Covering All Their Bases: An Investigation Into Identity Covering in the Sport Workplace

Jeffrey MacCharles

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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COVERING ALL THEIR BASES: AN INVESTIGATION INTO IDENTITY
COVERING IN THE SPORT WORKPLACE

A Dissertation Presented
By
JEFFREY DANIEL MACCHARLES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2020

Isenberg School of Management
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The past four years at many times felt like four minutes, while at other times felt like four decades. It was with the support of many people that I was able to manage the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ of the doctoral education experience, and to them I will be forever grateful. First, I must give my heartfelt thanks and sincere appreciation to my doctoral advisor, Nicole Melton, whose support, guidance, and wisdom helped me to enjoy the fun moments, appreciate the accomplishments, learn from the mistakes and overcome the challenges that come with a doctoral education. Your passion for research and education are contagious and have made me both a better scholar and a better teacher. I will always look back on the past four years as a time when I learned so much from you, and I will carry forward that knowledge with me into the future phases of my career. To the other members of my dissertation committee, Nefertiti Walker, Liz Delia and Linda Griffin, I am so appreciative of the time you took to assist me with this dissertation. I valued your contributions throughout the entire process and I am truly grateful for all of your feedback, which I believe has made this a much stronger piece of scholarship. I also want to thank you all for your flexibility as life threw a number of curveballs at us over the course of this dissertation process – it was much easier to deal with such uncertainty when I was confident that you all had my best interests at heart.

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ABSTRACT

COVERING ALL THEIR BASES: AN INVESTIGATION INTO IDENTITY COVERING IN THE SPORT WORKPLACE

SEPTEMBER 2020

JEFFREY D. MACCHARLES, B.A., B.S., UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

M.A., LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Dr. E. Nicole Melton

The sport industry has historically struggled to diversify its workforce. However, shifting racial and ethnic demographics in the United States in the coming decades, and greater numbers of individuals identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT), will soon force its hand. Recruiting and retaining a talented workforce from a diverse labor pool will require that sport organizations ensure their workplaces are inclusive spaces where employees can present their authentic selves without fear. Unfortunately, employees from marginalized groups often face implicit and explicit pressures to downplay aspects of their stigmatized identity through identity covering, which can have negative effects for the individual as well the organization. In this dissertation, I carried out three studies to investigate the covering phenomenon at various stages of the employment process: application (Study One), hiring decision (Study Two), and full-time employment (Study Three). Studies One and Three investigated identity covering from the perspective of the marginalized individual, while Study Two investigated how identity covering is perceived by hiring decision makers. Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation
(shadowing) revealed that covering is a nuanced phenomenon, and as such understanding the contextual complexities present in a given scenario helps us understand when, how and why individuals engage in covering. Additionally, covering involves a constant, conscious effort on the part of marginalized individuals, which can come at a steep personal cost while also giving them sought after rewards. Finally, marginalized individuals are beginning to see their stigmatized identities as strengths, particularly in traditionally homogeneous environments such as sport that need to be more intentional about their diversity and inclusion. As these individuals begin to gradually embrace more of their authentic selves at work, the need for covering may subside.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The homogeneity of the sport industry workforce is a fact that has not been in dispute, with numerous scholars determining that there is a lack of gender, racial and sexual orientation diversity at both the professional and collegiate level in administrative positions (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Cunningham, 2015a; Lapchick 2017; 2018a; 2018b). Researchers also indicate that those currently being educated through sport management programs to pursue career paths in the sport industry fit a similar demographic profile (Hancock & Greenwell, 2013) – as do the faculty members teaching them (Jones et al., 2008). Although it may seem that from a moral and ethical perspective that increasing diversity in sport organizations is an obvious path, there are other factors that will encourage sport organizations to integrate diversity and inclusion into their business practices. For example, consider that demographic changes in Western countries in the coming decades (Vespa et al., 2018) will soon create a more diverse labor pool that will force organizations, and industries as a whole, to do a better job at recruiting and retaining employees from diverse backgrounds. The non-Hispanic, white population is projected to shrink in the coming decades, and the multi-race group, Asians and Hispanics will soon become the fastest growing racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Vespa et al., 2018). Also, although measuring the exact number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) Americans is difficult, national survey data suggests 4.5 percent of the U.S. population (14.7 million people) identifies as LGBTQ (Newport, 2018) – the highest estimate to date. The Millennial and Centennial (those born after 1997) generations represent populations with substantial proportions
identifying as sexual minorities, which some estimates put at 20% and 31% respectively (Schneider & Auten, 2018). These examples provide evidence that an increasing number of individuals with marginalized identities will be entering the domestic labor force in the future, and as such all organizations should be ready to recruit and retain these employees.

Additionally, as organizations embrace diversity and inclusion have been found to obtain competitive advantages in areas such as resource acquisition, marketing, creativity, problem solving and organizational flexibility (Cox & Blake, 1991), they stand to benefit from recruiting a diverse slate of candidates if they manage their inclusion strategies appropriately. Organizations in demographically homogeneous industries such as sport (Cunningham, 2010; Fink et al., 2001) may find it particularly challenging to reap such benefits, as diversity and inclusion are not issues that have been prioritized by those industries in the past. However, sport organizations that embrace diversity and inclusion have typically outperformed their peers in areas such as creativity and staff engagement (Cunningham 2011a, 2011b, 2015b). In order to be successful at both recruitment and retention, organizations must allow and encourage marginalized employees to present their authentic selves in the workplace. Organizational and societal forces that may encourage employees to engage in identity management techniques, such as covering, can lead to negative consequences for not only employees themselves but also organizations (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Thus, a full examination of why and how marginalized individuals enact identity management techniques during their careers in sport is warranted.
Individuals – those of both non-marginalized and marginalized backgrounds - make decisions daily, hourly and by the minute regarding how they will present themselves through their appearance, their affiliative and associative behaviors and their expressions of advocacy (Yoshino, 2002; 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Although non-marginalized and marginalized individuals make such decisions, the implicit and explicit pressures on those in subordinate groups to minimize the stigmatized parts of their identity is at a level of intensity that is often untenable, resulting in them making the oft-uncomfortable decision to engage in identity covering (Yoshino, 2006). Identity covering (i.e. covering), which has roots in Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma theory and has been further developed by Griffin (1992a) and Yoshino (2002, 2006), refers to the actions that individuals with stigmatized identities take to minimize the perceptions and impact of that stigma. Covering itself is a complex phenomenon that can be manifested across four axes: appearance, affiliation, activism (advocacy), and association (Yoshino, 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013). In a survey conducted for Deloitte of over 3,000 respondents spanning ten industries, 83% of LGB individuals, 70% of black individuals and 66% of women reporting engaging in at least one form of covering (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). This survey, as well as Yoshino’s (2002, 2006) earlier works on covering do not specify when covering occurs, what specifically triggers the covering action or how frequently marginalized individuals cover in the workplace. Those nuances are worthy of study and would be helpful in understanding the complex workplace covering phenomenon in greater detail; thus, this dissertation attempts to uncover some of the intricacies of covering motivations and behaviors. The sport industry represents an environment where the in-depth studying of covering is appropriate due to its demographic homogeneity
institutionalized hypermasculinity (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013) and heterosexism (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a, 2014b). As such, studying covering in the sport environment will allow me to make important theoretical contributions to the stigma and identity management literature, as well as the sport management literature.

Covering by marginalized individuals may occur both before they are hired by an organization as well as during their period of employment. Although the writings of Yoshino (2002, 2006) and Yoshino and Smith (2013) have provided a picture of the general characteristics and prevalence of covering in the workplace, and other scholars have investigated individual and situational factors which may lead to the use of a variety of identity management strategies (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2001; Reed & Leuty, 2016), we lack information about the specific usage of the covering technique itself. Covering during the hiring process has been particularly overlooked in the literature, but there is evidence that it is something that should be investigated. Job applicants with both visible (e.g. race) and invisible (e.g. sexual orientation) stigmatized identities are often discriminated against due to stereotypes associated with such stigmas, as well as the biases of hiring managers (Hirsh & Cha, 2008; Bendick Jr. & Nunes, 2012). The sport industry is not immune from such stereotyping and bias in hiring, with racial minorities (Steward & Cunningham, 2015) and sexual minorities (Cunningham et al., 2010; MacCharles & Melton, 2018), being targeted for such discrimination during hiring. Stereotyping and hiring bias serve as evidence that stigmatized applicants would surely benefit from enacting covering behaviors, but we need to hear directly from these
individuals themselves to better understand their thought processes with regards to their identity management as they progress through the hiring process for sport-related jobs. Investigating how hiring decision makers evaluate sexual minority applicants who engage in identity covering and determining whether or not certain forms of identity covering are seen in a positive or negative light, is also worthy of study.

Although there is a need to investigate how identity covering is manifested and evaluated during the hiring process in sport organizations, it is also necessary to consider the implementation of such techniques by individuals once they are employed in such organizations. Evidence of covering by LGBTQ sport employees exists in the sport management literature (Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010, Cavalier, 2011; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a; Walker & Melton, 2015), as well as covering by Black/African American sport employees (McDowell, 2008) and female sport employees (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Burton, 2015). For LGBTQ individuals, there may be pressure to decrease the visibility of their stigmatized identity (Goffman, 1963), so they do not come across as “too gay” (Yoshino, 2006). This pressure suggests that in order to be a part of the sport industry, you must abide by certain terms of inclusion. In other words, the inclusion itself is qualified. Examples of this qualified inclusion can be seen in the sport management literature – particularly with regards to the experiences and perceptions of LGBTQ coaches. Parents typically supported their children being coached by an LGBTQ individual along as the coach downplayed the outward expression of their sexual identity (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) or that they did not use their position as a coach to promote their sexual identity to others in the sport environment – including the children they coached (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010;
Cunningham & Melton, 2014a). Qualified inclusion may seem like a step in the right direction on the way to full inclusion in sport; however, it really suggests that there are still consequences and repercussions for sexual minorities who flout boundaries and decide to express their full, authentic selves in the sport workplace.

Investigating the phenomenon of covering, as opposed to other identity management strategies such as conversion and passing, is important because of its ubiquity (Yoshino, 2002). Covering can be viewed as the most commonly used identity management technique amongst a wide variety of marginalized individuals because the actions of passing and conversion are not viewed as widely available to racial minorities or women (Yoshino, 2002). Even so, individuals with invisible stigmas (e.g. sexual minorities) often find it easier to engage in covering as the stigma is not as obvious as visible stigmas, which may also be the reason such a large number of LGB individuals have reported covering in the workplace (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Thus, using LGBTQ employees as the focus of academic research is common and useful to scholars studying this phenomenon. The challenge in studying covering, particularly in the workplace, is isolating it from the passing strategy, which LGBTQ employees would enact by attempting to actively pass as heterosexual (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2002, 2006). Although some may argue that the actions of passing and covering are indistinguishable, the motives behind the action will be different depending on the knowledge of the audience (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2002, 2006), therefore it is important to study the actions of passers and coverers independently, which has not been done before – particularly in the sport industry.
Scholars must also aim to determine what signals are being sent within the sport workplace that may encourage LGBTQ employees to deploy identity covering techniques. Signals that reflect supportive and accepting organizational cultures, such as non-discrimination statements and being welcoming towards same-sex partners of employees, have typically been reflective of environments where LGBTQ employees are less likely to report experiencing sexual orientation discrimination (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a; Ragins & Cornwell). In the sport workplace, signs of inclusion within an organization often were indicative of whether or not women employed in sport organizations felt the need to cover – particularly along the appearance-based axis (Walker & Melton, 2015). However, as societal attitudes shift and organizations in multiple industries seek to improve their diversity and inclusion efforts, there remains a lack of clarity about if and how organizational cultures are shifting enough to allow their LGBTQ employees to fully express their authentic selves in the workplace, or if elements in the workplace are still signaling that they should be enacting covering techniques to downplay their stigmatized sexual identity.

The broader discussion of diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace has become timelier recently. Events that have occurred in the United States over the past several months have amplified the heightened consciousness of inequities in society, as well as the steps which individuals and institutions in our society have been taking in order to remedy such inequities. For example, the killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minnesota sent thousands of protestors into the streets across the country, reinvigorating the Black Lives Matter movement in the process (Blankenship & Reeves, 2020). The push for remedying racial injustice and advocating for greater social justice in
the United States has been led by grassroots activists for decades, but the recent amplification of such causes has become more widespread across the spectrum of society, while taking particularly strong roots in the sport industry. Professional athletes, teams, leagues and brands are speaking up more than ever, and as support for the Black Lives Matter movement has been rapidly rising in public opinion polls, the data suggests that the public is moving along with them (Cranley, 2020). Additionally, with many states codifying employment protections for LGBTQ individuals over the past few years, and the Supreme Court decision in June 2020 that verified such protections exist federally under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Totenberg, 2020), key institutions are recognizing that sexual minorities are entitled to the same rights as non-sexual minorities. Although such legal protections are important for this stigmatized group, it also highlights the reality that more nuanced forms of discrimination may still exist in workplace environments, thus maintaining spaces that remain exclusive to those individuals who do not identify as sexual minorities.

Despite a growing body of research surrounding the phenomenon of covering in the workplace, there is a great need for an in-depth examination of the covering phenomenon specifically enacted by individuals with stigmatized identities. With regards to the aforementioned societal and institutional shifts towards equity and inclusion, there is also a need to understand if such progress mitigates the need for identity covering or heightens it. This type of investigation should be situated in an environment that is, and has been known for its demographic homogeneity, which makes the sport industry an appropriate setting for such research. By primarily focusing on LGBTQ employees in the sport industry in Study 2 and Study 3, I will be able to better isolate covering from other
identity management strategies and as such develop a more robust framework for understanding its prevalence and importance in the workplace.

Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is twofold. First, to investigate why and how marginalized individuals decide to implement covering techniques during the application process as well as in their everyday experiences in the workplace. Second, to develop an understanding of how decision makers in sport organizations view such covering practices. Through the completion of three studies, each with a particular focus on the three important career stages (application, hiring, employment), I will contribute to a deeper understanding of this common, but still under-researched identity management strategy. I will accomplish this through Study 1 by learning more about covering from the perspective of marginalized individuals themselves, most importantly what it is that specifically prompts them to cover parts of their identity when looking for jobs in the sport industry. Study 2 will allow me to obtain the perspectives on identity covering by decision makers in the sport industry who will be able to explain if and how the various forms of covering impact the standing and appeal of a potential job candidate. In Study 3, I will gain greater knowledge about how identity covering manifests in the sport workplace, and through debriefing interviews will also hope to learn about the environmental and cultural triggers that may cause marginalized individuals to engage in covering.

In this dissertation I will draw primarily from the literature on stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) and covering (Yoshino 2002; 2006), as well as Herek’s (2007, 2009a) extension of stigma theory focused on sexual stigma due to the emphasis on LGBTQ individuals in studies two and three. Additionally, as I am investigating the applicant-
employer relationship in Studies 1 and 2, I will use signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Celani & Singh, 2011) as an additional theoretical foundation. The literature on organizational culture (Schein, 1996) and the inclusive organization (Ferdman, 2014), will provide an additional theoretical basis for Study 3, along with the scholarship focused on authenticity in the workplace (Cha et al., 2019), as it is focused on the individual employee experience within organizations.

As a point of clarification, when discussing sexual minorities throughout this dissertation, I will refer to them using the acronym LGBTQ, as this is consistent with the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide (APA Style, 2020). If a participant in any of the three studies identifies themselves using a specific term (e.g. queer) I will use that word so as to be consistent with how they view their own identity.

1.1 The Sport Industry Context – Diversity and Inclusion

The sport industry and sport management academic programs face challenges with diversity and inclusion, and it is important to understand the “why” of the current state of affairs. The institutionalized norms of hypermasculinity and heterosexism that exist within sport create environments that are not open and accepting towards individuals that do not fit within the typical sport employee profile: the heterosexual white male (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a; Walker & Melton, 2015). Many jobs in sport are also based on stereotypes of traditional gender and sex roles, thereby limiting many positions to those who do not deviate from these so-called norms (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). Hegemonic masculinity in the sport industry also creates a power imbalance between men and women that is generally considered socially acceptable by both sexes (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), which
creates hurdles for the career progression and success of female sport employees. There are similar explanations for the lack of racial diversity in sport organizations, with institutionalized racism having a significant impact on the lack of representation of Black/African American people in high profile positions (e.g. coaching and administrative) in the industry (Singer, 2005; McDowell & Cunningham, 2007; Coakley, 2009; Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham, 2015a). Other factors that influence occupational segregation of racial minorities and bias towards racial minority leaders include the political climate, stakeholder expectations, organizational culture, hiring personnel bias, social capital and occupational turnover (Cunningham, 2015a).

The previous examples demonstrate that for marginalized individuals, the deck is typically stacked against them before they even submit a job application to a sport organization. As such, the pressure to engage in covering aspects of their stigmatized identity may be strong, in order to combat the institutionalized norms and other factors that create a semblance of bias towards them solely based upon that identity. Similarly, once inside sport organizations the pressure to not question or challenge the institutionalized norms for employees with stigmatized identities remains strong, examples of which can be seen with sexual minorities who downplay their sexual orientation in work settings (Krane & Barber, 2005; Cavalier, 2011; Walker & Melton, 2015), women who feel the need to avoid stereotypical female behaviors (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008) or who may forego a traditional maternity leave (Bruening & Dixon, 2008), and Black/African American women who may straighten their hair in order to minimize a racial characteristic (McDowell, 2008).
These examples are critical to the significance of my dissertation project, as they demonstrate that the sport industry still has a tremendous amount of growth that needs to occur to make it truly inclusive.

1.2 Paradigmatic Orientation

In order to develop a deep understanding of the covering phenomenon at various points during the hiring process, I have decided to adopt a three-study approach to this dissertation, with each study investigating covering at different phases: application, hiring and employment. As stigmas are socially constructed phenomena, the individual experiences of the marginalized individuals participating in Studies 1 and 3 will each be unique, yet they will still be equally valid (Taylor et al., 2016). The thought process being undertaken by each of the participants in Study 2 as they make hiring decisions requires a deeper understanding of their decision-making process, both individually and as a group. Due to this dissertation’s emphasis on the investigation of the unique mentally constructed realities of individuals and groups, and the relativistic and subjective nature of this research, taking a constructivist-interpretivist approach is appropriate (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005 Taylor et al., 2016). Constructivism-interpretivism holds that realities are conceived through the multiple mental constructions held by individuals and groups, and that such constructions are not necessarily ‘true’ in an absolute sense, but rather are unique, contextual and alterable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, this approach will allow me to more deeply investigate specific phases of employment and gather robust, meaningful data about the participants’ perspectives on their identities, perceptions of covering and any underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions about employment in the sport industry.
CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1: TO COVER OR NOT TO COVER

2.1 Introduction

If you walk into the front office of any North American minor or major league sports franchise, or the athletic department of a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I, II or III institution, you may discover that sport organizations struggle with diversity amongst their employees (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014; Cunningham, 2015; Lapchick, 2017; Lapchick, 2018a; 2018b). Similarly, taking a seat in most undergraduate sport management classrooms often reveals the same trend – with both students and faculty (Jones et al., 2008; Hancock & Greenwell, 2013). Although the lack of diversity in sport organizations, whether it be related to gender, racial or sexual identity, is no secret, it should be concerning for organizations that will be faced with a shifting demographic landscape in the coming decades that will affect the composition of the American workforce. Consider that the U.S. Census Bureau has reported that the non-Hispanic white population is projected to shrink by 20 million people between 2020 and 2060, with the fastest growing racial or ethnic groups over the same time period projected to be the ‘mixed’ race group (two or more races), followed by Asians and Hispanics (Vespa et al., 2018). In addition, a recent Gallup report found that between 2012 and 2016, the percentage of respondents that identified as LGBTQ increased from 3.5% to 4.1%, which translates to an estimated 1.7 million more U.S. adults identifying as a sexual minority (Gates, 2017). As Millennials make up the largest birth cohort of LGBTQ Americans (58%) and are the cohort that are just beginning their careers, it is
apparent that more LGBTQ Americans will be entering the workforce in the coming years (Gates, 2017).

This data provides evidence that an increasing number of individuals with marginalized identities will be searching for and applying for jobs in the future, and as such, organizations will need to be ready to recruit them without discrimination and welcome them in as their authentic selves. If they fail to do so, marginalized applicants may resist applying to organizations that shun diversity and inclusion, or they may decide to deploy identity covering techniques during the application process in order to minimize the visibility of their stigmatized identities, thereby limiting the potential of it impacting a hiring decision. Thus, in order to ensure that they are recruiting the best possible candidates (regardless of identity) and including them without any conditions, organizations must be aware of the signals they are sending towards marginalized applicants. Understanding how applicants view organizations and their signals from the scant knowledge they may have during the job search process will provide needed insight to organizations into the application decisions of a marginalized population.

There is scholarly support for the idea that individuals with stigmatized identities, both visible (e.g. race) and invisible (e.g. sexual orientation), face discrimination in the hiring process, as stereotypes of marginalized individuals and biases of hiring managers can influence hiring decisions (Hirsh & Cha, 2008; Bendick, Jr. & Nunes, 2012). In the management literature, for example, there are numerous examples of hiring bias against racial/ethnic minorities (Segrest Purkiss et al., 2006), sexual minorities (Weichselbaumer, 2000; Pichler et al., 2010; Tilcsik, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2013; Drydakis, 2015) and women (Glick, 1991; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Kawakami et al., 2005). Similar evidence can be
found in the sport management literature with regards to discrimination in hiring decisions based on race/ethnicity (Steward & Cunningham, 2015) and sexual orientation (Cunningham et al., 2010; MacCharles & Melton, 2018).

The awareness that individuals from marginalized groups face discrimination during the hiring process raises the question of whether or not these individuals seek to actively minimize their stigmatized identities, an act known as covering (Goffman, 1963), when applying for jobs. Research by Yoshino & Smith (2013) has found that covering is a common identity management technique used in the workplace, not only by individuals from marginalized groups, but also those individuals in the typical majority: heterosexual white males. In their survey of over 3,000 respondents from various industries conducted for Deloitte, they found that 61% of all respondents reported covering in the workplace along at least one axis (appearance-based, association-based, affiliation based, advocacy-based), and although stigmatized groups reported the most covering, (83% of LGB individuals, 70% of black individuals, 66% of women and 63% of Hispanics), 45% of heterosexual white males also reported covering in some degree in the workplace (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). This study did not specify when this covering was taking place – whether it was during the application process or once the individuals were in the organization as an employee.

Although it may be easy to dismiss the impact of covering as trivial, there is evidence that deploying identity covering techniques in the workplace can have negative effects on one’s psychological well-being and their organizational commitment. Yoshino and Smith (2013) found that a majority of survey respondents who had admitted to covering in the workplace felt that it was somewhat or extremely detrimental to their
sense of self, with 60% of appearance-based coverers, 62% of advocacy-based coverers, 68% of affiliation-based coverers and 73% of association-based coverers reporting such feelings. A majority of survey respondents (53%) also believed that organizational leaders had set forth an expectation that they (the respondents) should engage in identity covering, which had negative effects on their level of organizational commitment and their confidence in advancement and promotion (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). These results demonstrate that covering often results in a lose-lose situation for both the marginalized employee and the organization itself, thus it is in everyone’s best interest to better understand how organizations may be wittingly or unwittingly setting an expectation for covering – particularly during the application process, and particularly in industries that already struggle with diversity and inclusion, such as the sport industry.

As mentioned previously, Yoshino & Smith’s (2013) report, as well as Yoshino’s (2002, 2006) earlier works on covering do not specify when covering occurs, what specifically triggers the covering action or how frequently marginalized individuals cover in the workplace. Those nuances are worthy of study and would be helpful in understanding the complex workplace covering phenomenon in greater detail. In particular, drawing organizational attention to the cues and signals – subtle or non-subtle, intentional or unintentional – that encourage marginalized applicants to cover, could spur changes in their recruitment practices in order to make them more inclusive. As the sport industry struggles with diversity in all realms, studying the application process for sport-related jobs from the perspective of marginalized individuals could also provide greater insight into how their stigmatized identities influence their applications and recruitment experience.
Thereby, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, to explore which signals and cues displayed by sports organization through their recruitment efforts lead to covering by individuals with stigmatized identities. Second, to examine which axis, or axes, of covering are most used by marginalized applicants and their perceptions of the importance of such covering actions. I will draw from stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), signaling theory (Spence, 1973; Celani & Singh, 2011) and the covering literature (Yoshino, 2002, 2006) as the theoretical foundation from which to investigate my research questions. This study will provide greater insight into the application process for sport-related jobs – an area that has not typically been addressed in the sport management literature – particularly with regards to applicants that possess marginalized identities. Additionally, workplace covering has typically been studied from the perspective of current employees rather than prospective employees, and this study will help to gain insight on whether covering is manifested in different ways for each of those groups. From a practical standpoint, this research will allow sport organizations to better understand if and how the signals they are sending during the recruitment process have detrimental effects on the organization and/or the applicant themselves.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Stigma Theory

Stigma has been defined as “an attribute that produces a social identity that is devalued or derogated by persons within a particular culture at a particular point in time” (Paetzold et al., 2008, p.186). Sociologist Erving Goffman first wrote about stigma theory in his 1963 book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. He described three scenarios that would result in people experiencing stigma: (1) having a physical
deformity or disability, (2) lacking in moral purity (i.e. homosexuality, obesity, mental illness) and (3) being from a ‘tribe’ that deviates from the norm (i.e. African American, Hispanic) (Goffman, 1963; Paetzold et al., 2008). As stigmas are socially constructed and rely on the interaction between the stigmatized and the audience doing the stigmatizing, it is important to recognize that the stigma will not arise in all scenarios (Paetzold et al., 2008; Cunningham, 2015a). Goffman (1963) described stigma as the disconnect that emerges during an interpersonal interaction between an individual’s actual social identity and the expected social identity in that particular situation. This discrepancy triggers the negative beliefs, attitudes and behaviors on the part of the non-stigmatized individual(s) towards the stigmatized individual(s) that are typically associated with the act of stigmatizing (Goffman, 1963; Paetzold et al., 2008).

Despite writing his book over 15 years before Tajfel & Turner’s (1979) foundational piece on social identity theory, Goffman’s (1963) explanation of stigma leans heavily on similar theoretical principles of identity as were described by Tajfel & Turner (1979). In writing about social identity, Goffman (1963) stated:

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his ‘social identity’ (p. 2).

Therefore, these social identities are used to construct normative expectations of attributes, behaviors and appearances of specific social groups, and contributes to the evaluation of individuals meant to be members of such groups. These evaluations and group comparisons are where stigma manifests between and among individuals.
Since Goffman’s (1963) early work on stigma, scholars have made substantial efforts to better understand this complex phenomenon. Link and Phelan (2001) explained stigma as a multifaceted construct and should be defined in terms of the “co-occurrence of its components – labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination” (p. 363) and that “in order for stigmatization to occur, power must be exercised” (p. 363). The first component, labeling, involves the identification and categorization of differences amongst individuals and is the foundation upon which stigmatization is built (Link & Phelan, 2001). When labels are then used to “link a person to a set of undesirable characteristics that form the stereotype” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 369), then the second component of stigma – stereotyping – has been enacted. Stereotypes and the act of stereotyping have taken up a significant portion of psychological research on stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001) and many researchers have attempted to understand how stereotypes become operationalized.

The stereotype content model (SCM), one of the most often referred to explanations of stereotyping, maintains that stereotypes exist along two dimensions of social perception: warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske & Tablante, 2015). Warmth refers to perceptions of others as trustworthy, affable and moral, while competence is based upon perceptions of intelligence, skill and creativity (Cunningham, 2015a). The combination of these dimensions results in the expression of four potential responses: contempt/disapproval (low competence, low warmth), pity (low competence, high warmth), envy (high competence, low warmth) and admiration (high competence, high warmth). In the United States context, Cunningham (2015a) provided examples of groups that would fit into each of the response categories. He suggested that the low
The final three components of stigma – separation, status loss and discrimination – represent the actual actions taken upon a stigmatized individual or group once labeling and stereotyping have occurred. It is through these three components where stigmatized individuals actually experience the stigma itself, often resulting in internal wounds, such as a diminished psychological well-being, or external rejections, such as the denial of a job opportunity (Cuddy et al., 2008).

Another dynamic to consider with respect to stigma theory is the contrast between invisible and visible stigmas. Although visible stigmas are easily observed by others and often refer to physical characteristics, invisible stigmas are not readily observable to unknowing others (Frable et al., 1998; Quinn, 2006). This distinction is important due to the fact that identities will be managed differently depending on whether the stigmatized individual possesses a visible or an invisible stigma (Frable et al., 1998; Ragins et al., 2007). Additionally, the effects of the stigma on an individual’s sense of self and the importance of support mechanisms, such as social support, will vary based upon whether or not a stigma is visible or invisible. Individuals with invisible stigmas have reported greater degrees of psychological strain, such as low self-esteem, than those with visible
stigmas and have also regarded social support – particularly from non-stigmatized individuals – as being more important to their well-being than individuals possessing visible stigmas (Frable et al., 1998; Ragins et al., 2007). These differences are important to consider when examining the covering practices of stigmatized individuals in highly homogeneous environments.

2.2.2 Identity Covering

Goffman (1963) played a key role in the development of the theoretical foundations of covering. He viewed covering as a way that individuals with stigmatized identities actively engaged in techniques to shift the stigma into the background whenever possible. His most famous example of this phenomenon was exemplified by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who ensured he was always seated at a meeting table before other officials or the media entered a room so as to not be seen wheeling himself, or being pushed in his wheelchair (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Although it was no secret that the President was disabled and required the use of a wheelchair, his act of covering was simply meant to minimize the significance of his stigmatized identity.

The concept of covering has since evolved through the work of Pat Griffin, who identified covering as one of four identity management behaviors, along with passing, implicitly out and explicitly out (Griffin, 1992a) and Kenji Yoshino who examined three types of covering – gay covering, racial covering and sex-based covering – in his 2002 Yale Law Review piece and his 2006 book, Covering: The hidden assault on our human rights. Although Yoshino provides insights into all three types, a majority of his focus is spent on explaining the covering of invisible stigmas, such as in the case of gay covering. In both pieces he compared and contrasted the act of gay covering with the acts of gay
conversion and gay passing, emphasizing that gay covering is its own concept, reliant upon the audience exposed to the covering having some knowledge of the sexual minority’s sexual identity (Yoshino, 2002, 2006). Yoshino (2002, 2006) and Yoshino and Smith (2013) have indicated that the act of covering is more prevalent than one might assume, and that it occurs by outsiders in any type of social situation, which in some cases can be those thought to be in the majority, such as straight, white males (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Yoshino’s theory of covering has been praised by scholars for its ability to provide remarkable insight into an activity that is actually quite routine by making manifest “the otherwise evanescent accommodations outsiders routinely make in order to secure equal treatment” (Robinson, 2007, p. 1825).

According to Yoshino (2006), individuals can cover across four axes: appearance-based (self-presentation), affiliation-based (identity associated behaviors), advocacy-based (outwardly expressing views) or association-based (social relationships). These typologies are not mutually exclusive, and they can all be deployed by the same person in different social situations. Regardless of which axes are covered, they all have the potential to affect the social relationships, psychological well-being and careers of stigmatized individuals (Yoshino, 2006; Robinson, 2007).

In the sport context, there are many examples of the covering actions by LGBTQ sport employees along the appearance-based axis (Krane & Barber, 2005; Walker & Melton, 2015), association-based axis (Cavalier, 2011; Walker & Melton, 2015), affiliation-based axis (Krane & Barber, 2005; Cavalier, 2011) and the advocacy-based axis (Krane & Barber, 2005; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a). There has been, however, little-to-no research done on covering by sport employees who possess more visible
stigmas, and also regarding when and why covering is most likely to be deployed for sport employees of all stigmatized identities. As the sport management literature has highlighted that racial minorities (Steward & Cunningham, 2015) and sexual minorities (Cunningham et al., 2010; MacCharles & Melton, 2018) face discrimination during the employment application process, marginalized individuals searching for jobs in sport may be aware that identity covering techniques can benefit them during this process. In order to investigate such an under-researched area, it is important to hear from the stigmatized individuals themselves about their level of comfort in expressing their own authentic selves while they are applying for jobs in sport.

2.2.3 Signaling Theory

Understanding the use of identity covering techniques during the job application process requires that we consider theoretical perspectives related to recruitment and hiring. Signaling theory, a popular theory in the management literature (Connelly et al., 2011), provides a useful link due to its emphasis on the existence of signals (cues) transmitted to potential applicants. Although originally rooted in Economics, Spence’s (1973) study on labor markets introduced the concept of job-market signaling between applicants and organizations, specifically in order to reduce the information asymmetry between the two parties. In Spence’s (1973) version of the theory, job applicants (signalers) were expected to send signals to potential employers (receivers) that represented the levels of higher education they had completed. The opposite of this relationship, whereby organizations are responsible for sending signals to potential applicants, was the key outcome of Celani and Singh’s (2011) conceptual paper on applicant attraction outcomes. Their theoretical model posits that although both
individual-level (recruiter) and organizational-level (policies, advertising, demographic diversity) market signals lead to applicants making inferences about the organization as a workplace, this relationship is moderated by the applicant’s organizational identity salience, or how important the organization is to the applicant’s self-concept (Celani & Singh, 2011). These inferences, when positive, directly influence an applicant’s organizational identification, which leads to both individual-level (job-pursuit intentions, job-organization attraction, acceptance intentions) and organizational-level (quality of applicant pool, quantity of applicants) outcomes (Celani & Singh, 2011).

The construct of interest for the purpose of this study was the organizational signal, as I sought to better understand to what extent such signals prompt marginalized applicants to engage in covering during the application process for jobs in the sport industry. As there is information asymmetry between external applicants and organizations, organizational signals serve as one of the key windows into the inner workings of the workplace itself. The importance of organizational signals such as organizational image (Collins & Han, 2004; Lievens et al., 2007; Chapman & Mayers, 2015), reputation (Collins & Han, 2004) and corporate advertising and branding (Collins & Han, 2004) have been well documented in the management literature. There is little use of signaling theory in the sport management literature, although Melton and Cunningham (2012) did draw from it while studying the effects of sport organizations’ LGBTQ-inclusive policies on organizational attraction, wherein they determined that such inclusion policies signaled that the organization as a whole valued diversity and inclusion, and was more attractive to consumers who valued social equality. These results
were consistent with previous work on the effectiveness of diversity statements and programs (Rynes, 1991).

Although the identification and interpretation of organizational signals is the focus of this study, this knowledge on the part of applicants may then spur them to modify the signals that they send back through their application packets and interview presence (Spence, 1973). Although some applicants may see organizational signals that discourage them from applying at a particular organization altogether, others may simply view such signals as a minor warning that mitigating their stigmatized identities would be helpful in getting hired. The complexities of choosing to cover or not to cover during the application process and what an organization’s signals tell applicants about what personal signals they should send back are areas worthy of investigation. Thus, through the completion of this study, I aim to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** To what extent do organizational signals influence covering techniques during the application process for sport-related jobs?

**RQ2:** Are there differences in responses to pre-screening application questions or resumes based on a person’s marginalized identity (visible vs. invisible stigma)?

**RQ3a:** To what extent do marginalized applicants perceive the impacts of covering during the application process have an impact on their well-being?

**RQ3b:** To what extent do marginalized applicants perceive the impacts of covering during the application process have an impact on their future careers?
2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Participants

In order to simulate the application process in the most effective way, I sought out sport management students that were at a stage in their programs when they would be on the job market or looking for internships. As such, I recruited students at a large state university in both undergraduate and graduate programs in Sport Management. Students were contacted through student clubs as well as through their classes and asked to volunteer to participate in this study. Although the purpose of this study is to investigate the use of covering techniques by those in traditionally marginalized groups, no participants were excluded from either phase of the study in order to mimic an actual recruitment drive as best as possible. Despite this, eight out of the ten participants that completed both parts of the study identified at least one marginalized part of their identities that are traditionally stigmatized in the sport environment. Six participants were women and four participants were men. The mean age was 21.8 years old (N=10). Three participants were Black/African American, and two participants identified as LGBTQ (lesbian). All of participants expressed a desire to work in the sport industry upon completion of their degrees. Participants are referred to with pseudonyms for the purposes of anonymity.

2.3.2 Procedure

In this study, I adopted a multi-method qualitative approach in order to gain a better understanding of the application experience for marginalized individuals. This study was comprised of two stages and used two qualitative techniques: an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. For Stage 1, students were asked to
research North American professional sport leagues as if they were applying for an internship or entry-level position. Three sport organizations were chosen, but each participant was only asked to review two out of the three organizations for the purposes of this study and were assigned the organizations upon agreeing to participate in the study. The organizations chosen for this study have differed in the prominence of their diversity and inclusion efforts, with the National Basketball Association (NBA) being well-known for its diverse and inclusive culture (Lapchick, 2018c), Major League Baseball (MLB) beginning to make some greater strides with regards to diversity (Lapchick, 2018b), and the National Hockey League (NHL) continuing to struggle to shed its identity as a sport solely for, and of, white men (Davidson, 2018; Luszczyszyn, 2019). Participants were encouraged to seek out research about these organizations through whatever means or methods they typically use while searching for and applying for jobs. In this way I was attempting to mimic the actual job search process while also hoping to learn not only which organizational signals they were taking note of but also where those signals were coming from. After conducting the research on each organization, the participants were asked to answer a five-question pre-screening questionnaire (see Appendix A) for each organization. The questions were open-ended in order to elicit descriptive responses. Participants were also asked to submit an up-to-date resume for each organization and respond to a demographic questionnaire. It was up to the participants as to whether or not they submitted identical resumes for each organization or if they submitted different resumes geared towards the different organizations. Although the demographic questions were optional, as is common with
most job applications, it was one way to determine who may be representative of a marginalized group, whether it was due to visible or invisible stigmas.

During Stage 2, I conducted debriefing interviews with all participants where I followed up with questions related to the experiences of preparing their resumes and pre-screening questionnaires, as well as their perceptions of the organizations based upon the research that they conducted. I interviewed all participants, regardless of marginalized identity status, which allowed me to investigate for differences in responses between those in non-marginalized and marginalized groups. These interviews were semi-structured so that I could ask broad questions to all participants, but also better ask specific questions about their individualized answers to the pre-screening questions. As researchers, interviews allow us to have a meaningful encounter with participants in order to better understand their perspectives on their lives, experiences and/or situations in their own words (Taylor et al., 2016). In contrast to quantitative surveys or even structured interviews, semi-structured or in-depth interviews allow the researcher and participant to have a conversation between equals, which can provoke meaningful discussions that provide rich data (Taylor et al., 2016). Interviews were recorded and were conducted via a teleconference software (Zoom) in order to provide a similar experience to a face-to-face interview, to build rapport and to create a greater comfort level for the participants (see Appendix B for interview guide).

2.3.3 Data Analysis

As I have collected two sets of qualitative data – open-ended questionnaire data and semi-structured interview data – I have applied a coding process in order to conduct my analysis. After the completion of the first stage I carried out a brief review of the pre-
screening questionnaire data in order to prepare for the interview stage. As I did this, I also began to keep track of the emerging themes in order to initiate the conceptualization of the patterns and trends in the data (Taylor et al., 2016). As the interviews were conducted in Stage 2, I collected and analyzed the interview data simultaneously, in order to prepare for the inductive portion of the analysis. All data from Stages 1 and 2 was aggregated into NVIVO 12 and two rounds of coding took place. First, I used open coding to generate the main ideas surrounding high-level concepts that emerged from both sets of data (Taylor et al., 2016). Second, I used focused coding to refine those ideas into more concrete themes Although meticulously scouring the data in order to sort it into the appropriate refined themes (Taylor et al., 2016). After crafting the themes and sorting the data, I returned to the literature to assist in organizing and explaining my findings in the discussion in order to assess their cohesion with the theoretical rationale.

I enacted several techniques common to qualitative methodology to ensure transferability, trustworthiness and credibility. A peer de-briefer who was familiar with qualitative methods, but who was not involved in the study, discussed the data and themes with me in order to illuminate any inconsistencies or bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Participants were provided with their transcripts in order to conduct member checks on their own data for accuracy and reliability, thereby improving the validity and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Finally, as I carried out the research, I kept a reflective journal where I documented my own thoughts, feelings and assumptions that emerged during the course of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Glesne, 2006). Throughout the course of this study, university Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures were followed.
2.4 Findings and Discussion

Participants in this study recognized the strong competition for jobs within the sport industry, and as such they were cognizant of identity signals that they were sending to organizations during the hiring process that could be used against them in the case of a hiring decision. Participants mentioned the importance of signals which suggested that the sport organizations valued (or did not value) diversity and inclusion as being key to their decisions to be their true selves throughout the hiring process. Although many of them suggested that they would engage in identity management techniques such as covering, the revelation of when they thought those would be necessary was unexpected. Finally, there were conflicting attitudes regarding the effects of covering stigmatized identities on their career paths and their overall well-being, suggesting that contextual factors play a key role in determining such outcomes.

2.4.1 Racial Mosaics and Pride Parades - Organizational Signals

When beginning the job search process, applicants often conduct research on prospective organizations in order to gain knowledge that can assist them in constructing application materials, but also allow them to learn about what the workplace would be like should they be hired. The participants in this study noted that while conducting research prior to completing the pre-screening questionnaires they typically visited the organizations’ websites and found it particularly helpful if there was a ‘Careers’ section. Out of the three leagues that were assigned to participants in this study, both the NBA and MLB had detailed career sections of their websites that provided information regarding the organizational values, benefits, position types and diversity and inclusion initiatives. Many participants explained that although finding information about the
NBA and MLB was easy, it was more difficult to find information about careers on the NHL website. The NHL does not have a dedicated careers section of their website, and much of their external recruitment for both league and team jobs has been contracted out to a third-party website, *Teamwork Online*. Information was also found by searching for news about the leagues through an internet search engine. Additionally, as the three organizations are well-known sports leagues, and all participants were interested in sport to some degree, many of them also drew on their previous knowledge of the leagues themselves to help frame their responses to the pre-screening application questions.

The participants indicated a number of organizational signals that they thought were helpful in understanding more about the leagues and what it might be like to work in such organizations. When asked what information stood out to them about the organizations, participants shared more positive signals sent by the NBA than by the other two leagues. Megan, who identifies as a lesbian, was drawn to the NBA due to its relationship to the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) as well as statements made by Commissioner Adam Silver related to athlete mental health and supporting gender equality. Emma, who also identifies as a lesbian, saw several positive signals when she investigated the NBA careers webpage. She stated, “the NBA had a diversity and inclusion tab, but when you went on that page, they had a lot of visuals, and there was one of…they were included in some sort of Pride festival…so that caught my eye.” Emma also explained that they featured their environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility on their career webpage, and as such she believed that the NBA was very deliberate in giving an applicant many reasons as to why they would want to work for the league. Megan also echoed the presence of both the NBA and WNBA in
Pride parades in New York City as being a signal that she could bring more of her authentic self to work if she was to be hired by the NBA, who were demonstrating their support of the LGBTQ community through their participation in such an event. The literature on signaling theory and applicant attraction suggests that such deliberate signals are used for workplace branding, which like branding in the traditional marketing sense allows organizations to manage their image and the perceptions of the organization in the eyes of interested stakeholders, whether that be consumers or job applicants (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Celani & Singh, 2011). Organizations that have a positive image or brand in the eyes of job applicants typically see better applicant attraction outcomes, including job-pursuit intentions, job-organization attraction and acceptance intentions (Chapman et al., 2005). For sport organizations, developing a workplace brand that communicates a commitment to diversity and inclusion can assist them in recruiting employees from marginalized backgrounds.

Organizations that were able to send signals of similarity to potential applicants were also recognized as being desirable places to work. Melanie, a white, heterosexual woman, explained that she had read a lot about the NBA and knew them to be a very progressive organization, particularly when it came to their hiring of women and people of color, which made it a more attractive place to work in her opinion. Another participant, Anna, who is also a white woman, had received positive signals of similarity from an MLB team when she visited their front office staff with a university club. She explained that actually meeting with women who worked for the team and being able to talk to them about their experiences sent a stronger signal of inclusion towards women than if she would have simply read about their female staff members or saw photos of
them online. For Melanie and Anna, organizations that sent signals demonstrating their commitment to gender diversity in hiring were likely to be workplaces that valued their female employees. Kaleb, a Black/African American man, who was assigned to apply to the NBA and NHL suggested that if he were to receive identical offers from each organization for an internship, he would be inclined to choose the position with the NBA. His pre-application research, particularly on the NBA’s Early Career Programs webpage, gave him the impression that the NBA aims to “transcend all dimensions of diversity in the program, in the company, and the organization as basketball is a global sport, and they also use diversity to their advantage to generate better ideas to innovate.” A review of the webpage in question revealed images of fans, as well as past participants in the program, of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, which send strong visual signals to potential applicants, as Kaleb described. These revelations are thought-provoking, as they deviate from previous research that has been conducted on demographic similarity between applicants and recruiters. Although in this study applicants were not dealing with recruiters per se, they were using organizational communication tools, such as a website, as a proxy recruiter that could help them to make decisions about the organization’s values and culture. Whereas previous studies in the recruitment literature have suggested that having the same gender or racial identity as a recruiter has little impact on job attractiveness or the intention to select an offer (Rynes, 1991), the participants in this study suggested that any signals of demographic similarity from the organization were a positive sign for them during the job search process.

Signals also resulted in negative perceptions being formed about the leagues by potential applicants. This was particularly noticeable for the NHL. Alexa, a
Black/African American woman, noticed not only that the NHL lacked prominence of an equal opportunity statement, but also that the criteria listed for the job requirements and the language used in the NHL job postings had a masculine tone to them. As Alexis recounted:

The language just seemed masculine in nature. So, it made me feel like somebody that would, that employer who is asking for that position was looking for a male. And when you like read something out loud it usually has a voice and that voice seemed like a man was writing it.

Alexa’s observations align with previous research that found gendered wording in job advertisements often signals exclusion, particularly when masculine-worded job advertisements are viewed by women. Gaucher et al. (2011) found that women often found jobs that had an abundance of masculine wording in their postings as less appealing. In their analysis, Gaucher et al. (2011) determined that such verbiage can lead to sustaining gender inequalities in male-dominated industries or professions, which has broad implications for a number of fields, including sport.

The overt masculinity of the sport of hockey in general also was a signal to Megan about the culture of the NHL, which she saw as more aggressive. She commented on the physicality of the sport in comparison to the NBA, noting that hockey players are “slamming each other into the boards.” Although Megan was aware that sports in general were a male dominated space, which is supported by the literature on hegemonic masculinity in sport (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), she saw a difference in the intensity of such masculinity when comparing two professional male sports leagues. For sport organizations to be effective in recruiting applicants that are not carbon copies of the prototypical employee - the heterosexual white male (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999) – they must be aware of how all aspects of their
messaging and culture are being interpreted by potential employees who come from diverse backgrounds. Although the NHL was identified as sending more negative signals towards applicants, it was noted that they are making attempts at promoting themselves as an inclusive workplace, through their *Hockey is For Everyone* advocacy campaign as well as developing a new female hockey advisory committee along with the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA). Several participants indicated that they would have to do more if they want to understand how to improve the diversity of their workforce, demonstrate they are truly inclusive, and improve their workplace brand in order to effectively signal to diverse applicants that they are a desirable employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Celani & Singh, 2011).

As participants were asked to submit both a resume and answers to pre-screening questionnaires for two different sport organizations, I was interested in assessing how they would tailor each piece of their application to the organizations based on the signals they received and interpreted during their pre-application research. For the resume portion of the application, all participants submitted identical resumes regardless of which sport organization they were applying to (NBA, MLB or NHL). Although this could be viewed as unexpected, previous research has noted that job candidates should create resumes that appeal to a general audience, due to the relative anonymity of resume screeners (Knouse, 1994; Thoms et al., 1999). Such research also notes that it is more appropriate and useful for applicants to tailor their self-presentation to a specific interviewer, organization, role or situation during the interview process (Knouse, 1994; Thoms et al., 1999).
In contrast to their resumes, analysis of the pre-screening questionnaires revealed that applicants were more likely to tailor some of their answers to each organization, particularly for the questions that asked them to describe their perfect work environment and why they would like to work for the specific league. In this way, applicants were more likely to use their interpretations of organizational signals to shape their responses. For example, when responding to questions about why they wanted to work for the NBA, five participants specifically commented on the NBA’s commitment to progressive values and/or diversity and inclusion. These five participants – Alexa, Emma, Jacob, Megan and Melanie – are all individuals with at least identity that is traditionally marginalized in sport: gender, racial identity and sexual identity. In their follow-up interviews, they noted that the existing knowledge of, and familiarity with, the NBA, as well as their pre-application research allowed them to tailor their responses by pointing out specific elements of the NBA workplace brand that spoke to them in terms of diversity and inclusion.

2.4.2 Uncovered Applications and Covered Interviews – Applicant Signals

Participants recognized many organizational signals related to diversity and inclusion during their pre-application research. As the different approaches to signaling theory in the management literature indicated, organizational signals are but one type of signal that can have an impact on the recruitment and hiring process (Celani & Singh, 2011; Connelly et al., 2011). Applicants also send signals, which can be as overt as educational level (Spence, 1973) or as implicit as levels of warmth and competence (Agerström et al., 2012). Such signals can convey not only if an applicant is intellectually or technically qualified for a particular position, but also if they have the traits and
identities that are desirable in the eyes of a particular employer. Applicants may have more power to control or amplify implicit signals, such as behaviors or manners of dress, during the hiring process as they typically require less financial or temporal investment, or signaling costs, than pursuing academic degrees or technical certifications (Spence, 1973). However, that does not mean that applicants do not suffer from other costs, such as psychological costs due to the pressure and stress that may come with altering more nuanced signals. Such alteration may come in the form of covering elements of their stigmatized identities, along the various four axes – appearance, association, advocacy, affiliation. For applicants from marginalized backgrounds applying for jobs in a heterogenous industry such as sport, covering may feel necessary in order to get one’s foot in the door.

Participants in this study did not mention any fear in sending signals about their marginalized identities through their application packets (the resume and pre-screening questionnaires). However, many of them concurred with the previous literature (Knouse, 1994; Thoms et al., 1999) stating that their resumes were deliberately designed to be more general and to focus solely on their educational credentials and their professional experience, thus leaving out information that could identify deeper identity characteristics. Several of them commented that any tailoring typically occurs when a job posting requests a certain type of experience (e.g. using a specific type of software or being well-versed in a type of social media). In some cases, elements of their resume, such as a volunteer, internship or paid experience, may highlight aspects of their stigmatized identity that may have otherwise been hidden. For example, Melanie listed her leadership experience in both the sport diversity and women in sports student clubs in
the “Activities” section of her resume. Similarly, Alexa listed her role as an officer in a diversity in Business student club under the “Leadership Experience” section of her resume. Listing not only their membership, but also their leadership roles in such clubs could lead to potential employers viewing Melanie and Alexa as people who not only may be members of typically underrepresented groups in sport, but also that they are intentional about being advocates for diversity and gender equity in sport. How these signals would be interpreted by a sport organization, and what impact they could have on a potential job offer, is not the topic of this study; however, one could make the argument that it could be seen as a positive (e.g. the organization is looking to diversify its workforce and also loudly advocates for diversity and inclusion) or a negative (e.g. the applicant, once employed, may attempt to push an activist agenda against the wishes of others in the organization) depending upon the context. Prior research does suggest that there is an inherent risk in disclosing or amplifying parts of one’s identity in the workplace that are stigmatized, particularly if they are otherwise invisible (Ragins, 2008).

The use of a pre-screening questionnaire, in addition to a resume, in this study provided me with another allowed me to analyze if, and how, participants would disclose aspects of their stigmatized identities prior to a formal in-person interview, or if they would engage in covering. There were several instances where participants openly discussed their racial or gender identities, and other examples of where recruiters reading between the lines of the answers would be able to infer information about such identities. Melanie’s pride at being named the diversity student club’s first female president was featured in her response to the question What do you consider to be your most important accomplishment, and why? In terms of why Melanie felt it was her most important
accomplishment, she stated, “I can now be a role model to the future women club leaders and show them what we can do.” When Melanie was asked about why she decided to use this example as her response, she viewed it as a positive, stating “I was really excited to share it…something like that, that I could say I accomplished.” She also said she saw it as an example of her personal growth, as she had been a member of the executive board of the club since her second semester of freshman year, and gradually was elected to higher roles by her peers every subsequent year. Similarly, Kaleb tied his racial identity to the response to the same question, writing:

I believe my greatest accomplishment is the mentoring and coaching I have volunteered my time for in my community. I believe that giving back to the youth is crucial especially for young boys and girls of color. I appreciate serving as a model for children so that they can be assured they can strive for success.

When asked during his interview if there was any hesitancy in choosing that example or if he would potentially leave anything out of his resume or pre-screening questionnaire out of fear it would harm his chances at a job, he expressed “I think I’m very proud of my education and work experience, my extracurricular and community service – there’s nothing that I’m not proud of.” Although Kaleb did not explicitly state his racial identity (which is Black/African American) in that questionnaire response, his reference to being a model for young boys and girls of color could be easily interpreted by a recruiter as a signal of his own racial identity.

Melanie and Kaleb both have stigmatized identities that are visible – gender (Melanie) and race (Kaleb). Melanie and Kaleb’s examples demonstrate how drawing on one’s experiences in a way that amplifies a stigmatized identity to one’s benefit during the application process could be useful. Deciding to reveal information about these identities during the application process may not be a difficult decision to make,
particularly as progressing to the interview phase will put their stigmatized identity on full display. Additionally, under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, one’s race or gender could not disqualify them from an employment opportunity, so the risk of such a disclosure negatively affecting their candidacy was low. For those with invisible stigmas, the risk could be greater (Yoshino, 2002), although it should be noted that one of the most common invisible stigmas – an LGBTQ identity – has now garnered more protections after the recent Supreme Court decision stating that sexual minorities were also covered by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, thereby granting them employment protections under the law (Totenberg, 2020).

When participants were asked about how they would present themselves in an interview with either of the organizations that they had prepared application packets for, there was a greater consensus that they would likely cover aspects of their stigmatized identities in an interview setting. Although this could take various forms depending upon the stigma(s) associated with each individual, participants mentioned being consciously aware of how they would be perceived by interviewers, and shared steps they could take to mitigate any potential negative perceptions. Megan shared how her appearance would differ if she were to attend an interview with the NHL as opposed to the NBA. As a lesbian, she mentioned as she saw the NBA as a more progressive organization, she would be able to dress to her comfort level for their interview. Megan had a distinctly different view on how she should present herself during an interview with the NHL:

I think as a woman I would feel like I would need to be more feminine going into that [NHL] interview...I think I would definitely wear like a dress/blazer combo to the [NHL] interview. Whereas if I was going to one in the NBA, I wouldn't feel weird about wearing the pants/blazer combo. And I'm a taller individual, so I probably wouldn't wear too tall of heels, but I would probably wear a much more feminine shoe to an NHL interview. I would definitely wear the more pointed
shoe than a loafer. I wouldn’t feel uncomfortable wearing loafers to an NBA interview, but the NHL…I would definitely question that. Definitely.

Megan made a clear distinction between the progressive nature of an organization like the NBA and the more traditional or conservative organizations that she believes the NHL represents. In making that distinction, she recognized that she would face greater expectations regarding the gendered norms of the sport industry in an organization like the NHL, and as such her appearance should be hyper-feminine. Griffin (1992b) referred to this as the pressure for women in sport to present an image that is considered “heterosexy” in order to overcome any lesbian stigma that may be manifested in such a heteronormative space. By deploying appearance-based covering (Yoshino, 2006) during an interview, she felt that she would be able to downplay her stigmatized sexual identity.

Megan also attended a very liberal, progressive, women’s only college, and the belief that there may be a lesbian stigma associated with such institutions has caused her to refrain from discussing her college experience in too much detail in interviews. She expressed:

With my going to [name of college], I’m so proud of that and I had a great time, you know, just being around really intelligent women who were trying to do a lot of really incredible things. But sometimes when I go out into the workplace, sometimes it’s like ‘oh, that’s an all-women’s college’…So I definitely do think about it when I’m in interviews, I’m like, oh I can’t talk too much, I can’t allude to something too much because maybe they’ll get a different perception of me.

Megan showed consciousness of the bias and stereotyping on the part of others in her thought processes. Although she couldn’t erase the name of her alma mater from her educational history, she chose to minimize its prominence in an interview setting through a form of association-based covering (Yoshino, 2006).
Participants with stigmatized racial identities also commented on how they would manage aspects of their identities once they had progressed past a resume/pre-screening phase. Alexa recognized her relative lack-of-status and commented about how that influenced her belief that she could be fully authentic not only during the hiring process but also in the workplace, stating “I’m a black woman, so I’m on the bottom of the totem pole. So, I already know, I’ve already experienced it. I can’t do things or say things that other people can get away with.” With that statement, Alexa was acknowledging that she may feel the need to self-censor, or minimize discussions about things important to her, out of fear of impacting her already-diminished status. She also commented about how she currently engages in appearance-based covering, stating “I adjust my hair, I make everyone else feel comfortable.” The altering of one’s hair, particularly for Black/African American men and women, is a common form of appearance-based covering for racial minorities (Yoshino, 2002, 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Although one’s race is fixed, and as a visible stigma is not amenable to the more radical identity management strategies of conversion or passing, covering is a valid option for racial minorities who wish to downplay or mitigate aspects of their stigmatized identity (Yoshino, 2002, 2006).

Jacob, a Black/African American man, discussed how his racial identity is something he thinks about constantly, but that the situation that he finds himself in dictates how he manages that identity:

I think about it [his racial identity] all the time, but it depends on the group. Sometimes I’m perceived as white, even though I don’t look it, but I might act it based on some traits or habits that I do. Otherwise, when I’m with another group, I’m perceived as African American or black based on some trait that they have already perceived or a habit that I do with them.
He further confirmed that while in the presence of a group that is majority Caucasian/White, he modifies his behaviors so that others may perceive his actions to be more in line with their own race. As such, in an interview setting where he is the only racial minority in the room – something that would be likely to occur in the relatively racially homogeneous sport industry (Cunningham, 2015a; Lapchick, 2018; 2019a; 2019b) – his instinct may be to resort to affiliation-based covering in order to mitigate his stigmatized racial identity.

The nature of covering suggests that individuals can make conscious decisions on if, when and how they would like to deploy covering techniques. During the hiring process there may be numerous opportunities to engage in covering, but when the stakes are higher in an interview setting and stigmatized individuals have progressed one step closer to landing a job, the pressure to downplay one’s stigma(s) may be intense. The participants in this study made a clear delineation between how they would present themselves in their application packets versus their interviews, and it was evident that covering was more likely to be useful to them during the interview process.

Although it was clear that the participants in this study possessed many more types of invisible stigmas than visible stigmas, it was the visible stigmas that they were more open about in their resumes and pre-screening questionnaires. While some overtly or implicitly signaled their visible stigmas in their applications, they were unlikely to allude to invisible stigmas during that part of the process (e.g. nobody self-identified as a sexual minority in their resume or pre-screening questionnaires). However, participants seemed to be just as likely to cover their visible stigmas as their invisible stigmas once
they were in an interview environment, which speaks to the importance of that step in the hiring process.

### 2.4.3 Everybody Covers – The Prevalence of Invisible Stigmas

A key finding from Yoshino & Smith’s (2013) research on covering techniques in the workplace was that even those individuals who are typically seen to be in the majority, (e.g. heterosexual, white men) did report covering some aspect of their identities at work. Participants in this study who fell into such categories, or even those who had some type of privilege (e.g. being Caucasian/White) while also holding other visible stigmatized identities in sport (e.g. being a woman), reported that there may be other invisible stigmas that they would be cautious about amplifying during the hiring process in addition to once they were hired by a sport organization.

Kyle, a Caucasian/White, heterosexual man, explained that although he outwardly looks like the typical sport industry employee, there are invisible stigmas that he is cognizant of presenting on applications, during interviews, or in the workplace. He has a non-verbal learning disability which can impact how he interacts with others and how he processes information and cues in social situations. It’s particularly top-of-mind for him when filling out employment applications:

I’m always a little wary of sharing. And there’s even a question I think on job applications now that like, would you like to self-identify as…disabled? There’s a veteran one, a disabled one, and I’m always not sure whether I should click that or not, just because I don’t want it to impact my…and I know that they say that I think there are discriminatory laws, so they can’t let it, but I’m always just a little bit wary of that one.

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does cover some specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, there are ambiguities about how others may be handled
(Barker, 2006). Thus, Kyle may have legitimate concerns with amplifying such a disability during the hiring process.

Another invisible stigma that participants were cognizant of mitigating during the hiring process was their religion. Melanie, who is Jewish, and Kyle, who is Catholic, both mentioned that although their religion might not be directly related to any potential job, there may still be a need to manage such identities in different contexts. Kyle in particular suggested that the time commitment of many positions in sport can create conflicts with his religious practice. Recalling a previous job in which he worked at a golf tournament, and Sunday mass conflicted with the final day of the tournament, he recounted:

I know working in sport is tough and I know that you have a lot of these hours you have to work, but in my opinion, me taking an hour away is needed. And because that’s one of the identities that is crucial to me, so that’s kind of how I think that [his religious identity] would manifest itself [in the workplace].

When asked when he would disclose his religious identity, he suggested that it would not be something he discussed in an interview and would likely only bring it up if there was a clear conflict between attending a mass and a work commitment. However, he did acknowledge that most Catholic churches schedule multiple Mass times throughout the week and weekend, perhaps giving him more flexibility with a demanding work schedule, as if often seen in sport-related jobs (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004). Although there are federal protections against religious discrimination in hiring and employment, research has demonstrated that religious biases still exist in our society and can influence job candidate evaluations. For example, Wright et al. (2013) found that when resumes that had references to religious affiliation were sent to businesses, those candidates were less likely to receive a phone call, had fewer overall contacts and were rated lower on an employer preference index. Relative to Kyle’s specific situation, Catholics in that study
were one of four (out of a total of seven) religious groups tested who were singled out as seeing greater evidence of job discrimination (Wright et al., 2013).

2.4.4 Flipping the script on stigmas: From liabilities to assets

This study has demonstrated that applicants for sport-related jobs would engage in identity covering, particularly in an interview, in order to mitigate the impacts that a stigmatized identity may have on their chances at landing a job. As such, they see covering as a valuable tool to assist them in their career progression.

Marginalized participants spoke of leading with their skills and strengths in order to compensate for their stigmatized identity in hopes of making it to the next round of the hiring process. Jacob spoke of how he has been very intentional in the way he’s been adding to his resume with skills and experiences that will allow him to stand out as a racial minority in a traditionally racially homogeneous industry like sport:

I’m trying to build a quote-unquote package or toolbelt that shows that if I’m already a disadvantage going in, I can build my resume, or skills. So that way if I was not perceived as a minority, I could mesh in with everyone else based on my skills and number of experiences and willingness to work in different aspects of jobs.

Jacob’s perception is that he will have to work harder in order to receive the same types of opportunities that those in the non-stigmatized majority receive. His hope is that employers will first be impressed by his ample resume, taking him past the screening phase, which will allow him to deploy covering techniques and self-present in an interview in a way that would mitigate his stigmatized racial identity (as was mentioned in a previous quote). His fears of being overlooked due to his race do have support in the literature, as scholars have previously found that employers have negative opinions of the work ethic and motivation of Blacks/African Americans (Shih, 2002).
Although this study has demonstrated that covering a stigmatized identity during the hiring process – particularly during interviews – is common, there were several participants who mentioned there could be benefits to embracing their diversity. Alexa, who admitted to recognizing that she had to temper her words and actions as a Black woman, also realized that her uniqueness (particularly in the sport industry) could be appealing to potential employers. In recounting her time growing up, and attending a predominantly white school, she was honest about struggling with both her racial identity and her gender, and that it took her a long time to accept that she was Black and a woman. Since leaving that environment she has a new outlook, stating, “now I realize the power I have and what it means to be a black woman, even though I'm at the bottom. I realized that I have that power because I am different, and my diversity is my strength.” Kaleb also believes that for employers who value and understand the benefits of diversity and inclusion, hiring him – a person of color – could have broader benefits. He remarked, “in terms of being a person of color, that would be a strength as I can bring different ideas to the organization, which could help the organization long term.”

With more organizations beginning to prioritize diversity and inclusion and implementing policies and practices to enhance diverse hiring and retention (Leslie, 2019), the opportunity exists for individuals from marginalized backgrounds to flip their stigmatized identity from a liability to an asset. In various contexts, organizations that embrace diversity and inclusion have been found to see improvements in performance (Cunningham, 2011, 2015b; Leslie, 2019; McKay et al., 2009; Richard et al., 2007). In sport, this phenomenon has been noticed with sexual minorities in particular. MacCharles and Melton (in press) found that gay males have acknowledged that their stigmatized
sexual identity can be a benefit to sport organizations, but have added the caveat that their decision to engage in covering or to amplify their diverse identity, thereby impacting organizational performance, is hugely dependent on the organizational and community signals that they receive regarding inclusion. Thus, although stigmatized individuals can use their identities as a positive for them, that may only work in certain spaces and contexts.

2.4.5 The personal costs of inauthenticity

The research on the use of identity management techniques, such as covering, has demonstrated that downplaying or mitigating signals of one’s marginalized identity does have negative impacts on one’s well-being, particularly in the workplace (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Participants in this study reinforced that message by noting that the ability to be their authentic selves in the workplace was very important to them and that limiting such ability could cause personal strain. Upon reflecting on her previous jobs, Emma emphasized that when in an environment where she didn’t feel pressure to manage her sexual identity through passing or covering, she had a better work experience, saying, “I’ve made a lot deeper connections and been happier with my job when I felt people accepted me and I could act in my authentic way.” Organizations stand to benefit when employees can be their authentic selves in the workplace, as happy employees are often engaged employees, which creates workforces that are confident and committed to their jobs (Cha et al., 2019).

In addition to personal strife and strain, managing one’s stigmatized identity in the workplace can create a fear of interpersonal distrust amongst colleagues. Emma shared her concern about how colleagues would react if she chose not to be her authentic
self in the workplace, explaining “I’m always afraid that later on they’re going to say ‘well I didn’t know you all along’ – so it can cause a rift later on.” This concern about other’s perceptions of one’s authenticity is a valid concern, particularly as Cha et al. (2019) have argued that within certain contexts, externally perceived authenticity can lead to tremendous amounts of social power.

Choosing to cover one’s stigmatized identity can come at a high personal and social cost, yet participants in this study also recognized the reality that they faced heading out into a very competitive sport industry that is known for its homogeneity. As such, Although simultaneously expressing their desire to work in an environment that welcomed their full self each and every day, participants noted that they would likely have to take a job in an organization that did not allow that full expression. Stephanie explained her hope that sacrificing her authentic self in the short-term would have long term benefits:

Since I have such slim pickings, it's hard to find a workplace right off the bat that I can be my authentic self, so I kind of see that as I just have to deal with it for a few years, get good experience for my resume and then maybe I can find a workplace where I could potentially be my authentic self in the future.

Stephanie makes it clear that managing aspects of her identity will be critical in advancing down her career path in the sport industry – particularly during the early years. The acknowledgement of having to sacrifice one’s authentic self for the advancement of one’s career in sport is striking, yet it is a reality – particularly for those individuals who hold identities that are typically stigmatized in the sport industry.

**2.6 Conclusion**

For all parties involved, there is a certain level of risk involved in the hiring process. For organizations, they take a risk on hiring an individual about whom they have
relatively little information and an uncertainty about how that person will fit within the structure of the organizations’ policies, expectations and culture. For individuals, they are taking a leap of faith that what they see on the outside of an organization represents what its workplace environment is actually like on the inside. The information asymmetry that exists on both sides of this relationship can be alleviated by the sending and receiving of signals between the two parties: organizations and applicants. In a homogeneous industry such a sport, sport organizations should be cognizant of the fact that individuals from stigmatized groups are looking for outward signals of support for diversity and inclusion, which can be demonstrated through equal opportunity statements, imagery and iconography that is representative of different racial and sexual minority groups, and careful approaches to being inclusive in their recruitment materials and advertisements. For applicants, conscious decisions are made about if and when they should enact identity management techniques (e.g. covering), and such decisions are often in response to the organizational signals they have seen and interpreted. The signals sent in return could be seen as a risk for applicants, but for organizations looking to improve their diversity and inclusion, they may be actively looking for signals from applicants with stigmatized identities. Applicants tended to be more likely to be more wary of amplifying signals of their stigmatized identities during interviews, and as such covering techniques were more likely to be deployed in those situations. Although in agreement with Yoshino & Smith’s (2013) research, it was somewhat surprising to see that there were a wide variety of invisible stigmas that one may decide to cover, and that members of the non-stigmatized majority also can engage in covering. Participants noted that sacrificing their authentic selves can have negative personal effects, but there was a recognition that such decisions
could be necessary – particularly as they begin their careers in sport. However, there was hope for those with traditionally stigmatized identities in sport (e.g. race and gender) that what has traditionally been seen as a liability could now be turned into an asset, and that more and more stigmatized individuals are seeing their diverse identities as strengths that make them valuable additions to sport organizations.

From a theoretical perspective, this research extends the literature on covering (Goffman, 1963; Griffin, 1992; Yoshino, 2002, 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013) by shedding light on how organizational signals can trigger the use of covering behaviors. It also adds to the covering literature by highlighting when covering may occur. Previous research into covering and identity management by individuals in organizations typically has only looked at the manifestation once individuals are already in the workplace; however, this study extends that work by investigating how covering manifests during the hiring process, finding that it is more likely to occur in an interview setting than in an application packet.

Practically, this study has important implications for organizations, particularly with regards to their diversity recruitment strategies. This research demonstrated that potential applicants – particularly those with identities that are traditionally marginalized in sport – are actively seeking out signals that can either qualify, or disqualify, a potential employer. Sport organizations in particular should consider all the ways in which they can signal inclusivity in their recruitment materials and during the hiring process. They should also consider signals that may be less overt or obvious to them, such as the language used in their job advertisements, which may be inadvertently signaling exclusion. Organizations can improve their performance along a number of metrics with
diverse workforces and inclusive environments (Cox & Blake, 1991; Cunningham 2011a, 2011b, 2015b); however, they must be intentional in the ways in which they recruit and retain diverse employees, or else they will not be able to take advantage of the benefits that come with diversity and inclusion practices.

Although this study has important theoretical and practical applications, I also must acknowledge the limitations, which can also help to inform future research directions. While a concerted effort was made to ensure there was participants represented a diverse sample, recruiting more sexual minorities and racial/ethnic minorities could have been beneficial to the findings. Although I did not propose a research question related to intersectionality, broadening my sample to include individuals who have multiple stigmatized identities would allow me to examine the complexities of managing such identities during the application and hiring process. The participants also were representative of only one large, public university in the northeastern United States, and as such they may have been exposed to similar teachings and guidance regarding career preparation for sport industry jobs. Future studies should consider greater diversity in terms of institutions and geography. From a methodological standpoint, participants were asked to consider applying to only two North American professional sport organizations; however, as the organizations may not have been appealing to all participants, a future study should give consideration to a broader range of organizations in different sectors of the sport industry.
CHAPTER 3
STUDY 2: WHAT’S WITH THE SCARF?

3.1 Introduction

‘You never get a second chance to make a first impression’. As that old saying goes, how you decide to present yourself in your first encounter with another individual can often be extremely influential in their perceptions of you and how your relationship progresses going forward. This adage is particularly important to remember when preparing for a job interview, where your appearance, behaviors, diction and responses to questions will be meticulously dissected and interpreted by prospective employers. For job applicants with stigmatized identities, making the right first impression may involve the use of identity management techniques in order to downplay those identities and progress in the hiring process – all at the expense of being their true, authentic selves. Trying to maintain the difficult balance of standing out yet not seeming “too” different in order to win over potentially skeptical or biased hiring decision makers is a process that applicants with stigmatized identities know all too well. This becomes particularly salient when such individuals decide to enter organizations, or industries, that have long been seen as having homogeneous workforces. The sport industry, long seen as lacking gender, racial and sexual orientation diversity in its workforce (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014, Cunningham, 2015a; Lapchick, 2018; 2019a; 2019b), provides a fitting environment in which to study how identity management techniques employed by those with stigmatized identities influence evaluations and outcomes during the hiring process. Sexual minorities, representing a small, but growing, portion of the population (Newport, 2018; Schneider & Auten, 2018), are a useful subgroup to include in such an
investigation as they are limited in their representation in the sport industry (Cunningham, 2015a) and are typically found to be the likeliest employees to engage in identity management techniques (e.g. identity covering) in the workplace (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Thus, investigating how sexual minorities engaging in identity management strategies are perceived while applying for jobs in the sport industry provides an opportunity to understand more about this phenomenon and how it impacts the diversity and inclusion of sport organizations as a whole.

The labor pool in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse and will continue to do so in the coming decades (Vespa et al., 2018), which will force organizations and industries to develop better strategies to recruit and retain employees from diverse backgrounds. The LGBTQ population is just one of the marginalized groups whose population is expected to rise, with national surveys suggesting at least 4.5% of the U.S. population currently identifies as LGBTQ (Newport, 2018) – the highest number to date – but also with younger generations leading the way on living more open lives and identifying as a sexual minority that number is sure to grow. Recent data reveals that 20 percent of Millennials and 31 percent of Centennials (those born after 1997) identify as LGBTQ (Schneider & Auten, 2018), and those generations represent the new wave of talent that will be flooding the labor market in the coming years and decades.

Although demographic changes will force organizations and industries to adapt, there are also organizational benefits that come with becoming more diverse and inclusive. Scholars in the management field have determined that firms can obtain competitive advantages in areas such as resource acquisition, marketing, creativity, organizational flexibility and problem solving by fostering more diversity in their
organizations (Cox & Blake, 1991). Similarly, and more pertinent to the focus of this paper, Cunningham’s (2011a, 2011b, 2015b) work has revealed that when engaged in both diversity and inclusion initiatives, sport organizations with high levels of sexual orientation diversity typically see better outcomes than their peers on a number of workplace characteristics (e.g. creativity) and objective performance metrics (e.g. staff engagement). However, in order to be successful at both recruitment and retention of sexual minorities and reap such benefits, organizations must allow and encourage such employees to present their authentic selves in the workplace. Organizational and societal forces that may encourage employees to engage in identity management techniques, such as covering, can lead to negative consequences for not only employees themselves but also organizations (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Therefore, it is important to understand more about the level of authenticity a sexual minority should exhibit during the hiring process for jobs in the sport industry without jeopardizing a potential job offer.

For organizations, it could be difficult to take advantage of the benefits of diversity and inclusion if diverse candidates are sidelined during the hiring process. There is evidence in both the management and sport management literature which suggests that individuals with stigmatized identities, both visible (e.g. race) and invisible (e.g. sexual orientation), may face discrimination in the hiring process as stereotypes of marginalized individuals and biases of hiring managers can influence hiring decisions (Hirsh & Cha, 2008; Bendick Jr. & Nunes, 2012). The fear of this potential discrimination affecting their ability to gain employment may cause individuals to enact covering techniques during the hiring process in order to reduce the likelihood of this discrimination. In the management literature, for example, there are numerous examples of hiring bias against
sexual minorities (Ahmed et al., 2013; Drydakis, 2015; Pichler et al., 2010; Tilcsik, 2011; Weichselbaumer, 2000). Similar evidence can be found in the sport management literature with regards to discrimination in hiring decisions based on sexual orientation (Cunningham et al., 2010; MacCharles & Melton, 2018). Although these examples of discrimination suggest that there is a danger of one’s sexual identity impacting their chances of being hired, there is a need to understand whether or not the practice of covering may be beneficial as a coping mechanism for those individuals as they apply for jobs. It would also be valuable to better understand how hiring managers in the sport industry evaluate stigmatized applicants who display varying degrees of covering, and if and how potential biases may affect such decisions.

The sport industry can be considered to be relatively demographically homogeneous (Fink et al., 2001; Cunningham, 2010), which makes it a good setting in which to study stigmatized identities. One traditionally marginalized group that has not received much scholarly attention in the field of sport management (see Cavalier, 2011 and MacCharles & Melton, 2020 for exceptions) are gay men. Gay male sport employees are unique in that they possess a gender identity which aligns with the non-stigmatized majority in sport organizations, but they also possess a stigmatized sexual identity that goes against industry norms. As Cavalier (2011) notes in her research on gay male sport employees, sport “reifies and reproduces heteronormativity, gender norms and a masculinity that is valued above other forms of masculinity” (p. 628). This can make the sport workplace challenging for gay men to navigate, particularly as their sexual identity presents a stigma that although close to, does not perfectly align with the traditional sport employee archetype – the heterosexual, white male (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty &
Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). Understanding what characteristics of a gay man’s identity are acknowledged and interpreted by hiring decision makers in sport could provide greater insights into the hurdles that gay men have to overcome in order to work in sport, and how they can manage their own identities in ways that allow them to have successful sport careers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how hiring decision makers assess job candidates who identify as gay men in interviews for sport-related jobs, and to understand if engaging in identity covering techniques helps or hinders gay male applicants in their pursuit of sport-related jobs.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

3.2.1 Sexual stigma

Although Erving Goffman’s (1963) initial writings on stigma theory described how homosexuals, as an example of individuals lacking in moral purity, were a group that were likely to experience stigma, scholars have since gone further in investigating the complexities of the stigma experienced by and towards sexual minorities. Work by Herek (2007, 2009a) has identified and described sexual stigma as its own unique construct within the stigma literature. According to Herek (2007), sexual stigma is “the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to any non-heterosexual behavior, identity, relationship or community” (p. 906). At the structural, or institutional level, sexual stigma is manifested as heterosexism – an institutionalized cultural ideology that disadvantages sexual minorities, even without the enactment of individual prejudice or discrimination (Herek, 2007).

At the individual level, sexual stigma exists in three forms: enacted stigma, felt stigma and internalized stigma (Herek, 2007, 2009a). All three forms of sexual stigma
can be experienced by both sexual minorities and heterosexuals (the non-stigmatized majority), although their expression, or impact, often differs between groups. Enacted sexual stigma is seen through the expression of anti-LGBTQ behaviors, such as violence or verbal assaults against LGBTQ individuals, or the ostracizing of LGBTQ individuals in public and private settings (Herek, 2007, 2009a). Both sexual minorities and heterosexuals can be perpetrators and victims of enacted sexual stigma; however, its resulting trauma typically disproportionally impacts sexual minorities (Herek, 2009a).

Felt sexual stigma does not necessarily involve any overt signs of stigmatization, but rather is tied to the expectation that sexual stigma will manifest in a given situation. For sexual minorities this often leads to stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Bosson et al., 2004; Herek, 2009a). For heterosexuals, felt stigma often encourages them to implement self-presentation strategies that ensure they are not mistaken for sexual minorities (Herek, 2009a). Internalized sexual stigma stems from the individual belief that a stigmatized view of homosexuality is legitimate (Herek, 2007, 2009a). Sexual minorities experience internalized sexual stigma as self-stigma, which occurs when they hold negative sentiments about themselves and their sexual identity as a result of accepting the societal narrative of homosexuality as deviant (Herek, 2007). Sexual prejudice emerges when internalized sexual stigma is manifested by non-sexual minorities, and results in displaying attitudes and behaviors towards sexual minorities that fits the same societal narrative of homosexuality as deviant (Herek, 2007).

From Herek’s (2007, 2009a) theoretical work, I primarily draw from heterosexism at the institutional level, and from felt stigma and enacted stigma at the individual level. Although Herek (2007, 2009a) mentioned heterosexism in institutions such as religion,
law and medicine in the United States, sport management scholars have also provided
evidence of heterosexism being prevalent in sport (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Melton
& Cunningham, 2014a, 2014b). The existence of institutionalized heterosexism in sport
creates an atmosphere that has the potential to hinder the progression of LGBTQ sport
employees or to make their workplace experiences uncomfortable (MacCharles &
Melton, in press).

Felt stigma refers to the expectation that stigma will be enacted under certain
conditions or in a given scenario (Herek, 2009a). Although felt stigma may result in
stigmatized individuals managing and mitigating the impact of their marginalized
identities through coping mechanisms or identity management strategies, those in the
non-stigmatized majority may experience felt stigma as a fear that they will be labeled as
one of them. This may manifest simply as a lack of comfortability with stigmatized
others or could involve actively taking steps to ensure they are not stigmatized
themselves. Herek (2009a) used heterosexual men as an example of this phenomenon by
suggesting that being in the presence of sexual minorities, particularly gay men, can lead
to them to adopt behaviors that enhance their masculinity and conceal any actions that
could be viewed as effeminate. These behaviors may be manifested in a hiring
environment by those in the non-stigmatized majority who choose not to speak positively
about, or engage in negative commentary regarding sexual minority applicants, out of
fear that being supportive could result in others suggesting that they themselves are
homosexual.

The experience of felt stigma by the non-stigmatized majority may then lead to
the manifestation of enacted stigma. If these overt expressions of enacted stigma emerge
during the hiring process, it could have severely detrimental effects for sexual minority candidates. Although enacted stigma may take severe forms that cause emotional or physical trauma (e.g. through verbal threats or physical violence), in the hiring environment its manifestation is likely to result in acts of discrimination against sexual minorities, resulting in them being disqualified from a position (Herek, 2009a). Previous research conducted amongst lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals has found that gay men were the sexual minority group most likely to experience employment or housing discrimination in some form (Herek 2009b), therefore they may be particularly vulnerable to such discrimination in traditionally heterosexist and hypermasculine spaces, such as the sport industry.

For many sexual minorities, the interview process may incur additional stress as they navigate the depths to which they should reveal their authentic selves. Sexual stigma theory tells them that they have good reason to be concerned (Herek, 2009a), but little is known about how more nuanced characteristics and behaviors regarding one’s sexual identity are interpreted by hiring committees. As such, further investigation is needed to understand if, and how, hiring committees evaluate expressions of sexual identity during the interview process.

3.2.2 Identity Covering

Although some stigmatized individuals attempt to shed one’s stigma entirely through more laborious and drastic assimilative techniques such as conversion or passing, others embrace that identity personally while simultaneously seeking to minimize the impact of that stigma in various situations or circumstances. Goffman (1963) refers to
this behavior as covering, an act that focuses more on the obtrusiveness of a stigmatized trait, rather than its visibility (Yoshino, 2007).

Covering, like the other acts of assimilation, has been forced upon marginalized individuals by the demands of a society that has long valued similarity over differences (Yoshino, 2007). However, with covering, the messaging is that you can be different, just not too different. Or in other words for sexual minorities, you can be gay, just don’t be too gay. The act of covering is, in many ways, more suitable for use in today’s climate where sexual minorities have seen tremendous progress in their legal rights, such as the Supreme Court decisions allowing for same-sex marriage nationally and protection from employment discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As such, although there may be less overt forms of discrimination directed towards them based solely on their sexual identity, they may still be subject to more subtle forms of mistreatment in the workplace based upon their sexual identity. The pressure may no longer be to pass as heterosexual out of fear they would be fired or not hired, but instead it may be focused upon ensuring they are not flaunting aspects of their sexual identity at work, as research shows that nearly a third of Americans still believe that homosexuality should be discouraged (Fingerhut, 2016), and that many sexual minorities are still subject to discriminatory behaviors, attitudes and microaggressions, particularly in certain regions of the United States (Pew Research Center, 2013). Similarly, and with specific respect to this study, the changing of laws does not automatically change the deep-seated cultural attitudes that exist in certain spaces, such as sport, which has a long history of heterosexism and hypermasculinity (Melton & Cunningham, 2014a, 2014b; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013; Walker & Melton, 2015). As such,
the push to cover elements of one’s sexual identity may still be strong in such an environment.

Yoshino (2007) has argued that there are four axes along which stigmatized individuals can cover: appearance (self-presentation), affiliation (cultural and behavioral identifications), advocacy (politicizing one’s identity) and association (personal relationships). Individuals can choose to cover along all four axes, only one, or a combination of the axes, and their decisions to cover may depend on the situations they are in and the interpretations of signals that are being sent by the organization. Although covering has been identified in prior research on LGBTQ sport employees (Cavalier, 2011; Krane & Barber, 2005; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Walker & Melton, 2015), little is known about how the implementation of covering techniques may be interpreted by others in the sport organization, particularly those in the non-stigmatized majority. Similarly, little is understood about if, and how, covering may be beneficial to sexual minorities during the interview process for sport-related jobs, and whether or not there are axes of covering that are more beneficial. This paper looks to address these unknowns, thereby expanding the depth of the covering literature.

3.2.3 Signaling Theory

Decisions regarding self-presentation and self-disclosure on the part of sexual minorities during a job interview must be made with the full realization that they will act as signals to those on the hiring committee who are attempting to learn more about the candidates through both indices and signals. Spence (1973) used signaling theory to explain how two parties can overcome information asymmetry, which in an employment situation occurs between job applicants and potential employers, the latter of whom have
limited knowledge about how the job applicants may perform once employed by the organization. Spence (1973) argued that there is an inherent risk in the action of hiring, in that employers will be investing in a candidate through the payment of a wage based solely on a “plethora of personal data in the form of observable characteristics and attributes of the individual” (p. 357) without fully knowing what the marginal product will eventually look like. As such, there is an importance in observing and assessing applicant indices, which are observable, fixed characteristics, and applicant signals, which are observable attributes that are able to be changed by the individual themselves (Spence, 1973). For example, race represents an index, whereas level of education is a signal (Spence, 1973).

Although signaling theory is examined from a human resources perspective in two directions – applicant signals to organizations and organizational signals to applicants – in this study I am solely interested in investigating the former. Management scholars, in building off of Spence’s (1973) foundational work, have used signaling theory extensively in a variety of contexts, including in human resources research (Connelly et al., 2011). The sport management literature also features signaling theory, both in the marketing and consumer behavior spheres (see Cunningham & Melton, 2014b; Melton & MacCharles, in press) and the human resources space (see Kerwin, 2020; Tracy et al., 2020; Wallrodt & Thieme, 2018). However, the research conducted using signaling theory in human resources practices in sport has either focused on organizational signals (Kerwin, 2020), or when looking at applicant signals, solely focused on resume features, such as academic or professional accomplishments (Tracy et al., 2020; Wallrodt & Thieme, 2018). The more nuanced signals that may be sent through
behaviors or interactions in an interview setting have received little attention in the literature. Such signals, be they one’s appearance, body language, or a response given to a question, may be of equal or greater importance to hiring committees as being exposed to them in a live setting may have a greater impact than reading text on a resume. As resumes are typically used to screen candidates for interviews, interviews represent a further step in the hiring process when employers are looking for more information about candidates than is represented on a resume. For job candidates from marginalized backgrounds, we do not know if and how the identity signals that they send during an interview could influence whether or not a marginalized individual receives a job offer. This study aims to investigate the impact of such signals during the interview process, and whether or not covering characteristics that could serve as identity signals for invisible stigmas such as sexual identity influences hiring decisions. Thus, through the completion of this study I aim to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** To what extent do those making hiring decisions for sport-related jobs interpret applicant signals of their LGBTQ identity?

**RQ2:** What are the applicant characteristics that hiring decision makers are looking to see on applications for sport-related jobs?

**RQ3:** What are the applicant characteristics that hiring decision makers would not like to see on applications for sport-related jobs?

**RQ4:** To what extent do the initial attitudes towards the applicants differ once the hiring decision makers are together in a group setting?
3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Participants

For this study I wanted to hear directly from decision makers, or future decision makers, in the sport industry regarding how they assess job candidates. As such, I recruited participants from the master’s programs in the Sport Management department and Management school at a large, public university in the northeast United States. Using graduate students provides a convenient sample for the purposes of this study, and many of these individuals may have also already had work experience in the industry which provides them with an important understanding of the sport workplace that may not exist with a random sample of the population or even undergraduate sport management students. However, previous work experience in the industry was not a requirement for participants. 54 students were recruited, 51 of whom participated in 14 mock hiring committees (focus groups), with three participants participating in individual interviews due to scheduling issues that did not allow them to join a focus group; however, their feedback and evaluation of the candidates was still helpful and as such I have included their data in my analysis. The average number of participants per focus group was 3. Each focus group session lasted between 20-30 minutes in duration. The majority of groups were mixed gender, however there were two all-male groups and two all-female groups. 39% of participants were female (N = 21) and 61% were male (N = 33). 35 participants were White/Caucasian, 10 were Asian/Asian American, five were Hispanic/Latino and four were Black/African American. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
3.3.2 Procedure

During part one of this study, participants were provided with information on four male job candidates in the form of a resume as well as a job description for the role in which they were seeking. All four candidates were applying for the position of Assistant Director of Marketing and Promotions within a Division I college athletic department. The information contained in each candidates’ resume was nearly identical in order to suggest that the applicants were each equally qualified for the job. The resumes did not disclose any potential information about their sexual identity. Participants were asked to rank order the candidates from one (1) to four (4), with one (1) being the best fit for the job and four (4) being the weakest fit for the job.

During part two of the study, participants were asked to sign up for a time to participate in a focus group activity that would replicate the actions of a hiring committee. Focus groups are useful in qualitative research as they allow researchers to better understand how and why individuals make the decisions that they do (Taylor et al., 2016). They also draw on group dynamics to elicit insights that may only be uncovered when individuals interact with each other and spark ideas and solutions that may not have been apparent while thinking about a topic or problem on their own (Morgan, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). At the beginning of the focus group session, they were asked for their initial impressions of the candidates based solely upon their resumes. Next, they were shown four short video clips (approximately three minutes in duration each), which featured the candidates answering three pre-screening questions that would then be sent to a prospective employer. Actors were used to portray the candidates in the videos. All actors were White males in their early 20’s and Although they none of them disclosed
their sexual identity to the researchers, the candidates they were portraying all expressed
their sexual identity as gay during the interviews. Each of the four candidates differed in
the axes along which they covered based upon Yoshino’s (2006) categorization:
appearance, affiliation, advocacy and association. For example, Candidate 1 (Chad
Stevenson) exhibited appearance-based covering, but did not cover along the advocacy,
affiliation or association axes. Candidate 2 (Matthew Brown) covered along the advocacy
axis but did not engage in covering along the appearance, affiliation or association-based
axes. Candidate 3 (Andrew Oakley) covered along the affiliation axis but not along the
appearance, advocacy or association-based axes. And finally, Candidate 4 (Lucas
Murray) covered along the association-based axis but did not cover along the appearance,
advocacy and affiliation-based axes. A detailed description of the covering dimensions
and manipulations for each candidate can be found in Figure 1 (see Appendix F).

During the focus group activity I simulated the experience of being on a hiring
committee by encouraging the participants to discuss and debate the merits and
qualifications of each applicant after viewing the four short video clips, with the goal of
finalizing a rank order of the candidates agreed upon by all members of the focus group.
The conversation was semi-structured, with some initial thought-provoking questions
asked immediately after the participants finished watching the interviews, followed by
the participants discussing the candidates and debating their choices in a free-flowing
manner. Participants were able to take notes on scrap paper provided by the researchers
and that paper was also collected to be analyzed. I served as the facilitator for the
majority of the focus group sessions, and a colleague who was briefed on the study was
the lead facilitator in the room while I joined remotely for several that I was unable to
attend in person. As facilitators, my colleague and I also re-directed the conversation when it veered too far off track and we kept time track of time. The focus group sessions were video recorded in order to retain the data, both verbal and non-verbal, of the discussion in order to analyze both using qualitative techniques. Separate audio recordings of each focus group were also taken as a back-up in the event that the audio from the video recordings was not clear and needed to be cross-referenced with another source.

3.3.3. Data Analysis

Although each individual assessed the mock resumes in order to make a rank-order decision before the focus group activity, the main source of data that was analyzed was that of the focus group discussion. In order to analyze such data, I used a conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2007) of the focus group transcripts and participant notes to look for emergent themes, as well as a micro-interlocutor approach (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) to better understand the group dynamics of the focus groups.

The focus group transcripts and participant notes were uploaded to NVIVO12, where coding took place. For each set of documents, two rounds of coding were performed: open coding and focused coding. During open coding, I read the transcripts and the participant notes multiple times each while also doing some preliminary labeling of the text. This process allowed me to begin to make loose connections between the data that provided me with lines of analysis to follow-up on during focused coding (Taylor et al., 2016). The focused coding process involved refining the loose connections into more well-defined codes that fit within the overall story line that had been drawn out of the raw
data (Taylor et al., 2016). Transcripts were also cross-referenced with the participant notes to compare data from multiple sources and assure that all final themes were aligned with both sets of data.

The micro-interlocutor approach required investigating three components of the focus group activity: dissention and consensus, non-verbal communication, and conversation analysis. To assess dissention and consensus to the main question at hand (“How should the candidates be ranked in order of best suited to least suited for this job?”), I adopted a coding scheme to identify and record the type of agreement or disagreement that each focus group member presented, such as the five-level coding scheme suggested by Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009: indicated agreement (verbal or nonverbal), indicated disagreement (verbal or nonverbal), providing significant statement or example suggesting agreement, providing significant statement or example suggesting disagreement, and did not indicate agreement or dissent. This level of detail provides further explanation beyond just a simple descriptive count of the “yes” and “no” responses, and thus can indicate a broader scope of responses which may provide particular insight into the group dynamics at play in a particular decision. The assessment of nonverbal communication involved reviewing the video recording, and any associate field notes, for proxemic (use of interpersonal space) chronemic (speech pacing and silent episodes), paralinguistic (variations in voice volume, pitch and quality) and kinesic (posture and movements) data, which can provide an extra level of detail regarding the underlying dynamics of the particular group (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Finally, conversation analysis allowed me to examine the interactions between group members at a more granular level, giving me access to much richer data and as such enhancing the
overall meaning of my interpretations (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). This analysis involved focusing on elements of the conversation experience, such as turn-taking, turn organization, sequencing, word and tone choices, and other subtler interactional elements between participants.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, I utilized a number of techniques common to qualitative research. Two forms of member checks. I conducted member checks by returning transcripts of the focus groups to the participants, which allowed them to check for accuracy and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). I also consulted with a peer de-briefer on the data and themes, in order to help me account for any personal biases or assumptions that may have influenced the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The value of the peer de-briefer was to provide their expertise in analyzing qualitative data without being attached to the study in question, allowing for an unbiased evaluation of the findings (Gioia et al., 2013). A reflexive journal was also used to document my thoughts and impressions of the data collection over the course of the multiple days of focus group sessions, as well as during the data analysis, to ensure I was not losing sight of any biases, emotions or feelings that could have impacted my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Glesne, 2006).

3.4 Findings and Discussion

This study used simulated hiring committees to determine how gay males are evaluated during the interview process for sport-related jobs. As the information on the applicants’ resumes did not signal their sexual identity, I was able to examine in real time not only how such a disclosure influenced opinions of the job candidates, but also whether or not the way in which the identity was disclosed had an impact on the
evaluation. Overall, the reception to all of the candidates’ sexual identity was positive and did not seem to result in an outright rejection. However, participants were open about their opinions on the ways in which candidates chose to disclose their identities, suggesting that gay male applicants for jobs in sport should be strategic about engaging in certain forms of identity covering and highlighting specific qualities, experiences or characteristics during their interviews. The key themes that emerged from the data in response to the research questions are described below, with representative quotes from focus group participants highlighted in order to support the themes.

3.4.1 Looking for Connection or Disconnection – Candidate Signals

As the resumes were crafted to be extremely similar so that the candidate self-presentation could take center stage during the interviews, it was not a surprise to learn from the focus groups that they found it difficult to rank the candidates prior to viewing the interview clips. For many, they continued to struggle to differentiate between the candidates even after viewing the interview clips. In scenarios such as this where there was considerable ambiguity, many focus group members often gravitated towards those that either held desirable characteristics or similar characteristics to themselves. For example, the resume for Candidate 1, Chad Stevenson, listed prior work experience with the New England Patriots NFL football team, which appealed to several focus group members as the research was being conducted in the northeastern United States. Eric was one of the participants who noticed Chad’s credentials during the resume screening portion of the study, stating “I liked Chad. One reason, not just because I’m a Patriots fan, but I know the Patriots are a very well-run organization, so working for [them] stands out to me as opposed to the other three.” Although each of the other three
candidates also listed professional sport work experience on their resumes (Orlando Magic, Cleveland Indians and Dallas Stars), Chad’s resume was the only one that signaled a connection to the northeastern United States. Whereas several other participants across the focus groups also noted their affinity for Chad because of his ties to the New England Patriots – and recognized their inherent bias because of the geographical connection – Eric was unique in his attempt to provide justification above-and-beyond the fandom angle by referencing the positive business reputation of the Patriots. Even participants who had previous human resources experience, like Rion, were cognizant of the creeping in of a regionalized bias. In explaining why she might be more apt to see a candidate from a shared geographical area in a more positive light, she said “I will probably have way more to talk [about] with the person who is from New England than the person who is from somewhere else.” Geographical similarities can also relate to broader cultural similarities, particularly in a country like the United States which has regions with diverse cultures. Prior research on the influence of cultural similarity on hiring decisions has demonstrated that hiring managers often draw on cultural similarity when evaluating candidates because “they saw it as a meaningful quality that fostered cohesion, signaled merit, and simply felt good” (Rivera, 2012, p. 1016). Drawing on such subjective evaluations may be even more important when relatively little is known about a potential job candidate, or multiple candidates have very similar credentials.

Just as participants in the focus groups were keen to highlight areas of similarity with the candidates, they were just as likely to highlight areas of difference, typically to the detriment of that candidate’s standing. One particular characteristic that caused
participants to negatively evaluate the candidates was their alma mater. Both Peter and Brett, two participants in separate groups, commented on their strong distaste for Ohio State as reasons to rate Lucas, who was an alumnus of the university, more negatively. While discussing the candidates after viewing their interviews, Brett acknowledged that although Lucas had performed well and probably deserved one of the top two rankings, he made clear that he was torn about the decision, stating “I hate that this guy went to Ohio State, so I don’t want to put him as [number] one.” His group ended up ranking Lucas in third position.

The information asymmetry between applicants and employers that is inherent in the hiring process (Spence, 1973) leaves employers with the challenging task of interpreting signals through which they can attempt to evaluate candidates. As this study demonstrates, a common technique is to search for signals of similarity or dissimilarity that may be used to validate or disqualify a candidate. In situations where the candidates may have few distinguishing characteristics, hiring decision makers finding a personal connection to one candidate over another may be enough to dictate the hiring decision.

3.4.2 Visibility of Invisible Stigmas – Does Covering Matter?

Sexual minorities can express their sexual identities in a variety of ways. Signals such as their dress, voice (e.g. pitch and cadence), mannerisms, personal relationships and their own words can inform others of their status as a member of the LGBTQ community. A key question that should be asked is whether or not certain signals make a difference, for better or for worse, when a sexual minority applicant interviews for a job – particularly in a heteronormative environment. Relatedly, if signals are interpreted in a negative way by a hiring decision maker, does a stigmatized individual stand to gain by
engaging in some type of identity management, such as covering, in order to mitigate the stigma and increase their chances at moving forward in the hiring process? The data obtained through this study was illuminating with regards to these questions. Over the course of the 17 focus groups, the majority of the negative comments from group members related to mannerisms and body language – particularly with regards to Chad’s elevated pinky finger while drinking water and Matthew’s posture and crossing-and-uncrossing of his legs. I drew from Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) when analyzing the video recordings of each focus group in order to look for any type of non-verbal behaviors, such as visceral facial reactions or body language changes, when each of the four candidates appeared on the screen. It became very apparent based upon my analysis that Chad’s pinky finger while drinking elicited the most reactions through both non-verbal and verbal behaviors. Reactions included slight smiles, wry smirks, muted laughter, open chuckling, mumbling to their neighbor and mimicking his actions. Matthew also received several grins and smirks when he was first visible on screen. Only one of the 54 participants (Amelia, an Asian female) made noticeable reactions to all four candidates, including putting her hand in front of her face while laughing when Andrew appeared on screen. Despite Amelia’s reaction to Andrew, there were no other participants who made noticeable reactions to his presence on screen. Similarly, Lucas did not elicit any noticeable reactions from the participants other than Amelia, who smirked when he appeared on screen; however, Lucas was engaging in an affiliative behavior (talking with hands and accentuating a limp wrist) which did result in many negative comments during the focus group discussion. Eric expressed a lot of positive feedback about Lucas, but he also explicitly called out the hand behavior as being a problem, explaining, “I guess the
hand movement would be the only thing that went on that would really take away from his ranking.” Reflecting on all of this data, it is important to recall that Andrew was covering on the affiliation axis, and as such displayed no stereotypically gay mannerisms or body language. And although Lucas received two more first place rankings than him, Andrew still typically drew positive feedback. As such, gay men interviewing for jobs in sport should be cognizant of how their body movements, mannerisms and posture may be evaluated in a negative way, and as such affiliative covering could be beneficial to them as they attempt to seek out employment in sport organizations.

Although affiliative-based covering may have positive effects for gay men applying for sport jobs, other types of covering may not be as well-received. Matthew, who was consistently rated in either third or fourth, engaged in advocacy-based covering. As such, he did not mention any experiences in which he championed the LGBTQ community, organized an LGBTQ charity event or advocated for social change. The three candidates who did discuss their advocacy work – Chad, Andrew and Lucas – all received positive comments from many of the participants as they were evaluating them in their focus groups. Peter explained why Andrew’s experience as an award-winning volunteer with the Human Rights Campaign chapter in his hometown of Dallas was particularly important:

He spoke to his long-term commitment to LGBTQ advocacy and also some of the volunteer work he’s done for a while, and so you could tell that he was really connected to his community in an intentional and meaningful way.

Lucas also made a favorable impression on several of the participants by discussing an LGBTQ mentorship and allyship program that he started at Ohio State that has continued
to grow since he graduated from the university. When asked what moment during the interview clips stood out as a positive, Krista referred back to Lucas’ story, explaining:

When Lucas said that the program [he created] continued without him and then got even bigger, because I feel like that shows how dedicated he was to make it big and it was more important than just who he is.

After watching the interview clips and re-visiting each candidate’s resumes, participants often suggested that such advocacy work should have been listed on their resumes (it was left off of them intentionally so as not to send a signal that the candidate may be LGBTQ prior to participants watching the interview clips). Justin expressed a desire to see such information on the candidates’ resumes, particularly as it often formed a major part of their previous experience and demonstrated initiative, passion and leadership skills. He explained, “they were proud of this! [These were] their answers to the ‘what are you proud of’ question, so it was surprising that they didn’t put it on their resumes.” In this case, advocacy-based covering may actually have a net-negative effect when sexual minorities apply for jobs in sport. The participants noted that those advocacy signals were missing in the resumes but recognized the importance of such information. Perhaps such signals would have helped to ease the information asymmetry between the candidates and the focus group participants, or as Spence (1973) would refer to them, the employer, prior to viewing the interview clips, allowing the participants to have more distinct and defined perceptions of the candidates in relation to each other. The participants were clear that the information on the resumes did not allow them to easily differentiate between the candidates or provide a confident evaluation of who should be chosen for the position in question, and that more information was vital. The findings suggest that information
related to advocacy work should be amplified on resumes and in interviews as it provides signals that illuminate an individual’s character and work ethic.

The candidates’ decisions to disclose relationships with same-sex partners or LGBTQ colleagues and friends did not generate any substantial discussion amongst the focus group participants, as such association-based covering did not have any significant impacts on the focus group rankings and recommendations. The focus group participants’ assessment of the candidates’ decision to signal their sexual identity through various aspects of their appearance, or to engage in appearance-based covering, was more complicated and nuanced than when they were assessing evidence of the other three aspects of covering. Participants were more reluctant to directly address the candidates’ self-presentation in many cases, and instead were creative with their languages in ways that allowed their assessments to come across as less personal. This finding is discussed in more detail in the section to follow.

3.4.3 Use of Coded Language

As mentioned previously, prior to viewing the interview clips, and having only reviewed the candidates’ resumes, most of the participants reported that the qualifications of all four applicants were extremely similar, and as such it was difficult to differentiate between them or provide a ranking of best fit to weakest fit for the position in question. The importance of this observation was twofold. First, it showed that my effort to create the resumes so that each candidate would seem equally qualified on paper was successful. Second, it heightened the participants’ interest in the content of the interviews, and many stated both before and after viewing the interviews that their observations of the participants would be critical to their decision making.
Although facilitating the focus groups I paid particular attention to the words and terms being used to describe each of the four candidates as the groups were discussing the interviews amongst each other. Upon reviewing the notes in my reflective journal as well as the transcripts for codes, it was apparent that the participants were using very distinct adjectives to describe the different candidates. For example, Andrew, who was the candidate wearing the eye makeup, was frequently described as “confident” and “sure of himself”, often without a direct reference to his eye makeup. When asked about the most positive thing he noticed from any of the candidates in their interviews, Adam, a white man who was in a focus group with three other men of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, stated, “I liked Andrew’s confidence, and I thought that was a big ‘pro’. I think that’s important when you are hiring somebody.” Andrew was also praised for his eye contact, which was also related back to his confidence. Lucas, the candidate who had his nails painted a reddish color, was also referred to as confident. It should also be noted that Lucas and Andrew were the two top candidates out of the four, with Lucas being ranked first by seven of the 17 focus groups, and Andrew being ranked first by five out of the 17 focus groups.

The other candidate who was not engaging in appearance-based covering, Matthew, wore a scarf in his interview clip. Matthew was frequently referred to as “unprofessional”, not as “put together”, and “casual”. In Matthew’s situation, however, participants were much more likely to call out his decision to wear the scarf as related to his lack of professionalism. Jason, who was in a focus group with one other male and one other female, went as far as to question Matthew’s interest in the position in question, expressing:
the scarf for Matthew was wrapped around [his neck], and this might just be my preference, but I thought it was a little too casual compared to how professional the others looked. And I do think that it is a testimony…when you’re interviewing a candidate for a position…I think it represents how serious a person wants to be…and that they’re representing the place that they’re interviewing for in the manner in which they should be dressed.

Almost a quarter of participants referred to Matthew as unprofessional or casual, and they often were not shy about identifying the scarf as being a part of that perception. It should be noted that other than the scarf, Matthew was wearing a solid color dress shirt and neutral tie like the other candidates, thus the scarf was the only piece of clothing that differed from the other three candidates. As mentioned previously with regards to the ease in critiquing mannerisms and body language, these critical comments regarding a potential dress code violation may have been easier for participants to highlight than more nuanced, potentially controversial violations of men wearing eye makeup or nail polish. Dress codes are typical of most workplaces, and there is a general awareness of what is appropriate business attire for men and women (Peluchette & Karl, 2007). As such, drawing attention to an article of clothing could be seen as not as threatening as disparaging a man for wearing eye makeup or nail polish – both of which may evoke stronger affiliations with one’s sexual identity. Chastising a potential job candidate for a characteristic more closely tied to a marginalized sexual identity (e.g. gay) is a risky step for a hiring decision maker to take, as they could end up being labeled homophobic.

Although Chad, the candidate who was covering on the appearance-based axis, was described by a few participants as being “professional” and that he “looked the part”, more participants used terms like “generic” and “forgettable.” When I asked Julia for her opinion of Chad, she responded, “I feel bad saying this. I don’t really have an opinion. I didn’t really remember him.” Ava admitted to being surprised to hear Chad talking about
his LGBTQ identity as to her, “he just looked like a straight, white man, you know. And that’s what I’m used to seeing in the sports world.” Chad also came across as inauthentic, which was pointed out by Peter, who said “he didn’t seem like he was being himself…it was like he was trying to force it.” Despite engaging in appearance-based covering, Chad was open during his interview about his sexual identity by mentioning his boyfriend, explaining his involvement in organizing a Pride Night fundraiser, and also by giving off signals through his mannerisms (e.g. lifting his pinky finger while drinking water); however, he was perceived as inauthentic far more than the other three candidates. In terms of his evaluations, Chad was ranked first by only four of the 17 groups, and second by only four of the 17 groups. Perhaps Chad’s appearance-based covering when compared to Matthew, Andrew and Lucas’ appearance-based signals stood out in a negative way to the focus group participants, who viewed him as trying to be someone he was not. This analysis is consistent with the authenticity literature, which states that colleagues and others within organizations provide individuals with externally perceived authenticity when they view them as bringing their true selves to the workplace (Cha et al., 2019). This externally perceived authenticity can be integral in the workplace as it can provide an individual with much coveted social power, including influencing performance outcomes and career outcomes – such as receiving a job offer or promotion (Cha et al., 2019). For someone like Ava who mentioned her surprise at Chad’s sexual identity disclosure, he may have looked like the typical sport employee to her, but after learning about his sexual identity she may have realized that his authenticity should be more closely tied to his sexual identity rather than his occupational identity. This
disconnect that she noted may be one of the reasons Chad was ranked third in her focus group.

3.4.4 The Elephant(s) in the Interview Room – Assessing group dynamics

The purpose of asking the participants to watch the interview clips in groups after having evaluated the resumes on their own was to investigate if and how hiring committees would discuss elements of stigmatized sexual identities during an evaluation and deliberation process. As the vast majority of the participants had difficulty ranking the candidates based solely on their resumes before engaging in the focus group exercise, there was little information obtained about how being with their peers may have solidified or changed their minds from their initial assessments. As such, for this portion of the analysis I focused on whether or not consensus was found within the groups and how it was reached using the five levels of consensus described by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009). I also used conversation analysis (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009) to examine how participants used language and behaviors to communicate their opinions Although in a group setting.

First, in analyzing consensus, I examined only the 14 groups that had at least two participants (as noted previously, three focus group sessions had only one attendee present). One group decided to rank their choices individually with scores of four points for first, three points for second, two points for third and one point for fourth. They then totaled the scores for all four candidates and the top scorer was the consensus recommendation. All participants in this mixed-gender group agreed that this was the fairest and easiest way to make their decision after their discussion, and they each verbally indicated agreement once the results were finalized. Out of the 13 remaining
groups, members in six groups expressed affirmative consensus on their final results. This means that each one of them “provided a significant statement or example suggesting agreement” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, p.8). For example, in Focus Group 1, Tracey said that Andrew “knocked it out of the park” and that “he had way more energy than everybody else – he was actually enthusiastic.” Peter, the other member of the group, explained that in his mind, Andrew “crushed it” and that “he just seemed like a good dude.” In the other seven groups, although consensus was eventually reached, not all members used specific, affirmative statements to signify agreement, and instead either nodded in agreement or said something as simple as “I agree” or “yes” with no explanation as to why they agreed with the group’s choice. No participants ended the deliberations expressing a verbal or non-verbal disagreement with their group’s consensus. In the groups with the most debate and dissention, which were all mixed gender, it was often a woman who ended up convincing the man (or men) to agree with her ranking. In groups where a man (or men) convinced the women to agree with his (their) recommendation, the women typically did not engage in much conversation throughout the process. Further analysis of these groups’ decisions revealed that those that chose Andrew and Lucas, who ranked in the top spot the most, were more likely to have all group members express significant statements or examples to show their agreement, than those groups that chose Chad for the top spot. Pro-Chad groups tended to have one or two group members making significant statements to demonstrate their agreement with the group consensus, but there were also others in the group who simply indicated agreement with no explanation or justification as to why they felt he was the best choice. This suggests that there was a lack of enthusiasm for Chad as a candidate,
which aligns with my earlier analysis which found him to be considered very generic and forgettable.

Although I previously noted that participants tended to use coded language to discuss the four candidates, I wanted to dive deeper into if and when participants brought up the more polarizing signals, either in conversation or in their written notes. The conversation analysis revealed that overtly discussing signals such as Andrew’s eye makeup and Lucas’ nail polish was rare, and if the subject was broached by participants, it typically resulted in a brief acknowledgement without debate or discussion.

Participants in only four of the 17 focus groups brought up either Andrew’s eye makeup, Lucas’ nail polish, or both, during their deliberations. A review of the notes taken by participants while in the focus group meeting resulted in only finding four instances in which either the eye makeup or nail polish were written on note paper. Two of those instances were from participants in the same focus group, yet only one (Chris) mentioned it in the discussion with his mixed gender group. The other two instances occurred in two different groups, wherein one participant (Jennifer) who made the note brought both the eye makeup and nail polish up with her all-female group, Although in the other case, a man (Tanner) in an all-male group wrote “L: Nails” on his note paper but did not bring it up for discussion in his all-male group. It is interesting to note that in the latter example, Tanner was very quiet during the discussion, chiming in only twice – once to praise Lucas for being engaging during his interview and once to critique Matthew for his lack of professionalism. He liked Lucas and his group rated him first, all without any acknowledgement or discussion of his nails.
After providing their final rankings, groups that had not acknowledged Andrew’s eye makeup and Lucas’s nails were asked if they had noticed either of those appearance signals. Many participants admitted to observing one of the signals or both but did not engage in much further discussion about its significance. One man, Alexander, responded when asked about Andrew’s use of eye makeup, “it was very interesting, and I wondered if anyone was going to say anything about it.” When he was pressed by the facilitator as to why he didn’t bring it up himself, he stated that “it didn’t really matter”, which another group member concurred with verbally. Two groups, one composed of four women and the other composed of three women and one man, did engage in a brief discussion on which color may be most appropriate for a man to wear to a job interview (both groups suggested subtle or neutral tones that should be presentable and not chipped). The group composed of four women also suggested that Andrew’s eyeliner be more subtle, with less of a “wing” and not as “full”.

It was quite obvious from observing the focus groups that they were less likely to voluntarily bring up the more controversial signals, which were typically appearance based, and went against established gender norms. Although this study did not necessarily set out to determine if that lack of interest in acknowledging or discussing such types of signals was due to a level of discomfort with the topic or if participants genuinely believed that such identity signals did not matter when assessing a candidate for employment, there are a few observations that may help bring clarity to this distinction. First, as mentioned previously, there was a clear lack of voluntary discussion and voluntary note taking related to the two overt, potentially controversial appearance signals. Second, when the subject was broached, both voluntarily and in the post-ranking
debief, it was discussed very quickly and in a non-confrontational manner. Typically, once one or two members of the group took their stances on it, which was one that was either positive (e.g. Jennifer saying “I loved Andrew’s eyeliner”), neutral (e.g. Alexander saying “it didn’t really matter”) or conditionally negative (e.g. Luke saying “maybe it was a slight distraction, but it wasn’t taking away from anything he was saying”), other members of the group would either agree with the stance or not comment at all, suggesting that elements of groupthink may be at play (Janis, 1972). There seemed to be little appetite for getting into a heated debate about a male candidate’s choice to wear makeup or nail polish.

Although a rarity, there were two instances where the level of debate did become contentious, and in each situation, there seemed to be undertones of bias against Andrew and Lucas. The presence of eye makeup and nail polish felt like the elephant in the room during these debates, as neither were mentioned explicitly, but both loomed large. In a racially diverse mixed-gender focus group, there was Edward (a Black man originally from Africa), Terry (an Asian man) and Susan, (a Hispanic woman). Edward was very adamant that he liked Chad the best, whereas Susan preferred Lucas and placed Chad last. Edward described Chad as someone who “sounds like and looks like someone who might go out and get this role”, drawing attention to his self-presentation regarding his appearance and diction. When Susan challenged him on liking Chad solely based upon how he looked, he disagreed that he was basing it solely on his looks, but in his justification, he explained “it was not how he looked, it was how he portrayed himself,” which could also be seen as a subtle way to discuss his appearance. Although Susan was clearly frustrated with Edward’s explanation, and she confronted him about this potential
bias, she never once mentioned Chad’s appearance-based covering with respect to Lucas’ overt expression of his identity through his nail polish. That may have been a bridge too far for Susan. It was clear that she was interested in challenging his opinion, but the controversial nature of weighing in on a feature that could be seen as attacking the candidates’ sexual identity was a risky step to take.

One other group that engaged in robust debate was a three-person group consisting of Amelia (an Asian woman), Michael (a white man) and Brett (a white man). In this case, Amelia was the participant desperately fighting for Chad, but as noted previously she had the most visceral reactions to all four candidates, when they appeared on screen, including laughing and putting her hand in front of her face when Andrew appeared on the screen. Both Michael and Brett ranked Andrew first, and Michael initially said he would concede Chad in second place, but not first. Conversation analysis revealed that Amelia dominated the conversation and focused on Chad’s work experience, highlighting his experience in marketing (all four candidates had similar experience in marketing), and being confused as to why Andrew would want to leave his current job with the Dallas Stars (all four candidates were currently working in professional sport and expressed their interest to return to collegiate sport), in attempting to convince the two men of why they should put Chad first. She successfully pushed back the challenges from Michael and Brett, as in the end they were both swayed, with Michael stating, “I trust her!” This example demonstrates that one person in a group who has very strong beliefs and conviction can often sway the direction of a decision, even in the face of dissention and conflict.
3.5 Conclusion

This study provides us with a glimpse inside the deliberations that take place when evaluating job candidates for roles in sport organizations. Its unique contribution stems from the fact that only openly gay men were being considered for the position, and as such I was able to determine if there was an acceptable level of identity disclosure, or if there was an expectation that they should cover aspects their stigmatized identity, when applying for jobs within sport. I found that when evaluators have only a one-page resume with limited information and entries that do not allow for much differentiation, the default practice is to seek out areas of personal connection that elevate a candidate’s status, or signals of disconnection that may disqualify a candidate in their mind. However, their performances during the interviews were crucial for evaluators as they allowed them to more clearly differentiate between very similar candidates, and they were able to identify characteristics that stood out in a positive and negative way. Although celebrating their advocacy work and community involvement on a resume and during an interview can put gay men in a positive light, they should be aware of their mannerisms, body language and posture during interviews for sport-related jobs and consider affiliation-based covering to mitigate the stigma. As Krane & Barber (2005) and Cavalier (2011) found in their studies of sexual minority employees working in sport organizations, engaging in affiliation-based covering while at work is commonplace, and this study demonstrates that such enacting such covering should begin as early as the interview process. Gay men should also be cognizant of their appearance during a job interview with a sport organization, but its impact is more nuanced than one would expect. Clear violations of institutionalized business dress codes, such as men
accessorizing with scarves, stood out as detrimental to an individual’s candidacy, whereas self-expression through tasteful makeup or nail polish was not explicitly stated as a negative feature of a candidate. In fact, this study demonstrates that it can speak to deeper characteristics, such as confidence and authenticity, which are valuable to employers (Cha et al., 2019). Evaluators on hiring committees may use coded language with underlying meanings in order to describe candidates – particularly if those observations could be considered biased or controversial. In general, there was also a desire to avoid any confrontation about such observations, thus resorting to most groups engaging in groupthink (Janis, 1972), or avoidance, rather than engaging in direct discourse about gay men wearing eye makeup or nail polish in a job interview with a sport organization.

Theoretically, this study builds upon the identity management and covering literatures by highlighting the use of covering during the interview process. In particular, it adds the perspective of the evaluator, or outsider, which is a voice that Although present in the stigma literature (e.g. Herek, 2007; 2009) is not present in the covering literature (e.g. Yoshino, 2002; 2006). Covering is typically studied from the perspective of the individuals who engage in covering themselves, but it is clear from this study that those who witness the covering behaviors have opinions about which types of covering are appropriate and which should be avoided, particularly when applying for jobs. Additionally, this study creates a link between the covering literature and authenticity literature, as it was found that appearance-based covering for sexual minorities can actually lead to a decrease in externally perceived authenticity in the eyes of others (in this case, hiring decision makers).
From a practical standpoint, the findings of the study should be valuable to sexual minorities, but in particular gay men, who wish to pursue careers in the sport industry. Although it would be wonderful if they could express their full authentic selves during the hiring process, the reality is much different. In actuality, they should be careful about flouting traditional business dress codes by augmenting their look with accessories and they should also consider monitoring their body language, mannerisms and behaviors in order to downplay their sexual identities. However, being involved in the greater LGBTQ community and demonstrating a commitment to causes greater than oneself is seen as valuable.

Although the findings of this study are intriguing and make a contribution to the field, there are a few limitations that should be pointed out. First, all focus groups were shown the four candidates interview clips in the same order, as for the ease of facilitating the viewing, I packaged all four clips into one video. However, there was ample discussion about each of the four candidates and more often than not participants were making strong cases for their preferred candidates regardless as to which order they were displayed in. Second, for sample purposes, students from two graduate courses at a large, public university in the Northeast U.S. were used for this study. Due to scheduling constraints, most focus groups contained students who were enrolled in the same classes, so there was a familiarity between them which could have influenced their interactions with each other. Third, even though we obtained demographic data from course rosters, we did not ask participants to complete a demographic questionnaire. This information could have been useful in determining more about the cultural backgrounds or political leanings, two characteristics that could have implications for how they evaluate LGBTQ
job candidates. A future study could include such data, thus allowing a researcher to take a deeper look into how and why individuals may be evaluating candidates the way they are. Finally, as the two facilitators are both open about being sexual minorities, participants may have been more careful about how they disclosed their opinions or feelings regarding sensitive topics related to sexual identity.

In the future, it would be useful to schedule a debriefing interview with each participant individually after the focus group activity to determine what the process was like for them. Perhaps data could be obtained that spoke to feeling pressured to evaluate a candidate in a particular way, or what their perceptions of the others in the group were and how that affected their candidness and their overall approach to the task at hand.
CHAPTER 4

STUDY 3: IDENTITY COVERING IN THE SPORT WORKPLACE

4.1 Introduction

Sport organizations at every level are increasingly making strides towards greater acceptance and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) employees. The annual National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Inclusion Forum, for example, includes workshops and speakers that teach athletic departments to better serve their athletes and employees from marginalized identity groups (NCAA, 2018). Employee resource groups geared towards LGBTQ individuals and allies, such as NFL Pride (Gleeson, 2017) and the United States Olympic Committee’s LGBTQ & Friends (USOC, 2018a), have provided needed guidance and resources on LGBTQ issues within and outside of their respective organizations. The USOC has also developed an initiative entitled Finding Leaders Among Minorities Everywhere (FLAME), to encourage more individuals from marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ community, to consider employment opportunities in the elite sport sector (USOC, 2018b). And professional sport leagues at the highest level of North American sport, such as Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Football League (NFL), have worked with legal professionals to develop or enhance their sexual orientation non-discrimination policies (Waldron, 2013). However, enacting such noble policies or developing needed initiatives does not automatically make the sport workplace an environment where an LGBTQ individual feels entirely comfortable in being their authentic self. Elements of organizational culture, co-worker dynamics and societal attitudes can all create experiences that negate any positive strides that a sport organization may have made to
enhance the workplace for LGBTQ employees. As such, it is important for scholars studying LGBTQ sport employees to consider the ability of those employees to express pure authenticity in the sport workplace and to assess and understand the potential organizational barriers to being one’s authentic self.

North American sport organizations have followed the general societal trends seen in the United States as a whole, which has seen stronger legal protections provided to LGBTQ individuals through several victories at the Supreme Court (e.g. United States v. Windsor, Obergefell v. Hodges) and overall improved societal attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals and same-sex relationships, with 62% of Americans reporting support for same-sex marriage in 2017 - the highest percentage ever in the history of polling on the issue (Pew Research Center, 2017). Although many scholars acknowledge the advances in LGBTQ civil rights and general societal acceptance, there is also an understanding that providing legal protections does not automatically equate to a unanimous level of comfortability with LGBTQ individuals in every social setting. As Yoshino (2006) remarked when reflecting on the overall state of acceptance for marginalized individuals in the United States, federal protections that exist based on one’s race, sex, religion, national origin, and disability, and state protections based on one’s sexual orientation, demonstrate a greater consensus that people should not be penalized based on any of these identity dimensions; however, “that consensus…does not protect individuals against demands that they mute those differences” (Preface p. x). Research supports the expectation that individuals with stigmatized identities should engage in covering, which is the act of working towards minimizing the perception and impact of the stigma (Goffman, 1963). In a survey conducted for Deloitte of over 3,000
respondents spanning ten industries, 83% of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals, 70% of black individuals and 66% of women reported engaging in at least one form of covering (Yoshino & Smith, 2013).

Sport management scholars have found similar trends in covering when studying LGBTQ sport employees (Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010, Cavalier, 2011; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a; Walker & Melton, 2015) and female sport employees (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Walker & Bopp, 2010; Burton, 2015). The covering enacted by LGBTQ employees in sport may be to render their stigmatized identity as unobtrusive (Goffman, 1963). Yoshino (2006) describes this as the ability to be openly gay as long as it is not being flaunted. The sport industry has most clearly seen this sense of ‘qualified’ inclusion in studies of parental attitudes towards LGBTQ coaches, who typically supported their children having LGBTQ coaches as long as the coach did not outwardly express their sexual identity (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009) or promote their sexual identity to the children that they coached (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham & Melton, 2014a). Although this direct evidence has been limited to the coaching context, it does suggest that for LGBTQ sport employees, there may be repercussions for their workplace experiences if they do not engage in identity covering. This sentiment may be well-founded, as research from the general management sector has found that marginalized employees expressed significant pressure to engage in at least some form of covering in order to further their long-term professional advancement (Yoshino & Smith, 2013).

Although sport management researchers have determined that LGBTQ sport employees do employ identity covering techniques in the workplace, little else is known
beyond that. Covering itself is a complex phenomenon that can be manifested across four axes: appearance, affiliation, activism (advocacy), and association (Yoshino, 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013). While not directly referring to Yoshino’s (2006) classifications, the aforementioned studies in sport management that investigated LGBTQ identity covering have found evidence of appearance-based covering (Walker & Melton, 2015), affiliation-based covering (Krane & Barber, 2005; Cavalier, 2011), advocacy-based covering (Krane & Barber, 2005; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a), and association-based covering (Krane & Barber, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Cavalier, 2011; Walker & Melton, 2015). That evidence, Although important, lacks greater detail about when, why and how each type of covering technique is enacted, and whether or not specific types of covering techniques are more commonly seen than others by LGBTQ employees in the sport workplace. Additionally, many of these prior studies also included individuals who are *passing*, or are not ‘out’ in the workplace, and are in many cases attempting to pass as heterosexual (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2002, 2006). Some may argue that the actions of passing and covering are indistinguishable; however, the motives behind the action will be different depending on the knowledge of the audience (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2002, 2006), therefore it is important to study the actions of passers and coverers independently, which has not been done before – particularly in the sport industry. It is also not clear how the sport workplace itself, or what elements of the sport workplace, induce the enactment of identity covering techniques by LGBTQ employees. Ragins and Cornwell (2001) determined that LGBTQ employees reported less sexual orientation discrimination in supportive and accepting organizational cultures, particularly those with specific non-discrimination statements, same-sex partner benefits
and that invite same-sex partners to company functions. Although the research of other scholars has supported this notion (see Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a), it is important to note that the authenticity of, and commitment to, an inclusive culture by all in the organization is necessary to ensure that LGBTQ employees feel welcomed and included in their workplace (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; Ragins et al., 2007; King et al., 2008). In terms of the use of identity covering in the sport workplace, Walker and Melton (2015) found that any concealment or covering, particularly along the appearance-based axis, was based on the signs of inclusion present within the organization. It is not clear what these signs of inclusion were, or should be, in order for LGBTQ sport employees to consider employing covering techniques. Although attitudes are changing, and more inclusion initiatives are being crafted, we are not yet sure how the intricacies of the overall organizational culture, including cultural artifacts and behaviors of non-LGBTQ employees, affect the ability of LGBTQ sport employees to be themselves in their daily lives at work. As such, this is an area that merits further investigation.

Considering the aforementioned literature and the gaps identified in previous scholarly work on identity covering, the purpose of this study is to understand how identity covering is manifested in the sport workplace by ‘out’ LGBTQ employees and to better understand the role that organizational culture and the inclusive organization play in the enactment of those covering techniques. I will draw from stigma (Herek, 2007, 2009a) and covering (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2002, 2006) theories as well as elements of the organizational culture literature, with a particular focus on Ferdman’s (2014) work on the inclusive organization within the broader multilevel model of inclusion, and
Cunningham’s (2015) examination of LGBTQ inclusive athletic departments. This research will contribute to the covering literature by providing a better understanding of the antecedents to, and the mechanisms through which covering is enacted in the workplace. This information can also have practical implications for organizations by drawing their attention to organizational elements which can hinder their employees’ ability to always present their authentic self in the workplace.

4.2 Theoretical Framework

4.2.1 Authenticity in the Workplace

As Goffman (1959) noted with his well-referenced metaphor in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, individuals experience their lives in both front stage and backstage environments, as if they are participating in a theatrical production. When individuals are ‘front stage’, they are aware that they are performing in front of an audience, and as such they take extra care to ensure that they adhere to any and all performance expectations that the audience may have (Goffman, 1959). The individual is quite aware that any deviations from the typical performance will be noticed and assessed by the audience. However, when they return to ‘backstage’, they are free to relax, remove themselves from the character they had been portraying ‘front stage’, and express their authentic selves (Goffman, 1959). This front stage-backstage dynamic can be applied to the workplace, such that being in one’s office or in the midst of colleagues or other stakeholders represents front stage, while being out of that environment (e.g. in a house, restaurant or car) represents backstage. The nature of the performance suggests that there is a lack of authenticity on the part of an individual when they are front stage, whereas being backstage allows for an individual to present a more authentic version of
themselves. For those individuals who hold particularly stigmatizing identities, the ability to perform as someone else when front stage may allow them to achieve both professional and personal success.

Authenticity is a term that has been defined in multiple ways over the past two decades (Cha et al., 2019). For the purposes of this study, authenticity is defined as “the subjective experience of alignment between one’s internal experiences and external expressions” (Roberts et al., 2009, p. 151). In this case, internal experiences refer to values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings, whereas external expressions are represented by physical behaviors, nonverbal behaviors, and verbal messages (Roberts et al., 2009). Scholars have also noted that authenticity can be considered a continuum of high authenticity to low authenticity (Cha et al., 2019) and that there are valid differences between experienced authenticity, which is self-reported, and externally perceived authenticity, which is how others perceive an individual’s authenticity (Cha et al., 2019).

Although there are obvious benefits to individuals when they are encouraged to be their authentic selves in their workplaces (e.g. personal well-being, social relationships), organizations can also reap tremendous benefits when they support authenticity on the part of their employees (Cha et al., 2019). Experienced authenticity in the workplace has been positively associated with individual well-being and work engagement, both of which can lead to positive outcomes for organizations by creating workforces that are confident and engaged (Cha et al., 2019). Similarly, externally perceived authenticity has been shown to positively influence performance outcomes, particularly through authentic leadership, as well as image and career outcomes (Cha et al., 2019).
However, as Cha et al. (2019) have argued, not all workplaces are willing, or able, to facilitate the authentic self-expression often desired by employees. The presence of contextual factors that act as antecedents for the expression of one’s authentic identity paint a much more complex picture of if, and how, employees are able to bring their true selves to work each day. Contextual standards such as the valuation of social identities, expectations of emotional displays, organizational values and commitments to broader social values provide the framework through which employees can evaluate whether or not they should demonstrate authenticity at work (Cha et al., 2019). Those that fit within the standards, or are able to conform to such standards, will find it easier to portray experienced authenticity, giving them greater personal power (Cha et al., 2019).

Similarly, they may also experience externally perceived authenticity, providing them with important levels of social power (Cha et al., 2019). For example, a sexual minority working for an organization that demonstrates through its core values that it supports the LGBTQ community (and as such fits within the approved contextual standard) is more likely to express experienced authenticity and receive any benefits or power that may come from such expression. Being their true selves and expressing experienced authenticity can also lead to colleagues and other organizational stakeholders perceiving them as authentic (externally perceived authenticity), giving them much desired social power. Conversely, a sexual minority working in an organization that does not support the LGBTQ community would be seen to be deviating from the contextual standard, and as such would feel intense pressure to conform to the standard or risk missing out on key benefits or power. Thus, understanding the role that context plays in the expression of
authenticity on the part of employees, particularly those who may hold stigmatized identities, is critical for scholars studying authenticity in the workplace.

4.2.2 Identity Covering

Revisiting Goffman’s (1959) metaphor, while front stage, individuals may sacrifice authenticity by adopting a number of identity management techniques in order to create a performance that best fits the expectations of the intended audience. A commonly used identity management technique in the workplace is covering (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Although the term covering has gained renewed interest thanks to Yoshino’s writings over the past 10-15 years, its origins in the identity context can be traced back to Goffman’s, 1963 book, Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity. Goffman’s most famous example of an individual taking steps to minimize the perception of their stigmatized identity was wheelchair-bound President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who always ensured he was seated at the cabinet table before cabinet members and the media entered in order to minimize the prevalence of his disability and relegate it to the background whenever possible (Goffman, 1963; Yoshino & Smith, 2013).

Covering has also been mentioned by Pat Griffin as one of several identity management techniques used by sexual minorities in order to mitigate the stigma associated with LGBTQ identities (Griffin, 1992).

Kenji Yoshino extended Goffman’s and Griffin’s early work on covering through his 2002 publication in the Yale Law Journal and in his 2006 book, Covering: The hidden assault on our human rights by focusing on identity covering by sexual minorities and the underlying complexities of the covering concept itself. In both pieces he compared and contrasted the act of gay covering with the acts of gay conversion and gay passing,
emphasizing that gay covering is its own concept, reliant upon the audience exposed to the covering having some knowledge of the sexual minority’s sexual identity (Yoshino, 2002, 2006). Yoshino (2002, 2006) and Yoshino & Smith (2013) also make clear that the act of covering is more prevalent than one might assume, and that it occurs by outsiders in any type of social situation and includes the use of sex (gender) covering and racial covering (in addition to gay covering). Also, covering is deployed not only by typically stigmatized groups, but also by those thought to be in the majority, such as straight, White males (Yoshino & Smith, 2013). Yoshino’s theory of covering has been praised by scholars for its ability to provide remarkable insight into an activity that is actually quite routine by making manifest “the otherwise evanescent accommodations outsiders routinely make in order to secure equal treatment” (Robinson, 2007, p. 1825).

An additional contribution of Yoshino’s extension of Goffman’s (1963) work is the determination that sexual minorities can cover along multiple axes, which he refined from ten in his earlier work (Yoshino, 2002) to four in his 2006 book: appearance-based (self-presentation), affiliation-based (identity associated behaviors), advocacy-based (outwardly expressing views) or association-based (social relationships). This development lends credence to the idea that covering is a very dynamic phenomenon that not only consists of multiple typologies but also can be deployed by the same individual in different situations or social settings, and can affect an individual’s psychological well-being, social relationships and even their career (Yoshino, 2006; Robinson, 2007).

As mentioned previously, covering is a typical coping mechanism, or stigma management strategy, used by sexual minorities when they experience felt stigma (Herek, 2007, 2009a). Covering has been found to have been deployed by LGBTQ sport
employees in a variety of previous research. In Cavalier’s (2011) investigation of the gay male sport employee’s experience in the sport workplace, participants who were ‘out’ to some degree spoke about their desire to not draw attention to themselves by talking about being gay, or their personal relationships (association-based covering), unless it was brought up by someone else. While studying lesbian intercollegiate coaches, Krane & Barber (2005) found that several participants openly admitted to altering their appearance (appearance-based covering) or managing their behaviors (affiliation-based covering) to appear more feminine, not taking a stand against sexually demeaning taunts from fans (advocacy-based covering), and avoiding other known-lesbian coaches at conferences (association-based covering) so as not to be “guilty by association” (p. 76). Both gay males and lesbians admitted to engaging in advocacy-based covering in Melton and Cunningham’s (2014a) study of LGBTQ collegiate athletic department employees, with participants remarking that they did not want to be a “poster boy for gay rights” (p. 30) or a “power dyke pushing a gay agenda” (p. 30). Walker and Melton (2015) found that several of the lesbians in their study worried about looking feminine enough (appearance-based covering) and would in some cases introduce a significant other as a friend (association-based covering). This research is valuable in the sense that it provides us with evidence of covering by LGBTQ sport employees, but there is still more to be understood about the deployment of the covering along the four different axes, such as when and why the employees choose to deploy those techniques, and how they actually appear to the audience which they are geared towards. There is also a disconnect in understanding how the covering techniques are related to organizational culture and other elements of an inclusive organization.
4.2.3 Organizational Culture and the Inclusive Organization

The additional piece of the puzzle that is needed when studying identity covering in the sport workplace is the workplace itself – the sport organization. Specifically, it is important to understand if, and how, elements of the organization influence an LGBTQ sport employee that is ‘out’ (at least to some degree) to deploy identity covering techniques. One might assume that an LGBTQ individual who is ‘out’ to some degree in their personal or professional lives should not need to consider identity covering at all, yet as Yoshino (2006, 2008) and Yoshino and Smith (2013) have noted, a substantial number of sexual minorities do cover, as well as other groups of individuals for whom their stigmatized identities are readily apparent (women, racial minorities), or appear to have no stigmatized identities at all (straight White males). Thus, it is worth although to investigate what organizational elements may act as triggers in the decision to deploy identity covering techniques in the workplace.

In order to better understand what the environment is like in any organization, scholars have looked to an analysis of its organizational culture. Schein (1996) defined organizational culture as “the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments” (p. 236). This definition encapsulates the broad influence that an organizational culture can have on its employees, both by indoctrinating them with attitudes and behaviors seen as the norm and impacting their workplace experiences should their attitudes and behaviors fall outside of those norms.

The influence of organizational culture on diversity and inclusion in sport organizations has been studied frequently by sport scholars over the past two decades.
Early work determined that if diversity and inclusion is not valued in the sport workplace, then the prevailing organizational culture will be representative of the typical majority group in leadership positions: the heterosexual white male (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). However, it has also been found that when the leadership of a sport organization does not prioritize – or is indifferent to – LGBTQ issues and concerns as a part of its organizational culture, supportive coworkers have the ability to shift cultural norms in order to foster a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ employees (Melton & Cunningham, 2014b). This raises an important point – that organizational culture is only one level at which we can study the inclusive organization and implementing a multilevel framework may be provide scholars with greater insight into whether or not organizations truly foster inclusivity.

Ferdman (2014) refers to inclusion as a practice – “an interacting set of structures, values, norms, group and organizational climates, and individual and collective behaviors, all connected with inclusion experiences in a mutually reinforcing and dynamic system” (p. 16). Thus, inclusion is about more than just an organizational culture that promotes or values inclusion. Ferdman’s (2014) multilevel analytic framework of inclusion refers to individuals, groups and teams, leaders, organizational characteristics and societal attitudes as all having the potential to impact the inclusiveness of an organization. Organizational characteristics such as diversity statements, non-discrimination policies and same-sex partner benefits are most often thought of as essential components of an organizational culture that values inclusion (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001; King et al., 2008; Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Melton & Cunningham, 2014a), but there has been increased support for taking a multilevel approach to inclusive
organizations, and this approach has been already been applied when studying sport organizations (see Cunningham, 2015a).

The multilevel framework for inclusive organizations raises some interesting questions with regards to the use of identity covering techniques by LGBTQ sport employees. For example, could being placed in a particular group or team lead to LGBTQ sport employees feeling a greater need to cover along one of the four axes despite having pro-inclusion organizational characteristics such as diversity statements or non-discrimination policies? Or could being transferred to a new department where the leader does not display inclusive leadership prompt an LGBTQ individual to deploy some type of covering? Perhaps in the current political and societal climate, could an ‘out’ LGBTQ sport employee suddenly feel pressured to engage in identity covering in the workplace, despite the organization itself having a reputation for inclusivity? Cunningham’s (2015a) work on creating and sustaining LGBTQ supportive cultures in college athletics provides some context for these types of questions by demonstrating that there are multiple levels of antecedents for an organizational culture that supports LGBTQ inclusion. These levels include the individual-level, leadership, organizational-level and macro-level antecedents (Cunningham, 2015a). Thus, it is not enough to suggest that a positive organizational culture of inclusion allows all LGBTQ employees to feel comfortable being their authentic selves in the sport workplace. The complexity of the concepts of organizational culture and the inclusive organization requires researchers to dig deeper to fully understand the relationships between those elements and employee behaviors, such as the deployment of covering techniques.
Thus, through the completion of this study, I aim to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How are identity covering techniques manifested by LGBTQ employees in the sport workplace?

**RQ2:** What elements of organizational culture, and/or the inclusive organization as a whole, contribute to the enactment of covering techniques by LGBTQ sport employees?

### 4.3 Methods

#### 4.3.1 Participants

There were several key qualifiers that participants were required to meet before they could be included in this research. First, they must have been employed by a sport organization at the time the research was conducted, although there were no requirements on the level of sport or sector of the sport industry in which they worked. Second, participants must be ‘out’ with regards to their LGBTQ identity in at least some capacity in the workplace. This does not necessarily mean that a participant must be completely open about their sexuality in all facets of their job or with all co-workers; however, in order to effectively study covering, rather than passing, there must have been some degree of openness expressed by the participant in the sport workplace. A third requirement was that the individual was comfortable with me, the researcher, spending several days with them in their workplace during the shadowing portion of the study. This requirement was also contingent on their organization allowing me to enter the workplace to conduct this research.
To find participants for this study, I engaged in purposive sampling by consulting my network and the networks of my colleagues in order to identify potential participants who would match the qualifications I have listed previously. As many LGBTQ sport employees may not be publicly out and able to be found by solely searching the internet or workplace directories, the ability to draw from the network connections of myself and my colleagues was essential in obtaining participants. During the data collection process, the Covid-19 pandemic emerged as a global health threat, which resulted in restrictions on research activities being put in place by my institution. Additionally, many of the recruited participants were now no longer working in their offices, and as such attempting to conduct research in their workplaces would be impossible. Therefore, the decision was made for the purpose of this dissertation to use the one participant for whom data had been collected as the sole participant for this study. The participant for this study was a 25-year old white man who identifies as gay. He worked in an entry level role focusing on diversity and inclusion in a professional sports league office. As of the writing of this paper, he is no longer employed by the organization due to layoffs implemented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. His post-shadowing interview was therefore conducted after he had left the organization. For the purposes of maintaining anonymity, his pseudonym for this study is Brad.

Brad holds both a bachelor's degree and master's degree in sport management. Although he currently lives in the southern United States, where he also completed his graduate degree, he was raised in the northeastern United States. He attended a large public university in the northeastern United States for his undergraduate degree. Brad is a first-generation American whose racial and ethnic background is White/Hispanic.
4.3.2 Procedure

I used a variety of qualitative techniques to obtain the information necessary to complete this research. Although the length of my research and data collection were shorter than a traditional ethnographic study, the use of ethnographic methods is well-suited to my specific research questions. By adopting an ethnographic approach, I relied on participant observation in the workplace (shadowing) and semi-structured interviews with the participant himself as my primary techniques. Participant observation in the field allowed me to gain first-hand knowledge regarding the covering behaviors of the participant as he went about his daily work life in his natural workplace environment.

Following Taylor et al.’s (2016) best practices for participant observation in the field, I focused primarily on the observations themselves while in the field, and I completed the in-depth, descriptive written field notes after I left the field for the day. During the day, I used a small notebook, my laptop and my iPhone to take notes in ways that would not be seen as distracting. For example, for many hours in the field while I shadowed Brad we were situated in his office although he did work on his computer and on phone calls. During those moments, I was able to record notes on my laptop as I made observations.

While in meetings with others, I was able to use a notebook as others in the meeting were also writing in notebooks, and as such that limited the distraction that could have emerged by only the researcher taking notes. In more casual settings, such as the lunchroom, I could take notes on my iPhone as many others had their phones out while conversing over their lunches. In keeping with typical strategies for ethnographic research, I jotted notes using those tools when I was able to in the moment, and otherwise made mental notes that could be jotted down later when it was more appropriate or
convenient (Gill et al., 2014). In total I had 12 pages of handwritten notes, 28 pages of single-spaced typed fieldnotes and three notes files on my iPhone with numerous jottings – one for each day of shadowing. I observed Brad in his workplace over the course of three working days (totaling approximately 24 hours). The typical hours of shadowing were from 9am to 5pm.

The semi-structured interview guide drew from the theoretical background and included questions related to their organization and its inclusivity, as well as to their experiences and perceptions of covering in the workplace. Interviews were conducted both before and after the shadowing exercise. The pre-shadowing interviews assisted in guiding my observations in the field and the post-shadowing interviews allowed me to follow up with questions regarding observations that were made during the shadowing exercise. Please see Appendices H and J for the pre- and post-shadowing interview guides.

In addition to participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I also observed the behaviors of the participants’ co-workers and engaged in conversation with them while shadowing to determine their perceptions of the organizational culture and inclusive organizational practices (Ferdman, 2014).

4.3.3 Data Analysis

During the shadowing exercises, I collected and analyzed the data simultaneously, as is common in all types of qualitative research (Taylor et al., 2016). As I recorded my field notes each day, I kept track of the emerging themes and began to conceptualize the trends in my data by using techniques such as constructing typologies and crafting analytical memos (Taylor et al., 2016). A similar process was followed for all interview
data, which was analyzed in the same manner. At the time I was initially collecting data, I had still assumed that I would collect data from multiple participants, so while I was highlighting interesting observations, I did not have multiple participant experiences to draw from. Next, I entered the inductive portion of the analysis, the coding process, which results in refined interpretations of the data by “bringing together and analyzing all the data bearing on major themes, ideas, concepts, interpretations and propositions” (Taylor et al. 2016, p. 181). Two rounds of coding took place: open and focused coding. Open coding was used to generate ideas about the high-level concepts and focused coding was used to refine the ideas. Although also organizing and sorting the data into the correct themes (Taylor et al., 2016). Finally, I drew from the literature and participant data to consolidate themes into the final versions that were used as findings for discussion purposes (Gioia et al., 2013; Moustakas, 1994). All analysis was conducted using NVIVO 12 software.

In order to ensure trustworthiness and credibility, I employed several common qualitative procedures. A peer de-briefer was used to review and discuss the data and codes to provide insight and ensure that any biases or assumptions that I may have injected into the research process were accounted for (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The peer de-briefer was another researcher who was familiar with the qualitative methodology but is less connected to the specific literature that has influenced this study, which allowed them to provide an unbiased assessment of the findings (Gioia et al., 2013). The participant in this study was subject to member checks, which required them to review the verbatim transcripts of their interviews for accuracy and reliability, thus helping to ensure the validity and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;
Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Additionally, during the post-shadowing interview I shared my observations and interpretations of the data with the participant, and he was able to provide his own insights and thus contribute to the construction of the themes presented in the findings and discussion. This aligns well with Birt et al. (2016), who suggest using a member check interview, which involves participants themselves helping researchers confirm, modify or verify their interpretations. I also kept a reflexive journal to ensure that I was documenting my own thoughts, feelings and biases that I might have become aware of during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Glesne, 2006).

4.4 Findings and Discussion

Over the course of three working days (totaling approximately 24 hours) shadowing Brad, an openly gay entry-level employee in the diversity and inclusion unit of a professional sports league office, I was able to observe a variety of behaviors, nuances, interactions and commentary that demonstrated identity covering being enacted in the sport workplace. Brad’s deployment of identity covering was often situational and relevant to contextual factors in and around his workplace; thus, being on-site with him allowed me to better study this phenomenon. In this section I will outline my key findings and discuss their relevance to the broader discussions of authenticity in the sport workplace, particularly for sexual minorities. This discussion will be supported with observations from the shadowing exercise and quotes from Brad’s pre- and post-shadowing interviews.

4.4.1 The Inclusion Façade - Surface-level Diversity vs Inclusive Culture

In order to better understand the manifestations of Brad’s sexual identity and the enactment of covering in his workplace, I first had to investigate the organizational
culture and their efforts to be a diverse and inclusive workplace. During my pre-shadowing interview I had asked him what drew him to his current organization. In his response, he highlighted a few experiences that allowed him to shape his view of the organizational culture. He shared that he had actually been asked to lunch by the President/CEO as well as two other senior staff members when they visited his university campus when he was pursuing his Master’s degree. They were interested in learning more about the diversity club he had started in his department on campus, and the President/CEO shared with Brad how much he valued diversity and inclusion and that he had hoped that improving it, and creating more protections for minorities, would be a part of his legacy. The President/CEO connected Brad with the Director of Diversity and Inclusion, with whom he had a number of conversations with over the following several months, prior to a job in the department being posted. This allowed them to build up a rapport and relationship before he applied for the job. He also recalled his interview experience fondly, stating:

I was open about my sexuality throughout the interview process. So, I knew that if I was going to be hired, they were going to hire me as my full self. And I wasn't going to have to question that on day one, I was very explicit on that.

He would later learn from that same director (before he left the organization for a new position) that he was intimidated at the thought of managing a queer person as he had never worked with someone, let along managed someone, who was a member of the LGBTQ community. In reflecting on this conversation, Brad expressed his surprise:

For him, despite being a leader in diversity and inclusion, the idea of managing a queer employee was still a bit intimidating. Which I do think speaks volumes about the progress that still needs to be made in the space when leaders are still a little intimidated with the idea of working alongside someone who is queer.
After learning this information from Brad, I visited the organization’s website to search for a listing of employees. Once I had located the list, which conveniently had photos of every employee in the league office, I counted the number of men, women and visible racial minorities. As Brad had mentioned the President/CEO’s vision of improving diversity in the organization, I was not surprised to see nearly equal representation from both genders amongst the staff – 31 men and 27 women. However, in Senior Leadership there was only one woman (a white woman) serving as a Senior Vice President, with the President/CEO, Vice President, CFO, COO, CMO and Senior Vice Presidents roles being filled by white men, as is the norm in the sport industry (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). Out of the 58 employees listed, only six were visible racial or ethnic minorities. Thus, although their gender diversity was impressive, they were lacking in racial and ethnic diversity.

I was exposed to the gender diversity of the organization within the first hour of my first day of shadowing. I was greeted at the front desk by Melissa, and then the first two people that Brad introduced me to were Brittany (a Black/African American woman), Brad’s boss and the Director of Diversity and Inclusion, and Terri (a White woman), the Director of HR. Brad then took me on a tour of the four buildings that make up the organization’s head office, where he introduced me to a number of his colleagues – all of whom also happened to be women. Three of those women also represented six of the visible racial and ethnic minorities in the office. I was immediately struck by the obvious surface-level diversity within the organization. Although I would also be exposed to a number of diversity-related initiatives and programs that the organization maintains, such as LGBTQ pride events, Black History Month celebrations, and Hispanic
and Black fan engagement initiatives, I also experienced situations that caused me to question if there was an actual culture of inclusion – where individuals feel like they are valued for their differences and belong – within the organization. It is important to note that having demographic diversity represents a good first step towards an equal and just workplace, but “diversity without inclusion does not work” (Miller & Katz, 2002, p. 17).

There were a number of observations that I made during my time shadowing Brad that raised red flags about the organizational culture, particularly as it related to inclusion. During my first day shadowing, Brittany and Brad were planning activities for Black History Month, one of which was going to be a traditional soul food lunch. She stopped into Brad’s office to ask him to look at menus, and she expressed concern about some of the food options, believing that they would not be to everybody’s taste. She explained to me that some staff in the office were “intimidated by Mediterranean food” at a previous office luncheon. Her awareness of a resistance by colleagues to try new things, or explore new cultures through food, may have spoken to a workforce that was more closed-minded than they portrayed to outsiders.

Although the aforementioned soul food example exposed a potential crack in the façade of an inclusive organizational culture, other cracks also emerged, particularly ones that spoke to the hegemonic masculinity that typically pervades the sport industry (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). On my second day of shadowing, Susie, the Special Events Director, stopped into Brad’s office to discuss plans for a big annual meeting that was coming up, as well as the diversity recruitment initiative they stage during the summer for college students. At the end of their chat, Susie reached out with her fist clenched, signaling to Brad that she wanted to do a “fist bump.” Brad swiveled in his
chair and reached out to complete the fist bump. I noted that Brad also engaged in a fist bump with George, a Black/African American man, who quickly stepped into Brad’s office on my first day of shadowing for the sole purpose of giving him a fist bump. The fist bump, long associated with male athletes, has a masculine undertone that is representative of a bro-culture (Hamblin, 2013), and as such I noted these exchanges in my fieldnotes, analytical memo, and reflective journal as observations to follow up on with Brad.

Interactions between Brad’s colleagues also allowed me to observe and make inferences about the organizational culture as it relates to traditional gender norms. On my third day of shadowing, I overheard a conversation between a woman and a man who seemed to be standing in the kitchen that was down the hall from Brad’s office. Although I could not see what was happening, the woman said “you really know how to make me happy – strong boy!”, to which the man replied “thanks Katie.” By Katie calling the man a “strong boy” that “made her happy,” she seemed to be insinuating he had done something for her that required strength that only a man could provide. Listening to this exchange reminded me of a Marketing meeting that I had sat in on during my second day of shadowing, where I overhead a white man commenting to another white man, “happy wife, happy life” while describing his domestic relationship. Such a phrase evokes an image of paternalistic ideals and sexism that suggests it is a husband’s job to keep his wife happy in order to make his own life pleasant. And although I didn’t notice any overt homophobia during my three days of shadowing, on the final day I overheard two men in the kitchen who seemed to be searching the fridge. As there had been an event for out-of-town guests hosted at the office over the previous two days, there was some alcohol
remaining in the kitchen. One of the men asked the other if there was any “hard stuff” left, and the second man replied that he did not think so, but that there might be a spritzer or two left. When he said the word spritzer, he took on an effeminate tone and mimicked a lisp that, as a gay man myself, I knew was meant to mock a gay man’s speech. All of these examples led me to believe I needed to dig deeper into understanding the organizational culture.

In my post-shadowing interview with Brad, I described all of the aforementioned experiences I had during my three days of shadowing. I asked him if my interpretations of the behaviors as evidence of an organizational culture that is rooted in hypermasculinity and hegemonic masculinity were correct. He agreed with my assessment, stating:

Your suggestion of hypermasculinity in the office, and just a strong level of masculinity and bro culture...yes, I do think there was a lot of bro culture. I think in general there was a lot of bravado. I think there’s a lot of people in that office who pump their chest up. And it was often the men who pumped their chests up and made themselves feel good.

Brad also shared that there was a lot of stereotyping in terms of masculinity and femininity throughout the office, such as criticizing women that wore “too much makeup” as “high maintenance,” and there were very few women managing men, which helped to reinforce traditional gender roles and maintain the hegemonic masculinity that has been institutionalized in sport.

The disconnect that I observed between the obvious surface-level diversity – particularly with regards to gender – and the various signals of exclusion, sexism and heteronormativity that permeated through the organization drew me back to Ferdman’s (2014) work on the multilevel analytic framework of inclusion. It describes inclusion as a
complex construct that occurs at both the micro and macro levels and is experienced by different people in different ways (Ferdman, 2014). As such, a gay man like Brad could experience inclusion at the interpersonal level when working with his boss, Brittany, but simultaneously experience exclusion at the group level in the office-wide marketing meeting where heterosexual men are cracking jokes about their wives. This dynamic was important to understand as I analyzed Brad’s self-presentation in various work contexts over the course of the shadowing exercise.

4.4.2 The company he keeps – Interpersonal relationships

As I mentioned previously, during the first hour of the shadowing exercise Brad gave me a tour of his workplace, introducing me solely to women. As a gay man myself whose closest friends are women, I was simultaneously surprised and not surprised. I was not surprised because of both my own personal experiences, but also because of the vast amount of cultural references to the gay man-straight woman friendship in our society, one of the most well-known being the television show *Will and Grace* (Rumens, 2008). However, I was surprised because I did not expect to be present in the head office of a professional sport organization for nearly an hour without so much as seeing another man. In observing the interactions between Brad and his female colleagues, I noted professional yet friendly exchanges, that suggested his relationships with them were more likely to be rooted in an actual friendship rather than just a shared employer. When I brought this up to Brad in our post-shadowing interview, he expressed to me that he did not realize at the time he was only introducing me to women, stating “I think I just showed you to the people who I always felt most comfortable around. I don’t know if I was always cognizant that those were women.” Although he did mention that he would
have also introduced me to Colin and Aaron, two heterosexual men in the office to whom he feels a stronger connection with, should we had come across them that morning, he acknowledged that his relationships with females in the office were strongest. He explained why his experience as a stigmatized individual in sport made him have a particular affinity towards the women he worked with:

Even to this day, like who am I closest to? It is my female relationships and friendships in the office that I still maintain relationships with, and I think that just stems from my own biases on men. And my perceptions of men in sports. You know, working in diversity and inclusion, I’ve worked at the intersection of different issues related to racism to sexism and homophobia. And so I understood and had sympathy in a lot of ways. The main reason I got involved in DNI [diversity and inclusion] work was my frustrations with seeing sexism in the classroom. So, I did always feel a little bit of like, commonality, amongst other minorities in the office. And that was women, but it was also the people of color as well.

Brad also explained that although he felt professionally respected by many of the straight, white men in the office, he also felt “a little bit intimidated by them, personally.”

Brad’s level of comfortability with the women of the office rather than the men speaks to the literature on the multilevel analytic framework of inclusion, wherein he can express more authenticity and feel included at the interpersonal level with certain colleagues (e.g. women), while also having a different experience of inclusion at the group level if the gender composition is more heavily male (Ferdman, 2014).

Prior to entering the field to conduct the shadowing exercise, I was curious as to whether or not there were other sexual minorities in the organization besides Brad. Upon meeting Melissa when I walked into the lobby on the first day of shadowing, I had a feeling that there were additional sexual minorities, and that I had just met the first one. I interpreted the signals that she was sending through her choice of attire and her hairstyle to mean that she may have been a lesbian. Brad later confirmed this for me when we were
chatting in his office. He spoke highly of her and even though they did not interact much professionally, he recalled numerous times that they would have private conversations about their personal lives as well as issues that members of the LGBTQ community face at work. In addition to Melissa, there was also another gay man, Alex, who worked in the office as an Associate. I noticed Alex during my first day of shadowing when he came into the kitchen and was explaining how he had started prepping his meals in advance because “beach season” was coming, and he was looking to “get that Magic Mike body.” It was fairly obvious to me that he was a gay man, although I suspected that he was at the very least covering, but more likely passing, in the workplace. I wondered if I would see more interaction between them over the course of the shadowing exercise, but I ended up seeing very little communication between them at all, other than a brief discussion of having to reschedule an upcoming meeting. In our post-shadowing interview, I asked Brad about Alex’s sexual identity and their relationship. He replied:

I know on a personal level that he’s a part of the LGBTQ community because I saw him on [dating app], but he never personally came out to me or anyone in the office. It’s definitely someone who, on a surface level exudes a bit of queerness, but he never discussed it outwardly or openly.

The hesitancy in Brad and Alex forming a deeper friendship based upon their shared sexual identities seemed like it could be the enactment of what Yoshino (2006) terms association-based covering. In this type of covering, sexual minorities do not like to associate with other sexual minorities in the workplace out of a fear that it will amplify their sexual identity in the eyes of others. Brad mentioned that it was “easier to avoid” Alex because they had little reason to interact professionally, suggesting that he did not have a desire to associate with him in a social way. Similarly, Alex’s lack of outreach to
Brad, who he knew was an openly gay employee, may have stemmed from his desire to engage in association-based covering, so that he was not identified as gay-by-association. In our post-shadowing interview, Brad also commented on his decision to downplay his sexual identity through association-based covering during social events when employees were permitted to bring a “plus one.” He never brought a boyfriend, or for that matter even a straight male friend, to an event as a plus one. He explained his rationale, saying “I didn’t want to have to deal with the perception of, ‘oh is this Brad’s boyfriend? It makes things awkward. But bringing a female friend as a plus one never made me feel weird.” Brad knew that having his colleagues see him with another man in a social environment would amplify his sexual identity and put it at the forefront of their interaction, so using association-based covering allowed him to remove that awkward dynamic from the situation. This association-based covering also emerged in conversations about relationships in the office. Both he and Melissa rarely, if ever, referred to their partners in front of colleagues who were not sexual minorities.

4.4.3 Power and status beget authenticity, and vice versa

Although Brad works out of the head office of a professional sports league, a substantial part of his job is to be a liaison to the individual teams as they engage in developing, promoting and staging initiatives and events related to diversity and inclusion (e.g. Pride nights). During our pre-shadowing interview, Brad explained that in his first year working with the organization as an Associate, he reached out to all of the teams during Pride Month to let them know that as member of the LGBTQ community he was able to serve as a resource should they have any questions or concerns. He continued this
unfettered openness about his sexual identity with teams in phone calls and during visits to their stadiums when they were hosting Pride Nights. He explained:

When speaking with clubs on Pride Nights and activations, I am able to offer a unique perspective in that, I can kind of center them and often remind them that ‘I'm also a member of the LGBTQ community, and I think what we're doing here is very powerful. And here's why.’ And I think I can almost assure some teams that having one queer person's perspective, is validating enough sometimes.

This openness has resulted in an employee of a team revealing her lesbian identity to Brad. He explained that this person has not come out to anyone she knows, but her connection to Brad allowed her to feel safe in disclosing her sexual identity.

I observed Brad on two phone calls with teams, both of which are situated in traditionally conservative areas of the United States. He exuded a strong sense of confidence and expertise on both calls, and he was in command of the meeting. He shared knowledge that he felt would help them, and he made sure to use his status as a member of the LGBTQ community to explain why certain ideas would work or wouldn’t work. For example, when one of the teams mentioned that they were going to stock team Pride merchandise in their store to sell during Pride Month, Brad recommended that they keep it stocked for the entire season, not just around Pride Night, to signal to their local LGBTQ community that they support them year-round. A heterosexual employee may not recognize the importance of long-term community support, and as such Brad is able to demonstrate that he holds knowledge that others may not have, providing him with a higher level of power. Similarly, as a representative of the league office, Brad has status that the individual team employees do not have, as he has access to both resources and organizational leaders.
Brad’s status and power when interacting with representatives from teams stands out because as an entry-level employee in the league office, he holds very little power and status within the four office walls. When I observed Brad in large office meetings, he very rarely spoke at length, as his boss Brittany typically took the lead on discussing updates or answering questions related to the diversity and inclusion department. He was most active in the small Diversity Committee meeting, as well as in his one-on-one meetings with Brittany. In our pre-shadowing interview, Brad expressed that his “surface-level diversity is really low” and that he has “the privilege where I can swing in and out of being more open about who I am” because in his view, he does not come across to strangers as being gay. The fact that he does not believe he fits into traditional gay stereotypes allows him to come across as less “threatening” to someone who may have a negative opinion of sexual minorities. He stated that if he “was not feeling confident in his queerness” on any given day, he would engage in covering techniques to downplay his sexual identity. Such techniques could include dropping his voice to a lower tone (affiliation-based covering) or dressing in more masculine attire (appearance-based covering). He also explained that when he is presenting at large events, where stakeholders from across the league and the business community are present, he would also be more cognizant of adjusting the tone of his voice. While observing him in the workplace, in addition to association-based covering, which I described earlier, I also noticed some affiliation-based covering with regards to his body language and posture. Brad typically, when seated, kept his legs crossed and enacted a more effeminate posture. Often in large meetings, where he would be apt to cover such behaviors, he was able to place his legs under a table so that they were not noticeable. However, I noticed that
when interacting with men in the office in a one-on-one setting, he tended to present a more dominant, masculine stance or posture. For example, if he was sitting at his desk when a woman, such as Brittany, entered his office, he would rotate his chair and sit with his legs crossed. However, when Dean, the Chief Marketing Officer, stopped by his office at the end of the day on my final day of shadowing, Brad sat straight up in his chair and spread his legs, rather than keeping them crossed. Observing Brad’s behaviors over the course of three days, and more importantly Brad’s candid discussion of the ways in which he knows that he mitigates his stigmatized sexual identity in the sport workplace suggests that there is a level of pressure exerted upon him by the organization, and in many ways society itself, to cover.

Brad’s decisions to amplify or mitigate his sexual identity in the sport workplace had consequences for both his experienced authenticity and his externally perceived authenticity. As someone who grew up being involved in sports and taking a keen interest in sport, Brad has been socialized into the gendered and heteronormative norms that exist within the sport industry. Despite the fact that his mission as a diversity and inclusion specialist is to work to change those norms, he still remains subject to them for the time being. Brad’s openness with team representatives was him demonstrating his experienced authenticity, and it was in those moments when I saw him interacting with those individuals on phone calls, or speaking about his relationships and work with them, where he seemed the most comfortable and satisfied. When I asked Brad about his ability to be his authentic self with the teams versus with those in the head office, he expressed:

[With] the teams, I was fearless. I didn’t have to deal with, or very rarely did I ever have to deal with any negativity. When I showed that vulnerability to the teams, almost always I was rewarded with either respect, because now they’re like
‘okay, I’ll learn from you’. Or just true acceptance and a bit of, like, true compassion.

This is consistent with the literature on authenticity at work, which states that experienced authenticity can lead to strong personal power outcomes, such as positive well-being and increased work engagement (Cha et al., 2019). Brad saw himself being rewarded for demonstrating experienced authenticity in that setting and had significant effects on him. It should also be noted that his perceived power and status as a league representative in the eyes of team representatives helped to elevate Brad’s experienced authenticity, in many ways acting as an antecedent, and creating a cycle of authenticity and power.

As I did not interview Brad’s colleagues, or the representatives from the teams he supports, it is difficult to determine exactly what others thought of his authenticity – in other words, did he experience externally perceived authenticity? This evaluation is more complex than just stating whether or not individuals in the workplace saw him as authentic or not, as it depends on the rater’s point of reference. For example, if a colleague were to look at Brad through the lens of the traditional sport employee, they would expect him to act like a straight man and to cover any indications of his sexual identity in the workplace. When Brad covered in his office environment, he may have been experiencing externally perceived authenticity, while sacrificing his own experienced authenticity. However, if a colleague were to look at Brad and expect to see a gay man (in terms of whatever socially constructed image that evokes for them), and instead Brad’s covering downplayed that identity to the point where it was no longer noticeable, there may be a lack of externally perceived authenticity. Thus, stigmatized individuals may have to think carefully about how they manage their identities and what
impact that will have on their authenticity in various situations, as such authenticity has important effects on their political and social power.

4.5 Conclusion

This study allowed me to observe the workplace experiences of a gay man who works in sport. Although previous scholarship has seen researchers investigate this topic solely in a post-hoc manner (see Cavalier, 2011; MacCharles & Melton, in press), I’ve added an ethnographic component to the traditional post-hoc study in order to better understand the nuanced behaviors and actions that gay men adopt in their day-to-day experience of working in sport, particularly with regards to their decision to manage their stigmatized identities through covering. The original intent of this study was to investigate the workplace experiences of many sexual minority employees, of various genders and racial/ethnic backgrounds; however, the Covid-19 pandemic halted any further research and as such I have had to rely solely on the data from this one ethnographic case study. However, the data has revealed important findings that can be used to inform and influence future research on this topic.

This study has reinforced the notion that the organizational culture in sport organizations is often one filled with norms and ideals consistent with hegemonic masculinity (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013), hypermasculinity and heteronormativity (Cavalier, 2011). It also is consistent with Ferdman’s (2014) view of inclusion as multi-leveled, such that experiences of inclusion are highly personal, context dependent and situational. Through observing Brad in his workplace, I was able to see not only elements of his authentic self, and identify when those emerged (e.g. during one-on-one’s with supportive colleagues or in phone calls with teams where he exhibited status as an
expert), but I was also able to witness moments when he actively worked to cover aspects of his stigmatized sexual identity. Brad’s post-shadowing interview revealed his awareness of having to actively engage in identity management in certain contexts and work situations, thereby confirming the work of Yoshino (2002, 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013), which suggests that inclusion rests on certain terms laid out by others in the organization. Brad’s experienced authenticity while in his role as league liaison for diversity and inclusion initiatives was in contrast to his lack of experienced authenticity in other aspects of his job. Understanding the various ways that authenticity can be experienced by sexual minorities and perceived by others in the sport workplace is a complex undertaking, but my experience with Brad suggests that there is a power and status angle that exists and should be investigated more in future scholarship.

Theoretically this study builds upon the identity management and covering literature by demonstrating that stigmatized individuals are actively scanning their environments and using the information obtained to help drive decisions about when to amplify or downplay aspects of their stigmatized identity. In Brad’s workplace, using affiliation- and association-based covering techniques seemed to be the most useful; however, that may change in different contexts, environments or organizations. Additionally, while this study aligns with the previous scholarship on authenticity in the workplace (Cha et al., 2019), it also revealed that a sense of status or power may not just be an outcome of experienced authenticity, but that it could also be an antecedent. As this study only involved one participant, it would be helpful to investigate this further in future studies with more subjects.
From a practical standpoint, this research demonstrates how important it is for organizations to embrace inclusion at every level, lest they leave some of their most vulnerable employees feeling pressure to manage their identities at the expense of their authenticity and personal well-being (Yoshino & Smith, 2013; Cha et al., 2019). It also reinforces the idea that having a goal of improving diversity statistics, for example, by hiring more women or racial minorities, does not necessarily lead to a better workplace environment where everyone feels supported.

Although this study provided a tremendous amount of data and the findings were rich and impactful, there are a number of limitations to consider. First, as I was present in the subject’s workplace, there was a risk that he would be adjusting his behavior because of my presence. While this is a common concern with ethnographic research, I had established a rapport with the subject after knowing him for several years, and as such we had a level of comfort with each other. Also, as I am also a gay man, we had a level of similarity that would have allowed him to feel more comfortable both expressing his sexual identity, and discussing it with me, during the course of the study. Also, due to scheduling constraints on the part of both of us, the days in which I could shadow were confined to certain dates. This may have limited the amount of observations I could make, particularly when days were particularly slow. Having more flexibility, and more time in the work environment, may have added more observations, giving more depth to the data.

I hope to continue this research once research regulations and local ordinances allow me to once again visit the workplaces of other sexual minorities working in sport. Having the ability to embed myself within a sport organization and witness the behaviors,
interactions, self-presentation and attitudes of sexual minorities in the workplace provides tremendous insight into the workplace experiences of marginalized employees in sport. In a future study, it may also be helpful to interview the colleagues of the employees being shadowed in order to better understand externally perceived authenticity, which is a part of research on sexual minority sport employees that is missing in the literature.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Everybody covers. The ubiquity of identity covering by both the traditionally marginalized and non-marginalized in our society makes it a phenomenon worthy of intensive study. However, its presence in the academic literature is often as an afterthought, a secondary finding or a minor detail that does not merit further investigation. This dissertation, a package of three distinct yet related qualitative studies, has attempted to highlight covering as vital to the understanding of workplace inclusion. By centering these three studies in the sport industry, a traditional bastion of demographic and ideological homogeneity, I was able to investigate the complexities of enacting identity covering in workplaces that are pre-dispositioned to rejecting stigmatized identities.

The purpose of structuring each study to mimic a stage in the employment process was to build the findings off of each other and look for commonalities that would elevate the conclusions of the dissertation as a whole. As I analyzed the data and wrote up my findings, it was clear that this approach had been successful. For example, in Study One it was made evident that applicants to sport-related jobs were more apt to cover during the interview portion of the hiring process, rather than doing so on their resume or in application package. The findings of Study Two, which asked hiring decision makers for their input on covering behaviors, validated that decision by participants in Study One, as they suggested through their evaluation of gay candidates that certain types of covering should be deployed during the interview process for sport related jobs. Similarly, several participants in Study One mentioned their concern with their apparel choices for an
interview, depending upon which organization they were applying to. In Study Two, the focus group participants suggested that showing some uniqueness in your appearance is appropriate and can even have positive effects (e.g. exuding confidence), but that wardrobe choices that appear to violate traditional norms of business dress codes may do more harm than good. Thus, the participants in Study One were right to assume that an ill-fated choice of shoe, or pant, could ruin their chances of getting a job. Brad referenced his interview experience in Study Three, recalling how open he was about his sexual identity during the process. Although that might have been a surprise to some, the results of Study Two suggest that those making hiring decisions in sport may actually want to see candidates be as authentic as they possibly can be, and that being perceived as inauthentic can hurt your chances. And in relation to Study One, prior to Brad’s interview he had already met with Senior Leadership and was thus able to identify and interpret signals that the organization valued diversity and inclusion, making his disclosure during the interview an easier decision to make.

Overall, there were a number of overarching findings that emerged from the completion of all three of these studies. First, there are many challenges that go into the understanding of nuances that are involved in identity management, but these nuances are crucial to understanding the experience of stigmatized individuals in the sport workplace. Organizational signals (Celani & Singh, 2011; Connelly et al., 2011) play a key role in determining if identity covering needs to be enacted as was seen in Study One. Study Two demonstrated that hiring decision makers are also increasingly looking at nuanced behaviors and traits when tasked with evaluating candidates for jobs – all of which become more important when the candidates are extremely similar to each other. And in
Study Three, it was apparent that employees with stigmatized identities are slightly tweaking their behaviors as they move from office-to-office, or meeting-to-meeting, highlighting how inclusion exists as multiple levels (Ferdman, 2014) and the characteristics of each level dictate how stigmatized identities should be presented.

Another important finding of this dissertation is that for stigmatized individuals, identity management is a constant, conscious effort that involves monitoring everything from their appearance, wardrobe choices, tone of voice, interpersonal relationships, body language and choice of words. Studies One and Three in particular emphasized the amount of effort that can go into deciding what elements of one’s authentic self can be amplified, and which need to be mitigated. This is consistent with what has been written in the identity covering (Yoshino, 2002, 2006; Yoshino & Smith, 2013) and authenticity (Cha et al., 2019) literature. It is also clear that stigmatized individuals understand the costs (e.g. psychological, social, professional) that come with having to consistently focus on the management of their stigmatized identities.

Finally, and perhaps on a positive note, individuals with stigmatized identities are beginning to see how their stigmas can become strengths – particularly in traditionally homogenous environments such as sport. Their uniqueness can be a strength, and they are becoming increasingly comfortable of challenging the status quo and owning their diversity. Scholars in both the management (Cox & Blake, 1991) and sport management literature (Cunningham 2011a, 2011b, 2015b) have long suggested that organizations stand to benefit from being diverse and inclusive. However, marginalized individuals finally seem to be internalizing that information in order to use it for their own professional benefit. This is a welcome change, and positive outcomes can emerge when
both organizations and individuals recognize the value of diverse and inclusive workforces.
APPENDIX A

STUDY ONE PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE AND DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
2. Describe your perfect work environment.
3. Why do you want to work for this organization?
4. What do you consider to be your most important accomplishment, and why?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

**Demographic Questions (optional)**

What is your sex?
- Male
- Female
- Other [ ]

What is your age?
<Enter age in text box>

What is your sexual orientation?
- Heterosexual (Straight)
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other [ ]
- Prefer not to say

What year are you in your current degree program?
- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- 5th Year (undergraduate)
- Graduate Student

What is your ethnicity?
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian American
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
Other [                          ]
Have you previously held a position (internship, part-time, full-time) in the sport industry?
Yes
No
APPENDIX B

STUDY ONE DEBRIEFING INTERVIEW GUIDE

*NOTE: There were also questions based on the pre-screening questionnaire and the resume submitted prior to the interview.

1. How would you describe your overall perceptions of the two organizations for which you completed the pre-screening questionnaires?
   a. We asked you to take note of at least one thing in particular about the organizations during your research. Could you share those things and explain why they were of importance or of interest to you?
2. Could you explain and elaborate on what your preferred work environment is?
3. If you were to choose one of the two organizations that you would prefer to work for, which one would you choose and why?
4. What was your process for drafting your resume for this position? Did you use one that you already had on hand or did you make changes to suit the organization or position?
   a. If you did, what did you change and why did you change it?
5. Is there anything in your personal or professional lives that you would not be comfortable sharing with either of these employers in an application, cover letter or interview? If so, what would it be and why would you not feel comfortable?
6. If you were called into an interview for either of these organizations, how would the organization itself impact the way you prepared for the interview, how you dressed for the interview, or how you behaved during the interview?
7. What does the phrase “authentic self” mean to you? If you need some time to think about this, or jot down some notes, please feel free to do so.
8. How important is it for you to feel that you can be your authentic self in the workplace?

9. How important is your *(insert marginalized identity here)* to you in your daily life?
## APPENDIX C

### STUDY ONE PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>College Level</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexa</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Black/Af. Amer.</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Black/Af. Amer.</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaleb</td>
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<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Black/Af. Amer.</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
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<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

STUDY TWO JOB DESCRIPTION

Assistant Director, Marketing & Promotions

<Division 1> University Athletics

Responsible for the development and implementation of comprehensive plans to increase attendance at <Division 1> athletics contests, with a primary focus on men’s basketball, soccer and lacrosse. Oversee in-game presentation, promotions and the spirit squads to engage the community and serve as a sense of spirit and pride for our campus. Develop and cultivate partnerships in the local community, with local media and on-campus to increase season ticket sales, group ticket sales and single game ticket sales. This position requires an innovative, creative and energetic personality that cares for the overall well-being of our student-athletes, coaches and staff. Required skills include graphic design, as well as strong understanding of digital and social media marketing tools and best practices.

Requires B.A./B.S., one to three years of related experience, graphic design skills, as well as a strong understanding of digital and social media marketing tools and best practices.

Please send letter of application, resume and names of references via website.

Internal Number: 3789/I0216

DETAILS:

Posted: March 1, 2019
Salary: Open
Type: Full-time – Experienced
Categories: Sales/Marketing/Sponsorship
Sales/Marketing/Sponsorship – Event Promotion
Preferred Education: 4 Year Degree
APPENDIX E

STUDY TWO SAMPLE CANDIDATE RESUME

CURRENT ADDRESS
17 East Avenue
Sharon, MA 01201

Chad Stevenson
rsstevenson@gmail.com
http://linkedin.in/chad-stevenson

PHONE NUMBER
(413)-707-7493

EDUCATION
University of Connecticut
Neag School of Education
Bachelor of Science in Sport Management
Graduated Magna Cum Laude; Dean's List Fall 2014-Spring 2018
• Top Senior Nominee 2018
• Recipient of the Alumni Scholarship
• Recipient of James and Anabelle Brown Scholarship

EXPERIENCE
Kraft Sports Group
Marketing Associate
May 2018 – Present
• Lead and assist in the planning and execution of various events for the Kraft Sports Group properties (New England Patriots and New England Revolution), as well as partner events.
• Develop and manage key strategic relationships with partners and customers.
• Design and create marketing collateral using software such as Adobe Photoshop and InDesign.
• Coordinate the fulfillment of contracted assets for partners.
• Manage digital and social media activation for Kraft Sports Group and partner events and promotions.
• Provide quality, timely communication for partners and target customers.

University of Connecticut Athletics
Promotions Assistant
September 2016 – April 2018
• Assisted in planning and executing pre-game, in-game and post-game promotional activities to enhance the game day experience for fans at men’s and women’s basketball games.
• Planned and executed special events and theme nights
• Executed sponsorship fulfillment activities at men’s and women’s basketball games.
• Participated in student outreach on campus.

Springfield Golf & Country Club
Pro Shop Associate
West Springfield, MA
May 2014 – August 2017
• Greeted customers and handled a variety of transactions, including merchandise sales, greens fees, tee-time bookings and membership sales.
• Assisted club staff with special event planning and execution.
• Resolved conflicts and member issues in a timely manner.
• Trained new staff, utilizing leadership skills to ensure successful onboarding.
• Performed all morning preparation and end-of-day duties as required to ensure accurate accounting of sales.

ACTIVITIES
UConn Sport Business Association
Fall 2016 – Spring 2018
• Participated in club event planning and events

Boy Scouts of America
Fall 2008 – Spring 2016
• Achieved the Rank of Eagle Scout (January 2016)
• Assistant Senior Patrol Leader (December 2013 – January 2015)
• Patrol Leader (December 2012 – December 2013)

SKILLS
Computer: Proficient in MS Office (Excel, Word, PowerPoint, Access); HTML, Google Systems, Adobe Suite
## APPENDIX F

### SUMMARY OF COVERING MANIPULATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Covering Axis</th>
<th>Appearance-based manipulation</th>
<th>Advocacy-based manipulation</th>
<th>Affiliation-based manipulation</th>
<th>Association-based manipulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Chad Stevenson</td>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Organized Pride Night Fundraiser</td>
<td>Drinking water with pinky finger up</td>
<td>Mentions same-sex partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Matthew Brown</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Wearing scarf</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Legs crossed</td>
<td>Member of LGBTQ employee resource group during internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Andrew Oakley</td>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>Wearing makeup (eyeliner/mascara)</td>
<td>Received award for work with local Human Rights Campaign chapter</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Lesbian best friend in sport workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Lucas Murray</td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>Nails painted</td>
<td>LGBTQ Mentor and Ally trainer</td>
<td>Talks with hands / Limp wrist</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Candidate Manipulation: Candidate 1 (Appearance-based covering)

Q: What drew you to this position?

A: Well I really enjoyed my experience working in the Athletic Department at the University of Connecticut when I was completing my undergraduate degree in Sport Management and I’ve been looking for an opportunity to get back into college athletics. I’ve enjoyed my time working with the Patriots, and I have learned a lot, but I believe my passion lies more in college athletics than in professional sport. I know that your university has a strong reputation in athletics and a storied history, and it’s something that I would relish the opportunity to be a part of.

Q: Okay great. Could you describe something that makes you proud?

A: When I was at UConn and I worked as a Promotions Assistant in the Athletic Department I suggested that we hold a Pride Night fundraiser at one of our basketball games. As an LGBTQ student on campus I wanted to show that the Athletic Department was demonstrating its commitment to inclusion and I thought that a special event celebrating our LGBTQ community would be a great way to do that. I also wanted to raise money for an LGBTQ cause, so we decided to give a portion of the proceeds to an LGBTQ youth charity in the Hartford area. It was the first time that I had ever pitched such an ambitious idea and I was so lucky that my supervisors and the A.D. were supportive. It was a great event and I learned a lot about how to plan and execute a special event.

Q: That sounds wonderful! Thank you for sharing that. With regards to your current position, what do you enjoy the most?

A: Hmmm, I would say that I enjoy the variety of my job. Every day brings something new and there are never two identical days. I know people who work in jobs where day-in and day-out they do the same routines and the same tasks over and over again – my boyfriend has a job like that, and it is hard on him. I don’t have that issue and I consider myself very lucky to work in an environment that challenges me, engages me and excites me. I honestly do love walking into work every morning and I can’t wait to see how the day unfolds.
1. Please discuss your thoughts about the four candidate interviews that you just saw.

2. How did your impressions of the candidates change from seeing only their resumes to seeing their interviews?

3. Would any of you change your rankings of the candidates after seeing the interviews? Why or why not?

4. Were there any moments during any of the interviews that stood out to you in a positive way? Please explain.

5. Were there any moments during any of the interviews that stood out to you in a negative way? Please explain.

6. Please discuss amongst yourself a final ranking of the candidates. Everyone should be in agreement once you have reached a decision.
APPENDIX I

STUDY THREE PRE-SHADOWING GUIDE

1. Could you tell me about your employment history and career path? Please start with your first job out of college and continue up to and including this job.

2. Could you tell me about how your comfortability with your sexual identity has changed over the course of your life?

3. Please describe how ‘out’ you are to the following groups of people: family, friends, co-workers, strangers.

4. Could you explain what drew you to the current organization that you work for?
APPENDIX J

STUDY THREE POST-SHADOWING INTERVIEW GUIDE

*NOTE: Additional questions were added for each participant that may ask them to elaborate on observations I made in their workplace.

1. When you think of your current workplace, what words come to mind?
   a. Could you explain what those words mean to you in this context?

2. Could you describe an example of a time when you have actively worked to cover (hide) a part of your sexual identity while in the workplace?
   a. Can you think of any other examples of this?
   b. Tell me about the rationale behind covering your sexual identity in that/those instances.

3. In your own words, how would you describe an inclusive organization?

4. Please describe your feelings about the leaders in your organization.
   a. How do you feel they see you?

5. Please describe your feelings about your relationship with your co-workers.
   a. How do you feel they see you?

6. How much does the current political or societal climate influence how you portray yourself and your sexual identity in the workplace?

7. What does the phrase “authentic self” mean to you? If you need some time to think about this, or jot down some notes, please feel free to do so.

8. Do you consider the sport industry to be a more difficult place for an LGBTQ individual to be their authentic self as opposed to a different industry? Why or why not?
REFERENCES


