“What’s with the Scarf?” Investigating the Perceptions of Identity Covering by Hiring Committees In Sport

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Research in both sport management (Cunningham et al., 2010; MacCharles & Melton, 2018) and general management (Drydakis, 2015; Tichy, 2011) demonstrates that while sexual minority applicants face discrimination during the hiring process—with evaluators consistently giving heterosexual applicants more positive evaluations than LGBTQ applicants—there is also evidence of certain sport workplaces becoming more LGBT-inclusive (Cunningham, 2015; Melton & Cunningham, 2015; Melton & MacCharles, in press). Within these more accepting environments, however, sexual minorities are still cautious about how and to whom they should reveal their sexual orientation (Lynch & Rodell, 2018; MacCharles & Melton, in press).

In fact, LGBTQ applicants and employees will look for signals (e.g., an ally sticker) that it is safe to express their sexual orientation identity. During this process, these individuals will also send signals (e.g., mention their same-sex partner) as a way to gauge their colleagues’ levels of acceptance—often engaging in covering, or identity management techniques, as a way to downplay their stigmatized identity (e.g., gay, lesbian) and “blend in” within sport organizations (MacCharles & Melton, in press). However, past research has not fully examined the outcomes associated with covering (or expressing) one’s sexual orientation during the hiring process. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how hiring decision makers assess job candidates who identify as gay men—a marginalized group in sport—in interviews for sport-related jobs, and to understand if engaging in identity covering helps or hinders gay male applicants in their pursuit of sport-related jobs.

This study draws from stigma theory (Herek, 2007) and covering literature (Yoshino, 2002) to understand the effects of covering one’s identity. Specifically, we examine four types of covering: appearance, affiliation, advocacy and association. The following research question guided our exploration: How do specific types of identity covering influence hiring decisions?

To answer this question, we recruited graduate students (N = 54) to participate in focus groups (N = 14) and tasked them with ranking candidates for a sport marketing position. First, participants were provided resumes of four applicants with relatively identical qualifications and asked to rate the candidates. The next day, the focus group reviewed each candidate’s pre-screening interview. They were then asked to make a hiring recommendation as a group. Each applicant was a White gay man who was covering his sexual orientation along one of the four axes: appearance, affiliation, advocacy and association. NVivo 12 was used to analyze the audio transcripts from each focus group.

Findings show some types of sexual identity covering led to more positive comments (affiliation-based), while other types were perceived in a negative way (advocacy-based). Evaluators preferred expressions of candidates’ sexual identity through their appearance (e.g., eye makeup), and typically referred to the appearance-based coverer as “generic” and “forgettable”. However, the applicant who wore a scarf elicited strong negative reactions, suggesting that deviating from the typical business attire may be more polarizing than wearing makeup. Findings also showed evaluators use coded language to draw attention to expressions of an applicant’s sexual identity, and they were hesitant to engage in difficult conversations.