

# Trans Prejudice in Sport: Differences from LGB Prejudice, the Influence of Gender, and Changes over Time

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**Abstract** The purpose of our study was to examine prejudice toward trans individuals in sport. Questionnaire data were collected from separate, albeit demographically similar, samples of students in 2007 ( $n = 199$ ) and 2014 ( $n = 124$ ). Results indicate that trans prejudice was higher than prejudice expressed toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals and that these differences remained over time. There were no gender differences as women and men expressed the same degrees of trans prejudice. Finally, trans prejudice significantly decreased over time, although the magnitude of the change was not as large as the corresponding decrease in LGB prejudice. Study findings suggest that although prejudice against trans individuals has decreased, additional interventions and prejudice reduction efforts are needed.

**Keywords** LGBT · Transgender · Trans · Prejudice · Gender · Sport

Americans' attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons have improved over the past decades (Herek 2007; Pew Research Center 2016), as have LGB employees' rights and

protections (Fidas and Cooper 2016). This shift is also seen in the sport world. Gay athletes now participate in more inclusive sport settings, particularly in the context of men's team sports (Anderson 2009), and many lesbian athletes who disclose their sexual orientation to their teammates experience a sense of welcome and support (Fink et al. 2012). There is also evidence that fans have positive attitudes toward gay male athletes (Campbell et al. 2011), as do consumers toward LGB-inclusive sport organizations (Cunningham and Melton 2014). Finally, recent evidence suggests universities' athletic departments are effectively leveraging sexual orientation diversity to realize greater workplace creativity (Cunningham 2011a) and organizational performance (Cunningham 2011b, 2015) than their peers.

Despite these gains for LGB individuals, the sport environment is frequently not as welcoming for trans persons—that is, persons whose gender identity and expression do not match their sex assigned at birth (Carroll et al. 2012). Though commonly linked with LGB persons under a broader LGBT umbrella, there are distinctions. At a fundamental level, one focus is on sexual orientation (with LGB persons) and the other is on gender identity and expressions (with trans individuals). Although the two constructs might intersect, this is not always the case (Beemyn and Rankin 2011). In the workplace, trans employees are also comparatively unlikely to receive benefits or have workplace protections (Fidas and Cooper 2016). Within the sport context, most leagues' policies and rules regarding trans participation are exclusive and at least partially restrict participation opportunities—a pattern observed from the elite to recreational level (Buzuvis 2012). Not surprisingly, trans athletes frequently report difficulty in negotiating the sport space (Krane et al. 2012; Lucas-Carr and Krane 2012) and sometimes face verbal abuse from opposing players (Travers and Deri 2010).

In the present research project, we seek to extend this work in several meaningful ways. First, although scholarship related to trans athletes is limited overall, the work that has been conducted

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has primarily focused on the experiences of trans athletes (e.g., Lucas-Carr and Krane 2012; Tagg 2012; Travers and Deri 2010) or league policies (e.g., Buzuvis 2012; Travers 2013). Missing is an examination of the prejudice expressed toward trans persons. On a related point, we could not identify any research focusing on factors associated with prejudice toward trans athletes. In our research, we address these shortcomings by investigating (a) potential differences in the prejudice expressed toward trans and LGB individuals, respectively; (b) the influence of gender on the expression of trans prejudice; and (c) potential changes in these effects over time (2007 to 2014). In conducting these investigations, we respond to the call for more systematic investigations into issues confronting trans athletes (Griffin 2012).

### Prejudice toward Trans and LGB Individuals

There is reason to believe that trans individuals will face greater prejudice than will their lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) counterparts. We argue that trans individuals evoke stronger reactions because they challenge people's assumptions of succinct gender binaries—dissonance LGB individuals do not necessarily evoke. That is, people have expectations that individuals assigned a particular sex at birth will identify that way, and when they do not, negative reactions are likely to occur (Cahn 2011). This is consistent with Sykes (2006) who argues that reluctance towards inclusion of those with non-standard gender representations is based on fears regarding the destabilization of cultural notions of gender identity. Despite the preference for clearly organized categories, such is not always the case. As Alice Dreger correctly noted, “humans like categories neat...nature is a slob” (as quoted in Clarey 2009).

The desire for clear binaries is only heightened in sport, where teams and events are demarcated by sex. From an early age, boys compete against boys, and girls against girls—a pattern that continues and is strengthened as athletes mature. There is, therefore, little space in sport for individuals who do not neatly fit into the rigid gender-norms system. The presence of trans athletes on athletic teams also raises concerns of fairness and undue advantage, eliciting more negative reactions (Buzuvis 2012; Tagg 2012). The presence of LGB individuals on athletic teams is unlikely to draw a similar response. Given these dynamics, we hypothesized that participants will express greater prejudice toward trans individuals than they will toward lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals (Hypothesis 1).

### Trans Prejudice and Gender

There is considerable evidence that men express more prejudice toward LGB individuals than do women. Herek (2002) observed as much in a national poll of U.S. adults. Others have observed gender differences among exercise science students' ratings of

sexual minorities (Gill et al. 2006), participants' ratings of job applicants presumed to be LGB (Cunningham et al. 2010), athletes' ratings of LGB coaches (Sartore and Cunningham 2009), and parents' willingness to let their children play on a team coached by a sexual minority (Sartore and Cunningham 2009).

We suspect this pattern also carries over in the manifestation of trans prejudice. Within the sport context, these differences are likely a function of norms and a culture of hegemonic masculinity (Fink 2008). Not only do these factors serve to privilege men and certain forms of masculinity, but they also cast those not meeting those characteristics as “other.” Relative to women, men participating in sport might feel more compelled to adhere to these norms and, when they do not, they might face ridicule or shame. Herek and McLemore (2013) also recognized these dynamics, suggesting that men, more so than women, might feel social norms to express prejudice against LGBT individuals. Given this evidence, we hypothesized that men will express more trans prejudice than will women (Hypothesis 2).

### Trans Prejudice over Time

In many ways, prejudice against trans individuals is institutionalized in sport such that the prejudice becomes taken-for-granted and deeply cemented into the sport culture. This is consistent with Herek's (2007, 2009) notion of structural forms of stigma. As Cunningham (2012, p. 9) has noted: “institutionalized norms and rules related to gender, sport, and participation can influence the experiences and opportunities for women and sexual minorities.” Griffin (2012) has advanced similar arguments.

That noted, cultural practices and institutionalized norms can and do change over time—a process referred to as *deinstitutionalization* (Oliver 1992). National polls in the United States have shown, for example, that attitudes toward same-sex marriage have changed considerably over time, from a majority (57%) opposing such unions in 2001 to a majority (55%) supporting them in 2016 (Pew Research Center 2016). Anderson and his colleagues tracked a corresponding change in the sport context, with their data suggesting sport is becoming more inclusive and accepting of sexual minorities (Anderson 2009; Anderson et al. 2016; McCormack and Anderson 2014). They note that “social matters for lesbian athletes, and particularly gay male athletes, have dramatically changed for the better over recent decades” (Anderson et al. 2016, p. 1).

We expect similar patterns for trans prejudice. There is evidence, for example, that corporations in the United States are increasingly offering trans-inclusive healthcare options and training for trans inclusiveness in the workplace (Fidas and Cooper 2016). It should be noted, however, that these still lag behind similar provisions for LGB individuals. Within the

sport context, the International Olympic Committee ruled in 2016 that trans athletes could compete in the Olympics without re-assignment surgery, thereby signaling a more inclusive stance (IOC Rules 2016); the major governing body for collegiate sport in the United States—the National Collegiate Athletics Association—established policies aimed at creating inclusive, respectful spaces for trans athletes (Griffin and Taylor 2012); and some state high school associations established inclusive policies for athletic participation, allowing students to choose teams based on their gender identity (as opposed to sex assigned at birth; Buzuvis 2012). These shifts in organizational policies and practices signal a corresponding change in attitudes toward trans individuals. In our study, we analyze data collected 7 years apart (2007 and 2014), thereby allowing for an empirical examination of this possibility. Given this evidence, we predicted that trans prejudice will decrease over time (Hypothesis 3).

## Method

To examine our hypotheses, we drew upon previously unpublished data from a larger study (Cunningham 2008) and another dataset collected for the current study. We describe the data collection and samples for both studies and discuss the steps for combining the datasets.

### Study 1

#### *Participants*

Students ( $n = 199$ ) enrolled in sport and physical activity classes at a large, public university in the United States participated in our study. The sample included 102 women and 97 men, and it was largely White ( $n = 155$ , 77.9%), followed by Latino ( $n = 21$ , 10.6%), Asian ( $n = 12$ , 6.0%), African American ( $n = 5$ , 2.5%), persons who listed “other” ( $n = 4$ , 2.0%), and 2 persons who did not provide this information. Their mean age was 20.34 years ( $SD = 1.90$ , range = 18–29 years). Finally, on a scale of ranging from 0 (*completely heterosexual*) to 6 (*completely homosexual*), most of the participants ( $n = 175$ , 87.9%) identified as completely heterosexual.

#### *Measures*

Participants completed a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that requested their demographic information and for them to respond to items measuring their prejudice toward LGBT individuals. We measured prejudice using the Feelings Thermometer. This scaling has been used in past research related to prejudice toward LGBT individuals (e.g., Gill et al. 2006; Norton and Herek 2012) and assesses the degree

to which people feel warm (i.e., have positive attitudes) or cold (i.e., have negative attitudes) toward different groups. The directions read: “Please indicate your feelings regarding the following statements on a scale of 0–100, with 0 representing the coldest (least favorable) and 100 representing the warmest (most favorable) position.” Participants then provided ratings for lesbians, gay men, bisexual women, bisexual men, trans men, and trans women, in that order. We combined the ratings for trans women and trans men ( $r = .96$ ) to form a single trans prejudice score, and we combined the ratings for lesbians, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men ( $\alpha = .96$ ) to form a single measure of LGB prejudice. We reverse scored the final responses such that higher scores are reflected of greater prejudice.

#### *Procedure*

We collected data in 2007 from students enrolled in sport and physical activity classes at a large public university in the Southwest United States. The classes were required for graduation so included students with a wide variety of academic majors. Participation was voluntary, and all participants received a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study. The students completed the questionnaires following the class so as not to interrupt instruction. Completion of the questionnaire required about 10 min.

### Study 2

#### *Participants*

Study participants were students ( $n = 124$ ) enrolled in sport and physical activity courses at a large, public university in the Southwest United States. The sample included 72 men (58.0%) and 52 women (41.9%); 4 African Americans (3.2%), 6 Asians (4.8%), 24 Latinos (19.4%), 1 Native American (.8%), 84 Whites (67.7%), and 5 individuals that marked “other” (4.0%). The average age of the students was 20.10 years ( $SD = 1.41$ , range = 18–24 years). On a scale of 0 (*completely heterosexual*) to 6 (*completely homosexual*), most ( $n = 109$ , 87.9%) indicated they were completely heterosexual.

#### *Measures and Procedure*

Consistent with Study 1, we measured prejudice using the Feelings Thermometer. The directions read, “Please indicate your feelings regarding the following statements on a scale of 0–100, with 0 representing the coldest (least favorable) and 100 representing the warmest (most favorable) position.” We then specified the sport context by including the following stem: “I would be comfortable participating in sports with someone who was....” Participants then provided ratings for

transgender individuals, lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, in that order. As with the first dataset, we combined the ratings for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals ( $\alpha = .93$ ) to form a single score for LGB prejudice. We reverse scored the final responses such that higher scores are reflected of greater prejudice. The procedures were identical to those described in Study 1. These data were collected in 2014.

### Comparing and Combining Samples

We examined potential differences in the samples based on participants' demographics. The two samples did not statistically significantly vary in participants' mean age,  $t(319) = 1.16$ ,  $p = .13$ , gender of the participants,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.66$ ,  $p = .10$ , race of the participants,  $\chi^2(5) = 8.34$ ,  $p = .14$ , or sexual orientation of the participants (Study 1: 12.06% sexual minority; Study 2: 12.10% sexual minority),  $\chi^2(1) = .01$ ,  $p = .99$ . Thus, although the samples consist of different students and were collected 7 years apart, participants' demographics do not statistically differ.

The combined samples included students ( $N = 323$ ) enrolled in sport and physical activity classes at a large, U.S. public university who voluntarily participated in our study. The full sample included 154 women and 169 men, and it was largely White ( $n = 239$ , 74.5%), followed by Latino ( $n = 45$ , 14.0%), Asian ( $n = 18$ , 5.6%), African American ( $n = 9$ , 2.8%), persons who listed "other" ( $n = 9$ , 2.8%), and 2 persons who did not provide the information. The mean age was 20.25 years ( $SD = 1.73$ , range = 18–29 years). Finally, on a scale of ranging from 0 (*completely heterosexual*) to 6 (*completely homosexual*), most of the participants ( $n = 284$ , 87.93%) identified as completely heterosexual, while 10 participants (3.10%) marked 1 on the scale, 4 participants (1.24%) marked 2, 7 participants (2.17%) marked 3, 1 participant (.31%) marked 4, 4 participants (1.24%) marked 5, and 9 participants (2.79%) marked 6 (or *completely homosexual*).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

We computed descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and bivariate correlations, for all variables and present that information for Study 1, Study 2, and the combined sample in Table 1. Across the studies, prejudice expressed toward trans individuals correlated positively with that expressed toward LGB individuals. For the entire sample, results indicate that the mean score for trans prejudice was over the scale mid-point of 50 ( $M = 54.74$ ,  $SD = 33.95$ ), whereas the mean score for LGB prejudice was lower than 50 ( $M = 42.27$ ,  $SD = 32.15$ ). A one-sample  $t$ -test showed both values, although small, significantly differed from 50: trans

prejudice,  $t(313) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .01$ , Cohen's  $d = .14$ ; LGB prejudice,  $t(313) = -4.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = .24$ .

### Hypothesis Testing

We tested our hypotheses through a within- and between-subjects ANOVA, with one within-subjects variable (type of prejudice: trans or LGB) and two between-subjects variables: year of study (2007, 2014) and participants' gender (woman or man). Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants would express more trans prejudice than prejudice toward LGB individuals. The within-subjects variable, type of prejudice, was significant,  $F(1, 309) = 130.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .30$ . The mean score for trans prejudice ( $M = 54.74$ ,  $SD = 33.95$ ) was significantly higher than for prejudice toward LGB individuals ( $M = 42.27$ ,  $SD = 32.15$ ); thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that men would express more trans prejudice than would women. As seen in Table 2, neither gender,  $F(1, 309) = .87$ ,  $p = .35$ , nor the gender  $\times$  type of prejudice interaction was significant,  $F(1, 309) = .07$ ,  $p = .79$ . Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

With Hypothesis 3, we predicted that time of data collection would significantly influence trans prejudice, such that prejudice would reduce over time. The year  $\times$  type of prejudice interaction was significant,  $F(1, 309) = 4.61$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . Follow-up analyses showed that whereas both types of prejudice decreased from 2007 to 2014, the magnitude of the decrease for prejudice toward LGB individuals (2007:  $M = 49.54$ ,  $SD = 27.48$ ; 2014:  $M = 31.13$ ,  $SD = 33.54$ ),  $t(312) = 5.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .29$ , was greater than the corresponding decrease in trans prejudice (2007:  $M = 60.12$ ,  $SD = 28.92$ ; 2014:  $M = 46.49$ ,  $SD = 39.17$ ),  $t(312) = 3.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .20$  (see Fig. 1). These data collectively support Hypothesis 3.

## Discussion

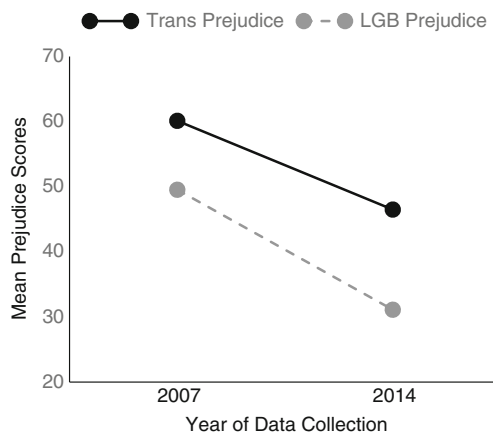
Although a number of researchers have examined the experiences of and prejudice expressed toward LGB individuals in sport (Anderson 2009; Campbell et al. 2011; Fink et al. 2012), there is a comparative paucity of research focused on trans individuals. The work that does exist suggests trans athletes report difficulty in negotiating sport spaces (Krane et al. 2012; Lucas-Carr and Krane 2012) and even experience abuse from their opponents (Travers and Deri 2010). Missing from these investigations is consideration of the prejudice people express toward trans individuals, how this prejudice might differ from that expressed toward LGB individuals, the influence of gender in these dynamics, and whether levels of these prejudices have changed over time. The purpose of our study was to investigate these possibilities. We observed that (a) trans prejudice was higher than prejudice expressed toward LGB

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables by samples

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i> or %	Correlations							
		1	2	3	4	5	7	8	
(a) Study 1 ( <i>n</i> = 199)									
1. Study	–	–							
2. Race	78.68%	–	–						
3. Age	20.34 (1.90)	–	-.01	–					
4. Sexual orientation	87.94%	–	-.04	-.01	–				
5. Gender	48.74%	–	-.18*	.05	.04	–			
7. Trans prejudice	60.12 (28.92)	–	.09	-.02	-.20**	.16*	–		
8. LGB prejudice	49.54 (27.48)	–	.09	-.01	-.27***	.13	.83***	–	
(b) Study 2 ( <i>n</i> = 124)									
1. Study	–	–							
2. Race	67.74%	–	–						
3. Age	20.10 (1.41)	–	-.02	–					
4. Sexual orientation	87.90%	–	-.06	.10	–				
5. Gender	58.06%	–	-.03	.10	.02	–			
7. Trans prejudice	46.49 (39.18)	–	.14	-.14	-.10	-.04	–		
8. LGB prejudice	31.13 (35.54)	–	.14	-.16	-.12	.01	.80	–	
(c) Combined Sample ( <i>n</i> = 323)									
1. Study	61.6%	–							
2. Race	74.5%	-.12*	–						
3. Age	20.25 (1.72)	.07	-.01	–					
4. Sexual orientation	87.9%	.01	-.05	.02	–				
5. Gender	52.3%	.10	-.13*	.06	.03	–			
7. Trans prejudice	54.74 (33.95)	-.20***	.14*	-.05	-.15**	.05	–		
8. LGB prejudice	42.27 (32.15)	-.28***	.14*	-.06	-.20***	.04	.83***	–	

Gender coded as 0 = women, 1 = men. Race coded as 0 = racial minority, 1 = White. Sexual orientation coded as 0 = heterosexual, 1 = LGB. Prejudice scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting greater prejudice  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

individuals and these differences remained over time, (b) women and men expressed the same degrees of trans prejudice, and (c) trans prejudice significantly decreased

**Fig. 1** Decreasing Trans and LGB prejudices over time

over time, although the magnitude of the change was not as large as the corresponding decrease in LGB prejudice.

Consistent with the first hypothesis, we observed that people express more trans prejudice than they do LGB prejudice. Thus, although trans and LGB individuals are frequently considered as a single group (e.g., the LGBT acronym), participants in our study differentiated between the two. We suspect the differential evaluations are due to the notion that trans athletes serve to challenge cisgender individuals' assumptions about gender binaries (see also Norton and Herek 2012). As Sykes (2006) has suggested, trans athletes evoke fear about the destabilization of cultural notions of gender identity (also see Cahn 2011).

We further expected that women and men would differ in their expression of trans prejudice. This was not the case, and our findings differ from past research focusing on LGB persons in sport (Cunningham et al. 2010; Gill et al. 2006; Sartore and Cunningham 2009).

We offer two possible explanations here. First, it is possible that trans athletes evoke stronger negative emotions among all persons, women and men, than do LGB athletes. In this case, prejudice would be uniformly distributed. From a different perspective, it is possible that as forms of masculinity have become more inclusive (Anderson 2009), men in our sample have adopted more egalitarian, accepting views toward trans athletes—views that are more in line with those of women. If this is the case, then gender differences would not be expected in any of the prejudice indices, a pattern we observed in the present study.

The latter possibility is in line with our third key finding: that prejudice decreased from 2007 to 2014. Anderson and colleagues (Anderson 2009, 2016; McCormack and Anderson 2014) have argued for, and presented evidence to support, the notion that sport has become more inclusive of LGB individuals over time. Our work extends this scholarship by showing that, over a 7-year timeframe, ratings of trans prejudice among college students in the United States significantly decreased. Of particular note, participants in both samples were from the Southern United States—an area of the country that generally holds more conservative views than their counterparts in the rest of the United States or in other Western countries. This suggests that even persons in conservative environments have adopted more egalitarian, inclusive views of trans individuals over time.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although there were a number of strengths to our research, we are also cognizant of potential limitations. First, we relied on student samples in all studies, and some might question how applicable the findings are to other populations. We do note, though, that much of the social psychology research focusing on prejudice has also drawn from student samples, and the patterns observed among psychology students are commonly reflected in the “real world” with more varied populations (for an overview see, Paluck and Green 2009, for an overview). In addition, we used the Feelings Thermometer to measure prejudice. Although a number of other researchers have also incorporated this measure (e.g., Gill et al. 2006; Norton and Herek 2012), we recognize that there are potential limitations with a single-item measure.

Keeping in mind these limitations, there are several areas for future research. Griffin (2012) called for more scholarly focus on trans athletes, and findings from our work further highlight this need. Evaluations of LGBT individuals, although associated with one another, are not uniform, and thus, researchers, theoreticians, and sport managers should remain cognizant of and seek to better understand these differences. Second, we collected data from different samples over time. This is consistent

with polling agencies, such as PEW Research Center (2016) and can offer insights into changing attitudes. That noted, additional insights might be gained by tracking the attitudes of the same participants over time. Third, it is possible that using other, multi-item and perhaps multidimensional measures of prejudice might yield a deeper understanding of trans prejudice. Finally, discussions of trans inclusion will sometimes include a discussion of intersex individuals (Buzuvis 2012; Cahn 2011). This was also the case when the IOC made policy changes regarding trans inclusion. Future researchers should consider prejudice expressed toward intersex individuals and whether this varies from other forms of LGB and trans prejudice.

### Practice Implications

There are a number of practical implications from our research. Most notably, our data suggest trans prejudice changes over time but that the change is less pronounced than LGB prejudice. Recent research suggests that interventions specifically aimed at reducing trans prejudice might hold promise in addressing this trend (Broockman and Kalla 2016). The authors found that speaking with people about trans rights and asking them to take the perspective of a trans person—referred to as analogic perspective taking—reliably reduced prejudice. The intervention was brief (10 min), and benefits remained even after 3 months. These results, as well as those from other intervention techniques (e.g., Paluck and Green 2009), show that although deeply engrained, prejudicial attitudes can and do change. Sport managers can draw from our work to engage their coaches and administrators, ensuring sport is welcoming for trans athletes.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, findings from our study paint a mixed picture regarding prejudices in sport. On the one hand, women and men no longer differ in their expression of trans prejudice, and the severity of trans prejudice decreased from 2007 to 2014. On the other hand, trans prejudice persists, is greater than prejudice expressed toward LGB individuals, and the decreases observed over time were not as large as the corresponding changes in LGB prejudice. Taken together, the results show that change is possible, and more efforts are needed to ensure trans individuals can thrive in inclusive, welcoming sport environments.

**Acknowledgement** The authors contributed equally to this work, and their names are listed alphabetically.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors have no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent** All participants provided informed consent to participate.

**Ethical Approval** The study was approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board.

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