

# Beyond Bars and Binaries: Redefining Masculinity and Community Through Sport

## Authors

- Quintin Crawford. (He/Him) Lead of Out in Singapore
- Devane Sharma. (He/Him) Co-Lead of Out in Singapore

## Key Words

*LGBTQIA+ inclusion, Community sport, Civic engagement*

## Summary

Out in Singapore (OISG) is a volunteer-led initiative offering inclusive fitness and social activities for LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly gay men, outside commercialised queer spaces. By challenging heteronormative and gendered norms in sport, OISG fosters safer, identity-affirming environments centred on connection, autonomy, and care. Its model contributes to a broader redefinition of masculinity and equality in sport, grounded in inclusion, visibility, and civic pride.

## Problem Statement

In Singapore, LGBTQIA+ individuals and in this case, particularly gay men, often face difficulties forming meaningful social bonds outside of nightlife and dating apps. While legal and social restrictions contribute to exclusion, equally pressing are the internal dynamics within the queer community, where narrow ideals around race, body type, and masculinity can limit genuine connection. As articulated in a widely shared 2019 open letter by Tim Burch, many members of the community experience profound loneliness and exclusion, even within supposed “safe” spaces.

Moreover, mainstream sports culture further compounds this isolation, as it remains heavily shaped by heteronormative and exclusionary ideals of athleticism and masculinity. As a result, many LGBTQIA+ individuals lack access to inclusive, affirming spaces that prioritise well-being, community, and pride.

Out in Singapore (OISG) was created in response to these layered exclusions. By offering fitness activities and social gatherings outside of bars and apps, OISG provides a platform for building quality connections and celebrating civic pride. The initiative meets a clear need for safe, community-led alternatives that challenge both external and in-group marginalisation. As a

result, OISG's work aligns with a broader understanding of gender equality in sport that includes diverse sexual orientations and gender expressions.

## About the program

Out in Singapore (OISG) is a volunteer-led community initiative that offers inclusive, non-commercial spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals and allies to connect through sport, fitness, and social gatherings. With a cumulative reach of over 11,000 followers across social media platforms as of June 2025, OISG primarily connects with its audience via Facebook and Instagram.

The initiative was born from a need to create meaningful, identity-affirming alternatives to nightlife and dating apps, which often dominate queer social life in Singapore. Within OISG, several activity groups have emerged to meet a wide range of community interests, including HIIT bootcamps, calisthenics, hiking, swimming, kayaking, karaoke, and astrology. These recurring programmes offer regular opportunities for engagement, wellness, and social cohesion. Joint sessions between groups — such as a run followed by a HIIT class — are encouraged to foster a sense of community across diverse interests.

Beyond sport and recreation, OISG also plays an active civic role. It supports annual events like PinkDot (Singapore's leading LGBTQIA+ visibility campaign), organises fundraisers for non-profit organisations such as The Greenhouse SG (a recovery centre), and hosts large-scale social gatherings. Its outreach extends to collaboration with mainstream sports communities, such as the "Conga Line" run that brought together various running groups to promote allyship and mutual understanding.

## Outcomes

While OISG is an initiative that focuses primarily on gay men, it contributes meaningfully to gender equality by challenging the gendered and heteronormative assumptions that underpin most sporting environments. In doing so, it also opens up space for reimagining masculinity itself — beyond dominance, competition, or conformity. By affirming bodily autonomy, freedom of expression, and psychological safety, the programme supports marginalised communities in reclaiming dignity and visibility through sport.

The community's emphasis on consent, care, and mutual respect across diverse gender identities and sexual orientations helps reduce isolation and vulnerability, particularly for those navigating multiple layers of marginalisation. By disrupting dominant ideals of manhood, OISG contributes to a more expansive, inclusive understanding of what it means to engage in sport.

Through its inclusive pathways to physical activity and social connection, OISG empowers individuals to reclaim agency over their health, relationships, and sense of belonging. These values are essential to building a more just and affirming sporting culture — one that welcomes difference, supports well-being, and positions gender equality as a shared responsibility beyond the binary.

## Successes

Since its launch, OISG has grown into one of the most active LGBTQIA+ community platforms in Singapore, regularly convening diverse groups around accessible and alternative gay activities. Its ability to maintain a sustained calendar of fitness-based meetups has fostered long-term participation, creating trust-based environments where members feel safe to return and engage.

One key achievement has been OISG's success in building intergroup solidarity: regular collaborations across internal groups (e.g. HIIT x running events) have helped bridge subcommunities that are often fragmented. Additionally, its visible presence in national events like PinkDot, and its partnerships with initiatives such as The Greenhouse SG, have allowed OISG to move beyond the fitness sphere and contribute meaningfully to civic inclusion and queer visibility.

Another and perhaps most powerful marker of success is the aim to create a cultural shift: OISG has redefined what queer gathering can look like—beyond nightlife, beyond performance, beyond normative superficiality — centering connection, wellbeing, and mutual care. As one community member put it: *"I found a sense of belonging I didn't expect. For once, I didn't feel like I had to perform to be accepted."* In a context where exclusion often arises from within the community itself, OISG has made space for those who feel sidelined to find belonging on their own terms.

## Challenges

Out in Singapore is led entirely by volunteers from within the community, and sustaining engagement depends on members stepping up to organise activities. However, the local context — where, according to organisers, *"people tend to blend in instead of standing out"*, resulting in a weakened engagement. Ultimately, this challenge contributes to limiting the variety of events that OISG can offer.

Additionally, the absence of a formal, permanent physical venue for most activities remains a persistent obstacle and adds a layer of difficulty to convert online interest into offline participation.

Finally, while OISG organises regular events with strong followings, particularly badminton and karaoke, some members may feel intimidated by the size of the larger communities behind these activities. In contrast, for less popular events, the absence of a large and consistent group can also discourage members from taking part. This has an impact on both participants and organisers, who may feel insufficiently supported in pursuing the activities that matter to them.

## Lessons & Recommendations

- Clear rules and guidelines are essential, not only to ensure that the space remains safe, but also to maintain an inclusive environment for all — particularly given the wide variety of activities that are offered. An organiser shares that one of OISG main guideline consists in the prohibition of activities and discussions related to ethnicity, nationality, or politics, as these can be divisive in nature.

- Moreover, OISG shares that while social media helps to increase visibility and outreach, word of mouth remains the most effective way to encourage participation. Although OISG has a relatively large social media following in Singapore, they notice that many individuals only attend events once they see a mutual friend is involved. Therefore, the organisers actively encourage existing members to invite their friends to join.
- Finally, it's important to note that while most members of the community are supportive and respectful — as in any setting — there are occasionally individuals who choose to disregard the rules or cause unnecessary difficulties for organisers. In such cases, direct dialogue is immediately initiated to resolve the issue at hand. If the behaviour continues, or if harm is caused to others, OISG prioritises the safety of the group, including, when necessary, excluding individuals from participation. Organisers emphasise that *“Being part of a community requires mutual respect, and safeguarding our members must always come first”*.

## References

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