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Towards creating belonging for the LGBTTQIA2S + community in Liminoid leisure event spaces

Willem J.L. Coetzee^{a,b}, Hannah Mckeeman^c and Stu Hayes^c

^aSchool of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University, Penrith, NSW, Australia; ^bDepartment of Environmental Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa; ^cDepartment of Tourism, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Significant strides have been made toward equality, LGBTTQIA2S + individuals continue to face discrimination. Leisure, however, holds transformative potential, providing spaces where individuals can express themselves freely. Within leisure event spaces, participants can experience liminoid states/moments which foster connection and belonging. Yet, many barriers continue to inhibit LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in these spaces. Facilitators of leisure play a crucial role in ensuring liminoid leisure event spaces are safe and inclusive. This research explored the roles and responsibilities of New Zealand leisure organizations in fostering such environments. Based on interviews with leisure providers, we identified a range of personal, organizational, and societal barriers and enablers to inclusion. Participants highlighted that fostering inclusion requires a collective, sector-wide commitment, accountability, and actively challenging discrimination. Participants also acknowledged that advocacy involves evolving their own mindsets. This article offers both a call to action and practical recommendations to support leisure practitioners advancing LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion and belonging.

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Introduction

Since the Stonewall uprising, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, takatāpui, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit and more (LGBTTQIA2S+) community has made significant strides toward equality and acceptance. Throughout this journey, leisure events have played a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging within the LGBTTQIA2S + community (Ong and Goh 2018). This multifaceted relationship is rooted in the ability for leisure events to create safe spaces, encourage self-expression, and build communal ties (Ong and Goh 2018; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021; Walters and Jepson 2019; Anderson and Knee 2022; Ong, Lewis, and Prayag 2025). Relatedly, leisure experiences also foster a sense of empowerment within the LGBTTQIA2S + community, where individuals can develop skills, gain confidence, and take on leadership roles (Ceatha et al. 2019). Indeed, leisure events function as important liminoid spaces, where individuals can temporarily escape the constraints and expectations of daily life, allowing for a deep sense of connection (Turner 1974; Patterson and Getz 2013; Milazzo 2026). These liminoid leisure event spaces (LLES) are particularly important for LGBTTQIA2S + individuals who, even despite the significant positive strides that have been made, may continue to face exclusion in their everyday experiences.

Sadly, in the recent global context, levels of exclusion have been on the rise, with more and more LGBTTQIA2S + individuals subject to tension, discrimination, violence, and marginalization (Meyer 2003; Kaniuka et al. 2019; Verrelli et al. 2019; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021; Coetzee 2023). The current global context, in particular, presents significant challenges for the LGBTTQIA2S + community, with recent changes in anti-LGBTTQIA2S + legislation in the United States exemplifying ongoing threats to safety and acceptance. The Trump administration, for instance, enacted policies reinforcing binary definitions of gender (Branstetter 2025) and removed over 350 LGBTTQIA2S + resources from the U.S. Department of

CONTACT Willem J.L. Coetzee  w.coetzee@westernsydney.edu.au  School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW, Australia, 2750, Australia

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Education's website (Smith 2025). This situation is echoed in local contexts, such as in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter New Zealand), the context for our research, where similar patterns of hate and discrimination have emerged. A recent example saw anti-LGBTQIA2S+ protests disrupting Pride events in Auckland (Williams 2025; Franks 2025), wherein a local religious leader told reporters that New Zealand 'needs to follow Donald Trump' (1News 2025). Such hostility contributes to persistent adversity, which harms both mental and physical health (Fulginiti et al. 2021; Hoy-Ellis 2023; Press and Lewis 2024), often compelling individuals to conceal their true identities as a means of self-preservation (Griffin 1991; Perry and Alvi 2012; Asquith et al. 2014; Ferfolja et al. 2020). The new wave of growing anti-LGBTQIA2S+ sentiments is dragging progress backwards and forcing individuals back 'in the closet' (Lee et al. 2025).

The current context, wherein anti-LGBTQIA2S+ sentiment is again on the rise, calls for heightened urgency in our efforts to make leisure inclusive. With LGBTQIA2S+ events subject to disruption, as seen in New Zealand, it is imperative for leisure providers to take an active role in inclusion efforts. Our research explored the experiences and perceived roles and responsibilities of leisure organizations in New Zealand for providing liminoid leisure event spaces that are safe for, and inclusive, of LGBTQIA2S+ communities. For the purpose of this article, LLES refer to temporary, transformative environments where individuals come together for communal experiences (Turner 1974; Patterson and Getz 2013; Milazzo 2026). These spaces can emerge from both planned and informal leisure events (see literature review). Leisure includes 'tourism, sport, recreation (active and passive, indoor and outdoor), hospitality and events' (World Leisure Congress 2023, n.p.). Leisure organizations are defined as 'Organizations producing goods and services for use in leisure time, organizations seeking to influence the use of leisure time and organizations supplying recreation, leisure and tourism organizations' (Tribe 2011, p.3).

Despite the ability of leisure to foster LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion, the realities of exclusion and marginalization persist in leisure event spaces. To help challenge these sorts of realities, those responsible for managing and facilitating leisure event spaces have an important role to play in offering temporary – and potentially transformative – escapes from the tensions of everyday life (Ong et al. 2025). Through the creation of safe spaces, where LGBTQIA2S+ participants have the ability to freely express and perform their identities (Lewis and Markwell 2021), facilitators of leisure may play a vital part in contributing to broader LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion and belonging goals. Despite this potential, there remains a notable lack of research on the role that facilitators of leisure event spaces play in minimizing harm by creating safe leisure event spaces for the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Addressing this gap is important given that leisure organizations have 'moral, fiscal, and legal incentives to ensure that [LGBTQIA2S+] individuals ... have access to safe, beneficial services that respond to their unique needs' (Theriault 2017, 122).

Literature review

The Liminoid nature of leisure spaces

Patterson and Getz (2013), drawing on Turner's (1974) concept of liminoidity, argue that 'Many forms of leisure bring people together at planned events [or liminoid states/moments] in a spirit of belonging and sharing' (234). More specifically, 'individualized leisure pursuits such as art, sport, pastimes, and games' (234), to mention a few, provide such opportunities for connection and community. When thought of in this way, leisure activities – regardless of whether they occur as part of a planned/special event or a more casual/informal coming together – may be viewed as 'communities of celebration' (Arai and Pedlar 2003). Thus, any leisure experience or activity may be seen as an 'event' in its potential to create a temporary liminoid space for communal experience. In this context, liminoid leisure spaces become event spaces, and vice versa. Turner (1969) argues that liminoidity creates *communitas* which, as Milazzo (2026) suggests, 'allows for socio-cultural generalizations and role segmentation – classes, roles, cultures, sexes, ages, and ethnicities – to fall away, [creating] a special feeling of closeness and excitement' (p.4). Hence, liminoid experiences that take place in leisure event spaces, may provide an ideal environment for challenging the realities of exclusion and marginalization faced by the LGBTQIA2S+ community in broader society. With this comes an important question: what are some of the considerations when providing liminoid leisure spaces as places for belonging and sharing, or 'communities of celebration' (Arai and Pedlar 2003)? Implicit within this question is the idea that there exist individuals or groups that have certain responsibilities for providing safe leisure event

spaces. How can facilitators of leisure break down socio-cultural generalizations that may disable the LGBTTQIA2S + community from that 'special feeling of closeness and excitement' (Milazzo 2026, 4)? Relatedly, the planning and management of leisure event spaces requires investigation.

Quiet and invisible!

Individuals of diverse sexual orientations (who individuals are attracted to) and gender identity (one's personal sense of gender) face a heightened risk of minority stress, suicidality and poor mental health compared to the general population (Fulginiti et al. 2021; Hoy-Ellis 2023; Press and Lewis 2024). This increased risk stems from experiences of adversity, including prejudice, discrimination, social exclusion, and internalized homophobia (Meyer 2003). The ever-present fear of violence, harassment, and discrimination impacts both physical and emotional health, leading many to conceal their true selves as a survival strategy. These risks, whether actual, potential, or vicarious, often force LGBTTQIA2S + individuals to modify their behaviour, constantly vigilant against potential threats (Asquith et al. 2014; Perry and Alvi 2012). It is therefore no surprise that LGBTTQIA2S + people typically report lower levels of well-being than the general population due to the social stigmas of having a sexual orientation that departs from heteronormative expressions (Davidson et al. 2017). This act of self-preservation, a tactic employed for decades, reflects a deeper, more poignant struggle for acceptance and safety (Ferfolja, Asquith, and Hanckel 2020; Griffin 1991). The need to hide or blend in, while protective, carries a heavy emotional toll, often manifesting in mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem (Sanlo and Espinoza 2012; Tetreault et al. 2013).

Although research on LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion is growing, studies focused on the leisure sector as a whole remain limited, often concentrating on specific sub-sectors of leisure (for example, much of the research focuses on the sport or recreation sectors). Existing research highlights manifold complexities. Unfortunately, many quiet and invisible LGBTTQIA2S + individuals are excluded from leisure event spaces that the general public often take for granted (e.g. Storr et al. 2022a, 2022b; Rankin et al. 2010; Patchett and Foster 2015; Anderson et al. 2018; Drake and Bielefield 2017). For instance, Denison et al. (2021) found consistent evidence across various sports settings indicating frequent encounters of discrimination and exclusion of LGBTTQIA2S + individuals. Similarly, Storr et al. (2022a) found that in Australian sports settings, same-sex attracted and gender diverse young people experienced bullying, homophobia and systemic discrimination. In their study examining LGBTTQIA2S + participation in aquatic settings, Anderson et al. (2018) found that when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts, individuals from the LGBTTQIA2S + community often face negative experiences in recreation and aquatic settings. In another study, Drake and Bielefield (2017) found that many transgender people did not use libraries because of a fear of discrimination, citing issues related to library staff being uninformed and, in turn, unsupportive. Consequently, Drake and Bielefield (2017) highlighted the need for 'comprehensive training in regard to the appropriate treatment of LGBQ and transgender patrons' (164). Hence, to build a more inclusive leisure sector, and to challenge the persistent discrimination faced by LGBTTQIA2S + community members, scholars contend that practical solutions must be developed and applied (Shaw 2025; Denison et al. 2021; Storr and Richard 2024).

LGBTTQIA2S + individuals often seek out community spaces where they can feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, free from discrimination (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021; Ong et al. 2025). Leisure event spaces, particularly those that foster liminoid states/moments, often foster positive social capital that might lead to a sense of belonging, good mental health, camaraderie, enjoyment and all the other positive leisure outcomes that are so often highlighted. This is perhaps especially true for leisure events targeted specifically at the LGBTTQIA2S+, wherein, as Ong et al. (2025) explain, such events:

broadly play two functions for queer people. For those who have integrated their queer identity into their everyday identity, these events help express this identity, thereby helping affirm their identity and build on it through the social connections formed. For them, LGBTQ + events are perceived as an in-group activity and function as an extension of the self, where the authentic self can continue to be expressed via participation (p. 11). In contrast, for those who typically conceal their queer identity, these events help provide a space where identities can be expressed and experimented with. In doing so, such events are not just a place for expression but an avenue for actively compensating for everyday concealment. (p11)

Therefore, despite the challenges that exist, there is great opportunity for leisure event spaces, particularly those targeted at and/or developed by the LGBTTQIA2S+, to become spaces of safety and belonging for the LGBTTQIA2S + community. Potential for similar outcomes also exists in broader leisure contexts. In examining the experience of LGBTTQIA2S + tennis players, Storr and Richard (2024) found that involvement in the sport was associated with improved mental wellbeing, with reports of ‘feeling loved and accepted, freedom to be their authentic selves, and not having to manage their sexual or gender identity’ (p.530). For transgender athletes in particular, it was believed that the tennis community created safe spaces, which played a positive role in their lives (Storr and Richard 2024). Relatedly, Storr et al. (2022a) found that LGBTTQIA2S + participants expressed a desire to be included in sports communities and were aware that being a part of a team can bring about ‘comradery, a sense of belonging, connection and community, as well as positive health attributes’ (p.610). As such, participants emphasized the need for sports organizations to implement inclusion strategies.

Importantly, the aforementioned studies, and others like them, have tended to focus more on the first-hand leisure experiences of LGBTTQIA2S + individuals. Research focussed on understanding the roles and perspectives of leisure organizations in providing safe and LGBTTQIA2S + inclusive leisure spaces is less prevalent.

Organizational perspectives

While much of the existing literature on LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in leisure settings focuses on individual experiences, there is a growing recognition of the need to examine organizational roles and responsibilities. Leisure organizations, including sport clubs, local governments, and event planners, are increasingly seen as key actors in shaping inclusive environments (Theriault 2017; Allison and Hibbler 2004). These organizations have moral, fiscal, and legal obligations to ensure that LGBTTQIA2S + individuals have access to safe and affirming leisure spaces (Theriault 2017).

Research in organizational diversity management highlights the importance of leadership commitment, inclusive policies, and staff training in fostering inclusion (Melton and Cunningham 2014; Perales 2022). For example, Melton and Cunningham (2014) found that perceptions of employee support for LGBT inclusion were significantly influenced by organizational culture and leadership. Similarly, Storr et al. (2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c) explored how sport administrators and volunteers navigate inclusion, revealing both resistance and commitment within organizational structures.

These studies underscore the importance of examining not just the experiences of LGBTTQIA2S + individuals, but also the perspectives of those tasked with creating inclusive environments. Moreover, if LLES can, as was suggested earlier, offer a unique opportunity to challenge exclusion and foster belonging, what are some of the considerations of and for those organizations wishing to enact practices that enable such spaces as places for belonging and sharing, or ‘communities of celebration’ (Arai and Pedlar 2003)? Importantly, the creation of such spaces is not spontaneous; it requires intentional planning and management by leisure organizations. This study explores how organizational actors perceive and enact their roles in facilitating LLES, and how these efforts contribute to broader inclusion goals. In so doing, by focusing on organizational actors, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion in leisure settings, highlighting the systemic and structural factors that enable or hinder progress.

LGBTTQIA2S + and the New Zealand context

In 1972, the first New Zealand pride event, ‘Gay Day’, was held in Auckland and was led by Ngahaia Te Awekotuku. This event marked a pivotal moment in the history of LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in New Zealand. From the early struggles for visibility and acceptance to the significant legal reforms that followed, New Zealand’s LGBTTQIA2S + history reflects a journey marked by challenges and triumphs. Hansen (2020) writes that ‘Queer people have always formed bonds of kinship and whanaungatanga in resistance to the powers which strove to invisibilise them, relying on one another for support, safety, love and pride’ (n.p.) Today, just under one in 20 adults in New Zealand identify as part of the LGBTTQIA2S + community, making up 4.2% of the total population (Stats NZ 2021). The Ministry of Social Development (2020) considers social inclusion, within the New Zealand context, to mean ‘people have the resources, skills and knowledge to

meaningful participate' (5). Moreover, the Human Rights Act of 1993 section 21 prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender. However, despite these legal protections, barriers to meaningful participation in leisure activities still exist for members of the LGBTTTQIA2S + community.

Active hate and discrimination against the LGBTTTQIA2S + community in New Zealand remains prevalent. For example, in 2023 a Greymouth church was 'vandalised with homophobic and anti-Semitic slurs, and a Tauranga Rainbow Youth office [was] burned down in a suspicious fire' (Benny 2023, n.p.) In 2018, Statistics New Zealand included sexual identities in their General Social Survey (GSS) for the first time, aiming to gain a clearer picture of how people with different sexual identities experience life in New Zealand. The survey revealed that individuals who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual more commonly faced discrimination compared to those outside the LGBTTTQIA2S + community. Building on this, research by The Discrimination Project (Hattotuwa et al. 2023) found that online hate speech against transgender and non-binary people had significantly risen following known anti-trans activist Posie Parker's visit to New Zealand in 2023. Kate Hannah described the language used online as 'genocidal' (1news 2023).

Issues around social inclusion for the LGBTTTQIA2S + community were examined in the first in-depth New Zealand trans and non-binary wellbeing survey conducted by Counting Ourselves (Veale et al. 2019). The study looked at a broad range of factors and experiences that affect the wellbeing of transgender and non-binary New Zealanders, including healthcare, education, sport, discrimination, safety, family, and community connectedness. The aim of the study was to 'help improve the lives of trans and non-binary people' (Veale et al. 2019, 1) and to provide 'the evidence required to improve health policies and support community initiatives needed to improve the health and wellbeing of trans and non-binary people in Aotearoa New Zealand' (Veale et al. 2019). The study found that just 14% of those surveyed had been involved in a sporting event in the previous four weeks, which is comparatively lower than the general population rate of 26%. Respondents reported that they had feared discrimination and felt uncertain about competition rules were inclusive of their gender identity. The findings suggested 'that fear of discrimination and concerns about eligibility criteria seriously limit trans and non-binary people's opportunities to have equal access to sports' (Veale et al. 2019, p. 66). Building on these studies, this research aimed to explore LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusion across the broad leisure spectrum, and asked the following questions:

- How do leisure organizations in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive and enact LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusion in liminoid leisure event spaces?
- What practices and barriers do staff identify in creating inclusive liminoid leisure event spaces for LGBTTTQIA2S + communities?

Drawing on our literature review, our study is informed by a theoretical framework that considers (LLES) as temporary, transformative environments that may arise from both planned events and informal gatherings. For LGBTTTQIA2S + individuals, who often navigate exclusion and marginalization in daily life, these spaces offer the potential for affirmation, visibility, and belonging. However, the transformative potential of LLES is not automatic. These spaces are shaped by the intentions, practices, and ideologies of those who plan and facilitate them. As such, in the context of this study, LLES are viewed as organizationally constructed environments. We explore how leisure providers, through their policies, values, and actions, either enable or constrain the potential of these spaces for LGBTTTQIA2S + individuals and communities.

Methods

A critical interpretive approach was adopted for the study, recognizing that critical research seeks to challenge dominant structures and advocate for meaningful change (Patton 2002; Reham and Alharthi 2016; Pasque 2023). Critical research is particularly relevant when examining the experiences of marginalized communities (Pasque 2023) as it can highlight the realities which constrain certain freedoms (Reham and Alharthi 2016). Rather than passively documenting exclusionary practices, this study aimed to expose and disrupt these barriers, aligning with the view that critical research should ultimately seek to transform exclusionary discourses (Patton 2002; Reham and Alharthi 2016; Pasque 2023). In line with this approach, the study was designed to shine a light on existing practices in relation to LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusion in the leisure sector and to highlight actionable pathways forward for change.

The research comprised two distinct phases in order to build a clearer picture of the perceived roles and responsibilities of leisure organizations for providing LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusive leisure event spaces. Qualitative methods were employed as they provide a means to evaluate lived experiences and identify potential interventions for social change (Denzin 2017). Phase one involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff from ‘umbrella’ leisure organizations. Phase two involved hosting an interactive session at the 2023 World Leisure Congress (WLC), where findings from phase one were presented to expert panel members and audience members for further discussion. Grounded in the potential of leisure for creating safe and equitable spaces for the LGBTTTQIA2S + community, while also recognizing the inherent challenges, the WLC set out with an ambitious social impact goal: ‘To make leisure more inclusive for the LGBTTTQIA2S+ community in Aotearoa New Zealand’ (World Leisure Organisation 2023). Presenting at the WLC enabled the researchers to align with critical research approaches – actively advocating for change and contributing towards the congress’s social impact goal.

Phase one

The organizations selected for analysis were ‘umbrella’ type organizations or governing bodies within the leisure sector, chosen for their active role in shaping values within their sub-sector (CommunityNet Aotearoa 2023). As organizations responsible for managing and/or influencing smaller bodies within the leisure sector (e.g. sports clubs or aquatic centres), these governing bodies have the potential to contribute to broader change across New Zealand. These organizations may be seen as pivotal in setting the tone and strategic direction when it comes to LGBTTTQIA2S + matters. Organizations were selected from sub-sectors: sport and recreation, local government, and tourism, hospitality, and events. Local governments were included in the study as they oversee numerous public leisure event spaces in New Zealand such as parks, libraries, aquatic centres, and art galleries.

A range of ‘umbrella’ leisure organizations were selected based on their relevance to the study. Participants were contacted via email (obtained from the organizations’ websites) and invited to participate in the research. The selection of individuals to contact was based on their role within the organization and their likelihood of being involved in LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusion initiatives. With the understanding that liminoid moments can occur in both formal and informal event settings, participant selection was guided by the theoretical framework. As such, participants outside of traditional event facilitator roles were selected to encompass a broad range of leisure setting facilitators. For local governments, individuals in positions relating to leisure or community services were approached. The study prioritized organizational and professional perspectives and, as such, demographic data on participants were not collected. Participants were given an information sheet detailing the aims of the project and ethical considerations. Those who agreed to take part were required to sign a consent form and were invited to take part in a recorded Zoom interview with two of the researchers.

The initial list of 277 leisure providers in New Zealand was compiled through a systematic review of publicly available information. From this pool, 61 organizations showed visible LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusion and formed the sampling frame for interviews. We invited all 61 but only 13 accepted our invitation. This relatively low response rate may introduce the possibility of self-selection bias, as organizations with a stronger interest in the topic or more favourable practices may have been more likely to participate. However, the number of interviews conducted is consistent with many qualitative studies, where samples of approximately 10–20 participants are often sufficient to reach thematic saturation. During the analysis, recurring patterns and themes began to emerge across the interviews, suggesting that the dataset was adequate to address the research questions. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted with this recruitment limitation in mind.

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 staff across a range of managerial, consultancy, strategy, and advisory roles, including DEI-specific roles. Those from local government had responsibilities for libraries, parks, policy, and community experience. While participants were not asked to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, they were selected based on their professional involvement in planning and delivering leisure and events across New Zealand. To our knowledge, one participant self-identified as a member of the LGBTTTQIA2S + community. Based on the content and tone of conversations,

Table 1. Participant overview.

Participant	Sub-sector
P1	Sport and recreation
P2	Local government
P3	Local government
P4	Local government
P5	Sport and recreation
P6	Sport and recreation
P7	Sport and recreation
P8	Sport and recreation
P9	Sport and recreation
P10	Sport and recreation
P11	Local government
P12	Local government
P13	Tourism, hospitality, and events

several other participants positioned themselves as allies of the LGBTTQIA2S + community. In the findings and discussion that follows, participants are provided with an ID (see Table 1 for an overview of participants).

Based on our theoretical framework, the interviews were designed to focus on how staff perceive their roles and responsibilities in creating inclusive environments, the barriers they encounter, and the strategies they employ. The concept of LLES, with their transformative potential, provided a critical lens in which the findings were collected and analysed. Participants were encouraged to reflect not only on current practices but also on what they envisioned as leisure's *potential* for LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion and belonging. This focus on transformative potential shaped how the findings were interpreted and applied as sector-wide solutions. In analysing the data, liminoid moments were not viewed as moments that occur in isolation, but rather understood to be embedded within, and facilitated by, broader systemic conditions. Hence, data analysis sought to identify personal, organizational, and society wide enablers which might facilitate moments of belonging for the LGBTTQIA2S + community in diverse leisure contexts.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the data were analysed thematically. Interview transcripts were read for familiarity, taking note of any patterns emerging in the dataset. Using an inductive approach, initial codes were generated to capture the core ideas from discussions with participants. These codes were then sorted into broad themes representing barriers to, and enablers of, LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion. Finally, related codes within each broad theme were further grouped into sub-themes to reflect the current challenges and opportunities for LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in the New Zealand leisure sector (See Table 2 below).

While thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data, the concept of LLES informed how these themes were interpreted. Drawing on Turner (1974) and Patterson and Getz (2013), liminoid spaces are understood here not as inherently inclusive, but as potentially transformative environments whose capacity to foster belonging is shaped by organizational practices, values, and power relations. In this sense, the concept of LLES functioned to guide our analysis towards how leisure providers enable, constrain, or interrupt moments of *communitas* and belonging for LGBTTQIA2S + participants.

Table 2. Codes and themes.

Raw data	Code	Theme
'It's always about the traditional elements of whatever sport they're delivering that really holds them up from being innovative sometimes, or from thinking a bit differently ... if it's what you've always done.' (P1)	Traditional environments and institutions	Tradition
'It's those larger sports that have deeply entrenched values and even language. Some of the language you hear in club rooms and changing rooms ... Personally, I wouldn't want to go near them with a barge pole ... Some of that stuff is quite deeply entrenched in the Sports club culture of a Saturday.' (P1)	Entrenched values, language, and culture	Tradition
'A lot of it comes down to the secondary school sports system ... what we're hearing is teachers trying to protect students at primary level from feeling excluded at secondary level ... for example, if they are really good at cross country ... if they're assigned boy at birth, then they're encouraged to participate with boys, because teachers know that when they get to secondary level it won't be an option.' (P1)	Traditionally gendered systems	Tradition

Phase two

Phase two of the research involved presenting and discussing the preliminary findings from phase one at the 2023 World Leisure Congress. As part of the session '*100 years of LGBTTQIA2S + leisure and events*', we hosted an abbreviated version of a 'solutions room', a format designed to foster 'active meaningful connections between attendees, [providing] peer support and solutions to ... challenges' (Segar 2018, n.p.). The session was deliberately structured as a collaborative knowledge-sharing exercise consistent with a *wananga* approach, which, according to the Māori belief systems, emphasizes dialogue, reflection and the co-construction of solutions.

After presenting the preliminary findings during the introductory part of the solutions room session, four invited senior academics with expertise in LGBTTQIA2S + in sport, marketing, tourism, and events were asked to take part in a facilitated panel discussion. Panellists were encouraged to draw on their own experiences and share knowledge or advice relevant to the research findings. In addition to the panellists and in-person Congress audience (n = 14), industry experts who had participated in earlier interviews were also invited to attend virtually and contribute to the discussion.

The session was conducted via Zoom, recorded with oral consent, and subsequently transcribed, and fact checked by two of the research team members who facilitated and attended the solutions room. Rather than treated as a separate dataset, the panel discussion findings were integrated into the sub-themes generated from the earlier interviews. This allowed for triangulation of insights, validation on initial themes, and the incorporation of perspectives that emerged from collective dialogue.

In the following section, the integrated findings from the interviews (Phase one) and panel discussion (Phase two) are presented and discussed thematically, with illustrative quotes used to capture the essence of each theme and sub-theme.

Findings and discussion

Interpreted through the lens of liminoid leisure spaces, the findings reveal how organizational actors shape, consciously or otherwise, the conditions under which moments of belonging may – or may not – emerge. While liminoid leisure events are often theorized as spaces where social roles temporarily fall away, participants' accounts highlight that such outcomes are neither automatic nor guaranteed. Instead, the potential for *communitas* is mediated by organizational traditions, ideologies, skills, and responses to resistance. The themes presented below therefore illustrate not only barriers and enablers to inclusion, but the ways in which leisure providers actively construct, facilitate, or undermine the liminoid potential of leisure event spaces.

Barriers to LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion

While liminoid states and moments in leisure event spaces are often theorized as enabling connection and belonging, participants' accounts highlight how organizational and societal barriers can significantly constrain this potential. Interpreted through a liminoid lens, these barriers illustrate how moments of *communitas* are delicate and easily unsettled by entrenched norms, power relations, and organizational practices.

Tradition

Facilitators of leisure reported that tradition often prevented LLES from being more inclusive. In this context, tradition refers to established roles, norms, and practices within sports and recreational settings, which can include long-standing rules, customs, and organizational structures that may be less accommodating of diverse needs. From a liminoid perspective, such traditions work to reassert fixed social roles, thereby limiting the emergence of *communitas* and feelings of belonging. This sentiment was felt particularly among those working in sport and recreation:

It's always about the traditional elements of whatever sport they're delivering that really holds them up from being innovative sometimes, or from thinking a bit differently ... club environments, they're not inclusive of many people, let alone a group that have specific and quite complex challenges to engaging in physical activity anyway. (P1)

The perceived gendered nature of sports, which can be deep seated, can create barriers for individuals questioning their gender identity and/or going through a gender transition, as many sport and recreational activities remain structured around rigid gender binaries (Elling-Machartzki 2017). This finding aligns with similar research in sports settings, where 'sport culture' often presents challenges for gender expression (Anderson et al. 2018; Storr 2021a; Romano and Quesnel 2021). So, while the liminoid nature of leisure event spaces has capacity to break down social roles (Milazzo 2026), long-held traditions in some LLES reinforce gendered social roles and hinder genuine connection between different groups.

Ideologies

Some participants felt 'an ideological shift' (P1) was needed to create safe LLES, not just at an organizational level but at a societal level too. This ideological shift entails challenging socio-cultural beliefs, biases, and stereotypes that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination, which is so often reported in leisure (e.g. Denison et al. 2021; Storr et al. 2022a; Drake and Bielefield 2017). Those who facilitate LLES, feel they have a responsibility to change the mindsets of the wider community:

One of the biggest barriers will be ... changing people's mindsets towards the rainbow community. (P9)

The perceived mindset shift needed, encompasses a broader understanding of diversity, inclusion, and respect for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Drake and Bielefield 2017). One participant shared an example of what she described as an outdated mindset held by many in her local area:

It's really the attitude of, 'I don't see gender [or] race. I treat people the same.' So, there is the acceptance to that degree but there is not those relationships and interactions with people who are different, to understand that you need to see difference and accommodate it. (P12)

The absence of recognition or awareness of 'difference' may inadvertently exclude and marginalize LGBTTQIA2S + individuals from LLES. The notion of 'treating everyone equally' without acknowledging the distinct experiences and identities of LGBTTQIA2S + individuals can render them invisible in LLES. Consequently, rather than dissolving difference, such ideology was described as rendering difference invisible, undermining the liminoid capacity of leisure spaces to foster recognition, connection, and shared belonging. Additionally, ideologies or mindsets which discourage individuals from forming relationships and interacting with members of the LGBTTQIA2S + community prevent groups from coming together to find commonalities in a particular leisure activity.

Community resistance

It was noted that active inclusion of the LGBTTQIA2S + community in LLES has at times resulted in community resistance or push back. Resistance can come in varying forms, ranging from formal complaints to more extreme actions, such as vandalism, protests, or threats. Several participants discussed their personal experiences:

We had a transgender author here who ... we had a book launch for her at one of our libraries here, and there were posters put up all over the town and all over the district, and they had to be put up four times because people kept taking them down ... because of how they saw her. (P11)

These firsthand accounts illustrate the potential risks of public support of the LGBTTQIA2S + community in LLES. Community resistance highlights the fragile nature of liminoid states/moments in leisure event spaces. While these spaces may allow social roles to fall away (e.g. Milazzo 2026), external resistance can interrupt these potentially transformative experiences and reimpose dominant social hierarchies.

Lack of knowledge and skills

Identified by multiple participants was a personal/organization-wide lack of knowledge and skills on how to create safe and inclusive LLES. This insight aligns with findings from Drake and Bielefield (2017) who reported on a similar lack of LGBTTQIA2S + knowledge amongst staff in library settings. Individuals may not be familiar with the rainbow community, nor might they have the knowledge required to effectively foster a sense of belonging:

I don't know if there's many people within our [organisation] team that would have the skills to even have those conversations. I know there's definitely a few of us that would be happy to have those conversations ... But ... we've got a fair few that would be like, they don't understand it. (P6)

From a liminoid lens, this lack of organizational knowledge limits the intentional facilitation of transformative moments, leaving belonging to chance rather than design.

Participants also spoke about there being a lack of available information about how organizations might foster a sense of belonging for the LGBTTQIA2S + community in LLES. Even more problematically, participants in the current study pointed to a potential lack of awareness and understanding of the demand for LGBTTQIA2S + inclusivity efforts.

It'll be a slow burn, and it's a word-of-mouth sort of thing ... for inclusion, often sports think, 'well I'm being told to be inclusive ... [but] if they're not coming, then there's no need for me to be inclusive, because there's actually no demand'. But actually, that's not the case. (P1)

Overall, while participants recognized their roles and responsibilities in providing safe and inclusive LLES for the LGBTTQIA2S + community, they perceived varying levels of understanding and acceptance of this responsibility across the leisure sector. Consequently, an ongoing lack of understanding of the needs of the LGBTTQIA2S + community when it comes to LLES will likely continue to stifle the potential of such spaces for fostering cohesion (e.g. Walters and Jepson 2019).

Fear

Some participants expressed that a fear of 'getting things wrong' hindered attempts to drive LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in LLES. The nuanced nature of sexual orientation and gender identity can create a fear of potential missteps. Storr (2021a) noted that there are similar sentiments felt in Australian sports settings, where individuals are afraid of making mistakes or *accidentally* discriminating against the LGBTTQIA2S + community. Interviews also pointed to fears about being criticized for misrepresenting the LGBTTQIA2S + community or using incorrect terminology. Participants expressed that despite being willing to act, and feeling they have a responsibility to do so, individuals or organizations may be reluctant to follow through with action due to this fear. This sentiment is captured well in the two excerpts below:

They might be willing to ... be more supportive and more inclusive but they're not sure how, and they're scared of making [mistakes or] using the wrong pronoun. (P5)

I think it probably comes back to that sense of wanting to get it right and that fear of getting things wrong or upsetting people. (P10)

This participant's view aligns with findings from Brackenridge et al. (2008), who found sports managers felt uncomfortable addressing matters concerning sexual or gender identity. As illustrated in the theme 'community resistance', promoting LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion can put an organization or an individual at risk, potentially fostering fear and discomfort, and at times, an unwillingness to defend marginalized communities. Fear of 'getting it wrong' thus emerged as a mechanism through which the liminoid openness of leisure spaces is curtailed, preventing providers from actively enabling moments of connection and affirmation.

Enablers to LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion

The findings highlighted a variety of barriers which prevented LGBTTQIA2S + individuals from feeling a sense of belonging in LLES, limiting their ability to form connections and feel a sense of community (Patterson and Getz 2013; Turner 1974). A key aim of phases one and two was to identify what is currently being done, and what might be done differently/better in the future by facilitators of leisure, to enable greater LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in LLES. How can facilitators of leisure create special moments of belonging in LLES for members of the LGBTTQIA2S + community? What are their roles and responsibilities in enabling LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion? The participants identified ways that leisure organizations and the people within them can start to break through the 'stone wall' (Halkitis 2019, p. 1) in their approach LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion, creating a broader sense of belonging. Interpreted through the lens of liminoidity, the following enablers can be understood

as organizational practices that actively stabilize the conditions under which moments of *communitas* and belonging may emerge.

Policy and strategy

Participants across all leisure sub-sectors, felt that it was their responsibility to have an official inclusion policy and strategy to effectively create safe LLES for LGBTQIA2S+ communities. This can begin at the 'top', with a 'leadership commitment' (P1) being seen as an important first step, before the broader rollout of any inclusion initiatives. This finding supports work by Romano, Rich and Quesnel (2021) who suggest that having formalized policies and guidelines is critical for LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion in sports settings. Although, it is important to note that policy and strategy commitments require action and behaviour changes so as to make real progress towards change (Storr 2021a).

Some participants also highlighted how, in their roles as leisure providers, wider legislation can be utilized as a safety tool to rebuke instances of community resistance:

It [legislation] can help shelter them [leisure organisations] from some of that criticism, because they can then fall back and say ... this is the guidance that we've received, these are the standards for the industry, don't come at us about them because you don't like the fact that we're doing it. (P3)

Hence, having official inclusion policy can support belonging for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals in LLES, when used as a tool to combat some of the key barriers to inclusion. For participants whom we spoke to working in the inclusion space within umbrella-type organizations, there was a suggestion that local organizations and clubs were increasingly looking to them for guidance on how to develop inclusion policies. While such guidance is forthcoming, the participants also explained that it is the responsibility of each organization to create its own policies rather than relying too heavily on policies created by the external umbrella organization:

They [leisure organisations/clubs] all have asked for, 'what's a set policy position that we could go for?' or 'what's a set response?' ... that's really difficult for us [umbrella leisure organisation] because we don't want to develop one policy that everyone then copies and pastes. (P10)

Given that leisure encompasses a broad range of activities and experiences, organizations therefore require unique policy and inclusion interventions so that they are able to foster a genuine sense of security and belonging in LLES. LGBTQIA2S+ individuals seek out spaces that are safe from discrimination (Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021) and arguably, having a policy in place that clearly outlines expectations for LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion, signals a commitment on the part of an organization that it will take care of this community.

In the solutions room discussion (phase 2), the importance of making gradual – rather than 'quick' – policy changes in relation to inclusion was also emphasized. Relatedly, implementing changes too quickly was seen as potentially counterproductive, running the risk of further stoking opposition from those who might be opposed to efforts to increase inclusion. As one panellist explained:

When we talk about those loud voices, one of the things that happens is ... many changes are implemented very quickly, and there's no period of time for those people who have loud voices to adjust to those changes, and then they get very angry, and then [the changes] get reversed.

Echoing Stroh (2015), the panellists further explained that while the pace of change might feel slow and frustrating, taking a slower, systematic approach can be more effective and sustainable in the long run.

Organizational values/philosophy

Organizational values and philosophy were described by some facilitators of leisure as pivotal for the creation of safe LLES. A participant working in local government believed that having a leadership team with strong values, who take responsibility for their role in creating safe spaces, filtered down through the workplace:

It is very much driven by the senior leadership who genuinely care about people ... We've had chief executives who honestly believe that our purpose as local government is to make people's lives better, and that filters down through all the stuff we do. (P2)

Another participant felt as though this had not quite been achieved. When asked what an ideal future might look like, she shared the hope that DEI roles would no longer be necessary, and rather, that DEI could be a collective responsibility across her organization:

We [the DEI team] quite often talk about that Utopia it would be if we weren't required ... What we sometimes find is that it [inclusion] sometimes can be left to one person's responsibility in an organisation, whereas ... our philosophy is very much that it should be everyone's responsibility. (P5)

These experiences highlight that while leisure events can inherently foster a sense of belonging and shared experience (Ong and Goh 2018; Walters and Jepson 2019), the responsibility for enabling inclusion must be collective and systemic. This recommendation is supported by Storr (2021a), who suggests that diversity work should be institutionalized as a part of daily practice, becoming a key responsibility of all members of an organization. When organizational values genuinely prioritize equity and are enacted across all levels, they create the conditions necessary for leisure events to become truly safe, affirming spaces for LGBTQIA2S + individuals.

Lived experience

For some participants, lived experience was viewed as a potential driver of change in LLES. One participant believed that having LGBTQIA2S + individuals within a leisure organization can actively lead to change, influencing both internal policies and external engagement. In the solutions room, one panellist referred to such individuals as 'champions', who might challenge heteronormative practices. However, there are also concerns that an overreliance on 'champions' can become burdening. In this extract, the participant shares an experience of an out and openly gay colleague:

[He was] elected as the first openly gay member [of council] but was really drained by constantly having to go back to questions about his identity all the time, when he was actually the strongest person on the economy. And there was a tendency to ... put him in a box over there and come to him on those questions but not come to him on the big financial questions, which is actually his strength. He just happens to be married to a man. (P12)

This extract highlights that while lived experience can support belonging in LLES, it is essential to recognize the potential burden that can arise from placing responsibility solely on individuals with lived experiences to address issues related to their identities. These ideas were expanded upon in the solutions room, with one panellist pointing out how the labelling of certain individuals as 'champions' can make a 'potentially quite tricky life, even trickier'. The panellist went on to highlight the importance of not putting all the onus on just one or a few LGBTQIA2S + individuals, but instead drawing upon others within an organization with personal ties to the LGBTQIA2S + community:

Don't underestimate the experiences of people in your organisations who are not members of the LGBTQIA2S + communities ... the life experiences that people have, not necessarily themselves personally, but they may have brothers, daughters ... who have navigated their way through all kinds of experiences ... it doesn't always have to come from the people who identify in the LGBTQIA2S + plus communities. The allies can very definitely be people whose extended families have experience.

The role of fostering belonging in LLES is hence, not isolated to those within the LGBTQIA2S + community, but rather a shared responsibility. One participant embodied this philosophy, sharing that having a family member who was transgender made inclusion work deeply personal for her. Drawing from this lived experience, she explained that she wears a rainbow lanyard at work to let those in the LGBTQIA2S + community know that they are accepted in said LLES. Visual cues, such as these, allow for liminoid moments to occur – creating *communitas*, and bringing people of different social roles together. Importantly, though, the accounts presented in this subsection highlight a tension within LLES: while lived experience can catalyse belonging, over-reliance on individuals risks re-fixing identities and responsibilities.

Capability building

Several facilitators of leisure emphasized their shared responsibility to build capability within organizations to address a lack of knowledge and skills (see earlier) and improve LGBTQIA2S + inclusion. As discussed in the previous section, the burden of responsibility for creating change and tackling inclusion issues can often

fall directly to members of the LGBTTQIA2S + community. One participant argued the sector needs '... to increase the understanding of opening those doors before they need to be opened ... to reduce that pressure on the individuals impacted' (P12). Reflecting on how to equip workers with the skills and knowledge to create safe LLES, these participants shared what their organizations had done in terms of collaborating with LGBTTQIA2S + organizations for training purposes:

We need to be building capability within our organisation ... there's been quite a big push recently around staff having for example ... Pride Pledge training ... we're trying to build a base level of understanding within the organisation. (P5)

Another participant emphasized the importance of building internal capability through training that focused on workplace values and philosophy:

We put a lot of time and effort into training throughout the organisation in terms of working to our values and being able to hold people to account at all levels ... and it makes a difference. (P2)

This participant highlighted her organization's comprehensive training approach, where training initiatives are aimed at all levels of the organization, ensuring that everyone, from executives to frontline staff, is equipped to practice inclusivity, be accountable, and foster an organization-wide sense of belonging. Building knowledge within organizations may give those who are not members of the LGBTTQIA2S + community, a greater understanding of the barriers which prevent LGBTTQIA2S + individuals from feeling special moments of excitement and closeness in LLES. In some sense, then, capability building was framed as a means of intentionally designing for liminoid moment, rather than assuming that inclusion will emerge naturally or organically through participation alone.

Collaboration and support

Collaboration and shared experiences emerged as pivotal for fostering belonging in LLES, with participants highlighting the responsibility to provide support to one another. As part of this, drawing upon the diverse experiences of others when it comes to navigating the complexities of LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion can be vital:

One of the things I have loved about joining local government ... is that whatever you are going through or whatever stage you're at, there is likely somebody else who has already been through that very stage or is about to go through that stage. And I think the power of that and the power of diversity of experience in communities is huge. (P11)

Collaboration between facilitators of leisure was also seen as key to achieving sector-wide belonging for the LGBTTQIA2S + community:

I try my best to just connect people so that we can get a bit more collaboration happening, because I don't really see much change happening if just pockets happen. (P5)

Several participants shared that organizations required top-down support, with one participant stating that there is 'a real appetite' (P10) for guidance. One participant shared a practical example, discussing a working group that had been established to connect organizations that had gone through similar experiences of community resistance to LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion efforts, thereby enabling organizations to learn from each other.

Changing mindsets towards LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion

As illustrated by the barriers to LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion, leisure organizations and the individuals working within them bear a significant responsibility in creating environments where all people feel a genuine sense of belonging. If LGBTTQIA2S + individuals do not feel they belong in LLES, they will be excluded from communal experiences. Facilitators of leisure have an active role to play in shifting mindsets to foster a more inclusive leisure sector. This role extends beyond just implementing the sort of inclusion strategies identified by participants; real change requires a profound transformation of attitudes and beliefs. The participants recommended pathways toward this change, recognizing that it also involves evolving their own perspective. In order for leisure to 'bring people together at planned events [or liminoid states/

moments] in a spirit of belonging and sharing' (Patterson and Getz 2013, p.234), it may be necessary for facilitators to critically reflect on and evolve their own mindsets.

Listen, encourage, and respond

Given that the voices of LGBTTQIA2S + individuals are so often marginalized (Verrelli et al. 2019; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021), most participants felt that in order to foster belonging in LLES, it was important to actively listen, encourage, and respond to the LGBTTQIA2S + community. Encouraging an open dialogue with the rainbow community, and building an understanding of the realities faced in LLES, was seen as having strong potential for improving understanding of issues and identifying possible solutions that foster belonging:

It's so important to talk to those people that you're looking to include ... The voices of those who experience discrimination, marginalization barriers to being active, their voices are so powerful in telling us what they want. (P1)

By understanding the unique and multifaceted needs of the LGBTTQIA2S + community, it becomes clear how to best invest time and resources in creating solutions that truly meet those needs. Participants emphasized that data insights (e.g. youth survey, census reports) can be utilized to drive evidence-based support that is aligned with community aspirations. At the same time, however, there was acknowledgement that currently in New Zealand there is minimal data available.

Recognize intersectionality

Multiple facilitators of leisure recognized the intersectional nature of identities within marginalized communities. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals' identities and experiences are shaped by multiple factors such as gender, sexuality, race, disability, and more (Anderson and Knee 2022). These aspects of identity are interconnected and cannot be considered in isolation when addressing discrimination and marginalization (Walters and Jepson 2019). One participant noted the limitations of approaches to inclusion in LLES that fail to recognize intersectionality:

Some ... [inclusion initiatives] don't necessarily account for the intersectional nature [of marginalized identities] ... You can't just move from a specific to a whole of approach. I think some of them sort of neglect the idea that some of those [marginalized] groups are intertwined, and they don't just experience things in isolation from one another. (P1)

Another participant expanded on this idea, sharing that the experiences of marginalized groups are often interconnected, reinforcing the need for inclusive approaches that consider these intersections:

We talk a lot about intersectionality. So much of the work that we do, whether it's targeted at women and girls, disability, rainbow communities, it all intersects. And many of the same barriers for those marginalized groups are the same and many of the ways that you can be more inclusive are also the same as well. (P5)

While LLES may allow for social roles to fall away (Milazzo 2026), when implementing inclusion initiatives, it is important to recognize the intersectional nature of identities. Failing to account for these intersections may result in overlooking the unique challenges and barriers faced by individuals within the LGBTTQIA2S + community, thus hindering efforts to create truly inclusive and equitable LLES.

Take a hard line as an organization

Some participants who have had personal experience in encouraging LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in leisure, felt strongly that organizations and individuals have a responsibility to 'take a hard line' or 'stick their neck' out when it came to inclusion:

We need to start drawing harder lines against active hate groups, and that means putting an effort in and sticking your neck out and standing up for vulnerable communities rather than yet again expecting us to bleed for the political comfort of cisgender, heterosexual, largely white people in positions of power. (P3)

This participant further stressed the importance of standing up for vulnerable communities, even if this means risking one's own safety:

Properly supporting diversity requires putting yourself at risk, because the hate that comes at us as a community will in part be directed to you as an organisation, and you need to be prepared to accept that, because that's part of what properly representing us as a community and properly supporting our rights means. (P3)

Powerful insights such as this serve as a reminder that advocating for inclusivity often comes with backlash and criticism, something that members of the LGBTTQIA2S + community experience daily. Supporting inclusivity requires a willingness to accept the risks that come with challenging stereotypes and deeply engrained beliefs. In this context, as others, participants urged for a proactive approach rather than passively tolerating discrimination. Importantly, according to Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy (2021), LLES's are an ideal environment 'to resist and change dominant discourses, prejudices and injustice' (p.450). Relatedly, the participants' messages highlight the need to create environments where everyone feels valued and included, even if it means taking bold steps to challenge discrimination and promote belonging.

More specifically, participants felt that people in positions of power need to use their privilege to stand up for the LGBTTQIA2S + community:

This is what diverse communities, not just queer people, but all marginalized communities, from disabled people to non-white people, have been saying for a long time, is you need to use your privilege to support us ... People in positions of privilege need to use that privilege to communicate, and when communication fails, to actively protect us. (P3)

Another participant recognized that as someone who was not a part of the LGBTTQIA2S + community, it was safer for her to stick her neck out and speak out against active hate:

[My colleague] and I also do feel emotionally impacted by these conversations, but not in the same way because they're not our journey or our experience. So, it's safer for him and I to stand up and say these things. (P12)

The same participant went on to share a personal experience of an incident wherein anti-trans protesters had begun spreading hate speech against the transgender community. Recognizing her privilege and responsibilities, she took personal actions to stand up for the LGBTTQIA2S + community even though it could potentially put her at risk:

I started wearing my transgender rights hoodie to the office every Friday when they [protesters] were there and walking through them. And I know that I felt safe to do that because I wasn't emotionally invested, but there were two people in my office who were really, really upset by it and felt a lot more emotional because they had a lot stronger connection. (P12)

This account highlights the importance of using privilege not just passively, but as a tool to advocate for the protection of marginalized groups in leisure event spaces. Crucially, too, the participant highlighted an important distinction in the context of speaking up for marginalized groups:

How do we use the voices and the privilege we have, not to speak for people but elevate their voices? (P12)

Rather than speaking on behalf of these communities, she emphasizes the importance of using privilege to elevate the voices of those directly affected. By adopting this mindset, individuals with privilege can take on a role as influential allies and advocates.

However, in an alternative view, Storr et al. (2021a) argue that 'chastising' organizations for discrimination can be potentially counterproductive. They stress that the act of 'calling out' sport organizations can turn them off from LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion, thereby limiting change within the sector. It may be that there is often a fine balance between taking a firm organizational stance against discrimination and being perceived as overly punitive towards organizations that engage in discriminatory practices.

Sell the benefits of inclusion

Accepting that some people will not change, at least not quickly, can serve as a starting point to breaking down barriers to inclusion in LLES. In such instances, a different, perhaps more pragmatic approach is needed. One participant shared that in her role, she had often had to 'sell' the benefits of inclusion. This involved purposefully encouraging groups and clubs to engage with the LGBTTQIA2S + community, but not necessarily for the sake of being 'inclusive' per se, but rather in the sense that it might help increase

memberships. Using this strategy, she found she was able to encourage slow change in organizations that had previously been reluctant to adopt inclusive practices:

You do become a salesperson in social issues because there's no other way really to convince people to do that. We call it the right thing, but for them it's outside of their BAU [business as usual], it's outside of what their traditional looks like. So, you do really have to learn how to sell the benefits of including people in participation and speak their language (P1).

She expressed that while this was not an ideal technique, it had been effective in initiating gradual changes in more traditional environments:

Unfortunately, it's about ... what can inclusion do for you? And a lot of what we're seeing is around the benefit, like selling the benefits. You can increase your membership; you could have more people come and be financial contributors. (P1)

This strategy, identified by participants, is consistent with findings from Storr et al. (2019) who found that much of the diversity work done by sport organizations is driven by a desire to increase participation, rather than for the goal of genuine LGBTTQIA2S + inclusivity. Nonetheless, by accepting the reality of differing perspectives and strategically appealing to practical benefits, organizations may be able to make slow, gradual changes.

Listen when corrected

As identified by multiple participants, a fear of getting things wrong can hinder the leisure sector from speaking out. To combat this issue, the importance of listening when being corrected by a member of the LGBTTQIA2S + community was highlighted:

As difficult as it is, you need to speak up but listen when you're being corrected. Like the reality is that nobody gets it perfect, nobody is perfect, nobody gets it right all the time. (P3)

The same participant acknowledged the difficulties in speaking out, however recognized that the best allies are those that listen when corrected and modify their behaviour accordingly:

I'm fully aware of how difficult this is, but this is where most of the best supporters come from, is not people who get it right all the time, but people who speak up, speak what they know, and when they're corrected they listen and say, like, 'I got that wrong, that was my mistake, thank you for taking the time to educate me, I'm going to do it differently.' (P3)

This sentiment was echoed in the solutions room discussion, with one panellist sharing that the LGBTTQIA2S + community was generally accepting of support when it came from an authentic place, regardless of mistakes that might be made:

I think we as a community celebrate when we are considered ... I know there can be fear, concern about how we do it, but I think we can see the authentic people are authentically happy to engage with us ... there might be mistakes, there might be flaws but I think ... there's a lot of acceptance and celebration that at least you're trying.

The path to LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion involves acknowledging the fear of making mistakes yet also recognizing the importance of speaking up and listening when corrected. The most effective allies, as highlighted by participants, are those who humbly engage, learn, and act with authenticity in their support for the rainbow community.

Taken together, our findings suggest that LLES are far from neutral or self-generating sites of belonging and *communitas*. Rather, their transformative potential is dependent on how leisure organizations negotiate/ manage tradition, respond to resistance, build capability, and enact values of inclusion. From the perspective of providers, fostering belonging involves actively managing the tension between the promise of liminoid openness and the persistence of structural and ideological constraints. In this sense, belonging is not an incidental outcome of leisure participation, but an organizationally, and consciously, produced outcome.

Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to examine the perceived roles and responsibilities of leisure organizations in New Zealand for providing LLES that are safe for, and inclusive of, LGBTTQIA2S + communities. Our findings

extend theoretical understandings of LGBTTQIA2S + inclusivity in leisure spaces, using liminoidity as a theoretical lens, by identifying ways in which facilitators and leisure organizations can harness the potential of LLES as sites for challenging exclusion and marginalization. In taking a broad view of the concept of a 'leisure event' we were able to capture barriers, which not only prevented inclusion in planned leisure events, but also all kinds of liminoid leisure states/moments. This broad view encompassed tourism, sport, recreation, and hospitality experiences, allowing us to extend the work of previous studies which took a narrower approach to LGBTTQIA2S + inclusivity within specific subsectors of leisure.

The findings revealed that, while leisure *does* hold potential to create special moments of belonging in liminoid states/moments (Turner 1974; Patterson and Getz 2013), there is much work to be done, by a multitude of organizational actors, *before* LGBTTQIA2S + community members might be able to participate in the co-creation of these special moments. Overall, our findings reveal a complex situation – aligning with similar studies which found that barriers prevented LGBTTQIA2S + individuals from feeling included in LLES (Storr et al. 2022b; Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy 2021; Patchett and Foster 2015; Anderson et al. 2018; Drake and Bielefield 2017; Ong et al. 2025). Despite the potential for leisure to bring individuals of different social roles together for moments of belonging (Patterson and Getz 2013; Turner 1974; Milazzo 2026), a multitude of barriers, which reinforce socio-cultural generalizations, prevent LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion in LLES.

These barriers, whether actual or perceived, relate to long standing beliefs and ideas about who belongs, or does not, in leisure settings. For the most part, societal wide views underpinned by tradition and ideology, reinforced through, at times, extreme levels of community resistance, risks perpetuating a situation wherein the LGBTTQIA2 + may remain 'invisible' in LLES. Importantly though, the participants in this study recognized their roles and responsibilities in providing safe LLES for LGBTTQIA2S + communities. Although, at the same time, they also acknowledged a sector-wide lack of knowledge on how to foster belonging in LLES and a wide-spread fear of potential mistakes.

However, our findings also offer signs of hope. The findings suggest that for LLES to be spaces where people of all backgrounds can come together, inclusion efforts must also be collective. Our findings support previous organizational perspective research which emphasizes commitments from leadership, official guidelines and policies, and organization-wide LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion training (Melton and Cunningham 2014; Perales 2022; Storr 2021a). LGBTTQIA2S + inclusion cannot occur in isolation, nor should it rest solely on the shoulders of LGBTTQIA2S + individuals or DEI teams. It must be a shared, collaborative commitment across the leisure sector and throughout all levels of organizations. This requires action from leadership through to frontline facilitators of leisure, with everyone recognizing their role in fostering belonging and their responsibility to act as proactive allies. As identified by participants, part of this responsibility involves challenging and evolving our own mindsets. Above all, though, it is about having a strong conviction, both as individuals and organizations, to challenge discrimination and actively protect marginalized communities within LLES. Only then, might facilitators of leisure fully recognize the transformative potential of LLES to bring members of the LGBTTQIA2S + community 'together in a spirit of belonging and sharing' (Patterson and Getz 2013, p.234).

This article serves as a call to action, urging those across the leisure sector, especially at an organizational level, to prioritize inclusion in their approach to leisure planning, programming, and management. It challenges individuals and organizations to confront issues of intersectionality within the leisure industry, recognizing that true inclusivity requires proactive efforts to address systematic inequalities and injustices. In examining the role of inclusion in New Zealand LLES, this article represents a crucial step forward in the collective understanding of the complexities and nuances of LGBTTQIA2S + experiences. It offers fresh perspectives and thought-provoking insights that have the potential to shape both the scholarly discourse and real-world practices, especially where such practices relate to the provision of safe and inclusive LLES for the LGBTTQIA2S + community.

While the findings from this study are based solely on the experiences of New Zealand-based facilitators of leisure, we believe that many of the emergent recommendations will be of use more broadly. We extend the work of LGBTTQIA2S + scholarship by presenting practical solutions to be applied within the leisure sector, as recommended by scholars (Shaw 2025; Denison et al. 2021; Storr and Richard 2024).

Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that not capturing participants' sexual and gender identities limits the ability to fully assess how lived experience may shape understandings of inclusion. Given the diversity within the LGBTTTQIA2S + community, more research is needed to explore the specific experiences of groups within this broad and multifaceted population. We also realize that our research is firmly situated in a country of privilege, and it will be interesting to investigate how other leisure organizations in different countries approach LGBTTTQIA2S + inclusion, comparing New Zealand practices with those in other cultural contexts.

Additional research directions that could build on this paper include exploring how multiple marginalized identities interact with the LGBTTTQIA2S + identity in LLES, examining how race, disability, socioeconomic status, and other factors create unique needs. In addition, research tracking the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of inclusion initiatives over time would be useful and should focus on measuring both organizational changes and the lived experiences of different groups within the LGBTTTQIA2S + community.

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Ethics approval

The project Inclusive leisure for the LGBTTTQIA2S + community in Aotearoa New Zealand received ethical clearance from the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, Human Ethics Committee (clearance number D23/226)

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