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## Football, Media and Homophobia: Framing of the First Pride Game in the Australian Football League

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Abstract:	<p>Two Australian Football clubs—St Kilda and the Sydney Swans—played the first Pride Game in Australian professional sport in 2016 to support and include the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) community at and through a major sporting event. This study examines the framing of this game in the print and online media, and in public responses via comments on media coverage and comments on Facebook posts. The framing of both the media coverage and the public response was predominantly supportive, with the theme of the 'inclusion', of gay AFL players and the broader LGBTIQ community, prominent. However, there was a significant difference in the frames used in media coverage compared to the public response to this coverage. There was a relatively high proportion of unsupportive comments (e.g. a "Stick to football" theme), including pernicious homophobia, present, particularly in the public response, compared to other recent related research. Overall, the findings suggest that, while there was strong support for the Pride Game, homophobia in sport remains, and the media, particularly social media is an important platform for its expression. This study also highlights the value in analysing multiple platforms in media framing research.</p>

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# 1 **Football, Media and Homophobia: Framing of the First Pride Game in the**

## 2 **Australian Football League**

### 3 **Introduction**

4 International rugby league player Ian Roberts was the first Australian professional player  
5 of any football code to come out as gay—in *New Weekly* magazine in 1995. This made  
6 Australian media headlines, not all of which were positive, and Roberts received  
7 homophobic abuse from the public while playing. Newspaper columnist and former  
8 Australian rugby union player Peter FitzSimons, at the time noted ‘the next sports person  
9 to come out will make fewer headlines, the next after that fewer still, and fewer still again  
10 until ... I'm bored already’ (FitzSimons, 1995). However, 20+ years later, the Australian  
11 media’s response to other male professional footballers coming out remains untested—  
12 Roberts is still the only one.

13 Internationally, media coverage of male professional athletes’ coming out has slowly  
14 transitioned from reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity historically found in sport, to  
15 more accepting models of inclusive masculinity. Coming out announcements from  
16 professional and college athletes in the United States (US), such as NBA player Jason  
17 Collins, and European soccer players, have generated a more positive media discourse  
18 (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cassidy, 2017; Cleland, 2015; Kian et al., 2015;  
19 Schallhorn and Hempel, 2017). Research also demonstrates a decreasing cultural

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9 1 homophobia in online spaces (e.g. social media and internet message boards) over time  
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11 2 (Billings et al., 2015; Cleland, 2015; Kian, 2015; Luisi et al., 2016), and more accepting  
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13 3 discourse in specific cases, including examples from English soccer (Cleland, 2015). This  
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15 4 suggests that media remains a forum for contested debate about homosexuality and  
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17 5 homophobia, and that it is important to engage with multiple media platforms when  
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19 6 seeking to understand the types and range of representation and discussion that occur.  
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24 7 While the number of openly gay athletes in professional sport is still low, particularly  
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26 8 in men's sport, some sporting organisations have engaged with the lesbian, gay, bisexual,  
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28 9 transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) community by supporting Pride initiatives.  
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31 10 Many sporting organisations, including Swedish professional ice hockey teams, and US  
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33 11 minor league baseball and soccer teams, have incorporated the rainbow—a symbol of  
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35 12 LGBTIQ pride and diversity—into their uniforms for Pride-themed games (Lukas, 2015).  
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37 13 The North American National Hockey League has embraced the Pride theme, with Pride  
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39 14 nights at games since 2015 and 'Hockey is for Everyone' since 2017 (Zeigler, 2017).  
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42 15 In a global context, Australia provides an interesting case study. There are several  
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44 16 openly gay male former Olympians, out officials and referees at the elite professional  
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46 17 level, multiple out female athletes across many sports, and prominent gay community-  
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48 18 level Australian Football players, but no openly gay male professional team sport athletes.  
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50 19 In addition, Australia has the second highest rate of 'closeted' grassroots sports  
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52 20 participants (Sadler, 2015) and many gay, lesbian and heterosexual athletes have  
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1 witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport (Denison & Kitchen, 2015). In Australian  
2 society more broadly, same-sex marriage was only introduced after the public voted in  
3 favour of it in 2017—but the accompanying campaigning damaged the mental health of  
4 members of the LGBTIQ community due to the negative sentiment present (Metherell,  
5 2019).

6 The Australian government's national sport administration body (The Australian  
7 Sports Commission, now Sport Australia) introduced the Pride in Sport Index in 2016,  
8 the first instrument for benchmarking inclusion of LGBTIQ people within sport and  
9 sporting organisations (Australian Sports Commission, 2017). In addition, several  
10 Australian professional sports teams have actively supported the LGBTIQ community  
11 (Ciccarelli, 2016; Bossi, 2017). While Australian and international initiatives  
12 demonstrate support for the LGBTIQ community, little research has explored media  
13 coverage of, or public response to, these campaigns.

14 In an age of increasingly fragmented and diverse media, this study aimed to explore  
15 the media coverage of sexual orientation and identity in Australian sport through the  
16 media and public responses to the first Pride Game in Australian professional men's sport.  
17 Using agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005) and framing theory (Entman, 1993), we examine  
18 the relationship between media coverage of this Pride Game and the public response to  
19 it. In so doing, we explore whether or not the trends identified in other national contexts  
20 are evident in an Australian case, including whether differences exist between

1 mainstream media and social media framing. This paper reviews the literature and  
2 describes the relevant theoretical frameworks and masculinity theory, before moving on  
3 to the method, results and discussion sections.

#### 4 **Literature review**

5 Most research exploring mainstream legacy media coverage of homosexuality in sport  
6 focuses on professional male athletes' disclosures that they are gay. Early work shows  
7 the initial response to gay professional athletes was mixed. One of the first cases explored  
8 was that of US National Basketball Association (NBA) player John Amaechi, who came  
9 out post-retirement in 2007. Hardin et al's. (2009) analysis of US newspaper opinion  
10 columns found that, while the writing appeared progressive, it often reproduced concepts  
11 of hegemonic masculinity. Kian and Anderson's (2009) analysis of the media around  
12 Amaechi's disclosure found supportive and inclusive coverage, alongside reinforcement  
13 of locker room hegemonic masculinity.

14 In contrast, when Jason Collins disclosed he was gay in 2013, the media adopted  
15 frames more favourable to inclusive masculinity. The most common message in  
16 newspaper coverage of Collins' coming out was one of a 'landmark' event (Kian et al.,  
17 2015), with an overwhelming framing of sport as accepting and inclusive of homosexual  
18 athletes. A study comparing the media framing of coverage of Collins to that of Michael  
19 Sam, a yet to be drafted US college American Football player, who came out in 2014,

1 suggested that the nuanced coverage meant that sports journalism could perhaps no longer  
2 be considered the ‘toy department’ of the newsroom (Cassidy, 2017).

3 Explorations of gay athletes’ coming out in Europe also indicate changes in media  
4 framing over time. Cleland (2014) compared coverage of Swedish soccer player Anton  
5 Hysén’s coming out in 2011 with that of Justin Fashanu in 1990, and noted that ‘a  
6 significant number of articles stress the need for key stakeholders in football [soccer]  
7 (players, fans, clubs, agents, the authorities, and the media) to accept gay players’  
8 (Cleland, 2014: 1269). Media coverage of German soccer player Thomas Hitzlsperger’s  
9 coming out in 2015 was also overwhelmingly supportive (Schallhorn & Hempel, 2017).

10 However, not all sports media narratives have moved to reject hegemonic  
11 masculinity completely. Luisi et al., (2016) analysed US newspaper coverage of the  
12 coming out of both Collins and Sam, and concluded that while NBA media coverage  
13 demonstrated elements of inclusive masculinity, National Football League (NFL) media  
14 sources were more likely to illustrate traditional hegemonic masculinity structures. For  
15 example, anonymous NFL coaches were quoted saying that homosexuals would  
16 ‘chemically imbalance an NFL locker room’ (Luisi et al, 2016: 15).

### 18 *Alternative media framing of LGBTIQ athletes*

19 As in traditional media discourses, there is evidence of less blatantly homophobic online  
20 content over time. Kian et al., (2011) analysed 7000 posts across 618 US college

1 American Football message boards and found examples of homophobic language, leading  
2 them to argue that while ‘mainstream sport media is increasingly policed for homophobia  
3 and sexism, ... the anonymity of the internet permits hegemonic masculinity to flourish  
4 in specific locations, without contestation’ (Kian et al., 2011: 680). More recent research  
5 on fan responses in the United Kingdom (UK) indicate changes in online discourse.  
6 Cleland (2015) identified inclusive masculinity on English Football (soccer) Association  
7 message boards, while Cleland et al., (2018) found just 2% of the 5000 posts on UK  
8 soccer fan online message boards and comments from *The Guardian* newspaper about  
9 Thomas Hitzlsperger’s coming out, contained pernicious homophobic content.

10 The limited research exploring traditional and online media coverage of  
11 homosexuality in sport suggests a multi-platform analysis is useful. For example, an  
12 analysis of liberal US website MSNBC.com revealed that while this media outlet  
13 overwhelmingly framed coverage of Collins and Sam as positive for sport and US society,  
14 readers’ comments underneath those stories attempted to uphold traditional hegemonic  
15 masculinity (Kian, 2015). Similarly, Billings et al., (2015) found a difference between  
16 platforms after analysing newspaper articles and tweets following coverage of Collins’  
17 disclosure. Although coverage was generally positive, traditional media framed the story  
18 as a ‘watershed’ moment for sport, while Twitter contributors framed it more in terms of  
19 civil rights (Billings et al., 2015).

20 Most previous analysis of sport media has focused on coverage of athletes who

1 disclosed their sexual orientation. Some research has explored how organisations include  
2 the LGBTIQ community and tackle homophobic abuse from a policy perspective (Bury,  
3 2015). However, there is limited research on how the media frames sporting  
4 organisations' support for social change initiatives. Our study addresses this gap by  
5 investigating the frames present in the media coverage of, and public response to, the first  
6 Australian Football League (AFL) Pride Game.

### 8 *Agenda-setting and framing*

9 Agenda-setting and framing are common theories applied in media research. Agenda-  
10 setting theory proposes that increased media focus on an issue raises the salience of that  
11 issue, relative to others, for media consumers. Fundamentally, agenda-setting theory  
12 posits that the media can influence what viewers or readers think about, but it cannot  
13 directly influence what the public thinks (McCombs, 2005; McCombs, 2013).

14 Framing theory, in conjunction with agenda-setting theory, helps explain how  
15 discourse frames the content already filtered through an agenda-setting process. A frame  
16 can be used 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in  
17 a communicating text' (Entman, 1993: 52). Framing is useful within media research to  
18 'organise the world both for journalists who report it and, .... for us who rely on their  
19 reports' (Gitlin, 1980: 7). Essentially, the media select and emphasise specific  
20 components of an issue or event, and ignore or give a lower profile to other components



1 (Entman, 1993). This can influence how the public receives and accepts information on  
2 the issue with frames both shaping public perception and facilitating how less informed  
3 groups navigate their understanding of a story (Scheufele, 1999).

#### 4 ***Hegemonic and inclusive masculinity***

5 Masculinity is the set of social practices and cultural representations associated with being  
6 a man. However, according to Connell (2005) rather than there being one performance of  
7 masculinity that all men conform to, there are multiple performances of masculinity,  
8 across multiple sites. Different men display different versions of masculinity and  
9 masculinity in any individual can be transient and influenced by context (Connell, 2005).

10 Hegemonic masculinity has been described as ‘the configuration of gender practice  
11 which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of  
12 patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and  
13 the subordination of women’ (Connell, 2005: 77). Traditionally, sport media and  
14 professional sport have reinforced notions of hegemonic masculinity (Whannel, 2002),  
15 and organised competitive sports and the media that cover them in Western cultures have  
16 been highly homophobic (Anderson, 2011b). Early research indicated that sports fields  
17 were inherently homophobic to uphold the masculine ideal (Pronger, 1990). Messner  
18 (1992: 34) wrote, ‘the extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys [in  
19 sports] learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to  
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1 prove one's heterosexual status is not acceptable.' Anderson (2002) described team sports  
2 as an arena in which 'hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, as an athlete  
3 represents the ideal of what it means to be a man, a definition that contrasts to what it  
4 means to be feminine and/or gay' (Anderson, 2002: 860). More recent research suggests  
5 these attitudes are changing, with an associated decrease in homophobia in sport  
6 (Anderson, 2011a; Bush, Anderson & Carr, 2012), including in Australia (Murray &  
7 White, 2017).

8 A useful theory in this new era of declining homophobia (Cleland, 2018) is  
9 Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity concept. This proposes that multiple  
10 masculinities can co-exist with equal cultural appeal across different sports settings where  
11 boys and men rejected homophobia, compulsory heterosexism and sexism. Rather than  
12 rigidly conforming to hegemonic masculinity, the concept of multiple masculinities has  
13 resulted in more fluid, varied and reconfigured performances of masculinity. In line with  
14 the move towards ideals of inclusive masculinity within sport in Western cultures, the  
15 research on media coverage of LGBTIQ athletes discussed above highlights a shift from  
16 upholding ideals of hegemonic masculinity to supporting notions of inclusive  
17 masculinity. In this context, this study asks the following questions:

18 RQ1: What frames were present in the media coverage of the first AFL Pride Game?

19 RQ2: What frames were present in the public response to the first AFL Pride Game?

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9 **1 Method**

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11 **2 Context**

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14 3 The Pride Game aimed to support and include the LGBTIQ community at and through a  
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16 4 major sporting event, and to raise awareness about the issues faced by people identifying  
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18 5 as LGBTIQ. The 2016 Pride Game was a St Kilda Football Club (St Kilda) home game  
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20 6 played against the Sydney Swans Football Club (Sydney) in the AFL, Australia's leading  
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22 7 professional sports league. The AFL, an 18-team national league, generated AUD\$500m  
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24 8 in revenue in 2015 (Bowen, 2016). The AUD\$2.5b paid to the AFL's in 2015 was the  
25  
26 9 highest price recorded in Australian history for sports broadcasting rights (Stensholt and  
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28 10 Mason, 2015). Globally, the AFL has the fourth highest average crowd attendance per  
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30 11 game (Australian Associated Press, 2015). It therefore generates significant national  
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32 12 media attention across numerous platforms.  
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37 13 For the first AFL Pride Game (the focus of this paper), players from both teams wore  
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39 14 rainbow-adorned uniforms, while LGBTIQ support services and networks set up stalls at  
40  
41 15 the game, and Melbourne's LGBTIQ radio station broadcast the game live, in addition to  
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43 16 usual radio and television network coverage. An integrated month-long campaign used  
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45 17 St Kilda's internal club and external sources to promote the match as a space for  
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47 18 inclusiveness and belonging within sport. This included creating content with a message  
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49 19 of inclusion (e.g. videos with LGBTIQ fans, staff members and other stakeholders),  
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51 20 which was disseminated through St Kilda's website and social media channels.  
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1 St Kilda previously supported Pride events including encouraging club staff to walk  
2 in Melbourne's annual Pride March, and becoming an official stakeholder in a community  
3 (non-professional) Pride Cup game held by the Yarra Glen [Australian] Football Club  
4 annually since 2014 (Wade, 2016). Two years before the AFL Pride Game, Jason Ball, a  
5 Yarra Glen player, became the first Australian Football player at any level to come out.  
6 In the absence of any openly gay current or former professional AFL players, Ball became  
7 a community icon for gay men playing Australian Football. The AFL created an  
8 educational video on sexual orientation, featuring Ball, to show to newly drafted AFL  
9 players, and Ball was a prominent AFL Pride Game ambassador, working closely with St  
10 Kilda to educate players and staff.

11 The Pride Game was held in August 2016 at Docklands Stadium (capacity 53,359  
12 for AFL games) in Melbourne (capital city of the state of Victoria; Australia's second  
13 largest city; population of over four million people). Over 33,000 people attended the  
14 match, slightly higher than the average AFL match attendance (31,805) across the season  
15 (Connolly, 2016).

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### 17 ***The sample***

18 To explore the media coverage and the public response to the first AFL Pride Game,  
19 traditional media articles, online articles, comments and social media posts were  
20 collected. The sample included Melbourne's two major print newspapers (The *Herald*

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1 *Sun* and *The Age*), online articles from other Australian media, and comments in response  
2 to Pride Game-related Facebook posts (see below for more details of specific sites). These  
3 outlets were selected to facilitate analysis across a range of media forms, enabling  
4 engagement with emerging debates in the literature around the importance of  
5 incorporating multiple media platforms in media content research.

6 *The Herald Sun* (and *Sunday Herald Sun*), a News Corp Australia tabloid newspaper,  
7 has a daily readership of more than 825,000. *The Age*, at the time a Fairfax Media (now  
8 Nine Entertainment Co) broadsheet newspaper (though technically now published in the  
9 compact Berliner format), has a daily readership of 477,000 Monday–Friday, 645,000 on  
10 Saturday and 508,000 on Sunday (*The Sunday Age*) (Morgan, 2016). A copy of every  
11 edition of both newspapers was collected between July 20 (the official Pride Game launch  
12 date) and August 20, 2016 (a week after the Pride Game). All identified Pride Game-  
13 related articles and letters to the editor were included in the sample. These two  
14 newspapers were selected because they are the two mainstream newspapers most focus  
15 on Australian Football in Melbourne, the location of the Pride Game. They also enabled  
16 the study to engage with news coverage from the two major newspaper organisations in  
17 Australia, News Corp Australia and Fairfax Media (now Nine Entertainment Co).

18 A Google News Alert was established with the terms St Kilda, AFL and Pride Game  
19 to collect online news articles daily between July 20 and August 20, 2016. All identified  
20 Pride Game-related articles on news websites were collected. The final sample included

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1 articles from mainstream media (e.g. FoxSports.com.au, the Australian Broadcasting  
2 Commission, and Special Broadcasting Service), and queer media (e.g.  
3 samesame.com.au, the Star Observer and Gay News Network). All identified public  
4 comments in response to these online articles were also collected.

5 Pride Game-related public comments from posts on three public Facebook pages—  
6 the St Kilda ([www.facebook.com/stkfc/](http://www.facebook.com/stkfc/)), the AFL ([www.facebook.com/afl/](http://www.facebook.com/afl/)), and  
7 [removed for peer review]—were collected between July 20 and August 20, 2016.  
8 Facebook, the most used social network in Australia, has a unique audience reach of over  
9 15 million per month, reaching 71% of all internet users in February 2016 (Tucker, 2016).  
10 Although other research has used Twitter as a data source to analyse discourse on  
11 LGBTIQ media narratives (Billings et al., 2015), we used Facebook in this study as its  
12 unlimited characters allow for more detailed responses/comments and in-depth analysis  
13 from contributors, and because it has a wider audience reach in Australia than Twitter.  
14 This social media content, and the data collected from the Google News Alert expanded  
15 the geographic reach of the study beyond the Melbourne heartland of the two newspapers,  
16 the *Herald Sun* and *The Age*. While those newspapers are Melbourne-based, the other  
17 data had no such geographic boundary.

### 19 ***Data analysis***

20 All identified items were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. A two-

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9 1 step coding process was followed (Saldaña, 2013). A deductive, qualitative content  
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11 2 analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) was adopted to coding to generate multiple and  
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13 3 layered elements of analysis. An initial layer of coding was applied to categorize items  
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16 4 as either supportive or unsupportive of the Pride Game, based on initial close reading.  
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18 5 Key factors considered in this close reading included the specific words used in the item,  
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20 6 and the tone of the language used in the item. Further descriptive coding was then  
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22 7 conducted, informed by Cleland et al's., (2018) use of McCormack's (2011) four-stage  
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24 8 model, which categorises homosexually-themed language as: 'homophobic language'  
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26 9 (pernicious intent and a negative social effect in trying to degrade or marginalise a person  
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28 10 or behaviour through an association with homosexuality); 'fag discourse' (a wide range  
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30 11 of intent but less negative social effect); 'gay discourse' (no intent either way but  
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32 12 privileges heterosexuality); and 'pro-gay language' (a positive social effect and more  
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34 13 inclusive towards sexuality) (McCormack, 2011: 673–675). This coding schema and two-  
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36 14 step process allowed both a quantitative analysis of the number and proportion of items  
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38 15 identified in each theme, and an exploration of nuance in the data. For example, it enabled  
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40 16 us to identify and quantify items relevant to more specific themes within the broad  
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42 17 categories of 'supportive' and 'unsupportive', such as *inclusion* and *stick to football*.  
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44 18 These are discussed in more detail in the analysis and discussion that follows. Two coders  
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46 19 collaborated to code a sample in this first and second step, working through a random  
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48 20 selection of articles and posts, and coming to agreement on particular themes. One coder  
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1 then conducted the rest of the coding using a guidebook developed in the initial stage.

2 In addition to coding the comments made in response to Pride Game-related  
3 Facebook posts, comments that achieved ‘top comment’ status—the comment with the  
4 most ‘likes’ from users—underneath each Pride Game-related Facebook post were  
5 recorded and coded.

## 6 7 **Results**

8 A total of 1980 items were gathered, including 11 print newspaper articles, 30 online  
9 articles, 32 letters to the editor, 211 comments associated with the media articles and 1696  
10 comments on 33 Facebook posts.

### 11 12 ***Media Coverage: Inclusion***

13 The key frame identified in 38 of the 41 print and online media articles was a supportive  
14 frame of ‘*inclusion*’, across two identifiable groups—potential gay AFL players and the  
15 broader LGBTIQ community. The fact that no AFL player had ever come out as gay was  
16 mentioned in most media articles, with a strong theme of urging gay players to come out.

17 There was also a wider inclusion frame around the LGBTIQ community in the media  
18 coverage, suggesting that it was important for Australian Football and the AFL to promote  
19 a message of inclusion, and then translate that message into action, through initiatives such  
20 as the Pride Game. The AFL chief executive Gillon McLachlan was quoted as saying:



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1 People are born how they're born, that's just a fact, and there are some in the community who  
2 still might not accept that. If we can play a role with St Kilda and Sydney in calling out that  
3 fact and that everyone should be able to be who they want to be. If we can do that through a  
4 football game and have the conversation then let's have it. (SBS, 2016).

5 In addition, LGBTIQ online news sites included three opinion-piece accounts of the  
6 game's meaning to the writer. LGBTIQ news sites were more likely to focus on the Pride  
7 Game's community inclusion message, while newspapers and other news websites  
8 focused more on the gay AFL player angle.

9 One story that linked both aspects of the *inclusion* frame was that of Nicky Winmar,  
10 an indigenous former St Kilda player famous for standing against racial discrimination in  
11 the AFL in 1990, and his son Tynan Winmar. Immediately prior to the Pride Game, the  
12 media focused on Tynan, who came out as gay, his struggle in sport and his father's  
13 support for him. Consequently, these items were framed as *inclusion*, both for LGBTIQ  
14 members of the community and gay AFL players.

15 However, some media coverage coded as *inclusion*, could be interpreted differently.  
16 For example, after the Pride Game launch, *The Age* published an article titled "Gay footy  
17 players urged to come out in force", in which former player and activist Russell Greene  
18 was quoted as saying "we're doing everything proactively that we can possibly do, but  
19 until four or five boys get together and say, 'yeah, we are gay', that culture still remains."

20 Overall, while the article supported the Pride Game as a way for the AFL to be more  
21 inclusive of gay players, it also emphasised that change depends on players coming out,

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9 1 alongside clubs or the code driving cultural change to accept all community members. In  
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11 2 other words, while supporting a more inclusive masculinity, these articles also proposed  
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13 3 a complex process of change, requiring action from the league, other organisations, and  
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15 4 individual players. These article also recognized that social change is an ongoing process  
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17 5 requiring time, that will not happen immediately. What was not always considered in such  
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19 6 calls for action by individual players, however, was the potential costs to the players if  
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21 7 they were not supported appropriately by the league and by supporters on coming out.  
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25 8 While the overwhelmingly majority of media coverage in this study was positive,  
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27 9 three media articles had an unsupportive frame, encapsulated by the phrase '*stick to*  
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29 10 *football*', which potentially reinforced notions of hegemonic masculinity. Although the  
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31 11 content of these articles was not categorised as homophobic language, there was a theme  
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33 12 that sport should only be a space for sport. For example, *The Daily Mail* (an online tabloid  
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35 13 Australian news site) reported that talk-back radio host Tom Elliott said "I don't want to  
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37 14 be lectured, I don't want a political message. I don't care if it's about indigenous culture  
38  
39 15 or gay players or multiculturalism or women's issues or whatever". This framed the Pride  
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41 16 Game as a 'political message', suggesting it was inappropriate to use sport to champion  
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43 17 social change. The *stick to football* frame was also present in a blog post from *Daily*  
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45 18 *Telegraph* columnist Tim Blair, who wrote "the AFL also wants to shape community  
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47 19 attitudes on subjects that have absolutely nothing at all to do with sport". This frame was  
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49 20 reinforced in a *Herald Sun* cartoon depicting a banner with 'Average White Male Round'  
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1 (Figure 1). It should be noted that these unsupportive media stories all appeared in more  
2 conservative (and tabloid in an Australian context) media outlets, and were individual  
3 views, not ‘news’ stories. Such responses can be considered as attempts to reassert the  
4 existing dominant position of, in this case, heterosexual white males and forms of  
5 hegemonic masculinity. However, these responses downplay or ignore altogether the  
6 historical and existing power relations that have enabled some groups to be dominant at  
7 the expense of other groups.

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9 *Insert Figure 1 about here*

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11 The three media articles that framed the Pride Game using the unsupportive *stick to*  
12 *football* frame were greatly outnumbered by the coverage applying the supportive  
13 *inclusion* frame. Nonetheless, they demonstrate that a small component of the media  
14 coverage potentially reinforced elements of hegemonic masculinity, by suggesting that  
15 the AFL should not be a vehicle or forum to promote social change. It is also important  
16 to note that these messages appeared in high circulation outlets, thereby reaching large  
17 numbers of people.

#### 18 19 ***Public response: Inclusion and ‘Stick to Football’***

20 The public response to the Pride Game, as it emerged through media, was established by

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1 analysing 1939 items made up of 32 letters to the editor, 211 comments under nine media  
2 articles, and 1696 comments on the 33 Facebook posts by St Kilda (n=24), the AFL (n=5)  
3 and [details removed for peer review] (n=4). Of these, 389 comments under online media  
4 articles and on Facebook posts were not specifically related to the Pride Game (e.g. “go  
5 Saints, keep those finals hopes alive”) and were considered irrelevant to the research. A  
6 total of 884 public response items were coded under the *inclusion* frame (Table 1). In  
7 contrast to the media items, most public response items framed the Pride Game in terms  
8 of the inclusion of, and support for, the LGBTIQ community rather than gay AFL players.  
9 Responses ranged from short Facebook messages such as “Great initiative, well done  
10 AFL” (www.facebook.com/afl, August 14) to longer letters to the editor in *The Age*, such  
11 as:

12 “No doubt the AFL will cop stick from the usual suspects for sponsoring the inaugural Pride  
13 game (Sport, 12/8). However, as a gay man who has enjoyed watching footy over a lifetime,  
14 I congratulate all those involved - not least the St Kilda and Sydney Swans clubs - in taking  
15 brave first steps in making footy a welcoming place for gay people, both on and off the field.  
16 Gary Jaynes, Ivanhoe.” (The Age, August 13).

17  
18 There was evidence that both the LGBTIQ community and the mainstream  
19 community welcomed the game. The message of community inclusion was particularly  
20 prevalent in comments responding to St Kilda official Facebook page posts, evident in  
21 the following quotes:

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9 1 As a straight man, I'll be wearing my beanie [hat] and scarf with pride this Saturday night.  
10 2 I'm proud to be a member of a club with the guts to stand up for equality. To stand up for  
11 3 those who get picked on and made to feel less for just being themselves. Onya Sinters!  
12 4 (www.facebook.com/stkc, August 11).  
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19 6 Thanks for putting me in this! It was such a huge night for me, I loved getting all dressed up  
20 7 and feeling 100% open about who I was at the game I love most. I cannot accurately express  
21 8 in words how important a night this was for me, and I know I am nowhere near alone. Be  
22 9 proud always! (www.facebook.com/stkc, August 15).  
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29 11 *Insert Table 1 about here*  
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33 13 Nearly all (87%) of the comments in response to the 24 Pride Game-related St Kilda  
34 14 Facebook page posts were supportive, while approximately two-thirds of comments in  
35 15 response to the five AFL (65%) and the four [details removed for peer review] (73%)  
36 16 Facebook posts were unsupportive (Table 2). A higher proportion of comments in  
37 17 response to posts on both the AFL (10%) and [details removed for peer review] (8%)  
38 18 pages were also coded as homophobic language compared to comments in response to  
39 19 posts on the St Kilda page (2%).  
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9 1 Many of the public response items framed as *inclusion* directly challenged the  
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11 2 homophobic views of others. For example, some comments with the most ‘likes’ on the  
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13 3 AFL’s Facebook page were responses to negative comments from others.

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15 4 Can't all you homophobic twats just sit down and let some people be happy? The AFL  
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17 5 representing pride has no impact on the actual game whatsoever, and only serves to make  
18  
19 6 people feel more included. Grow up. (www.facebook.com/afl, July 25).

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23 8 Over 500 positive reactions to this post and only 4 angry faces. Compassion is winning.  
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25 9 (www.facebook.com/stkc, July 20).

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29 11 This desire to challenge the outwardly homophobic views of others was also evident  
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31 12 in the comment sections of online news websites, particularly of the *Herald Sun*.

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33 13 The majority of the unsupportive public responses were framed as *stick to*  
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35 14 *football* (n=556, 84% of all unsupportive responses and 29% of all public  
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37 15 responses). Responses framed like this emphasised that the Pride Game was a way  
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39 16 for the AFL and clubs to demonstrate ‘political correctness’ and that Australian  
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41 17 Football should not be subject to ‘political agendas’. As an example, the comment  
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43 18 that received the most ‘likes’ (n=1224) across all of the Facebook comments  
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45 19 included in this study was in response to an AFL Facebook page post—“FFS [For  
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47 20 F... Sake] could the AFL just concentrate on sport for once and not shoving random  
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49 21 agendas down our throats? I watch sport to get away from all this crap.”

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9 1 Many of the responses framed as *stick to football* included qualifiers such as ‘I’m not  
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11 2 homophobic, but....’ or ‘I don’t care what goes on behind closed doors, but...’. For  
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13 3 example, a response to a *Herald Sun* story noted ‘Just play some bloody footy!!!! I don’t  
14  
15 4 care if you are gay, straight, black, white, green or purple, I just want to go to footy and  
16  
17 5 see my team take some marks and kick some goals and maybe win, is that too much to  
18  
19 6 ask!!!!.’ This is indicative of McCormack’s (2011) ‘fag discourse’ which, while not  
20  
21 7 necessarily intended as negative or to stigmatise homosexuality, has a negative social  
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23 8 effect with an underlying message that sport should continue to privilege heterosexuality.  
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25 9 It also carries an underlying assumption that sport can exist and operate independently of  
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27 10 the broader societal context within which it is embedded. This is in direct contrast to the  
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29 11 more inclusive contributions, which in many instances articulated a close connection  
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31 12 between sport and society.

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36 13 One hundred and seven public response items were coded as ‘homophobic language’,  
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38 14 and could be described as having ‘pernicious intent’ (McCormack, 2011). Seventy seven  
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40 15 (6%) Facebook comments and one letter to the editor (3%) were coded as ‘homophobic  
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42 16 language’ compared to 32 (19%) comments underneath online articles. Most homophobic  
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44 17 language comments under online media articles were in response to *Herald Sun* articles.  
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46 18 This forum allows comment using a pseudonym, which may explain the higher  
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48 19 prevalence of this type of comment in this setting. The comments coded as homophobic  
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50 20 language included multiple comments suggesting the game was unsuitable for children,  
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1 calling the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras ‘a freak show’, and noting, ‘if I was an AFL  
2 player and there were gays in my team I would not want to be in the same change rooms  
3 let alone have showers with them.....no thanks!’’. Outright homophobic comments  
4 comprised only 6% of the public responses included in this study. Although the intent of  
5 the comments and articles in the ‘*stick to footy*’ category is difficult to decipher, it is  
6 important to note that it represented 29% of all responses.

## 7 8 **Discussion**

9 While varied and nuanced, the dominant narrative across both media and public response  
10 to the Pride Game was positive and supportive both of people who identified as LGTBIQ,  
11 and of St Kilda’s and the AFL’s broader initiative supporting social change. In this regard,  
12 there was a clear trend in the media coverage to representations and discussions  
13 promoting forms of inclusive masculinity, mirroring findings from other recent research.  
14 However, compared to recent European research (Cleland et al., 2018), this study also  
15 found a higher proportion of unsupportive, homophobic content with potential pernicious  
16 intent, among the public responses. Although it was the least common in this study, the  
17 proportion of the public responses coded as homophobic language (6%) is higher than the  
18 2% reported by others (Cleland et al., 2018).

19 It should be noted that, as in Cleland’s (2018) research in Europe on fan messages,  
20 there were significant examples in this study of posts pushing back against homophobic



1 views when they were present in Facebook posts or in article comments. These findings  
2 suggest that social media and other forms of online media provide a forum in which direct  
3 interactions and debates around masculinity, and how it should be understood and  
4 practiced, can occur between supporters in ways not previously possible. Therefore, these  
5 platforms offer an opportunity to address the criticism that agenda-setting and framing  
6 theories underestimate audience agency. At the same time, it is important not to overstate  
7 this. While enabling a range of voices and perspectives to be presented is one thing, it is  
8 another matter as to whether those different voices are listened to, and are influential.

9  
10 The fact that nearly one-third of public responses in our sample, while not explicitly  
11 homophobic, were framed as *stick to football* with a potential negative social impact,  
12 possibly reinforces traditional ideas of heteronormativity and articulates a perspective  
13 that sport and society can and should exist separately. This reflects the findings of a recent  
14 analysis of social media responses to a US Soccer online post that identified that posts  
15 resisting the intertwining of politics and sport were a significant portion of the sample  
16 (Cavalier & Newhold, 2018). In much of the public response to the Pride Game in this  
17 study, respondents sort to distance themselves from the directly pernicious intent of  
18 homophobic language by using qualifiers such as ‘I’m not homophobic, but...’ which  
19 still potentially stigmatises the LGBTIQ community while seeking to normalize  
20 hegemonic masculinity as the ‘natural’ state. Ultimately, while seeking to separate out

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1 sport and politics, such responses actually highlight the intersection. These findings also  
2 speak to recent work that examines sport organisations' policy and fan responses to it.  
3 For example, Magrath (2018) and Magrath and Stott (2019) found, via in-depth  
4 qualitative interviews that while fans supported anti-homophobia policy in principle,  
5 they invoked homophobic chants in practice when supporting their team.

6 The findings of this study are of additional significance because recent international  
7 research suggests that media coverage and online discussion spaces have transitioned  
8 from homophobic language and models of hegemonic masculinity, towards a more  
9 inclusive masculinity (Billings et al., 2015; Cassidy, 2017; Cleland et al., 2018; Kian et  
10 al., 2015). The relatively high proportion of unsupportive public responses found in this  
11 study may reflect the context of Australian Football as a sport, with the AFL more closely  
12 resembling professional sport codes, such as the NFL, without high-profile gay athletes.  
13 For example, Luisi, Luisi and Geana (2016) found that the NFL media were more likely  
14 to reinforce notions of hegemonic masculinity than NBA media (Luisi et al., 2016). As  
15 with the NFL, and unlike the NBA when Luisi et al. conducted their study, no active or  
16 retired AFL player has identified as gay, and this may have contributed to the notions of  
17 hegemonic masculinity present. This might also explain why the media coverage of the  
18 Pride Game focused on the lack of openly gay AFL players. It may also be explained by  
19 the broader context in Australia, where at the time of the Pride Game, same-sex marriage  
20 was not yet legal, only being legalized in 2017 amidst strong resistance from some

1 sections of the Australian community.

2 An important finding of this study was a clear difference between the frames used in  
3 the mainstream media coverage and those used in the public response. Although both  
4 highlighted inclusive supportive messages, the public response also framed the issue  
5 unsupportively as *stick to football*. The comments in response to the St Kilda Facebook  
6 posts were the exception, as they were overwhelmingly supportive and focused on  
7 *inclusion*. This may reflect the previous advocacy work by the club on this issue.

8 This study highlights the value in analysing multiple platforms in media framing  
9 research, given the different frames identified across different platforms. The letters to  
10 the editor and public comments in response to online articles had a high proportion of  
11 unsupportive comments, perhaps because the websites allowed comments to be made  
12 anonymously, a similar finding to Kian's (2015) research that examined media coverage  
13 and comments to MSNBC's coverage of Jason Collins and Michael Sam. In contrast, the  
14 comments in response to Facebook posts, particularly to St Kilda Facebook posts, were  
15 overwhelmingly supportive and focused on *inclusion*.

16 Overall, the most important finding from this study is the difference between the  
17 framing of the media items and the public response items. Much of the media coverage  
18 was framed around the lack of an openly gay AFL player, while also promoting inclusion  
19 of the LGBTIQ community. Conversely, the public response, while also mostly  
20 supportive of the inclusion of the LGBTIQ community, used the unsupportive *stick to*

1 *football* frame much more frequently than the media. The St Kilda Facebook page was  
2 the only platform where the media framing and the public response were closely aligned.  
3 As social media continues to become more important in mass media framing and agenda-  
4 setting, the value of comparing media frames across different platforms, and even in  
5 different spaces within those platforms, is evident. This research confirms findings in  
6 international contexts that indicate the importance of studying multiple platforms in sport  
7 media research (Billings et al., 2015; Kian, 2015). In this regard, this current research  
8 also indicates that media, broadly defined, can be a site for contested representations and  
9 perspectives. The findings show that different perspectives were presented, and that  
10 supporters were taking advantage of the interactive possibilities of online media to engage  
11 directly with each other. Interestingly, given the focus and methods approach of this  
12 study, the negative and non-inclusive comments were developed and presented in  
13 response to the largely positive and inclusive representations of the mainstream media.  
14 This tends to re-enforce one of the central insights of agenda-setting, namely that while  
15 the media can frame what people are thinking about, it cannot control how people think  
16 about issues. The emergence of social media in this context is important as it provides an  
17 immediate forum through which people can present their viewpoints, which was not  
18 available to the same extent prior to the emergence of the internet and social media. In  
19 this case, even where there is a predominant approach proposing a model of inclusive  
20 masculinity, the fact that some voices argue for maintaining or reinforcing a hegemonic

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9 1 masculinity suggests that players who are considering coming out will potentially face  
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11 2 intense personal criticism from at least some supporters and commentators, despite a  
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13 3 more generally supportive environment emerging.  
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16 4 This study has a number of limitations which should be acknowledged. The  
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18 5 relationship between this study's findings and those of previous studies of media  
19  
20 6 coverage of athletes' disclosing their homosexuality should be treated with caution.  
21  
22 7 Based on the positive response to the Tynan Winmar story uncovered in this study, media  
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24 8 coverage of, and public response to, an individual AFL player disclosing they are gay  
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26 9 may be generally more supportive than was evident in this study, as it was primarily  
27  
28 10 focused on the response to a Pride Game, rather than a story of an individual coming out.  
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31  
32 11 Perhaps the most significant limitation is our collection and use of Facebook data.  
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34 12 Facebook comments can be affected by Facebook's news feed being individually tailored,  
35  
36 13 with each user's previous engagement influencing what they see. Data collection of  
37  
38 14 Facebook content is also problematic for researchers as some comments on public posts  
39  
40 15 may not be publically accessible (Olmstead & Barthel, 2015; Oremus, 2016). It is also  
41  
42 16 unclear if or how administrators of the Facebook pages included in this study moderated  
43  
44 17 or removed comments, and in particular if St Kilda removed more negative comments. It  
45  
46 18 is also possible that comments in response to Facebook posts, particularly responses to St  
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48 19 Kilda posts, were positively biased. This same caution should be applied to the letters to  
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50 20 the editor because, based on a content analysis, it is not possible to know how many letters  
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1 in total were sent to the newspapers. It is also clear how or why letters were selected for  
2 inclusion in the letters section. Despite these limitations, the findings of the content  
3 analysis are important, as they provide insights into material that was ultimately part of  
4 the public discussion.

## 6 **Conclusion**

7 While much of the previous research in this field has explored media reactions to athletes  
8 coming out, this study offers a novel insight into media coverage of, and public response  
9 to, a Pride Game in professional sport. Much of the existing research has focused on  
10 basketball, American Football and soccer, in the US, UK and Europe (Billings et al.,  
11 2015; Cassidy, 2017; Cleland, 2015; Cleland et al., 2018; Kian et al., 2015; Schallhorn &  
12 Hempel, 2017). By comparison, this study offers insight into how the media and public  
13 frame LGBTIQ issues in a different sport (Australian Football) and cultural context  
14 (Australia). It also offers insight into media and public framing of a related but different  
15 issue, the first Pride Game in Australian professional sport. Applying agenda-setting  
16 theory (McCombs, 2013), this study suggests that while the media put the Pride Game on  
17 the public agenda, it did not wholly influence how the public framed their reaction.  
18 Nevertheless, the analysis provides evidence that the media, broadly defined, is a space  
19 where debates around masculinity in sport are occurring, and that even in the social media  
20 context, some people are putting forward arguments based on inclusive masculinity. The

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1 findings also echo previous research that indicates multiple frames of analysis are useful  
2 in the new media environment (Billings et al., 2015; Kian, 2015). In particular, given the  
3 current fragmented media context, analyzing one form of media alone risks providing a  
4 partial understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. As such, this study suggests a  
5 need to extend the arguments of agenda-setting, to recognize that there may be multiple  
6 voices competing to set the agenda. In addition, social media is enabling more voices to  
7 contribute to these debates in public than was previously the case.

8 The findings of the study also suggest opportunities for further investigation,  
9 including analysis of a broader range of media. The starting point for this study was  
10 Melbourne-based news media, given the context of the specific game under analysis. This  
11 could be broadened in future research to consider whether similar perspectives emerge in  
12 locations beyond Melbourne (particularly in more regional or remote communities). A  
13 second potential area for further investigation would be to interview people participating  
14 in these discussions. While challenging in terms of accessing the participants, this could  
15 provide insights into the motivations behind their contributions. Overall, this study offers  
16 a theoretically and empirically important case study in a growing literature around the  
17 representation of LGBTIQ issues in sport in the media, while also providing a foundation  
18 for further research.

## 20 **Declarations of Conflicting Interests**

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1 **Table 1.** Public response: coding by source (n, %).

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Source	Unsupportive (663, 34% <sup>a</sup> )		Supportive (884, 46% <sup>a</sup> )
	Homophobic language	“Stick to footy”	Inclusion
Letters to the editor (32 <sup>b</sup> , 2% <sup>a</sup> )	1 (3% <sup>c</sup> )	21 (66% <sup>c</sup> )	10 (31% <sup>c</sup> )
Comments under online media articles (211 <sup>b</sup> , 11% <sup>a</sup> )	32 (19% <sup>c</sup> )	86 (53% <sup>c</sup> )	45 (28% <sup>c</sup> )
Comments under Facebook posts (1696 <sup>b</sup> , 87% <sup>a</sup> )	77 (6% <sup>c</sup> )	449 (33% <sup>c</sup> )	829 (61% <sup>c</sup> )
Total (1939 <sup>b</sup> )	110 (6% <sup>a</sup> )	556 (29% <sup>a</sup> )	884 (46% <sup>a</sup> )

35 a = proportion of total items including items coded as irrelevant.

36 b = total number of items from this source including items coded as irrelevant.

37 c = proportion of row total (i.e. excluding items coded as irrelevant).

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1 **Table 2.** Public response: Coding of comments in response to Facebook posts (n, %).

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Facebook Page	Unsupportive		Supportive
	Homophobic language	“Stick to footy”	Inclusion
	(526, 31% <sup>a</sup> )		(829, 49% <sup>a</sup> )
AFL (519 <sup>b</sup> , 31% <sup>a</sup> )	43 (10% <sup>c</sup> )	228 (55% <sup>c</sup> )	140 (34% <sup>c</sup> )
[Details removed for peer review] (219 <sup>b</sup> , 13% <sup>a</sup> )	17 (8% <sup>c</sup> )	140 (65% <sup>c</sup> )	59 (27% <sup>c</sup> )
St Kilda (958 <sup>b</sup> , 56% <sup>a</sup> )	17 (2% <sup>c</sup> )	81 (11% <sup>c</sup> )	630 (87% <sup>c</sup> )
<b>Total (1696<sup>b</sup>)</b>	<b>77 (6%<sup>a</sup>)</b>	<b>449 (26%<sup>a</sup>)</b>	<b>829 (49%<sup>a</sup>)</b>

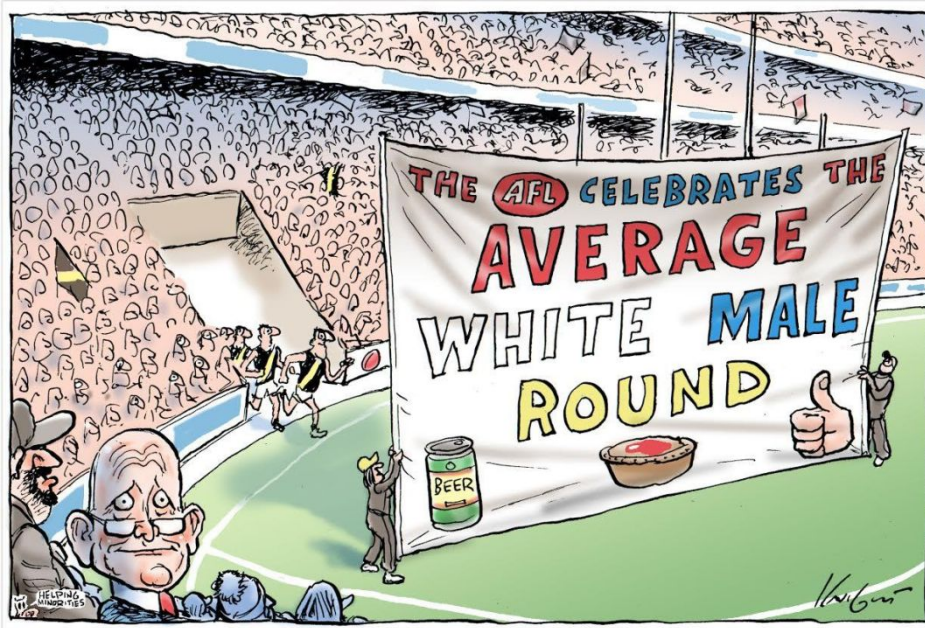
a = proportion of total items included including items coded as irrelevant.

b = total number of items from this source including items coded as irrelevant.

c = proportion of row total (i.e. excluding items coded as irrelevant).

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1 **Figure 1.** Cartoon in the *Herald Sun* 16 August, 2016.  
2 (Reproduced with permission from Mark Knight).



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