my swim’. Colin’s experience was similar to Joan’s.

Sometimes when you’re feeling a little harassed or stressed you know it’s a challenge to go along and because people know I’ve been there a long time and I volunteered so they expect me to lead the group and sometimes I don’t want to. (Colin)

Because Colin was a long-standing member of the running club, there was an assumption that he would take on leadership responsibilities rather than experiencing the run on a personal level. His long-term civic service not only to LGBT+ communities but also as a county sport organisation board member meant that championing the wellbeing of others often overrode his need for personal enjoyment from sport.

Sarah expressed how ‘volunteering became a barrier’ to her participation in horse riding because of expectation to volunteer. For Sarah, being seen by others predominantly as a volunteer in this context posed a threat to her sense of self as a competitor and hindered her participation. This noticeable tension between participation and volunteering was similar to Wegner et al. (2019) where volunteers either accommodated both sport and volunteer identities or redefined their sport identities to fit in with their volunteer identity.

Some participants hesitant to disclose their LGBT+ identities found the sportsperson persona allowed them to engage in volunteer work without focusing on their identity. Meanwhile, other volunteers struggled to balance their roles as both volunteers and sport participants and their commitment to community wellbeing. These findings underscore the fluidity of identity negotiation, shaped by the context of volunteering and evolving self-concepts. Balancing multiple identities can reinforce expectations and create additional conflicts.

### ***Identity management***

Notwithstanding the negotiation between conflicting identities and the process through which the fluidity of identity exists, there are other factors at play that shape (and at times, constrain) the identity work process. Emerging from negotiation of identity conflicts, participants adopted more long-term strategies to create a consistent and stable identity across different contexts through ongoing identity management (Watson, 2008).

Frida distanced herself from identifying with the LGBT+ label. Frida’s volunteer work was a natural extension of who she was which was in contrast to how she expressed her LGBT+ identity. She referred to being a lesbian as ‘that identity’ and LGBT+ as an ‘interest group’. Her choice of words indicates a deliberate strategy to avoid being closely associated with or defined by her sexual orientation in the context of her volunteer work. Frida’s view of LGBT+ as ‘a group’ rather than ‘a community’ signalled her hesitation of any groups that would ‘advertise her [lesbian] identity’ and attach group stigma to her identity (Ng et al., 2012) – not keeping with a coherent identity.

In managing their identities, Gwen and Julie exemplified how some individuals resisted societal expectations around labelling sexual orientation by prioritising other aspects of their identity. By entering a same sex relationship in midlife, Gwen and

Julie considered themselves as LGBT+ by association but it had not become a defining dimension of their identity to the same extent as presenting a community-minded persona in volunteering. According to Julie, ‘technically you should be bi(sexual) but we’ve always been about not having a box. I have a wife and that’s it. We don’t like to be defined by that. At orienteering, they don’t appear to treat us differently’.

Gwen and Julie challenged the notion that their relationship should be defined by their sexual orientation, contrasting it with the normative heterosexual experience where such labelling is unnecessary. They actively managed their identities in a way that reflected their personal experiences and resistance to societal norms, especially in a context of romantic relationships that demand clear definitions and labels for sexual orientation.

On the other hand, David strived for a separation of his volunteer and LGBT+ identity in some of his volunteer roles whereas in others he was visibly LGBT+.

The people at the swimming pool knew I was gay, they knew my husband. I didn’t hide it at all, but it was never important, I wasn’t needed to be LGBT to be in that role. They didn’t need a token LGBT person ... I was there because I was good at marketing. (David)

Unlike Sophie who claimed ‘I’m an activist in everything I do’, David first separated his activism from his professional identity. This indicates that while he felt accepted, being LGBT did not define his value in his former trustee role with his professional identity taking precedence. After David moved on to his current volunteer role, he took a more proactive approach to his LGBT+ identity, moving from quiet authenticity of the trustee role to more active advocacy of being an LGBT+ running club coach and parkrun event director and by deliberately sharing his LGBT+ identity in these contexts ‘to break down barriers for others’ who might be ‘less confident in being gay’. The changes in David’s thinking reflects a deeper understanding of the potential impact of his visibility as a gay man in these spaces. van Overbeeke et al. (2022) also noted how finding role models from communities of non-volunteers might encourage volunteering from under-represented groups.

Additionally, Peter’s journey illustrates the complexities of navigating one’s minority sexual orientation within traditional sports environments. Before Peter founded an LGBT+ cricket club, it took him ‘a couple of years’ before disclosing his identity to others in his former non-LGBT+ club. According to Peter, ‘instances of homophobia were limited’ and he described his involvement as ‘fine’ on one level but he also felt like an outsider while he was setting up the new club.

... it’s funny because years ago, I never objected to LGBT sports clubs. I just never felt like that was for me, or that’s something I’d want to get involved in. Now I’ve decided to exit the game, full circle, to start LGBT+ club. I can instantly see the difference. I want it for me and to make a safe, positive environment for LGBT people who want to get involved as players, supporters or volunteers. It’s about changing cricket into a more positive, inclusive environment more broadly. (Peter)

Coming together for a joint cause kept LGBT+ people involved in their communities through civic participation (Battle & Harris, 2013). As an agent of change, the advocate persona represents this strong commitment to supporting and enhancing the experiences of LGBT+ communities. By creating a space where his identity was fully embraced, Peter moved from compartmentalising his LGBT+ identity from his sporting life to advocacy-driven identity management. Whilst Peter felt comfortable primarily presenting as a

sportsperson in his former club, he embraced the advocate persona in the more identity-affirming environment of an LGBT+ club. Similarly to Peter, Liam had ‘since joining the LGBT+ running club ... become more confident and comfortable with my sexuality. I had always been quite unsure of myself’.

Liam’s growing confidence in his sexuality through involvement in an LGBT+ sports club echoes the experiences of other participants who found affirmation and identity through their sports communities. Niamh, for instance, identified strongly as a ‘derby player,’ integrating her personal identity with the inclusive, alternative culture of roller derby, which contrasted with her more conservative upbringing.

I can say if I hadn’t taken part in roller derby, I’d probably be married with a child to a man. Whereas now I’m engaged to a woman ... in the context of I grew up in Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland in the 1990s and noughties, there would have been that thought of being gay is wrong ... I make no apologies. I’m just gonna be here ... took me till I was 30 years old to get this far. And then it took me till I was 33 to meet someone. I refuse to hide it away from anyone just because they might feel uncomfortable. (Niamh)

Niamh discussed how she has maintained and adapted her identity over time in response to her personal experiences and societal expectations. She reflected on how her involvement in roller derby influenced her life choices and identity, including her sexuality and personal relationships. Her refusal to hide her identity despite past societal pressures demonstrates how she managed her identity to remain authentic and consistent with her values, regardless of external discomfort or expectations.

Participants tended to adopt long-term strategies for managing their identities, balancing their personal and social roles amidst heteronormative sport environments. Some adopted a cautious approach while others resisted societal expectations to label their sexual orientation by prioritising other aspects of their identity. David and Peter’s positions shifted over the years from resisting the LGBT+ environment (and identity) to embracing a more integrated and advocacy-driven approach. Liam and Niamh exemplified the influence of inclusive environments can have on having an identity-affirming volunteering experience. The participants’ identity management involved (as a result of prior identity construction and negotiation) actively maintaining a coherent identity that aligned with their personal beliefs and the different contexts in their lives.

## Implications

The findings of this study extend our understanding of identity work among sexually diverse sport volunteers, particularly in the context of heteronormativity in sport. By examining the identity construction, negotiation and management processes through three personas – advocate, community-minded and sportsperson – the study offers the following theoretical contributions. The study illustrates how identity construction of sexually diverse sport volunteers is tied to personal histories, socialisation and the specific demands of their volunteer roles, expanding beyond motivational profiles of sport volunteers (Engelberg et al., 2014). Personas serve as snapshots of identity, capturing enduring aspects and shifts over time to better understand how volunteers construct and negotiate their identities. The findings reveal the complexities of identity negotiation for sexually diverse volunteers within sport volunteering contexts. Volunteers often

adjust their identities based on the perceived safety and inclusivity of their environments. This negotiation is influenced by factors such as length of experience, the specific sport culture, and the degree of heteronormativity present in the volunteer setting. The study highlights how identity management is a process of seeking consistency, influenced by the volunteer's experience and changes in the social environment. Volunteers with extensive experience tended to have more firmly established volunteer identities. In contrast, newer volunteers were still in the process of constructing their identities, often influenced by the norms and expectations of the sports environment they were entering. Using life history interviews to explore sport volunteering experiences remains a scarcely used approach (Gipson & Malcom, 2020). The inclusion of topical life history interviews allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' volunteer journeys, capturing the evolving nature of their identities in relation to volunteering.

The findings also offer practical implications for the management and support of sexually diverse volunteers in sport settings. With the creation of volunteer personas, we have considered how the identity work connected to these personas could be supported. By implementing flexible support and resources that adapt to the evolving identities of volunteers, organisations can create more meaningful connections with individuals passionate about contributing as sport volunteers. For instance, while advocates might initially benefit from leadership development opportunities to champion diversity and inclusion initiatives, community-minded volunteers may need platforms to share their experiences and strengthen community ties. Similarly, sportspeople could be supported through mentoring roles that allow them to pass on their expertise while continuing to develop their sporting identity. However, it is crucial to recognise that volunteers are not static in their personas; they navigate various identity challenges and transitions. Therefore, organisations should not only match volunteers to roles that align with their current identity but also provide opportunities for growth and identity exploration. Recognising that volunteers at different stages of their involvement may require different forms of support – such as guiding new volunteers to feel comfortable in disclosing their identities or empowering experienced volunteers to mentor others – ensures that the fluidity of volunteer identities is supported. By embracing this flexibility, organisations can create better volunteer experiences that encourage more meaningful engagement.

## **Limitations and future research**

There were several limitations to the study which should be recognised. Firstly, participants were interviewed once, whereas more extended engagement could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of timelines and past experiences. The study also relied on participant recall which can be prone to memory errors. It is worth noting, however, that recall relating to sexual orientation and the role it plays in identity formation might be more accurate than for other life events (Calzo et al., 2011).

As a qualitative study, the results apply to the specific sample of 16 sexually diverse sport volunteers and should not be taken as being representative of diverse volunteer experiences in sport. Rather, examining the experiences of sexually diverse volunteers across different sporting contexts provides a nuanced understanding of identity work's impact. The study's sample did not fully represent the wide range of identities and experiences within LGBT+ communities but rather LGBA+ experiences. Further research could explore if and how

sport volunteer personas from this study could extend to other diverse groups beyond minority sexual orientation (e.g. individuals who are gender diverse, with disabilities, ethnically or culturally diverse). Study participants also somewhat reflected typical UK sport volunteers (educated to university level, white). Lastly, research could investigate factors that influence the retention of diverse volunteers in sport, including the risk of burnout. Understanding what drives continued engagement versus withdrawal could inform strategies to support and sustain diverse volunteers over time.

## Conclusion

This paper explored how individuals constructed, negotiated and managed their identities in sport volunteering contexts through identity work by adopting personas, as informed by Watson's identity work framework (2008, 2020). We used constructivist grounded theory cross-case analysis of topical life history interviews with sexually diverse volunteers to explore these processes.

Participants seeking to achieve and/or further LGBT+ inclusion through volunteering, considered advocacy as an important aspect of sport (or, for some, a more important aspect of it), which resulted in the presentation of an advocate persona within the context of their sport volunteering. For those presenting a community-minded persona, their identity work was closely related to civic service with sport happening to be the context they were in. In contrast, sports participation provided a foundation for some participants to strengthen their sports volunteer identity through a sportsperson persona, emphasising the personal benefits of sport to the participants as well as wanting to see their sport thrive.




Ultimately, participants present the advocate, community-minded, or sportsperson personas as a result of continuous and dynamic identity work. The length of their volunteering experience plays a role in this process, with those who have more experience typically having more fully developed and stable identities. However, regardless of the length of experience, each participant's journey is marked by a combination of personal history, social interactions and their socio-political context. Throughout the lives of study participants born between 1960s and 1990s, LGBT+ rights have seen both advancements and setbacks, affecting the urgency of advocacy and the celebration of LGBT+ identities. Still, some volunteers choose to downplay their sexual identity due to discursive pressures in their volunteering environments and prefer association by their sport or civic service rather than under the LGBT+ umbrella. For sexually diverse volunteers, advocacy, sport and community can serve as extensions of their volunteer identities in finding a sense of belonging and a safe environment for engaging in sports.

Building on Watson's foundational work, our study provides further insights into the nuanced ways individuals present personas. This research expands the understanding of volunteer identity and offers valuable perspectives for management and engagement strategies. By comprehending how volunteer identities are constructed, negotiated and managed, sport organisations can better support their diverse volunteers, fostering an environment conducive to personal growth, inclusivity and sustained involvement.

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