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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# 'One team member doesn't make a Pride parade': an international study of people's experiences of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer in motorsport

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we report our qualitative survey research that explored lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) people's experiences of motorsport. Fifty-nine participants were recruited with support from *Motorsport UK* and *Racing Pride*, who posted invitations to participate on their social media channels. Reflexive thematic analysis resulted in two themes. In the first theme, *'The first rule of the race team is no chicks or fags': A lack of inclusivity for those of diverse genders and sexualities*, we discuss how motorsport was sometimes reported to be a somewhat unwelcome space for LGBTQ+ people. In the second theme, *'I don't necessarily publicise or promote it': Safely navigating sexuality in motorsport*, we show how participants navigated a set of complex contexts and were strategically selective in being out and open about their sexuality. Our research indicates that heterosexism, sexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in motorsport can result in a hostile environment for people of diverse genders and sexualities that has to be carefully negotiated by LGBTQ+ people. However, our participants were passionate about motorsport and reported pockets of inclusion as well as optimism about a more fully inclusive future.



## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Gender; LGBTQ+; motor racing; sexuality; sport

In July 2024, racing driver Ralf Schumacher posted a picture of him and his male partner on *Instagram*. Schumacher, (brother of seven-time world champion Michael Schumacher) competed in Formula 1 (F1) for a decade and is the highest profile of only four F1 drivers known to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Richards, 2024; Walfisz, 2024). His post has been described as a 'significant breakthrough' offering the potential to 'pave the way for more diversity in F1' (Walfisz, 2024). To date, no male driver has publicly declared that they are gay or bisexual whilst still racing in F1. Schumacher's post prompted current F1 drivers Fernando Alonso and Lando Norris to state their support, with seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton noting that whilst Schumacher's announcement was positive, more progress is needed for the sport to be inclusive of sexuality and gender (Benson, 2024). Indeed, there has been a turn towards high-profile F1 drivers speaking out about diversity in motorsport, including in relation to racialised identities and gender/sexuality (e.g. de la Fuente, 2024). However, F1 is not the only form of motorsport in which people of diverse genders and sexualities are involved, and there are many roles other than driver.

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## Motorsport

Motorsport is locally, nationally, and internationally significant and 'one of the largest spectator sports in the world' (Ferguson et al., 2019, p. 2570). Drivers can compete at amateur through pro-am, to professional levels in a range of championships. Some compete in 'tin-top' racing (e.g. *British Touring Car Championship*; *GT Championship*; *National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing* [NASCAR]), including racing classic and historic cars (e.g. *Classic Sports Car Club*). Others drive single-seater open-top cars, often starting in karting, progressing to Formula 2, 3, and 4, and Formula E, with IndyCar and F1 considered the pinnacles of motorsport, and often the ultimate goal that remains unreachable for most drivers. Motorsport involves entire teams of experts from drivers, mechanics, engineers, analysts, and strategists, to hospitality, press communication and marketing officers, all of whom contribute to the success of a team. In recent years, there has been an increased interest and audience growth in motorsport, particularly F1. This is perhaps at least partly attributable to the 'Netflix effect' of the *Drive to Survive* documentary-series where viewers can engage with behind-the-scenes footage of F1 drivers and teams (Smith, 2019, 2021), which may be attracting new and more diverse audiences to motorsport than in the past.

## LGBTQ+ people in sports

There is a paucity of research focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) people in motorsport, and we therefore set the scene of sexuality within sport more broadly. The history of LGBTQ+ sportspeople has sometimes been one of invisibility and stigmatisation. LGBTQ+ people in high-profile professional sports during the 1920/30s often remained closeted (e.g. tennis player Bill Tilden; golf champion Babe Zaharias). During the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, those who came out (or were outed) often faced significant personal and professional repercussions (e.g. National Football League player David Kopay; tennis players Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova; British football player Justin Fashanu) (Brackenridge et al., 2008). More recently, the landscape for LGBTQ+ professional sportspeople has improved – at least within some sports – and the dominant narrative is of a cultural shift towards more inclusive climates within sporting cultures (see Krane, 2019). This turn towards acceptance is reflected in professional sportspeople being out and open about their sexualities (e.g. British diver Tom Daley; U.S. hurdler Trey Cunningham) (Buzinski, 2024; Magrath et al., 2017). Nonetheless, those who are open about their sexuality (and/or same-sex relationships) might still risk encountering some backlash (e.g. British boxer Nicola Adams, who was trolled for dancing with a same-sex partner on British entertainment show *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2020; McGrath, 2024).

There is also a turn towards more inclusive environments within wider recreational sports and physical activity contexts (Krane, 2019; Magrath et al., 2017). However, experiences do differ according to geographical location, and factors such as age, racialised identities, gender, and physical abilities – hence intersectionality is an important and complex area to consider (Denison et al., 2021; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). Further, how safe LGBTQ+ people feel may depend on structural factors such as job security, and whether sports teams and organisations have visible LGBTQ+ people, groups, or policies, all of which contribute to a sense of inclusivity (Storr et al., 2022). Finally, specific sporting contexts should be taken into consideration. Some sports might feel particularly exclusionary (e.g. football; Denison et al., 2021), whilst others embrace and celebrate diverse genders and sexualities (e.g. Roller derby; Breeze, 2010; Gieseler, 2014). Overall, the research evidence indicates that sports cultures are nuanced and vary from 'highly inclusive' to 'highly prejudicial' with 'a myriad of climates in between' (Krane, 2019, p. 3; Denison et al., 2021).

## Gender and motorsport

Despite the lack of focus on sexuality, scholars have considered gender within motorsport. Motorsport is one of the few sports where women and men compete together (Ferguson et al.,

2019; Kochanek et al., 2021). However, whether fans could name a woman driver might depend on the motorsport they follow and the depth of their historical knowledge. Motorsport has been in existence since the late 1800s, and women have been present for at least the last 100 years – with some notable success.<sup>1</sup> Longstanding or more avid fans may be aware of the five female F1 drivers to have raced during its 75-year existence.<sup>2</sup> However, women's visibility in motorsport has historically been minimal (Pflugfelder, 2009). Women may rarely be drivers, or hold high-profile positions, and have instead often been relegated to roles supporting men (Pflugfelder, 2009). Disparities between genders could be attributed to how motorsport is traditionally associated with white heterosexual men and a particular version of traditional masculinity (Kochanek et al., 2021; Peterson & Wegner, 2023; Pflugfelder, 2009).

There is consensus that the route into motorsport is difficult and might often be via a (wealthy) family background (Kochanek et al., 2021). Women may face additional barriers such as few role models, less track time than men, and negative perceptions and stereotypes about their physical abilities, despite no evidence of any physiological disadvantage (Ferguson et al., 2019; Kochanek et al., 2021; Matthews & Pike, 2016; More than Equal, 2023). In a sport dominated by traditional masculinities, if women are seen as 'too masculine' then they may be regarded as a threat, whereas being perceived as 'too feminine' can undermine how seriously they are taken (Matthews & Pike, 2016; Pflugfelder, 2009). These issues matter and are particularly important in terms of funding, particularly given that drivers frequently rely on investment from sponsors to support their careers (More than Equal, 2023; Peterson & Wegner, 2023). Yet women face significant challenges in generating sponsorship, and report not being taken seriously by sponsors who may be unwilling to invest in female drivers, particularly during their early careers (Kochanek et al., 2021; More than Equal, 2023). Even the notion that sponsors are hard to find restricts and disempowers women, when it fuels competition over camaraderie in an already highly competitive environment (Kochanek et al., 2021). Women also face sponsors having unrealistically high expectations, and risk being marketed somewhat tokenistically. Further, others around them may undermine individual women's sponsorship success as attributable to their age and gender, rather than their ability (Kochanek et al., 2021). Overall, women continue to face barriers in motorsport, including sexism, prejudice, and stereotypes (e.g. Kochanek et al., 2021). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that women's participation in motorsport remains low, estimated to be around 1 in 10, reducing to approximately 4% in the higher echelons (Benson, 2023).

Nonetheless, some women have achieved a level of visibility within (relatively) high-profile motorsport. Those who follow F1 might be aware of Susie Wolff's involvement in the sport or know that Jessica Hawkins is currently an ambassador and test driver for *Aston Martin* (and was previously in a same-sex relationship with British racing driver Abbie Eaton) (Braybrook, 2024). Danica Patrick is well known to *Indy* and *NASCAR* fans in the United States<sup>3</sup> (Jones, 2016) and has a heightened international profile since becoming an expert commentator on *Sky F1* (see, Potts, 2023). Jade Edwards raced in the *British Touring Car Championship* (BTCC) in 2023 and became a television pundit for ITV (the UK's commercial public broadcast channel that televises BTCC). However, women continue to face barriers in motorsport and there may be a lack of 'dedicated technical, physical, psychological and tactical training tailored specifically to female drivers' (More than Equal, 2023, p. 7; Kochanek et al., 2021).

In 2019, a single-seater championship was established for women drivers. *W Series* offered scope to increase opportunities for women to race, and to raise the profile of women in motorsport. However, the series went into liquidation after just three seasons due to funding difficulties (White, 2023). In 2023, *F1 Academy* (funded by F1) held its first season of women-only racing as part of a wider professional programme to increase female participation and support women progressing to higher levels of single-seater racing (<https://www.f1academy.com/>). Some who have raced in these series have been out about their sexuality, indicating that women drivers are seemingly somewhat able to be open about being LGBTQ+ (at least within this specific context) (e.g. Lefevre, 2023). Other industry initiatives to promote gender equality in motorsport also exist (e.g. *British Women Racing*

*Drivers Club; Females in Motorsport; Girls Across the Grid; Girls on Track; Women in Motorsport; and More than Equal*) and such schemes have the potential to support women's access to, and success within, motorsports (Kochanek et al., 2021). However, whilst there is some understanding of (seemingly cis) women's experiences of motorsport, there is little or no discussion of trans people.

## LGBTQ+ people and motorsport

Due to limited academic literature, we draw on wider sources to offer a picture of LGBTQ+ people in motorsport. It seems likely that few motorsport fans would be able to name an LGBTQ+ driver given the distinct lack of visibility of diverse sexualities in most high-profile motorsport. Motorsport was ranked 20th out of 21 sports (including football) for equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) (More than Equal, 2023). At the end of the 2020/2021 F1 World Championship season, Max Verstappen won the series with *Red Bull Racing*. Team Principal Christian Horner and his wife Geri Halliwell spoke to *Sky Sports*. Presenter Simon Lazenby commented that F1 team members get support at home, to which Christian Horner responded:

oh absolutely, I've gotta say a big thank you because, y'know it's not just my wife, but all the wives and girlfriends, y'know, it's a tough calendar, and uh, you know, people take their emotions home, they take it out on the ones that they love and so on and, you know, it's all the support that goes on behind the scenes (2021).

This exchange could be interpreted as hetero/sexist by implying that those at the track are all men whilst their partners are all women either 'behind the scenes' or 'at home'. This overlooks both that women have roles within F1, and that men at the track might have boyfriends and husbands. Whilst this seemingly innocuous interview with one individual should be taken in context – Horner's wife was present and Lazenby's comment was in direct response to her remarks – nonetheless it could be that this type of narrative reflects a wider environment of hetero/sexism within motorsport despite wider calls for diversity.

However, change may be happening, perhaps aided by high-profile championship winning drivers such as Lewis Hamilton and Sebastian Vettel being outspoken about LGBTQ+ rights (Baldwin, 2021), with Hamilton wearing a Pride Progress Flag on his helmet to draw attention to anti-LGBTQ laws and cultures in some countries where F1 races (e.g. Qatar and Saudi Arabia) (Benson, 2024; Ravindran, 2021). These actions have received positive responses and been argued to reflect a welcome shift away from a culture of silence. One organisation specifically focused on seeking to promote diversity is *Racing Pride* who work with an array of partners including *BWT Alpine F1 team* to promote LGBTQ+ inclusivity in motorsports (<https://racingpride.com/>). Founder ambassador Matt Bishop, who has held various roles in F1 teams, has joked about feeling that he was 'the only gay in the F1 village' when he started out nearly 30 years ago (Murley, 2021). In recent year there has been a turn towards addressing inclusivity and increasing the diversity of drivers, teams, and fans in motorsport (see, Baldwin, 2021; Peterson & Wegner, 2023; Ravindran, 2021).

## The current study

Despite the rising popularity and increased visibility of motorsports, studies specifically focused on motorsport remain few and far between, despite developing narratives around EDI. In our study we sought to explore the research question '*what are LGBTQ+ people's experiences of working and competing in motorsport?*'

## Methodology

We chose an online qualitative survey due to little being known about LGBTQ+ people's experiences of motorsport, and given that LGBTQ+ participants competing in motorsport may be hard-to-find and geographically dispersed (Terry & Braun, 2017). Open-ended questions were developed from

literature on gender and motorsport and wider research on LGBTQ+ people in sport. We asked how participants became involved in motorsport, and their experiences of being LGBTQ+ within motor racing, including when or whether they felt un/welcome in the sport. We also asked when they felt their sexuality was relevant, and whether their partner and/or sexuality was spoken about within their teams or more widely. Finally, we sought perspectives on whether others' experiences might differ according to sexuality, and when or whether they saw LGBTQ+ people being out and open or represented within motorsport. We ended by inviting them to add anything else that was important to them.

### **Participants and procedure**

Ethical approval was granted by the University of the West of England (UWE) College Research Ethics Committee. We recruited by contacting local and national motorsports societies and organisations via email which initially resulted in few responses (but served as a pilot to test the questions). After we met with *Motorsport UK* (the UK's governing body of four-wheel motorsport), they offered significant support, including sharing details of our study internally and externally. Most participants learned about the study through *Racing Pride* who (following contact from *Motorsport UK*) shared a call for participants on *Instagram* and *X (Twitter)*, which resulted in the study becoming international. This call included a link that directed potential participants to *Qualtrics*, where they were presented with an information sheet that detailed the background to the study, what voluntary participation involved, risks and benefits, how data would be managed and reported, and how to withdraw. Informed consent was required for participants to progress to the demographic and survey questions.

Fifty-nine people aged between 17–64 years participated (M age = 31). They described their sexuality as gay (27), bisexual (12), pansexual (6), or bisexual/pansexual (1), lesbian (7), queer (3), asexual (2), and straight male fem-boy (1). Participants were 35 men (1 noted that they were cis), 9 women (1 noted that they were cis), 7 trans people (2 transmen, 2 transwomen, 1 trans, 1 transexual woman, and 1 trans fem), and 4 nonbinary people, with others describing themselves as female (1), male femboy (1), he/him (1), and 'bit of everything deep down really' (1). Whilst 31 were single, 28 had a partner. Most were white (47), working class (40), with varying levels of education. Most (52) did not describe themselves as disabled. We asked about how out they were, because research indicates that when athletes are open about their sexuality with team members, they tend to report positive experiences of sport. We know little about whether such experiences are shared by those who are not out, and anticipation of negative responses may lead some to keep their sexuality private from their teams (Krane, 2019). Amongst our participants, 21 reported that they were out to everyone, 17 to most people, 20 to some people, and 1 to no one. Their roles in motorsport varied considerably but 22 were competitors/drivers (see Table 1).

In our analysis we report participant number, racialised identities/ethnicities, gender/sexuality, and their age. In the second theme we also include their response to how out and open they were, due to this being an aspect of our analysis.

### **Data analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the data and develop patterns of meaning (e.g. Braun et al., 2016; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Terry et al., 2017). We initially took a broadly experiential approach given how little is known about those of diverse genders and sexualities in motorsport, and our aim to represent their experiences. However, we also interpreted their responses within the wider sociocultural context of LGBTQ+ identities, and how these might exist within motorsport environments. Therefore, to enable us to legitimise participants whilst simultaneously recognising experiences as mediated by wider social contexts, we took a critical realist approach (e.g. Ussher & Perz, 2006). The first author is a social psychologist whose research has focused primarily on gender

**Table 1.** Participants' roles within motorsport.

Role	No.	Additional comments
Competitor/driver	22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Amateur</i></li> <li>● &amp; <i>Engineer (&amp; de facto team lead)</i></li> <li>● <i>driver</i></li> <li>● <i>driver</i></li> <li>● <i>driving karts</i></li> <li>● <i>mechanic</i></li> <li>● <i>and mechanic</i></li> <li>● <i>racer</i></li> <li>● <i>Sim racer competitor</i></li> <li>● <i>social media/marketing</i></li> </ul>
Mechanic	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>tire specialist</i></li> <li>● <i>crew chief</i></li> </ul>
Engineer	3	
Marshall	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>chief of post</i></li> </ul>
Official	2	
Accreditation and hospitality	1	
Clerk of course	1	
Creative	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>mostly imagery, but also copywriting</i></li> </ul>
Event staff	1	
Ex-driver	1	
Former blogger and equality activist, now sport researcher and fandom oldie	1	
Freelance photographer, fan	1	
I own a motorsport media company and manage a motorsport publishing website	1	
Journalist	1	
Junior data engineer	1	
Marketing & oversight of racetrack trainings for motorcycle riders	1	
Marketing and sponsorship	1	
Motorsport business owner	1	
Outdoor kart track and kart race team owner	1	
PR	1	
Presenter	1	
Race Director	1	
Reporter	1	
Social media	1	
Staff writer, e-sports editor, social media manager	1	
Steward	1	
Team manager	1	
Track management/media relations	1	
Video production	1	
Declined to answer	1	

and sexualities, and who is an enthusiastic spectator of motorsports (with no experience of personally participating in motor racing). The second author is a passionate spectator of both car and motorcycle racing (with limited involvement in motorsport through participation in 'arrive and drive' races). Both authors identify as bisexual. Our personal and professional knowledge of sexuality and motorsport, along with the academic literature, informed our analysis of the data.

We initially read responses as completed surveys were submitted on *Qualtrics*, before familiarising ourselves with the data by carefully reading the entire dataset on multiple occasions. The first author jotted down ideas they noticed and questions to ask of the data as they read and re-read responses. The coding process was completed manually using a printout of all participant responses. Data were coded semantically (staying close to meanings portrayed by participants at the surface of the text) and latently (codes that developed as we became more deeply engaged and could interpret at a deeper level). Code names were created and initially noted on the survey responses in Word online before being transferred to a separate document (e.g. *standing out in motorsport*; *LGBTQ+ supported by all*; *biphobia*; *homophobia*; *transphobia*; *gender norms are the norm*; *downplaying phobic responses*; *camaraderie despite competition*; *pockets of inclusion*). Initial themes were developed using our

resources to organise codes into meaningful patterns. Both semantic and latent codes contributed to the development of themes. Initial themes were reviewed and refinements made to ensure that data within each theme best represented patterns of meaning. Writing up began by developing theme definitions (initially created as part of the review phase) before selecting data extracts and developing our analytic narrative. Theme names were developed from quotations that exemplified the central organising concept of each theme.

## Analysis

In the first theme, *'The first rule of the race team is no chicks or fags': A lack of inclusivity for those of diverse genders and sexualities*, we report how motorsport was often a somewhat unwelcoming environment for LGBTQ+ people. The second theme, *'I don't necessarily publicise or promote it': Safely navigating sexuality in motorsport*, demonstrates how participants carefully navigated the complexities of motorsport environments.

### ***The first rule of the race team is no chicks or fags': A lack of inclusivity for those of diverse genders and sexualities***

In this theme we explore how the dominant picture was of motorsport as an environment where LGBTQ+ identities were not unequivocally recognised and respected. A sexist, heterosexist, and sometimes biphobic, homophobic, and/or transphobic climate was seemingly part and parcel of much motorsport. The endurance of traditional masculinities was sometimes attributed as being the foundation of an exclusive and exclusionary motorsport environment – within which LGBTQ+ people were not always welcomed. Motor racing was explicitly situated as *'the pursuit of a white, cis, straight man'* and motorsport *'as a very traditionally "masculine" sport, there's this feeling for queer people that you can't fully be yourself'* (P49, Chinese-Singaporean gay man, 22). P9 had *'never had any issues with my fellow competitors'* but commented that *'due to the "macho" culture of fast cars and a male dominated world, I think that this is not the case for a lot of other people within the LGBTQ+ community'* (white gay man, 31). P40 stated: *'I've heard so much homophobic bullshit over the years from colleagues and other people in the sport'* (P40, white-British queer man, 33), and the picture many participants painted was of a lack of inclusivity for those of diverse genders and sexualities – in various ways and across different levels of motorsport:

Motorsport is an environment where homophobic and transphobic language regularly goes unchallenged. I joined a team and was told the 'first rule of the race team is no chicks or fags' by my senior engineer. The people around laughed and agreed. Comments like these being left unchallenged forced me out of the industry to complete my gender transition. (P19, British lesbian trans woman, 26)

I feel if I came out as bisexual as a man, or transgender, then I would instantly lose any seat with any current drive I have. There is a very homophobic tone around rallying in the UK despite utterances to the contrary. Maybe for female bisexual competitors it may be slightly different but women still face their own challenges in the sport. (P39, white, bisexual, trans, 31)

It's still difficult to get hired as a part of a team. There is still the thought that women can't do things well in motorsports, we still need to prove our value 3 times more than men. It is also concerning that homophobia still remains, mostly at kids karting level, when it's very common to use homophobic slurs as a synonym of being not brave enough on track. (P52, mixed-Latin, lesbian trans fem, 42)

Notably, participants often presented phobic language and comments as something they witnessed happening around them rather than perceiving them as directed towards them personally. Nonetheless, these impacted on their sense of value, safety, and belonging. The explicitly exclusive 'ground rules' and use of homophobic slurs serve to imply that LGBTQ+ people will not thrive in motorsport and that they are inferior and unwelcome. This unwelcoming space reported by participants was somewhat ubiquitous, sometimes subtle, sometimes less so, and sustained by the



agreement or acquiescence of others around them. This meant that many participants mentioned not feeling able to be out and open, either in the past, or now. It was evident that gender was an important lens, with women and trans people having nuanced experiences and being perceived to face different and additional barriers. The existence of this hostile environment had direct and indirect impacts and was reported to threaten both entry into motorsport, and the success of women and LGBTQ+ people within the sport.

Whilst some participants explicitly spoke of a hostile environment, there were other more implicit ways in which a lack of inclusivity arguably manifested. Some participants had initially been under the impression that motorsport was not a place for them:

Growing up, I was aware of motorsport but *I never thought it was an industry for me* - I was assigned female at birth, and there weren't really many people like me. (P10, mixed-Asian pansexual nonbinary, assigned female at birth, 18, emphasis added)

On a corporate track day my instructor suggested I look at doing my ARDS test [Associate of Racing Driver Schools]. *I didn't even know what that was or that motorsport opportunities were available to someone like me.* (P48, white bisexual female, 32, emphasis added)

It is not entirely clear the specific aspect of 'me' that made motorsport feel a closed door to them (e.g. gender, or combinations of gender/sexuality and racialised identities/ethnicities). Nonetheless, an awareness that motorsport is primarily the domain of straight white men is implied through their assumption that membership would not be open to them. We asked participants *please could you tell us a bit about how you came to be involved in motorsport?* Many responses read as though they had been asked to defend their presence as an LGBTQ+ person in motorsport. Their answers could be interpreted as reflecting recognition that motorsport might not be the most obvious vocation for those of diverse identities. This included them emphasising longstanding familial involvement – since the 1950s/60s – whilst others positioned their interest as deeply ingrained when describing it as having always existed:

Through my partner, but I was *always* interested in motorsport *from a very young age* and had thought about joining motorsport in some sort of capacity before meeting my partner. (P9, white gay man, 31, emphasis added)

Many of even the shortest answers to the initial question located motorsport as a personal passion that was an intrinsic aspect of themselves through use of 'always' or 'since birth'. P15 was *'born into karting'* (white-American gay man, 38), whilst P48 *'knew nothing of motorsport growing up but always had an unexplained passion for cars'* (white bisexual female, 32), and P56 *'was a fan since birth. I had no family history or interest in motorsport but I loved it. I always wanted to become involved'* (Caucasian-Australian gay man, 38). These types of framing somewhat essentialised their love of motorsport and were perhaps strategic in suggesting that motorsport was a calling that they had no choice but to pursue (the implication being, despite them being LGBTQ+). The perceived inevitability of them pursuing their passion was apparent across a range of motorsport careers and from participants with varied backgrounds and demographics. These highly individualised accounts could be read as justification of their right to a position in a sport where LGBTQ+ people might not be expected to belong.

We note that there were instances when participants emphasised that they felt welcome in motorsport and able to be themselves. However, it was also noticeable that this sometimes immediately followed statements acknowledging the presence of homophobia:

Mostly things are fine. There is the boss that [uses] homophobia as a weapon. There are other times that people use words associated with gay culture as insults or out of frustration. These tend to be in non-professional teams. (P56, Caucasian-Australian gay man, 38)

[F]or years (especially when I was closeted) I had to ignore the fact that race paddocks can sometimes feel overwhelmingly 'masculine' places - I use inverted commas because it's all a bit of a show sometimes, lots of so-called banter and casual sexism and suchlike without, I suspect, much actual substance to it. I've heard homosexual slurs used for racers deemed not as tough or able as others. Playground level stuff - I don't think

those using the slurs were outright homophobic - but it's this casual stuff that can eat away at your confidence [...] Which isn't to say my negative experiences happened often at all, and I mostly love being in race paddocks. It's just that every now and then, I'd hear something that made me think 'maybe I can't be my full self here' [...] Hearing casual homophobic slurs during banter within teams. It's been pretty infrequent, and I suspect it was all intended without any malice, but it still wasn't ideal for me to hear. (P36, white-British gay man, 35)

These responses show participants downplaying homophobic language as occasional and inadvertent incidents of unprofessionalism. In so doing, they minimise the extent and intent of others' behaviours. They were keen to make clear that motorsport was not entirely unwelcoming, but rather that these were exceptions to the rule, or not to be taken too seriously. Nonetheless, the overall picture was of gender and sexuality impacting either their own or other people's experiences of motorsport. This manifested when participants reported that women and LGBTQ+ people faced a climate where they did not always feel welcome or as though they could always easily belong.

### *'I don't necessarily publicise or promote it': Safely navigating sexuality in motorsport*

In this theme we explore how participants spoke in ways that showed them having to carefully navigate their sexuality within motorsport. A range of complex contexts informed them being selective about how out and open they were, and to whom, and how they existed within motorsport spaces. Participants' responses evidenced them negotiating factors such as their professional identities, ensuring their ongoing place in motorsport, and seeking a sense of safety and belonging.

The picture of how out and open participants were varied across the data. Yet despite a general prevalence of openness, our participants' narratives often indicated being strategic in how out they were. For some, this was akin to an approach of 'if I'm not asked, I don't tell':

My sexuality is no one's business but my own. I do not broadcast that I'm part of the LGBTQ+ community, but equally if I'm asked about my sexuality, I do not deny anything and am open and honest as that does not affect me or anyone else. (P9, white gay man, 31, out to most people)

I don't really bring up my sexuality unless I'm asked to, as I don't feel there's a need to talk about much of my personal life in a professional context. (P10, mixed-Asian pansexual nonbinary, assigned female at birth, 18, out to most people)

It doesn't really come up. Usually someone will ask why I don't have a boyfriend. I respond with that I don't have time for a committed relationship and focusing on my racing and passions. (P12, white-American lesbian asexual woman, 24, out to some people)

These participants provided a particular rationale for not sharing their sexuality unless asked, or at all, premised not on fears or concerns about others' responses, but rather on the irrelevance of sexuality to their role in motorsport. They established a clear binary between 'the personal' and 'the professional' by downplaying the relevance of sexuality, and instead stressing their abilities and dedication to the sport. They also drew on notions of openness and honesty which perhaps enabled them to present themselves as an authentic (LGBTQ+) person, without needing to declare their sexuality. In this sense, their identity was portrayed as primarily that of motor racing professional, with their sexuality pushed to the sidelines.

Others navigated being out and open differently and painted a picture of tentatively testing the water. This was based on them being somewhat cautious and hoping to establish that their teammates and others outside the team would be accepting, before committing to 'coming out'. Funding was one of the elements that informed their tentativeness at both an individual and corporate level:

No matter how many races I win I have often felt like I shouldn't be there. I have not been fully out cause of fear of losing what little sponsorship I have and having people not willing to work with me cause of my sexuality. (P27, Latin American-gay man, 29, out to everyone)

When we first took over the business and started putting focus on the LGBTQ side of things we lost customers, sponsors and supposed friends [...] With our team and close friends everything is out in the open. When approaching or dealing with new customers we kinda tread lightly to not offend or step on toes right away. (P15, white-American gay man, 38, out to everyone)

These narratives are of sexuality as a potential barrier to establishing or sustaining friendships and networks. To unreservedly declare their sexuality could potentially pose a serious financial risk to them, or their business, and threaten their success in the sport. Therefore, they somewhat cautiously negotiated when and how to walk a path towards being out to everyone. Performance also came into play when navigating their place within motorsport. For P27 it seemed that race wins were not enough to 'prove' that they belonged. For others, belonging appeared to be conditional on their success, as evident when they described times of feeling *'fully welcomed when I demonstrated my skills as driver and as mechanic'* (P52 mixed-Latin lesbian trans fem, 42, out to everyone). P24 wrote that sexuality *'has nothing to do with my skills'* (white gay-as-fuck man, 19, out to everyone), whilst P12 referred to stock car driver Zach Herrin who *'is an openly gay man and he doesn't let being gay slow him down'* (white-American lesbian asexual woman, 24, out to some people). It seemed then, that participants were keen to emphasise that sexuality would impede upon neither performance nor professionalism.

Some were selective in who they surrounded themselves with and those they were out and open to. Once they had assessed who could be trusted, or had appraised friends around them as likely to be accepting, this opened up the option to be out:

To the people I trust, I enjoy being out as pansexual and nonbinary to those people. However, I do not feel safe enough to be fully open to everyone yet, because a lot of people (especially family and fellow competitors) would not like it. My friends that know I am out make me feel very welcome. (P13, white-American pansexual nonbinary, 17, out to some people)

I just told my team boss and team manager about my sexuality because they are close friends of mine off track. So I thought it'd be okay for them to know. They both accepted it and accept me that way. (P18, white-European bisexual woman, 17, out to some people)

Their accounts suggested that whilst motorsport was seemingly a place that was not entirely welcoming of LGBTQ+ people, there were pockets of inclusion to be sought. Their narratives were generally of coming out as offering a form of sanctuary when they felt welcome and able to belong. The picture they presented was sometimes of 'safe here, but not there' with the responsibility on LGBTQ+ people to work out the difference between the two. These narratives of selective coming out were noticeably prevalent across the accounts of bisexual and pansexual women:

I'm open about my sexuality to people I get to know but I don't necessarily publicise or promote it. I've found the sport very welcoming to my gender but have been the subject of a number of inappropriate advances both from men who assume I'm straight and from men once they learn about my bisexuality assuming I might be interested in having sexual intercourse with both them and their female partner. (P48, white bisexual female, 32)

Whilst P48 feels accepted as a female, she nonetheless reports incidents of harassment which are attributed to assumptions about her bi/sexuality. There were complexities for those of multiple marginalised identities and some referenced how different aspects of their identities informed their experiences. For P26, *'I'm also Jewish, which is another reason I'm not out'* (P26, bisexual/pansexual man, 31, out to some people), whilst P59 highlighted that they witnessed racism: *'interacting with the older guys, the ones who have been in it for a while, can be hit or miss. Especially the one crew chief who casually makes racist remarks out of nowhere'* (P59, white-American, lesbian, nonbinary, 22, out to most people). There was (only occasional) mention of negotiating the spaces they were in, in terms of how they could make efforts to change understandings:

In general [...] most people are accepting, however you do get the occasional comment that doesn't sit right. I try to speak out about this where possible, usually by discussing it privately with the people involved, and this generally leads to greater understanding. (P10, mixed-Asian pansexual nonbinary, assigned female at birth, 18)

These participants navigated their identities amidst a context of complex factors that needed to be taken into consideration before making their sexuality known to others. It seemed that many drew solace from their perception that diversity and inclusivity were already improving. P16 stated that *'It feels more welcoming now as we are getting more inclusive* (white-British gay man, 42, out to everyone). These sentiments were shared by others, who also noted that there remains room for improvement:

I would say the sport as a whole feels more inclusive now than say 5–10 years ago, but there's still some way to go before I'd feel fully safe being out and proud in the paddock (P49, Chinese-Singaporean gay man, 22, out to most people),

Even though the LGBTQIA [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual] community gets more and more accepted in motorsports, due to there not being a lot of representation (or barely), especially in the higher tiers, it's not enough being talked about. When I was young and figuring my sexuality out, I had no one to look up to. I hope for future generations that will change. (P21, white-European gay man, 25, out to everyone)

These participants reflected directly on their own experiences to highlight the importance and potential benefits of inclusion. It was apparent that for those of diverse genders and sexualities negotiating their place in motorsport was not a straightforward matter. As P8 stated<sup>4</sup> *'one team member doesn't make a Pride parade'* (queer transman, 38, out to most people). What dominated their stories was a sense of having to navigate where it was personally and professionally safe to be out in ways that would not infringe upon their place within motorsport.

## Discussion

Our analysis offers novel and internationally significant insights into LGBTQ+ people's experiences of working and competing in motorsport. Sexism, heterosexism, and homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic language were commonly mentioned. Whilst some participants did report feeling welcome, nonetheless, their accounts were set within wider narratives of phobia/phobic incidents. The existence of phobia mirrors wider surveys of LGBTQ+ people within and outside motorsport (e.g. Menzel et al., 2019). Participants reported incidents happening around them, rather than feeling personally targeted, but nevertheless these impacted their sense of safety and belonging. The infrequency of reports of challenging phobia mirrors wider LGBTQ+ surveys (e.g. Menzel et al., 2019). Lack of inclusivity in motorsport was sometimes attributed to how motor racing remains largely dominated by traditional masculinities and straight white men (e.g. Kochanek et al., 2021; Peterson & Wegner, 2023; Pflugfelder, 2009). Homophobic language was reportedly used to insult those who underperformed, the implication being that those of diverse sexualities are inferior to those who are straight. Women have also been reported to be considered 'less than' their male counterparts in motorsport, with underperformance attributed to gender, and their successes downplayed (Kochanek et al., 2021; Pflugfelder, 2009). Our results extend beyond cisgender narratives and enable us to theorise that those of diverse sexualities, and those who are trans, may be considered 'less than' their cis heterosexual counterparts. Motorsport has previously been poorly ranked against other sports in terms of EDI (More than Equal, 2023), and our results evidence the existence of a somewhat hostile environment for LGBTQ+ people.

Participants spoke of taking individual responsibility for navigating their sexuality and identifying potentially safe spaces within motorsport. It was telling that the underpinning assumption was that others would not know about their sexuality – a further indication of heterosexism. How out and open participants were varied. Those participants who took a 'if they don't ask, I don't tell' approach to being out and open offered both personal and professional rationales for doing so. Scholars have more broadly noted that 'don't ask, don't tell' cultures in sport are a reflection of heterosexism and discrimination (e.g. Anderson & Bullingham, 2015, in relation to lesbian athletes). Our results mirror these, and extend them to evidence that heterosexism and discrimination exist within motorsport and persist within team sports. Other participants took

a tentative approach and were strategic about sharing their sexuality. Whilst participants broadly recognised the potential risks of coming out, they did not directly report negative responses. This could perhaps be attributed to them having skilfully judged who would be safe and supportive to come out to. Those who were open with team members often – although not unequivocally – gave narratives of coming out as resulting in acceptance and belonging. However, it could be that those around them were careful not to express prejudice once they knew of someone's sexuality (e.g. Kissane & Winslow, 2016, in relation to fantasy sports). Our participants' reports of supportive teammates could also be attributed to 'reverse relative deprivation', where LGBTQ+ people assess their situation relative to an anticipated 'worst-case scenario'. Therefore, any support might exceed their minimal expectations, and the situation be perceived as better than anticipated, which may serve to enhance their sense of wellbeing (see, Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Professionally, others knowing about their LGBTQ+ identities was understood to pose a risk to their success in seeking and renewing sponsorship or employment contracts, upon which they may heavily rely (Peterson & Wegner, 2023). Overall, our data resonate with Griffin's (1998) concept of a 'hostile environment'. LGBTQ+ people were seemingly conceived of as a problem, even when their identities were not known by others – evidenced through phobia, and in participants' careful consideration of how, when, and whether to be out. There was also evidence of a 'conditionally tolerant environment' with acceptance contingent on their silence about their sexuality – evidenced in discussions about professional identity and fears around sponsorship. A few participants indicated feeling unconditionally welcome, although this was unusual, hence motorsport is yet to become fully 'open and inclusive' (Griffin, 1998, p. 92).

Participants located a longstanding love for cars and motorsport as something deeply ingrained and reported personal passion as their motivation for pursuing the sport. This reflects discourses of athletic identities as partly premised on naturalised notions of inherent and individual passion (see, Meân & Kassing, 2008, in relation to soccer). Our participants emphasised skills and these were also located as internal to the individual. Some have noted that skills can be acquired, but that developing them relies on budgets that often arise from sponsorship and employment in order to gain experience and improve their abilities (see, Peterson & Wegner, 2023). Overall, participants stressed the importance of performance and professional identity, but dismissed the relevance of sexuality, and downplayed the existence and impact of homophobia. We can theorise that these participants' individualised stories of passion, skills, and success as transcending sexuality may result from their identities being othered, and therefore represent them engaging in stigma management. In minimising the relevance of sexuality, participants could resist the notion that LGBTQ+ people are 'less than' (see above). By downplaying phobic incidents, participants can dismiss their significance and position themselves as unaffected. In doing so they agentically resist narratives of LGBTQ+ people as victims and instead locate their environment as predominantly positive (e.g. Fine, 2011; McDermott et al., 2008, ; Savin-Williams, 2005). Similar strategies have been reported in terms of racialised identities and the effects of racism – which has been noted to be problematic in seeking to address stereotypes (see, Peterson & Wegner, 2023). Overall, participants reported that whilst their experience was of motorsport environments sometimes being inclusive – and certainly more so than in the past – there was nonetheless scope for further improvement to ensure the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people in motorsport.

### *Implications*

There are important implications that arise as a result of the hetero/sexist and phobic culture of motorsport. These largely relate to addressing the homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia that seemingly exist within motorsport environments. This is particularly important given that individualistic narratives and stigma management strategies may mean that prejudice, stereotypes, and structural barriers are easily overlooked and could therefore go unaddressed (see, Peterson & Wegner, 2023). Motorsports organisations and senior team members, along with those who manage

racetracks, must ensure that personal and structural support is in place for LGBTQ+ people (see, Denison et al., 2021). Support could be in the form of written policies that set the tone and include how to cope with unwelcome comments and how to report such incidents in a way that they can be safely and effectively addressed.

Many participants named drivers who were relatively high-profile within their series and spoke of visibility in positive terms when asked about representation. They also referred to various initiatives to promote gender/LGBTQ+ people in motorsport. Such organisations were commended, particularly *Racing Pride* who were spoken of in glowing terms (and through whom many participants heard about this research). Future studies could establish which aspects are proving to be effective and in what ways, as well as identifying what more can be done. *Racing Pride* already produce a guide on how to be an ally (<https://racingpride.com/wp-content/uploads/RP-Ally-Pack-May-2022.pdf>) and further resources and policies could also be developed and widely distributed.

### **Limitations and future research**

Our qualitative online survey design and the support of motor racing organisations resulted in a wide range of varied responses and generated in-depth and detailed data. Our analysis offers insights that can inform future researchers. Our participants were mainly white and gay men but even so, there were nuances evident in our data. Previous empirical research has indicated how (mainly U.S.) women's experiences of motorsport varied considerably from men's (Kochanek et al., 2021). More widely, some gay men have been reported to perceive homophobia in sport as a bigger issue than women of diverse sexualities (Menzel et al., 2019). By contrast, other research has reported how accepted gay male athletes felt, compared to the considerable challenges faced by Black lesbian athletes (see, Krane, 2019). Bisexual and pansexual people are often overlooked in sports research but may experience biphobia and see their sexuality silenced or delegitimised due to binary understandings of sexuality (see, House et al., 2022). In sum, diversity shapes experience. Therefore, researchers could specifically consider the contemporary motorsport experiences of those of diverse genders (e.g. women, trans, and nonbinary people, with a particular emphasis on transphobia), sexualities (e.g., bisexual, pansexual, and lesbian people in motorsport, with a focus on biphobia, panphobia, and lesbophobia), physical abilities, and racialised identities. The intersections of identities are also important in understanding differing sporting contexts more fully (e.g. Denison et al., 2021; Herrick & Duncan, 2018).

We did not initially anticipate our small-scale unfunded U.K. based project becoming international. Therefore, one limitation was that we did not ask about participants' locations or nationalities (although some volunteered this when answering demographic or survey questions). The countries in which people compete will impact their experiences and how open they feel able to be (Peterson & Wegner, 2023). Even with the limited information we had, it was clear that geographic location was an important contextual factor. We also note that participants referenced the specificities of their particular racing series (e.g. hillclimbing, karting, rallying, and so on), and this too may be worthy of further exploration to better understand distinct experiences and where interventions might be most required.

### **Conclusions**

Our international qualitative survey was the first study to empirically explore LGBTQ+ people's experiences of motorsports, and our results offer important insights. The overall picture was of motorsport as a hostile environment that was not fully inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, and where those of diverse genders and sexualities may not easily belong. This was due to their not being welcome when they experienced or witnessed hetero/sexism, biphobia, homophobia, and transphobia. It was clear that being LGBTQ+ was somewhat of a social barrier and participants engaged in stigma

management strategies. These LGBTQ+ people working and competing in motorsport skilfully navigated how and who to be out and open to in order to protect their personal and professional identities. However, there were reports of improvements in inclusivity in recent years. In the future, the support of individuals and organisations could lead to a culture that better and more meaningfully reflects equality, diversity, and inclusion in motorsports.

## Notes

1. Camille du Gast, credited as the first woman in motorsport, overtook 89 competitors in the 1901 Paris-Berlin race. In 1929, Hellé Nice broke the land speed record in a women-only race. The first woman to race in an F1 Grand Prix was Maria Teresa de Filippis in 1958, finishing 10<sup>th</sup> in Belgium, before later being banned by the race director based on her gender (Gilboy, 2018). Lella Lombardi (whose partner was female) finished 11<sup>th</sup> at the 1977 *24 heures du Mans* endurance race and was the first woman to score points in F1 in 1974 (Gilboy, 2018; Jones, 2016).
2. Five female drivers have entered F1 races: Maria Teresa de Filippis (1958–1959); Lella Lombardi (1974–1976); Divina Galica (1976/1978); Desire Wilson (1980); and Giovanna Amati (1992) (see, Braybrook, 2024).
3. Danica Patrick finished third in the 2009 *Indy 500* before qualifying on pole for the 2013 *Daytona 500* (Jones, 2016).
4. This comment was made in relation to someone taking a Pride flag onto the podium in *W Series*.

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