

SPORTING THE MASCULINE MANTRA: A POST STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF
GENDER AND WELLBEING IN COMPETITIVE MEN'S UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

By

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Dedication

To the game I fell in love with as a timid grade high school kid. It has been my passion, my escape, my shelter in even the toughest times. The sound of sneakers on the court, the feel of the ball in my hands, the intoxicating swish of a jumper – all these years later it is still perfect.

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Abstract

Gender has been widely recognized as an important factor that influences student health. This is particularly evident within the student athlete population, as inter-collegiate athletics and sporting spaces on post-secondary campuses have been generally defined as hypermasculine sites where athletes are mistreated and excluded due to their violation of the norms of hegemonic masculinity. It has been posited that the culture of hegemonic masculinity operating within competitive men's sport works to stigmatize and devalue non-dominant groups. While competitive sport has been linked to health benefits, it has been theorized that the masculine nature of sport has the potential to hinder the health and wellbeing of men athletes. The purpose of this study was to explore how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the health and wellbeing of competitive men's university athletes. A transformative framework and poststructuralist approach were used. A participant group of eleven men-identified athletes from local universities varsity teams of basketball, football, and soccer were recruited through university athletic departments and social media postings. In-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted, and discourse analysis was used to explore athlete-coach relationships, gendered language, physical health and injury, mental health, and masculine norms and values. The examination of themes and discourse helps construct a rich understanding of the relationship between masculinity and health and wellbeing of men in competitive sport.

Keywords: Masculinity, men athletes, competitive sport, wellbeing, poststructural

List of Abbreviations Used

LGBTQ2SIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Two-Spirit, Intersex, and Asexual peoples
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletics Association
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The link between masculinity and athlete wellbeing in competitive men's sport warrants research to better understand the cultural mechanisms that influence health. This introductory chapter will begin with a brief description of the role that physical activity and sport play in health promotion. The chapter will introduce the current culture of competitive men's sport, illustrating the ways that masculinity has been theorized to dominate this space and influence athlete wellbeing. Then, the need for an exploration of the relationship between masculinity and athlete wellbeing will be illustrated. The chapter will continue by describing the rationale and purpose of the study, defining key terms, and presenting the research question. The chapter will then give a brief overview of this study and conclude by outlining the significance and implications of the study.

Physical Activity, Health, and Sport

The link between physical activity, health, and wellbeing has been well-established (Andersen, Ottesen & Thing, 2019; Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2018, 2019). Insufficient physical activity has been labeled as a key risk factor for noncommunicable disease such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes. According to the World Health Organization (2018), physical inactivity is a leading risk factor for mortality worldwide. As of 2010, 23% of adults, and more than 80% of the world's adolescent population, were insufficiently physically active (World Health Organization, 2018). It is therefore important to examine strategies that may support physical activity, including organized activity such as recreational and competitive sport. The relationship between physical activity, health, and sport will be discussed in greater detail in the next sections.

As one of the gatekeepers of physical activity, sport has the ability to play an active role in improving global health through the prevention of non communicable diseases (Mountjoy et al., 2018). Research has indicated that participation in regular physical activity, such as recreational or competitive sport, is also associated with a decreased risk of anxiety, depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and substance use (Andersen et al., 2019; Pluhar, McCracken, Griffith, Christino, Sugimoto & Meechan III, 2019). An examination of Norwegian adolescents in recreational and competitive sports discovered that compared to those not participating in sport, athletes in recreational and competitive sport had fewer mental health symptoms and reported fewer problems in their daily life (Breistøll, Clench-Aas, Van Roy, & Kjærsti Raanaas, 2017). Participation in team sports have been associated with fewer mental health problems than individual sports, and competitive sport athletes reported the least amount of mental health problems compared those in different levels of competition (Breistøll et al., 2017; Van Slingerland et al., 2018).

The benefits of sport have been shown to positively influence overall wellbeing (Andersen et al., 2019; Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018), and regular participation in organized sport has been linked to healthy development, including physical health, interpersonal relationships, purposeful living, motivation, self-efficacy and self-esteem, positive values, emotional control, and behavioral self-regulation (Reverdito, Galatti, Carvalho, Scaglia, Côté, Gonçalves, & Paes, 2017). Sport participation has been shown to play an important role in development, including personal and immediate outcomes such as enjoyment, positive expectations, and personal assets and skills (Holt, Scherer, & Koch, 2015; Reverdito et al., 2017). Given this, involvement in organized sport is a multi-dimensional influence with many mental and physical health benefits.

As a discipline, health promotion and university sport connect because sport has been suggested as one setting for promoting social good, particularly health, and for delivering health promotion messages (Donaldson & Finch, 2012). One mechanism through which health promotion and sport connect is through the development of healthy environments and organisational culture, including structural changes and policy implementation (Kelly, Baur, Bauman, Smith, Saleh, King & Chapman, 2010). Although the primary role of sports clubs is to organise and provide opportunities for competition and participation in sport, sports clubs are also considered to be social organisations for promoting social good, particularly health (Donaldson & Finch, 2012). Researchers have advocated for the benefits of participation in sport (Andersen et al., 2019; Breistøllet al., 2017; Brustad, Vilhjalmsson & Fonseca, 2008; Coalter, 2007; Collins, 2014; Reverdito et al., 2017; Scharhag et al., 2013) yet Van Slingerland et al. (2018) suggested that collegiate athletes are predisposed to the same or greater risks of experiencing declining mental wellbeing as the general population. This suggests the need for health promotion research to examine how men in competitive university sport experience health and wellbeing.

Masculinity in Competitive Men's Sport

Since its inception in North America, scholars have theorized that competitive sport acts as an indicator of masculinity and male power (Anderson, 2011; Kian et al., 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). This theory views sport as a venue for boys and young men to learn idealized masculine values (Anderson, 2011; Kian et al., 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017).

Competitive men's sport has even been described as an indoctrination into manhood and a social institution organized primarily around the definition and encouragement of certain forms of masculinity (Anderson, 2011; Kian et al., 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). Many

academics suggest that competitive men's sport has been, and continues to be, used as a tool to teach young boys culturally idealized masculine values such as strength, aggression, and violence (Anderson, 2011; Kian et al., 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). This has led to the assertion that men in competitive sport must align with a narrow set of exclusive and restrictive characteristics predicated on physical strength, toughness, and competitiveness to maintain active membership (Kian et al. 2015; Luisi, Luisi & Geana, 2016; MacDonald, 2014; Schwalbe, 2014).

Competitive men's sports have been generally defined as hypermasculine sites where athletes may be mistreated and excluded due to their violation of perceived masculine norms (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018). This has been especially prevalent on collegiate campuses where inter-collegiate athletics and sporting spaces have been shown to be hostile for 2SLGBTQIA+ athletes, for example (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; James, 2019). Men's competitive university sports have been alleged to endorse this exclusion and mistreatment, which has been shown to have the potential to influence negative health and wellbeing outcomes in athletes who do not present or identify with an idealized masculine norm (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018). Given the literature indicating that men's competitive university athletes competing in collision and contact sports, such as basketball and football, demonstrate the strongest conformity to perceived norms of masculinity, James (2019) posited that these athletes play key roles in fostering exclusive attitudes. More thorough research is required to understand how specific sporting contexts create and cultivate masculine spaces that can influence athlete health and wellbeing. By focusing on competitive men's sport, a more robust understanding of the relationship between sport and athlete wellbeing can be obtained.

Study Rationale

Sport environments and cultures vary greatly according to type of sport, level of competition, and region; and as a result, men in competitive sport may have vastly different experiences and understandings of masculinity (Andersen, Ottesen & Thing, 2019; Piko, 2000; Stick, 2017). Past research examining masculinities in competitive sport has not explored specific sporting contexts, and few have considered how differing cultural variables may produce varying experiences of masculinity (Anderson, 2011; Anderson, 2015; Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; MacDonald, 2014; Pariera, Brody & Scott, 2019). Of the studies that have analyzed specific sporting contexts, the majority have focused predominantly on football (Adams et al., 2010; Carter, 2014; Ramaeker, 2016; Steinfeldt et al., 2011; Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt, 2012; Theberge, 2003). A comprehensive examination of the specific contexts in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer may add to this understanding.

The current understanding of masculinity in competitive men's sport is limited by a narrow view that has ignored diverse perspectives (Anderson, 2011, Anderson 2015; Pariera et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2019; Southall et al., 2011). Past studies examining masculinity in sport have been largely focused on the examination of white, middle class, American men aged 18 – 22 years, and a deeper qualitative analysis inclusive of more diverse participants is necessary to obtain a richer understanding of this phenomenon (Anderson, 2011, Anderson 2015; Pariera et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2019; Southall et al., 2011). This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by examining men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer; three sports that often have racially and socially diverse participation groups (Abdel-Shehid, 2005; Carrey, 2011; Stick, 2017; Wilson, 2003). In doing this, the study worked to improve the understanding of the ways that masculine culture is produced in specific sport contexts. Sporting

cultures within these competitive men's university basketball, football, and soccer produce differing athlete experiences that call for a critical theory such as poststructuralism to carefully analyze. The exploration of the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer will contribute to a better understanding of the values, beliefs, and practices that impact the health and wellbeing of its athletes.

Study Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to use a poststructural approach to explore how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the health and wellbeing of its athletes. For this study, men's competitive sport was examined specifically through the varsity teams of basketball, football, and soccer. To meet this purpose, three objectives were investigated:

1. To examine how athletes come to understand masculinity and performance in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer.
2. To examine how masculinity produces cultural conditions that impact athlete health and wellbeing in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer.
3. To explore how athletes perceive masculinity as related to health and wellbeing.

Study Design

A transformative paradigm and poststructural approach were used to explore how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the wellbeing of its athletes (Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2004; Weedon, 1987). Data was collected through in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 11 participants. Participants included collegiate athletes (in basketball, football, and soccer) who identified as men, from four local universities. Interview data was analyzed using discourse analysis, a lens that examines data for beliefs, values,

practices, and power relations (Aston, 2016). The methodology and study design will be explained in greater detail in chapter three.

Key Terms

Masculinity. Masculinity is a term that refers to the qualities or attributes that have been traditionally regarded as characteristic of men (Atkinson, 2011; Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; MacDonald, 2014). Although a specific set of characteristics and standards may be valued culturally, masculinity does not have one singular manifestation, and men learn to shape and define their masculinity according to their lived experiences and encounters with social and institutional discourses (Anderson, 2011; Atkinson, 2011; Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). The terms traditional and hegemonic masculinity are used interchangeably throughout this thesis to describe the current theory of North American masculinity that will be explained in greater detail in the second chapter's literature review.

Wellbeing. There is a general agreement that wellbeing includes the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning (Andrews & Whithey, 2012; Diener, 2000; Frey & Stutzer, 2010). Wellbeing has also been described as judging life positively and feeling good (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). This study utilized a definition of wellbeing that encompasses physical, social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. This broad definition was employed to effectively examine the relationship between masculinity and health and wellbeing in athletes.

Men. Gender is defined as the socially constructed processes that are often aligned with characteristics being feminine, masculine, blended elements of both, or neither (Rushton, Gray, Cauty & Blanchard, 2019). Gender refers to the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes, and

opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men (World Health Organization, 2020). It is important to note that gender interacts with, but is different from, the binary categories typically associated with biological sex. As this study is focused on gender, and not on biological sex, I will use the term ‘men’ in discussions of masculinity and in defining the study’s participant population.

Study Implications and Significance

As a discipline, health promotion has been generally defined as the promotion of changes in environmental conditions to facilitate the development of a culture of health and uses a variety of specific strategies including health education, political action, public policy and organizational development (Rootman, Dupéré, Pederson & O’Neill, 2012, p. 22). Despite the narrow scope of this study focusing mainly on men’s university football, basketball, and soccer, the knowledge garnered is generally relevant and may be transferable to other sports, age groups, and levels of competition. This is significant because the knowledge that detailed health promotion activities aimed at strengthening individual, environmental and social resources may improve wellbeing (Herman, Saxena & Moodie, 2005).

The findings of this study will contribute to the body of knowledge on the relationship between masculinity and the health and wellbeing of men in competitive university sport. A thorough understanding of the experiences of masculinity in competitive men’s sport is important for sporting organizations and leagues in developing policy and practice that encourages inclusion and supports the health and wellbeing of athletes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review will provide a critical examination of the literature on physical inactivity, health, and sport. This will be followed by an analysis of the literature on masculinity in competitive men's sport. This chapter will situate this study within the literature, contending that while there are positive health benefits attributed to organized sport, there is a gap in the knowledge of this relationship when considering specific sporting and athlete contexts. Additionally, it situates the study within the discipline of health promotion, demonstrating its significance to a greater body of knowledge on health and wellbeing. The review will also emphasize the importance of a diverse study population in masculinities research, noting that men in competitive sport may have a variety of masculine experiences.

Physical Activity, Health and Sport

There is evidence that physical activity is associated with physical and cognitive functioning, overall health, and positive engagement with life (Andersen et al., 2019; Aranceta, Perez-Rodrigo, Fillit, Butler, O'Connell et al., 2002; Gondra & Orduna, 2001; Houde & Melillo, 2002; Mattson, Chan & Duan, 2002; McReynolds & Rossen, 2004; Oguma, Sesso, Paffenbarger Jr & Lee, 2002). Physical activity has been associated with psychological benefits such as improved quality of life, increased self-confidence, and improved control of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Andersen et al., 2019; McReynolds & Rossen, 2004). Given the link between physical activity and health, recreational and competitive sport, along with other programming created to increase physical activity, health, and wellbeing, should be explored and supported (Andersen et al., 2019; Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018; Pluhar et al., 2019).

The Benefits of Sport

There has been an increase in the utilisation of sport in health contexts with a variety of goals, and sport has received significant attention as a promising setting for health promotion (Andersen, Ottesen & Thing, 2019). Researchers have advocated for the benefits of participation in sport, a form of physical activity that has been strongly connected to favorable physical, mental, and emotional health outcomes (Andersen et al., 2019; Breistøllet al., 2017; Brustad, Vilhjalmsson & Fonseca, 2008; Coalter, 2007; Collins, 2014; Reverdito et al., 2017; Scharhag et al., 2013). Given this, the role of involvement in organized sport on the state of wellbeing later in life has and continues to be an important topic of health-related research (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al., 2018).

Physical Health. Benefits to physical health have been strongly linked to participation in sport. Research suggests that regular athletic activity, such as participation in competitive sport, can induce physiological cardiac adaptations that have positive effects on life expectancy (Scharhag, Löllgen & Kindermann, 2013). Data indicated that endurance sports, such as football and soccer, prolong life even when they are pursued at the competitive level (Scharhag et al., 2013). This is significant given past concern that the intense activity demanded of competitive and high-performance athletes might shorten their lives (Scharhag et al., 2013). Teramoto and Bungum (2010) found that elite endurance athletes and mixed-sports athletes, such as those in basketball, football, and soccer experience lower rates of cardiovascular disease, illustrating the physical benefits of long-term vigorous sport training. Andersen, Ottesen and Thing (2019) found consistent evidence that participation in team sport is associated with improved physical health. They asserted that team sport is an efficient mode of promoting health and ensuring exercise participation and continuation throughout life (Andersen, Ottesen & Thing, 2019).

Although there are many physical benefits from sport participation, there are limitations as well, and sport injuries are a significant risk in competition. Sports with the highest number of participants, such as football, tend to have the highest frequency of injury, and serious damage from concussions and other significant contact collisions can have a significant impact on health throughout life (Malisoux, Frisch, Urhausen, Seil & Theisen, 2013; Salim, Wadey & Diss, 2016).

Mental Health. Research has indicated that participation in sport also carries mental health benefits. Pluhar et al. (2019) suggest that the physical benefits, as well as the sense of accomplishment and self-esteem youth gain by playing sports, may contribute to decreased risk of anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. This aligns with Toseeb et al.'s (2014) assertion that sports can provide relief for symptoms of mental health issues, allowing adolescents to alleviate and manage their problems. Despite this, Pluhar et al.'s (2019) findings cannot be considered widely generalizable due to the narrow representation of their group and the use of self-reporting. Breistøll, Clench-Aas, Van Roy, & Kjærsti Raanaas (2017) also identified an association between sport participation and mental health symptoms, reporting that, compared to those not participating in sport, athletes in recreational and competitive sport had fewer total symptoms. In their study population, participation in team sports was associated with fewer mental health problems than individual sports, and competitive athletes reported the least amount of mental health problems (Breistøll et al., 2017). Despite these findings, their study is limited by the inability to conclude on causation, as outside variables that may influence mental health were not accounted for. Andersen, Ottesen & Thing (2019) found consistent evidence that participation in team sport is associated with improved mental health. They asserted that team sport is an efficient mode of promoting health and ensuring exercise participation and continuation (Andersen, Ottesen & Thing, 2019).

Wellbeing. Beyond influencing positive physical and mental health, participation in sport has been linked to wellbeing. Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. (2018) found a positive relationship between childhood sports participation and overall wellbeing in later life. Reverdito et al. (2017) identified a link between regular participation in organized sport and aspects of healthy development, including interpersonal relationships, purposeful living, motivation, self-efficacy and self-esteem, positive values, emotional control, and behavioral self-regulation. Howells, Sarkar & Fletcher (2017) asserted that athletes have the potential to benefit from difficulty, or growth following adversity (Howells, Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017). This may include an increased appreciation for life, more meaningful relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, and a richer existential and spiritual awareness (Howells, et al., 2017). This is consistent with studies asserting that involvement in competitive sport has been strongly associated with health-related behaviors and psychological wellbeing (Brustad, Vilhjalmsson & Fonseca, 2008; Vilhjalmsson and Thorlindsson, 1992). Further, it emphasizes that this association is largely attributed to the high physical performance demands of participation and the high levels of social integration present within competitive sport teams (Brustad et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2015; Kirby & Kluge, 2013; Vilhjalmsson and Thorlindsson, 1992).

Masculinity and Sport

As mentioned, competitive sport's connection to masculinity has been widely analyzed. Many have theorized that competitive men's sport is an institution that promotes masculinity and male power (Anderson, 2011; MacDonald, 2014; Kian et al., 2015; Stick, 2017). Many have posited that the projection of traditional hegemonic masculine values onto men in competitive sport has the potential to negatively impact athlete health and wellbeing (Anderson, 2015;

Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2017; Pariera, Brody & Scott, 2019). This section will present the available evidence connecting sport to traditional notions of masculinity in North America.

Hegemonic and Toxic Masculinity

Sociologist R.W. Connell developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity as an alternative to sex roles theory, which relied heavily on biological sex to explain gender identity instead of the process through which it is learned and informed by elements such as race and geographic location (Butler, 2004; Connell, 1987; Connell, 1995; Kessler & McKenna, 1978). The concept refers to the dominant yet contestable position atop a social hierarchy of men that included complicit and subordinated categories (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019). The concept was based on Antonio Gramsci's (1975) theory of hegemony, which postulated that a dominant class maintains the subordination of the working class by garnering their consent to occupying an inferior position that they come to view as natural (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Holt et al., 2015). For Connell, men who occupied the hegemonic position in Western society maintained their superiority in a patriarchal system through social forces that worked to assert dominance over women and other men, some of which validated hegemony by striving but failing to attain it (Connell, 1995; Connell, 2005; Stick, 2017).

In the traditional western context, the hegemonically masculine man was thought to be white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, and anti-feminine (Connell, 1995; Levy, 2007), and while social and cultural forces influence this image, the basic tenets of physical strength and toughness are largely maintained across different contexts (Davis, 2019; MacDonald, 2017). Connell (2005) noted that men who embodied these traits were likely to hold economic, political, and cultural positions of power, that enabled their domination over others. More recently, some

scholars use the term ‘hypermasculinity’ to describe the way in which the original traits of hegemonic masculinity become harmful and problematic in their extreme forms, resulting in elevated levels of sexism, racism, and homophobia (MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). Courtenay (2000) found evidence that men who value and embody hegemonic masculinity or hypermasculinity do so to the detriment of their own health, as risk-taking behaviours and interpretations of self-care as weakness results in poor mental health and lower life expectancy.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued for its limitations, including: its insufficient engagement with violence as a form of power (Allain, 2012; Hughes, 2017; Stick, 2017); its oversimplification of gender as being trait-based (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Stick, 2017); its misinterpretation as a fixated set of characteristics and not a contextually defined status or position (Pringle & Markula, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Anderson, 2010; Hughes, 2017); and its evasion of positive representations of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; MacDonald, 2017). In a key piece co-authored by criminologist James Messerschmidt, Connell acknowledges these criticisms and concedes that the dynamics of masculinity can and have changed over time, thus warranting an updated theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity has informed the study of competitive men’s sports such as basketball and football because these sports rely on fierce competition, toughness, aggression, and anti-feminine language (Allain, 2012; Anderson, 2010; Messner, 2002; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Stick, 2017; Whitson, 1990). Sport sociologist Stanley Eitzen wrote about how sport’s ability to act as a microcosm of society enables it to act as a vehicle for hegemonic masculinity:

“Sport serves to control persons ideologically by reinforcing society’s values among the participants...Sport in its organization, procedures and operation

serves to promote traditional gender roles. Most importantly, sport advances male hegemony in practice and ideology by legitimating a certain dominant version of social reality.” (2000, p. 373)

Messner’s (2002) analysis of the internal dynamic of male athletic teams is reminiscent of hegemonic masculinity in that the group he refers to as the ‘leaders’ is responsible for dominating other teammates through degrading discourses. Other scholars add that both teammates and coaches play an important role in policing athletes’ masculinity and those who do not conform risk being excluded (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; Davis, 2019; Lilleaas, 2007; Messner, 1992; Stick, 2017). Moreover, the cyclical nature of competitive men’s sport results in coaches who were socialized to embrace hegemonic masculine values being put in a position where they can have the same effect on the athletes they mentor, reproducing the cycle (Sierra, 2013; Wilson, 2003).

A term that has gained popularity in the literature in recent years is ‘toxic masculinity,’ which refers to what some scholars assert are a collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with traditional masculinity that have been said to be harmful to women, men, children, and society more broadly (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Salter, 2019; Sculos, 2017; Wailing, 2019). Toxic masculinity has become a blanket statement when horrific acts are committed or experienced by men (Wailing, 2019), and feminist movements use it to characterize homophobic and misogynist speech and violence by men (Harrington, 2020). ‘Toxic’ expresses the harmfulness of the practices and discourses that comprise the traditional notion of masculinity (Sculos, 2017), and the term has become a framework for popular and scholarly understandings of the gender factor in social problems (Harrington, 2020).

Toxic masculinity has been asserted to be responsible for aggressive and predatory heterosexual behaviour resulting in sexual and domestic violence committed by men; the suppression of men's emotions leading to emotional and mental health issues such as depression, the deterioration of men's physical health, men's engagement with physical violence, and men's engagement with homophobic practices (Harrington, 2020; Salter, 2019; Wailing, 2019). Connell (1987) theorized that these do not emanate from something bad or toxic that has crept into the nature of masculinity itself, but rather it comes from social and political settings, the particularities of which set them up for inner conflicts over social expectations and male entitlement (Wailing, 2019). Toxic masculinity has provided a framework that has essentialized marginalized men as aggressive and criminal, discursively packaged in a way that it was presented as concern for men's wellbeing (Harrington, 2020). Toxic masculinity implies that larger systemic and social structures are not responsible, focusing on the actions of individual men (Wailing, 2019).

Toxic masculinity has been critiqued by many for individualizing discourses that have historically targeted marginalized men, thus working to maintain gender hierarchies and individualize responsibility for gender inequalities to certain bad men (Salter, 2019; Wailing, 2019; Harrington, 2020). Some have argued that using the term 'toxic masculinity' continues to position men as victims of a broader vague entity, rather than highlighting their agency in the reproduction of masculinity (Salter, 2019; Wailing, 2019). The use of terms such as 'toxic masculinity' may not work to dismantle gender and sexual binaries, but rather, may continue to reproduce them (Wailing, 2019).

Hegemonic masculinity remains a significant concept, and Breger, Holman, and Guerrero (2019) have asserted that traditional norms have contributed to a culture that, through its core

tenets of dominance, control, and violence, has maintained an unhealthy sporting environment. This research will abstain from focusing on the ‘toxic’ actions of individual men, instead considering the wider social and institutional discourses that have been theorised to organize competitive men’s sport as a site for the reproduction of hegemonic masculine ideals (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012; Messner, 2002; Ramaeker, 2016). This study employed an understanding of hegemonic and toxic masculinities to examine the way that dominant social and cultural forces produce masculine ideals within competitive men’s sport.

Masculinity in Competitive Men’s Sport

Despite the potential health benefits of sport participation, the perceived link to hegemonic masculine ideals may hinder the wellbeing of competitive men athletes (Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Kimmel, 2012; Messner, 2002; Ramaeker, 2016). Competitive sport has been theorized as an institution in which young men and boys are socialized to define and act out their masculinity (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012; Messner, 2002; Ramaeker, 2016). Connell (2005) described competitive men’s sport as the “leading definer of masculinity” in mass culture (p. 54), and others have asserted that it is a site for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1990). This section will detail the perceived link between masculinity in competitive men’s sport and athlete health and wellbeing.

Many have suggested that competitive men’s sport promotes a culture saturated with oppressive and discriminatory beliefs and behaviours that, through social and institutional discourses, reinforce hegemonic male dominance (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messner, 1992). Young men are mentored by coaches who went through the same system of masculine reproduction, and these coaches have been described as influential in the construction of traditional masculine identities (Sierra, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Athletic peers,

coaches, and sporting organizations actively police the masculine ideals that are considered by many to be deeply rooted in competitive men's sport (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; Luisi et al., 2016). Men in competitive sport may actively avoid behaviours that are stereotypically aligned with femininity and non-dominant masculinities, resulting in a microcosm wherein traditional hegemonic masculinity is continually reproduced and defined (Luisi, Luisi & Geana, 2016; Southallet et al., 2011).

Athlete Health and Wellbeing

Given the perceived connection between masculine ideals and health, men in competitive sport may be an increasingly at-risk group for poor health and wellbeing (Hutt & Numer, 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have asserted that men in competitive sport are socialized to adopt unhealthy masculine ideologies that may ultimately have costs to their health and wellbeing. This has been attributed to the traditional masculine norms alleged to socialize men in competitive sport to use physical toughness to hide vulnerability, deal with physical pain by avoiding emotions, and adopt win-at-all-cost attitudes (MacDonald, 2014; Messner, 1992; Ramaeker, 2016). Courtenay (2000) argues that men use their disregard for personal health to signify personal strength and power, leading hegemonic values to precipitate men's lower life expectancy and poorer health conditions. Hegemonic masculine ideals are alleged to actively facilitate stigmas of weakness surrounding health in competitive men's sport, creating an environment where physical injuries resulting from aggressive and violent competition are viewed as more legitimate than psychological issues (Schwenk, 2000; Ramaeker, 2016; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). Therefore, men in competitive sport that experience depression and anxiety may not receive the appropriate treatment (Gavriolva & Donohue, 2018; Tomalski et al., 2019).

Hegemonic masculine values hold the potential to influence negative health in men athletes. Mahalik, Burns and Syzdek (2007) found that those who associated themselves with more traditional forms of masculinity report fewer health-promoting behaviours. Courtenay (2004) observed that traditional masculine attitudes were linked to higher levels of anxiety, greater cardiovascular reactions to stress, maladaptive coping, depression, and poor health behaviors. Levant et al. (2009) found that men who reported discrepancies between the behaviours they perceived as masculine and their own behaviours engaged in higher risk activities, a finding they attributed to an attempt to reconcile this conflict by engaging in riskier activities. Sloan et al. (2010) reported that men with fewer negative health behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity still held masculine beliefs about health, framing their health behaviours as beneficial to their exercise performance rather than for other health outcomes. Sloan et al., (2010) also found that the men disavowed a direct interest in talking about health, which they construed as excessive and feminine, instead justifying their practices variously in terms of sporting targets, appearance concerns and being autonomous. Hutt and Numer (2015) identified an interesting connection between adherence to masculine ideals and weightlifting, which functioned as a coping strategy for stress. Research has indicated that men often do not express their emotional distress, choosing instead to engage in exercise and alcohol or drug consumption to cope (Angst et al. 2002; Hutt & Numer, 2015).

Masculinity in Collegiate Sport

As the focus of this study was on Canadian post-secondary sport, but most research was conducted in the United States, it is important to clarify the differences between college and university among the two countries. ‘College’ in the United States is most equivalent to ‘university’ in Canada, while ‘college’ in Canada refers to smaller institutions that primarily

offer shorter term diplomas and certificates that focus on practical work experience. There are competitive, financial, and contextual differences between Canadian and American collegiate sport. The National Collegiate Athletics Association in the United States encompasses over 1,100 schools across three divisions, and the total athletics revenue reported among all athletics departments in 2019 was \$18.9 billion (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019). The U Sports, Canada's university athletics association, encompasses 56 schools across four divisions, generating a total revenue of approximately \$5 million Canadian in 2019 (U Sports, 2020). Canada also has the Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association, comprised of 98 institutions including colleges, smaller universities, technical institutes and cégeps (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel) (Canadian Collegiate Athletics Association, 2020). Colleges in the United States are often a steppingstone toward major professional sports. While this does happen in Canada, it is not as common as the American system.

Collegiate campuses have been shown to foster inter-collegiate athletics and sporting spaces that can be hostile for those who do not meet perceived masculine norms, such as 2SLGBTQIA+ athletes (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2017; James, 2019). The promotion and acceptance of hegemonic masculine traits on collegiate campuses has been theorized to have a direct impact on the socialization of collegiate men (Kimmel, 2013; Davis, 2019). This is significant given that the relationship between hegemonic masculine norms, the health practices of young men and risks to health and wellbeing has been well established (Courtenay, 2000; Hutt & Numer, 2015).

Collegiate campuses have been identified as distinct spaces that work to socialize young men to accept and reproduce traditional forms of masculinity (Kimmel, 2013; Davis, 2019). In his exploration of masculinity on college campus, Kimmel (2013) identified an understanding of

masculinity that displayed no hint of femininity; measures manhood by the extent of possessions, status, and power; shows very little emotion; and pushes forward without regard for risk (Kimmel, 2013; Davis, 2019). He asserts that this social understanding of masculinity is bound together by a unifying theme that men should restrict emotions, never admit weakness, and put on a face that expresses that everything is fine (Kimmel & Davis, 2011). Davis (2019) asserted that traditional masculine gender ideology was similar within all men, but how they expressed their masculine ideology appeared differently based on race. He observed that while most men spoke of their tolerance towards hegemonic violations such as perceived femininity and sexual diversity, it was more generally looked down upon and considered not normal (Davis, 2019). This placed collegiate men, and consequently collegiate men athletes (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2017; James, 2019), in a position where their development into fully actualized human beings is impeded by restrictive norms of hegemony and masculinity (Davis, 2019).

Given academic and athletic time demands, as well as the hegemonic and potentially toxic nature of men's competitive sport, Van Slingerland et al. (2018) suggested that collegiate athletes are predisposed to the same or greater risks of experiencing declining mental health and wellbeing as the general population. The mental health of university students has been a growing concern across Canadian campuses, with students at risk of mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide (Van Slingerland, Durand-Bush & Rothwell, 2018). In competitive sport, mental health problems are often viewed as weakness, motivating athletes to avoid mental health providers due to fears of social exclusion (Gavriolva & Donohue, 2018; Gucciardi, Hanton & Fleming, 2016; Liddle et al., 2017; Schwenk, 2000; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). Traditional masculine norms may contribute to a mental health stigma that acts as a primary barrier preventing men in collegiate sport from seeking help, resulting in the underutilization of mental health services

(Gavriolva & Donohue, 2018; Sebbens et al., 2016). Men in competitive sport have been shown to endorse negative views toward psychological services (Ramaeker, 2016), and mental health services for men in competitive sport remain limited, especially for men who participate in team sports including football, basketball, and soccer (Davis, 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2018).

Violence, aggression, and other hegemonic and toxic masculine traits have been theorized to play a prominent role in competitive men's sport, and collegiate sports such as football and basketball directly encourage violence against other men (Davis, 2019; MacDonald, 2014). This understanding of violence and aggression has been explored in masculinities research that has focused on the ways in which the health practices of boys and men put them at risk of negative health and wellbeing (Courtenay 2000; 2004; Mahalik, Burns, and Syzdek 2007). Given the suggestion that athletes in men's collision and contact sports may demonstrate the strongest conformity to the perceived norms of masculinity (Anderson, 2010; James, 2019; Mahalik, Burns, and Syzdek 2007), a comprehensive examination of the specific contexts in competitive men's university basketball, football, and soccer may add to this understanding. The exploration of the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer will contribute to a better understanding of the values, beliefs, and practices that impact the health and wellbeing of its athletes.

Competitive Men's Basketball

Competitive men's basketball has been described as an influential force in reinforcing an objective reality of masculinity that impacts an athlete's formation of his own masculine identity (Carey 2011; Wilson, 2003;). Wilson (2003) found that young men in collegiate basketball are socialized to ignore pain, learn how to "suck it up," and be tough (Wilson, 2003, p. 71), fostering a culture and identity that revolves around the perception of male dominance (Stick, 2017

Wilson, 2003). According to Wilson's (2003) study, behaviours demonstrated by coaches of competitive men's basketball are sometimes physically and/or verbally abusive. These practices may be perpetuated by coaches who reinforce trends based on hegemonic values taught during their playing careers (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; Luisi et al., 2016; Wilson, 2003). These actions are reflective of masculine ideals that prioritize physical toughness, strength, violence, and aggression in sport (Anderson, 2011; Kian et al., 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017).

Walker and Sartore-Baldwin (2013) investigated NCAA men's basketball coaches' perceptions and attitudes toward women in men's college basketball, showing that they actively reinforce hegemonic institutional norms within competitive men's sport. They asserted that men's collegiate basketball is hypermasculine, gender exclusive, and resistant to change (Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Mammen (2008) examined the relationship between athlete perceived coaching behaviours and athlete anxiety in Canadian university basketball players. He found that coaches play a significant role in athlete anxiety, and a correlation between athlete anxiety and negatively perceived coaching behaviours within a variety of sports has been suggested (Mammen, 2008). This is a significant issue given that hegemonic masculine practices in competitive sport may exacerbate anxiety levels, leading to lower health and wellbeing for men in competitive sport (Gavriolva & Donohue, 2018; Tomalski et al., 2019). The study reported a negative significant relationship between perceived physical training and somatic anxiety as well as between competition strategies and concentration disruption (Mammen, 2008). Given its examination of Atlantic University Sport men's basketball players, the study likely reflects similar experiences of men at Halifax universities.

Competitive Men's Football

Throughout its history, competitive football has been theorized as a "mechanism of masculinity" that socializes young men to adopt traits of hegemonic masculinity (Adams et al., 2010, p. 279). Institutional discourses have been said to have established football as a bastion of manhood where only the manliest of men will be successful, moulding the current visualization of the ideal football player as a big, strong, muscular man (Carter, 2014). The rules encourage and even require aggression, toughness, and physical force, an example of traits within the game's social structure that represent dominant forms of masculinity (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). Football has been labelled as a combat sport and defined as an environment in which high levels of aggression, violence, and injury exist not as accidents or violations, but as intended and desired parts of the game (Carter, 2014; Messner, 1992; Steinfeldt et al., 2011). Like other combat sports, football celebrates the force and power that is at the heart of sport and masculinity (Theberge, 2003). Carter (2014) observed that, "football culture says players do not show pain; they sacrifice their body for the team", an illustration of the way that contact sports require a significant amount of physicality and toughness (p. 3). The focus on hegemonic masculine traits has been shown to negatively influence the health and wellbeing of its athletes, and those who pursue careers may experience significantly reduced health and even life expectancy (Carter, 2014; Oates & Durham, 2004).

Football directly encourages violence and aggression, establishing them as avenues through which boys and men can compensate for uncomfortable feelings such as shame and hurt (Davis, 2019; MacDonald, 2014). This understanding relates to masculinities research focusing on the ways that health practices of boys and men put them at risk (Courtenay 2000; Hutt & Numer, 2015; Mahalik et al., 2007). Steinfeldt et al. (2011) found that NCAA football players

who felt restricted in their ability to engage in affectionate behaviours reported less life satisfaction and those who conformed to masculine norms reported intense stigmas towards psychological help-seeking. Van Slingerland et al. (2018) found that Canadian U Sport football players considered the presence of a mental illness to reflect weakness, and that players who provide support may be stigmatized by association. Research suggests men in competitive football may not only be vulnerable to psychological distress but may also be less likely to seek help for such distress (Van Slingerland et al., 2018). The use of self-report data and issues of attrition make further research into this group necessary to develop a more complete understanding of the relationship between masculinity and mental health. Steinfeldt et al. (2011) and Steinfeldt and Steinfeldt (2012) examined schools located in the United States that, due to specific cultural climates, may not accurately reflect the experiences of men in Canadian university sport. Given that masculinity is constructed differently by class, race, and ethnicity (Kimmel, 2013), a more diverse examination is required in future research.

Competitive Men's Soccer

As a dominant sport in many countries, many have argued that soccer is linked to masculinity and serves at the center of masculine production for all boys and men in Western cultures (Adams et al., 2010; Bulgu, 2013; Mean, 2001; Messner, 2002;). Many have alleged that men's soccer has acted as a tool for building masculinity in the socialization process of young men, citing dominant hegemonic narratives as the source of the institution's influential authority (Adams et al., 2010; Bulgu, 2013). Bulgu (2013) found that violent and aggressive practices have transformed soccer into a men's field by empowering masculinity values. He asserted that "winning" and "violence for winning" were a shared experience in competitive men's soccer players (Bulgu, 2013, p. 79). Magee and Jeanes (2013) found that the competitive nature of

men's soccer activities had the capacity to stimulate positive health outcomes, but could also potentially influence negative health and wellbeing, such as through stress and performance anxiety, that were shown to exacerbate mental health problems. They also highlighted over-aggression and violence as aspects of the game that had the potential to negatively impact athletes over time (Magee & Jeanes, 2013).

Roberts, Anderson, and Magrath (2017) reported that English Premier League academy level soccer players maintained emotional closeness and physical tactility with male teammates and friends. They posited that the effect that sport has on the behavioural acts and emotional openness that players maintain is greatly influenced by the ways they view their teammates and friends and occupational competitors (Roberts et al., 2017). Adams et al. (2010) examined the role of discourses in the construction and regulation of sporting masculinity within a semi-professional British soccer team, reporting that coaches frequently used discourses that drew on narratives of war, gender, and sexuality to facilitate aggressive and violent responses for enhancing athletic performance. They also observed segmented and contradictory on-field/off-field masculine identities for these players in which athletes modelled aspects of hegemonic masculinity when in sport but distanced themselves from it outside of sport origins (Adams et al., 2010). This suggests that sport is not a near total institution, but rather a space that requires men to model hegemonic masculine values to maintain their membership (Adams et al., 2010; Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018; Pariera et al., 2019). In doing this, these studies fail to examine the impact that variables such as race and social class have on the experiences of masculinity. Further, the focus on strictly sexuality ignores other aspects of hegemonic masculinity that marginalize certain groups of men. Adams et al. (2010) noted that although soccer does not exist as a highly masculinized sport in North America, it is considered a highly

masculine endeavor throughout much of the world. This is an important distinction, as these findings may not be easily generalizable to the experiences of men in a Canadian context.

Summary

There is ample research indicating that physical inactivity is a serious health issue and that active participation in organized sport is a strategy that has the potential to positively influence health and wellbeing. Despite this, competitive sport's association with traditional hegemonic values and toxic masculinity has been theorized as potentially damaging to the health and wellbeing of men athletes. The current understanding of the relationship between health and masculinity in competitive men's sport has been limited by a narrow view that has ignored athlete diversity (Anderson, 2011, Anderson 2015; Pariera et al., 2019; Southhall et al., 2011; Reis et al., 2019). This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by examining men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer; three sports that often have racially and socially diverse participation groups (Abdel-Shehid, 2005; Carrey, 2011; Stick, 2017; Wilson, 2003). These three sports were also chosen because of their similar popularity in Canada, availability at Halifax colleges and universities, and roster sizes.

Chapter 3: Methodology & Methods

This study utilized a poststructural approach to examine masculinity in competitive men's university sport. After conducting one-on-one semi-structured interviews with eleven men-identified basketball, football, and soccer athletes, discourse analysis was used to determine the beliefs, values, and practices that impact relations of power in competitive men's sport. This chapter outlines the methodology and methods for this study. The chapter will start with a description of the transformative worldview and poststructural approach that was used. The chapter will then address my positionality as the researcher, describe the study population and recruitment strategy, and describe the data collection and analysis processes. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations and discussion of quality and rigour.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to use a poststructural approach to explore how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the health and wellbeing of its athletes. For this study, men's competitive sport was examined specifically through the varsity teams of basketball, football, and soccer. To meet this purpose, three objectives were investigated:

1. To examine how athletes come to understand masculinity and performance in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer.
2. To examine how masculinity produces cultural conditions that impact athlete health and wellbeing in men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer.
3. To explore how athletes perceive masculinity as related to health and wellbeing.

Transformative Worldview

The basic tenet of the transformative paradigm is the idea that knowledge is not neutral, and instead reflects power dynamics and social relationships (Sweetman, Badiee & Creswell, 2010). Transformativism holds that the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society (Sweetman et al., 2010). The transformative worldview takes special aim at improving social conditions for groups experiencing marginalization, such as women, BIPOC and people who identify across the LGBTQ2SIA+ spectrum (Cram & Mertens, 2015). One of the main proponents of transformativism is the notion that research inquiry should be intertwined with politics and political change to confront social oppression (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The goal then is to create action that has the potential to challenge dominant forms of knowledge, such as within the hegemonically dominated institution of competitive men's sport. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The ontological assumption of the transformative paradigm holds that reality is socially constructed by those who attempt to access a position of greater power (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The epistemological assumption brings up the notion of the relationship between researchers and participants. Within the transformative paradigm, understanding the culture of participants and building trust are paramount (Mertens, 2007). Transformative methodologies not only aid in reframing worldviews, but also in understanding that subsequent methodological decisions may need to be reframed as well (Mertens, 2007). This reframing can highlight the benefits of involving community members and prevent further marginalization through collaboration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study will utilize the perspectives and experiences of men athletes to create an understanding of how the culture in competitive university sport has been socially constructed and maintained.

Transformativism is focused not only on the needs of individuals, but on the systems and structures that produce, reproduce, and maintain power dynamics and inequities, making it an effective framework for examining masculinity within competitive men's sport. The principal emphasis of this study was the way that men in competitive university basketball, football, and soccer experience masculinity, and how those experiences influence their health and wellbeing as athletes. To adequately address this focus, the transformative worldview may be aided through the integration of theoretical perspectives such as poststructural perspectives, which help construct a picture of the issues being examined (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Poststructural Theory

Poststructuralism is a theory of knowledge and language that rejects the possibility of absolute truth and objectivity (Gavey, 1989). Instead, poststructuralism considers knowledge to be the product of language and discourse that, over time and repetition, become accepted as dominant ways of understanding (Gavey, 1989). Poststructuralism attempts to understand these dominant understandings by questioning their legitimacy through the examination of marginalized and competing discourses (Gavey, 1989). Poststructuralism works to identify how the things we come to understand as taken for granted become known. In poststructural theory, language is the focus in analysis of social organization, social meanings, knowledge, and individual consciousness (Weedon, 1987). Poststructuralists suggest that language is important when seeking to explain the social world because it gives everything meaning, and there is no reality outside of language (Gavey, 1989). The meaning we experience within language is created through daily communication and conversations (Aston, 2016; Weedon, 1987). These daily practices are what frame an understanding of the ways we are in the world. Language gives guidance to how discourse is created, and through the repetition of daily practices and

interactions, the things we say have a compounding affect over time, creating meaning and producing dominant forms of knowledge (Aston, 2016).

Discourse emerges through language and daily practices and produces a set of beliefs that are conceived, understood, and reinforced through daily practices (Gavey, 1989). Recurring and everyday ways of saying and writing things have a cumulative effect which create discourse. Discourse refers to language practices, which are historically, socially, and institutionally specific narratives that shape our values and beliefs and the way we think and act (Aston, 2016). This encompasses everything that is said or written in society, and everything that is printed or talked about and represented in daily practice (Angenot, 2004). Through daily interaction, the threads of language wrap around each other continually to create discourse and produce dominant understandings. Institutional discourse occurs when participants represent a work or situation-related institution, where at least one participant defines the interaction as ‘work’, or where the language, nature of the language, and speaker’s goals are influenced by the institution in play (Freed, 2015). The combination of these discourses creates meaning and produces knowledge that comes to be understood as reality (Weedon, 1987).

While power is central to poststructuralism, I will discuss knowledge because as Foucault (1975) describes it, power is too slippery, transient, and always in flux. Knowledge is produced and influenced by institutional systems and discourse which regulate truth and create dominant ways of knowing within social and institutional contexts (Gavey, 1989). Instead of simply discovering reality, revealing truth, or uncovering facts, poststructuralism works to understand how discourses produce dominant forms of knowledge which then come to be taken for granted as reality (Gavey, 1989). Since meaning is actively constituted by language, it cannot be absolute, but rather becomes understood as the accepted form of knowledge (Cheek, 2004).

Similar to Foucault's (1975) panopticon, ways of knowledge produce a system of self-regulation, influencing people to meet norms and police ourselves according to dominant social structures. In this way, language frames reality through discourse (Gavey, 1989).

Subjectivity, or how we are positioned in life, is the product of the relationship between language, discourse, and knowledge. Subjectivity refers to individual thoughts and emotions, sense of self, and ways of understanding one's relationship to the world (Weedon, 1987). This can apply to a participant's positionality, while considering how they navigate dominant social discourses (Van Wijlen & Aston, 2019). Poststructuralism considers 'self' to be socially constructed, meaning that we exist within the terms of available discourses (Weedon, 1987). In other words, social structures create identity, and knowledge influences how people inhabit subject position. It is this subjectivity that gives us access to ways of knowing, instructing how we think, feel, and experience reality. This takes the onus off of individuals, and we take various discourses around us to produce and inhabit subject positions. Discourses and dominant understandings of knowledge are not easily malleable, but enough resistance over time can influence gradual change (Weedon, 1987). Although institutions shape how we come to know subject positions, long, subtle changes over time can have effects. Using poststructural theory, researchers can see how people negotiate their beliefs, values, and experiences through the examination of competing discourses (Aston, 2016). This allows a critical understanding of the way discursive practices are employed by institutions to influence everyday realities.

Utilizing a poststructural approach alongside a transformative framework enables me to understand and question everyday practices, such as hegemonic masculinity, that produces knowledge within competitive men's university sport. This approach will be useful in identifying and analyzing social and institutional discourses that produce and reproduce traditional forms of

masculinity. In examining these discourses, the poststructural approach will guide me in developing a critique of the way power relations between teammates, coaches, sports, and leagues perpetuate accepted forms of knowledge through gendered discourses and institutional regulation (Gavey, 1989).

Researcher Positionality

Before describing the method for this study, it is important to note my positionality as the researcher. While designing the study, I was very aware of my position and the experiences I have had in competitive sport that have shaped my own process of masculinity. I chose this topic primarily because I have fifteen years of experience in competitive men's sport and six years of experience playing men's university basketball in Canada. Throughout this lengthy athletic career, I have witnessed and been complicit in the processes and effects of masculine ideology.

As a straight, white, cis-gendered, settler man, I spent the larger part of my athletic years without a conscious understanding of the way that institutional and social processes shaped the experiences of masculinity for myself and my teammates. After studying an undergraduate degree in sociology, I have become more keenly aware of my own meaning-making experiences that have been shaped primarily by my men athletic peers. Despite this, I bring my personal experience of masculinity to this study, and my own assumptions about masculinity and men in collegiate sport as well. These assumptions, fostered by a career of coaches, teammates, and parents instructing me to "be a man", are centered on the traditional notions of toughness and physicality that I was socialized to produce as a young boy. Qualitative research is value-laden and never free of bias, and in acknowledging this I own my biases and will work to mitigate them during data analysis. I worked to keep my biases in check by taking several steps, including journaling and member checking, to ensure that key themes were properly identified and that I

did not presuppose the outcomes of the study. These strategies are explained more thoroughly in the quality and rigour section of this chapter.

Study Population

Participant Description

Participants were recruited from four local universities. This strategy was selected because these athletes could contribute to an increased understanding of masculinity in competitive men's sport, the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the proximity of the schools to one another, it was likely that the participants experienced similar climates or cultures that could add to the richness of study findings. As the researcher intended to fill gaps in the literature pertaining to participant demographics, recruitment in the study was restricted to sports that have the tendency to have more diverse roster populations (Van Slingerland et al., 2018; Davis, 2019). These sports included soccer, basketball, and football. While one of the purposes of this study was to address a gap in the literature relating to the diversity of participants, this objective was only partly accomplished. This study was successful in recruiting eleven men-identified university athletes. Five of the eleven men athletes were BIPOC, with one participant identifying as Asian and four participants identifying as Black. The remaining six participants identified as white. The participant group was comprised of six basketball and five football athletes. Challenges attributed to COVID-19 may have limited the successful recruitment of a truly diverse participant group. Recruitment strategies were primarily limited to social media and online techniques, making it difficult to reach a wider audience if the study information was not spread effectively through connections and word of mouth.

Inclusion Criteria

Prospective participants from the identified sports must have been a member of their university team for the entirety of at least one of the past five collegiate seasons. This helped to facilitate the discussion of recent experiences, preventing participants from drawing on distant memories. To be eligible for inclusion, prospective participants must have been proficient in speaking and reading English. Prospective participants were excluded if they identified as a woman or did not consent to participate.

This study recruited a sample of eleven participants. This sample size was consistent with past studies conducted by Abudulai (2014), MacConnell et al. (2013), Mselle et al. (2017), and Griscti et al., (2017) who interviewed 4, 8, 8, and 10 participants, respectively. These four studies were appropriate to model given their uses of qualitative interviews, poststructuralism, and discourse analysis. This sample size was also feasible within the confines of a master's thesis and given that I was solely responsible for facilitating, transcribing, and analysing all interviews (Ryan & Bernard, 2006).

Recruitment

I used my position as an insider of both the dominant masculine and collegiate student-athlete groups to recruit participants for the data collection process. I also used this insider position during the interview stage to establish rapport and trust (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). I contacted the executive director of athletics and recreation at each of the included universities, as well as the head coaches of the men's football, soccer, and basketball teams. The executive directors were provided with an information sheet that detailed the study, its purpose, the methods, potential risks and benefits, the duration, researcher measures to assure privacy and confidentiality of participants, and a request that they forward the information on to the coaches

and student-athletes in their department who met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study. Additionally, I placed recruitment posters at each of the four universities, and utilized social media postings on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to reach out to prospective participants.

All interested student-athletes were directed to contact me for screening prior to the interview stage of data collection. During a phone call screening session, each participant was asked a short set of questions to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria for the study. This involved turning away several potential participants because of the study's desire to recruit a participant group of at least half BIPOC athletes. After evaluating their eligibility, I explained the details of the study to each prospective participant, provided them with an option of interview location and time, and asked them to provide their verbal consent prior to the beginning of the interview.

Data Collection

Data was collected using one-on-one semi-structured interviews. As Kvale (1996) states, studies undertaken with a goal to gain insight into the human experience and related meaning from the perspective of those who live it are best achieved through interviews. The goal of qualitative interviews is to access participants' world to gain insight into their everyday experiences (Fossey, Harvey, Mcdermott & Davidson, 2000).

One-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes were used to explore participants' experiences of masculinity in competitive men's sport. Given the circumstances related to the COVID-19 virus and Nova Scotia public health guidelines, all interviews were conducted using the online platform Microsoft Teams instead of in person. Interviews were audio-recorded using a handheld digital recording device, with the participant's consent.

I conducted all interviews, adhering to an interview guide of eight questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The use of an interview guide helped with initial lines of questioning, probing, and follow up questions to facilitate consistency in data collection (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Follow-up questions were used to probe, clarify, or validate responses (Aston, 2016; Patton, 2002). As well as utilizing an interview guide to provide structure and enable the collection of relevant data, I employed emerging questions in response to cues from participant responses (Abudulai, 2014).

I employed open-ended and general interview questions designed to understand the central phenomenon in the study – masculinity in competitive men’s sport (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interview questions were intended to reveal participants’ everyday experiences of masculine values in sport rather than deductively examining predetermined themes. The interview process began with an opening question about general health and sport before more specific questions about participants’ experiences, perceptions, and feelings about masculine values. I worked to actively engage with participants using follow-up questions to elicit “alternative problematic views” that explore the discursive resources they access to interpret experiential meaning to the fullest (Abudulai, 2014, p. 105). This interview guide can be found in Appendix E. An example of an interview question that was used is:

- How do people talk about masculinity, or what it means to be a man in [INSERT SPORT]?

Probes:

- a. How do you think [INSERT SPORT] defines the ‘ideal man’?
- b. What are some traits you would associate with this image?
- c. How might men in [INSERT SPORT] be pressured to look or act?
- d. Would you say that you fit this image?
 - i. Why or why not?

I took field notes during and immediately following each interview using memoing. These notes allowed me to capture nonverbal elements of the interview such as body language, personal observations about the interviews, and notes regarding key points outlined during the interview (Kvale, 1996). I also conducted a post interview analysis of my notes wherein I reflected on details about the interview, such as participants' behaviour and distractions (Patton, 2002). Audio recordings of the interview sessions were then transcribed verbatim into written texts in preparation for the data analysis stage of the study. Each participant was given a randomly generated pseudonym that was attached to their audio recording, field notes, and typed transcription.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis was used for this study. Discourse analysis is an approach that identifies and names language processes that people use to constitute their own and others' understanding of personal and social phenomena (Gavey, 1989). These processes are related to the reproduction of or challenge to the distribution of power between social groups and within institutions (Gavey, 1989; Aston, 2016). Discourses have the potential to govern the unconscious and conscious minds and emotions of people, as meaning is only created within discourses through a network of power relations (Aston, 2016). Discourse analysis is concerned with language-in-use; that is, how individuals accomplish personal, social, and political projects through language (Cheek, 2004; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Discourse analysis works to shed light on the connection between personal experiences and social and institutional discourses using "conventional" data collection techniques that generate texts that can be analyzed discursively from an understanding of discourse analysis that is driven by a certain theoretical frame, such as the transformative framework (Cheek, 2004, p. 1145). As discourse analysis and

poststructuralism have many overlapping focuses, it is an appropriate option for the purpose of the study. This approach was used to examine the way that discourse in competitive men's sport produces and reproduces traditional masculinity.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim after each interview and all identifying information was removed. Interview transcripts were analyzed using discourse analysis as outlined by Aston (2016). The first step was to identify important issues by reading the transcripts and noting certain quotations that I deemed important (Aston, 2016). Next, I identified any beliefs, values, and practices that I felt align with the highlighted quotations, taking special care not to follow my own beliefs and values, instead using those of the participants. I then described any social and institutional discourses that I believe influence the construction of masculinity in competitive men's university sport (Aston, 2016). I discussed the relationship between discourse, the participant, and their experiences of masculinity in competitive men's sport. I unpacked the way in which different discourses affect the participant, noting to what extent they adhere to the beliefs, values, and practices, and if there are conflicts and/or tensions (Aston, 2016). In the last stage of this process, I provided the participants' subjectivity, by noting how they are positioned, and then added their agency, by examining how they act in certain situations, such as fitting in or challenging a discourse (Aston, 2016).

The use of discourse analysis helped to identify the beliefs, values, practices, competing discourses, relations of power, and subjectivity and agency of participants that impacts how they experience masculinity in competitive men's sport (Aston, 2016; Cheek, 2000; Weedon, 1987). Varying themes and opinions emerged from the data, and all perspectives were openly and equitably heard and valued (Aston, 2016). All transcripts were analyzed separately as well as

compared to find common themes. My supervisor and I analyzed the first two transcripts separately and discussed the identification of patterns.

The use of discourse analysis in this study allowed me to pay close attention to way that participants tell their stories, making the exploration of how people come to know more effective. Discourse analysis functions to illuminate the interplay and relationship between power, knowledge, and meaning (Parker, 2002). This sheds light on how knowledge provides a way for people to act and organize others, creating a social order and privileging certain traits while relegating those who do not live up to it in subordinate positions. Through an examination of how knowledge was constituted in this specific setting, I am able to offer an alternative to the dominant culture within that space. This involved unpacking the ways that people accept or challenge different ideas, using poststructuralism as a way of understanding how these cultures are created (Aston, 2016). This is strengthened by a transformative theory challenges us to change them to create more equitable societies and culture spaces (Mertens, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research that involves collecting data from people, about people, there are ethical issues that should be considered (Punch, 2014). Researchers should protect their participants, develop trust, and guard against misconduct (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were given the opportunity to contribute to new knowledge, receive the final research report, and were given a \$15 honorarium for their participation. Given the nature of discussions related to the consequences of masculinity in competitive men's sport, there were questions or topics that some participants may have found difficult to discuss. I made it clear that participants could refrain from responding to any question. Each participant had the option to stop the interview at any point. Given that certain topics or lines of questioning may have

negative impacts on mental health or wellbeing, participants were provided with a list of local services and resources prior to the interview.

As interviewing in qualitative research is increasingly seen as a moral inquiry, researchers should be mindful of sensitive information and potential power dynamics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers should reflect on how their role, background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To establish reflexivity in this study, I identified my position as a member of both the dominant masculine group and varsity athlete community. In doing so, I acknowledged my membership of a dominant group may have impacted who took part in the study, how people may respond to the results, and how I may have interpreted the data during analysis. The researcher's position has the potential to create a conflict of interest or power imbalance, so to mitigate this, prospective participants were made aware of my positionality and that I would be facilitating the interviews.

I took several steps to respect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants. Participation in the study is confidential, and myself and my supervisory committee maintained sole possession of all audio recordings, the master list, and written field notes. All audio recordings were stored on a locked computer in the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University. My supervisor and I had sole access. All study materials will be stored for a period of 5 years before being destroyed. During the transcription process, each transcript was de-identified and coded to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Before the writing process, each participant was given a randomly generated pseudonym. This name was applied to their audio recording, field notes, interview transcripts, and was applied to all quotations during the writing process.

Quality and Rigour

Strategies to ensure quality and rigor in qualitative research include credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend that qualitative researchers engage in at least two methods of establishing quality and rigor. I utilized strategies to ensure the credibility, transferability, and dependability of this study's findings.

Credibility focuses on internal consistency or ensuring congruence between the constructed realities of the participants, and the way those realities are presented by the researcher (Morrow, 2005). Credibility in the study was achieved by using peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, and member checking. I engaged in peer debriefing with my supervisor, which helped to determine to what extent I had over-emphasized a point, under-emphasized a point, and carefully read the data and the final report (Milne & Oberle, 2005). During the interview phase, member checking was an on-going process involving the use of probing questions designed to clarify participants' answers. The interview protocol included feeling questions and probes designed to focus the interview on the participant's personal experience and provide more depth to the conversation (Patton, 2002; Aston, 2016).

My personal experiences in competitive men's sport means that I hold a possible bias that had the potential to unconsciously guide coding and data analysis. This combined with my familiarity with many of the schools and athletes involved in the recruitment process had the potential to impact responses or themes, threatening the accuracy of the study. Researcher reflexivity provided an opportunity for me to consider how my experiences and understanding of the world affects the research process (Morrow, 2005). By openly and honestly recognizing my

position as a straight, white, cis-gendered settler man, I acknowledged these potential biases during data collection and analysis.

Transferability is a method of ensuring quality in qualitative research. Generalizability is not an expectation in qualitative research, but transferability refers to the ability to understand the context within which the research was conducted, which can be beneficial to researchers conducting similar types of research (Morrow, 2005). To encourage the transferability of data, I included a rich description of the context that these competitive men's university basketball, football, and soccer players came from, which can be found in chapter 2. This included detailed, rich descriptions of participants' experiences of masculinity as well as the contexts in which those experiences occur.

Dependability refers to the necessity to remain consistent in research processes across time (Morrow, 2005). Dependability was addressed in this study so that if the research is repeated in the same context with the same methods and participants, similar results will be achieved (Doria, 2017). The process through which findings were derived was explicit and repeatable as much as possible (Morrow, 2005). This was accomplished by carefully tracking the emerging research design and keeping an audit trail. It is important to note however, that the replication of this study may not produce the same findings. The beliefs, values and practices will vary when using different participants with different personal experiences.

Summary

This chapter described the research design and methodology. The chapter began with a description of the transformative worldview, poststructural theory, and the way they relate to the purpose of analyzing masculine discourses within men's competitive sport. The chapter then described the characteristics of the study participants and how they were recruited. Procedures

for data collection, management, and discourse analysis were then described. To conclude, the chapter described approaches to ensure ethical considerations and quality and rigour.

Chapter 4: The Institution of Sport

This study's findings have been separated into three chapters: The Institution of Sport; Mental Health; and Masculinity in Competitive Men's Sport. The Institution of Sport chapter will examine how athletes are perceived by those inside and outside of sport, the influence of coaches, physical injuries, and highlight how dominant forms of knowledge are produced in competitive men's university sport. The Mental Health chapter will describe the culture of silence around mental health in competitive men's sport, mental health stigma, the difference between how mental and physical health are addressed in competitive men's sport, a lack of resources and services, and the value of teammate supports. Finally, the Masculinity in Competitive Men's Sport chapter will examine masculinity in competitive men's sport by highlighting how dominant forms of masculine knowledge are normalized and how violations of norms based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and femininity are policed. Finally, it will discuss institutional changes and their potential for future.

This first findings chapter will focus on the way that masculinity is constructed within the institution of competitive men's sport. Competitive men's sport is a large and complex institution, with many stakeholders and factors that impact how men athletes come to understand and navigate masculinity. This chapter will start with an examination of how athletes are perceived by those inside and outside of sport, highlighting a perceived 'dumb jock' stereotype. The chapter will then explore the influence that coaches have on men athletes before investigating how physical health and injury relate to masculinity and production of dominant forms of knowledge in competitive men's university sport.

How Athletes Are Perceived

Many participants spoke about the way that men athletes are viewed by those inside and outside competitive sport. They also spoke about expectations that come with these perceptions, with several participants describing societal stereotypes wherein athletes are expected to be “big” (Chris), “dumb” (Aaron), and “aggressive” (Eric). Over time and repetition, some athletes start to believe and embrace this dumb jock discourse, shaping their behaviour according to these expectations. As the dumb jock discourse is reproduced socially, it becomes known as an accepted form of knowledge through a process one participant described as “*buying into the cultural norms themselves of being like, you know, I'm just a big, dumb football player, and this is how I'm supposed to act, and this is what I'm supposed to do*” (Chris). This process can impact athlete wellbeing, and as one participant stated, “*if everybody's saying that you're dumb and like people just think you're dumb like just because you're an athlete, like yeah, that can be like damaging*” (Aaron). When the dumb jock discourse comes to dominance in athletic environments, it can have a negative influence on athlete health and wellbeing.

Some participants used language that indicates an important relationship between student athletes and academics, with one remarking, “*if you're a university athlete, you're a student first*” (Eric). This view was not perceived through institutional action, and several participants described a lack of academic support from their coaches, programs, and athletic directors. One participant recalled asking a professor for an alternate test time due to his conflicting game schedule, only to be denied and asked, “*Oh you think you're special because you play football?*” (Xavier). Given some participants described athletic programs which did not prioritize academic success in their athletes, these young men showed signs of normalizing dominant dumb jock discourses and continuing them in their own social contexts.

While participants cited the lack of academic resources as contributing to dumb jock discourses, some demonstrated how a player's complicity can contribute as well. One participant described his own academic self-doubt, *"I've never been like the best student... like if people think that I'm dumb, I guess that's kind of like an insecurity of mine"* (Aaron). Despite his academic insecurities, Aaron demonstrated how he reaffirms the very societal discourses that tell him he is not smart. When asked about how he prioritized academics and athletics as a student-athlete, Aaron remarked that *"If I said I was going to go for shots, and then my teammate was like, 'Oh, I've got to study,' I'm going to be like... Like I'm not going to approve, really"* (Aaron). This illustrates how competitive men's sport teaches athletes to prioritize athletics over academics and, through the repetition of athletic focused language, this process can influence an athlete to disregard his academic responsibilities even in the face of insecurity and self-doubt.

There was some resistance to the dumb jock discourse among participants, with some indicating their desire for these athlete stereotypes to end. One participant stated, *"If we made 'I'm a big, smart football player part of that ... I think that will go the furthest way in changing the culture around this type of hypermasculinity and homophobia"* (Chris). This reflects resistance to the dumb jock discourse, as his counter discourse of *"big, smart football player"* challenges the institutional stereotype that those who do not play traditionally skilled positions such as quarterback must be dumb. When the dumb jock discourse persists across competitive men's sport, it becomes a part of the subject experience and athletes reproduce the dominant discourse about it means to be a dumb jock or athlete in men's competitive sport.

Coaching Style

Coaches have been described as influential in the construction and reproduction of traditional masculinity in competitive men's sport, and their styles and techniques may impact

this process (Sierra, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Participant responses revealed that coaching style varied across sport and team, but aggression, violence, and gendered language were mentioned by all participants. Some participants described “*hard coaches*” (Vince, Kyle) that were focused on discipline and physical toughness. Many participants accepted hypermasculine coaching styles constructed around physical toughness, aggression, and violence as simply part of competitive sport. Some even viewed this as a positive and almost necessary part of competitive sport, with one participant saying, “*they really were hard on you, tough on you. They just wanted to make you get better*” (Kyle). Players showed a desire for a more intense coaching strategy, with participants expressing that “*you want to be coached hard, and if you’re messing up you want to be taught and corrected*” (Robert) and “*some players need a kick in the butt... they need that healthy fear of a coach*” (Chris). This is echoed by one participant’s remark that his response to harder coaching styles would be to “*kind of put your head down and power through. Like go harder*” (Eric). Veteran participants seemed to appreciate harder coaching styles more, likely as a reflection of the years they have been socialized to accept hegemonic masculinity as ideal in their respective sports. One participant said, “*you know, especially young players, they need that*” (Chris). Given their tenure in sport, veteran players encourage younger teammates to accept that while coaching styles may be outwardly harsh and emotionally tough, they are in the best interest of the player. This reflects a social discourse between in which men are socialized to adhere to dominant masculine ideals to maintain membership in competitive sport.

In an environment that demands success, participants described how coaches might focus more on failure than achievement. This represents a discourse from hypermasculine coaches wherein the dominant masculine man is always a winner, establishing defeat as a less masculine practice. As one participant stated, “*If you do something right, you’re kind of celebrated a bit,*

but the punishments definitely outweigh the positive reinforcement if you do something well”

(Robert). Another participant commented:

It wasn't exactly like a nurturing style. It was more so, 'be accountable for yourself', and 'show up at this time', and 'listen for this long'. Like there was help if you needed it in terms of like extra guidance. But I'd say overall it wasn't like the friendliest environment.

(Shane)

Men coaches in competitive men's sport are often not nurturing because this would create a less masculine environment. This reflects a gendered discourse that establishes masculinity as strong, logical, and cold, while femininity is considered weak, emotional, and nurturing (Adams et al., 2010; Allain, 2012; Anderson, 2010). Instead, coaches are instrumental in transferring hyper-masculine values to younger players. By emphasizing individual accountability, coaches put the onus on players to embrace and exhibit strength and aggression to maintain membership in the dominant masculine group.

Competitive men's sport is cyclical in nature, and coaches who were socialized by dominant forms of knowledge during their playing careers perpetuate it through transfer to their current players (Sierra, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Participants described an emphasis on physical toughness, strength, and aggression; illustrating the way that coaches operate as tools for competitive sport to push masculine discourses across generations, socializing young men athletes in an effort to maintain hegemonic masculinity as the legitimate form of knowledge. As one participant described about his team practices:

Sometimes the stuff that he was doing was just to check your gut or like toughness, which is definitely important. But like you would question yourself, like why are you doing this?

Like this is not like a skill workout. This is just like simply to test you how tough you are.

(Jeremy)

This reflects the way that some coaches do not always prioritize talent but focus on producing men athletes who present characteristics that are prized and congruent with dominant masculine values across generations.

The way that coaches delimit the behaviors that make a player suitable for the game is further reflected in the way that they talk about masculinity with their athletes. While there are overt forms of misogynistic language such as “*don’t be a pussy*” (Aaron) that will be examined later in this chapter, participants also described how subtle words or sayings pushed players to accept hegemonic masculine characteristics. An example of this is a coach criticizing his players for poor performance. As one participant explains, “*So it’s not like be a man or masculine, it’s just subtle things, again. It’s just be more aggressive, take that shot*” (Kyle). These subtle comments push players to adhere to dominant characteristics such as physical strength because an association is made between success and these masculine values. Dominant narratives position ideal masculine values atop a social hierarchy in sport, coercing men into the belief that their only opportunity to succeed comes from their commitment to these values. In telling players to be more aggressive, a coach is conveying that they are not performing at a level fitting the ideal man.

Gendered Language as Motivation

All participants recounted hearing coaches use gendered or hypermasculine language as a motivational tool. One participant said, “*man up was one that you’d hear like, or nut up*” (Tyler). Other participants recalled phrases such as “*pull up your skirt*” (Jeremy), “*pussy*” (Eric), and “*soft*” (Robert). The gendered nature of this language reflects misogynistic views

perpetuated by the hegemonic masculinity in competitive men's sport. Gendered discourses construct a binary where masculinity is seen as strong and powerful, while femininity is seen as weak and undesirable. Many participants seemed to accept this discourse, as is evident with one participant who said, "*yeah, those kind of terms like 'don't be a bitch', you know, 'you're being a pussy', like that's pretty commonplace, I'd say, like in practice and stuff*" (Shane). This can also include the use of homophobic language and slurs that are used to scold an athlete for not adhering to prescribed masculine standards in competitive men's sport. These will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

Another participant illustrated how the use of gendered language is normalized in team environments, "*you'd hear something that would go off in your head like 'you probably shouldn't say that' but then you maybe chalk it up to being locker room talk*" (Eric). Although some participants indicated internal conflict regarding language, with some expressing resistance, many reflected a sense of complicity and acceptance that gendered language is commonplace in competitive men's sport. One participant said, "*I feel like guys have had to just come to terms with it and, you know, accept it*" (Robert). Although some participants suggested they do not personally use gendered language, they demonstrated their complicity in allowing it to be widely used in team settings. By not challenging this language, players contribute to maintaining a hypermasculine and hyperaggressive competitive sporting environment.

Although some players reflected a culture of acceptance, other participants expressed mixed feelings about their coach's use of gendered language to encourage better performance. One participant labelled his coach's strategy as "*a misguided attempt at motivating*" (Shane). Some participants described their coaches as loud, aggressive men whose passion was evident in their demeanor. This may work for some athletes such as one participant who said, "*you want to*

be coached hard” (Robert), but another challenged this style, stating, *“I’m not a player who responds well to someone yelling at me, you know yelling at me when I make a mistake”* (Xavier). This brings the effectiveness of harder coaching styles into question, illustrating how some athletes may use it, partially, to remain compliant, as the coaches maintain the ability to punish players who contest them (Adams et al., 2010).

Participants indicated that a uniform coaching style may not work in motivating all players, and a coach should tailor their techniques to maximize performance without negatively impacting athlete health and wellbeing. One participant stated, *“It’s the coach’s job to understand who doesn’t need that and who does”* (Chris). Another noted that *“if you’re hard on [players] for too long that they just kind of break”* (Robert). There is evidence to suggest a player shift towards rejecting hypermasculine discourses from coaches in competitive men’s sport. This may be due to senior coaches who are retiring and being phased out and replaced by younger men. Given their age, there is an expectation from players that these new coaches should have a better understanding of the influence that they have on the overall health and wellbeing of their athletes, and their coaching styles directly impact this.

Generational Differences

Many current coaches are former players who were socialized by coaches that valued hegemonic masculine characteristics based on physical toughness and aggression (Wilson, 2003; Sierra, 2013). These men take the norms and values that they were taught and convey them to their own players, effectively reproducing this knowledge across generations (Wilson, 2003; Sierra, 2013). As one participant stated:

We have coaches who played in physical eras of basketball and they want to get us to play their type of basketball. So, you know if we’re not doing that or if a guy is doing that

more to another guy, then they've definitely said, 'toughen up' and 'be more of a man' and stuff like that for sure. (Robert)

Participants acknowledged this pattern and expressed generational shifts are needed to contest currently accepted masculine norms. This reflects how athlete compliance with gendered discourses may constitute a waiting strategy. As one participant stated, *“Coaches might have been players at one time, but they were players in a completely different era, and you know, socially things have changed, so I think there needs to be more player-led initiatives in this sort of realm”* (Tyler). Participants demonstrated an awareness of the way coaches socialize them to embrace dominant masculine values, expressing that competitive sport culture should model a societal shift which has moved toward establishing a more inclusive form of masculinity.

Participants expressed resistance to coaching that perpetuates dominant forms of knowledge regarding masculinity. Some participants described emerging social discourses that work to lessen occurrences of hypermasculine language. As one participant describes, *“We don't go about it, at least from a teammate to teammate, we don't go about it saying, 'man up', you know, or something like that”* (Robert). This resistance is illustrated by another participant saying *“I think all of our guys understand how 'don't be a pussy' can be viewed as not correct um, so we don't really say that, I don't really think it's trickled down to affect how we think”* (Vince). By resisting gendered discourse, the cyclical nature of masculine knowledge in competitive sport may be challenged over time. In omitting derogatory language regarding gender and masculinity, players use their agency to create more inclusive environments. Participants identified new and younger coaches as important in changing the way that men are socialized to act in competitive sport. One participant stated:

And where guys have grown up in a certain era, that's what they were taught and that's

what they try to teach now, and younger coaches they are kind of, they have the same mentality as the younger players where they're trying to not be as derogatory and stuff even though it is competitive. (Robert)

Younger coaches can maintain the competitive atmosphere in sport without perpetuating a form of masculinity centered around values such as violence and aggression.

Participants described how younger coaches represent a shift away from more traditional ways of thinking about masculinity in competitive sport. One participant stated:

The way I think of it is the old school kind of coaching style versus newer school. I've always had the kind of coaches with the older school approach by guys who played back in the older days. I mean you look at young coaches now, um, like in the NBA Brad Stevens or guys like that. They seem like more players coaches, like they're more for you.

(Kyle)

While some athletes were complicit in allowing coaches to perpetuate stereotypes and ideals based on hegemonic values learned through their own playing careers, it is evident that players are interested in a shift. The generational gap between young players and old coaches creates tension in how men interact with each other. More than just interpersonal, this tension represents competing discourses vying for dominance as new language challenges accepted ways of knowing in competitive men's sport. Players see young coaches as important because they perceive similar lived experiences. As younger coaches continue to influence a shift toward a more inclusive form of masculinity, men in competitive sport can explore more positive ways to interact with each other and manage their overall health and wellbeing.

Physical Health and Injury

Participants identified a link between physical health, injury, and perceived masculinity. University sport requires a strenuous and demanding schedule, and while this produces players that are in excellent physical shape, it can also lead to injury. Participants stated, “*there was no threshold to protect players*” (Xavier) and that, “*You’re physically just tired. Not even the mental part. But physically you’re just tired and beat up*” (Kyle). Physical injuries are inevitable in sport, yet participants indicated that players who got hurt would have their masculinity questioned. When asked about players sitting out, one participant plainly responded, “*they’re being pussies*” (Aaron). This illustrates a perceived link between masculinity and physical health, and how men athletes have their masculinity judged based on their ability to participate and avoid injury. Despite the toll that competitive sport can have on the body, men athletes are expected to push through pain, exuding physical strength, toughness, and competitiveness to retain their masculine status (MacDonald, 2014; Schwalbe, 2014; Kian et al. 2015).

It became evident that players actively police each other, viewing any absence due to injury as a sign of lesser masculinity. One participant said, “*People would say aw you’re faking it or aw you’re just [...] being a pussy or being a bitch or being weak, like suck it up, be a man get back on the field, right?*” (Xavier). These comments reflect how the hegemonic masculine ideals valued by the institution of competitive men’s sport are perpetuated through player-to-player conversation. Hegemonic values are also enforced by coaches through language, and one participant recalled a post-practice talk from his coach: “*Like guys are getting hurt and [Coach] after practice, he said our guys were getting too banged up because they wanted physio to rub their asses and shit like that*” (Robert). This participant’s coach overtly criticizes players, using homophobic language to ostracize injured players by bringing their masculinity into question.

This illustrates the way that gendered discourses have normalized heterosexual masculinity, constructing differing masculinities as the other from which men in competitive sport will try to distance themselves for fear of judgement.

Participants appeared complicit in allowing these discourses to continue, even though pushing through injury can negatively impact physical health. Participants did not mention any form of resistance. As one participant said, *“you never want to hear your teammates call you soft, or like saying ‘you’re not giving your all’, your hundred percent. Or coaches doubting your ability to be available”* (Kyle). One participant commented, *“you would get a hard time if you were sitting out”* (Shane). Another participant described negative feedback, saying, *“you’re being a bitch’, ‘you’re a pussy’, all those kinds of things are associated with sitting out”* (Chris). One participant noted that, *“you’re really taking the pride over your actual physical health at some points”* (Kyle). This illustrates how some participants showed a sense of misguided pride in underprioritizing physical health, instead working to ensure that their teammates and coaches did not view them as less than the ideal man which, according to institutional standards, is physically tough and will push through pain.

Playing Through Injury

Hegemonic masculine discourses centered on physical toughness appear to influence both social and coach-based pressures to play through injury. Evident in the perceived connection between injury and masculinity, players police injuries within their teams (Luisi et al., 2016; Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2018). Many participants described a culture wherein the difference between being ‘hurt’ and ‘injured’ is emphasized, terminology that one participant described as *“the classic idioms that you get from coaches and players”* (Chris). Another participant described how these definitions would be used to chastise someone, *“you would get a*

hard time if you were sitting out for minor stuff or things that you maybe felt were more serious than like what most people thought about it” (Aaron). Injury discourses in competitive men’s sport have created a dichotomy between hurt and injured which is used to legitimize a physical health issue and criticize players for perceived weakness. If a player is hurt, they can play, but if they are injured, it is more serious and may be seen as excusable. These discourses contend that a masculine player can continue through pain when he is hurt, while more serious issues are categorized as injuries, making them legitimate reasons for sitting out from competition.

Many participants did not indicate any form of resistance to the discourses connecting injury and perceived masculinity. As one participant explained, *“playing football, you have to play through injuries. So, like if you don’t, or you get like knick knack injuries, they’ll say you’re soft”* (Kyle). In this way it becomes an accepted way of thinking among players, escalating the problem when serious injuries are tested. One participant described this process, *“Let’s say if you injure your ankle or something like that, and it’s like oh, if it’s not broken, you can still play, and stuff like that”* (Eric). The rationale for this peer policing seems as though players expect the fullest level of dedication and masculine toughness from themselves and their teammates. One participant indicated that sitting out would let the team down, saying *“why can’t you be out here if I’m out here?”* (Chris). He went on further:

We’re not looking for people that need a break. We’re not looking for people that need to take a week off. We’re not looking for people that can’t practice all week and then want to play the game. You better be available. (Chris)

Participants illustrate the demanding nature of competitive sport and describe how players expect their teammates to adhere to dominant masculine values to be successful. It also represents

competitive sport's cutthroat atmosphere in which a player's worth is related to their masculine performance and those who fail to meet dominant standards may be criticized or ostracized.

Some participants described situations where coaches criticized them openly for injuries. One participant outlined an interaction with his coach after sitting out due to an ankle injury: "*He basically kind of like made me feel like shit about like not practicing with the team ... He'd be like, 'Oh, like [participant]'s got to stop being a baby like about his ankle'*" (Aaron). When players are criticized or pressured to play through physical injury, both their commitment and masculinity are questioned. In putting the onus on players to perform through injury and prove their masculine status, both coaches and players are complicit in allowing dominant health discourses to influence how men athletes navigate the connection between masculinity and health.

Legitimizing Injury

Participants revealed that men in sport consider certain physical injuries to be more legitimate than others, warranting less judgement for players sitting out from play. Determining which injuries require rest seems motivated by masculine ideals prioritizing physical toughness. One participant said:

I think that most people do their own appraisal on that injury. And I think that a lot of people's appraisals in football may be flawed by that like pseudo masculinity. Like they think that minor stuff, like a rolled ankle or, you know, a jammed finger or something like that, they may think that that's weak and that's unacceptable to be out for. (Aaron)

When athletic peers and coaches make assessments of an injury, the player effectively loses agency regarding their own health. This may negatively impact health due to the intense social pressures to compete through pain. Many of these evaluations seemed to be based on the ability

to visually see the injury in question. As one participant described, *“I think as soon as people see that cast and that sling say, I think that... I don't know, I've never seen someone like give a hard time to someone who's in a cast or a sling”* (Vince). Another participant echoed this sentiment, *“A lot of the times they are legitimate, but there's definitely like a cloud of doubt like held over anyone who didn't suffer something serious that everyone saw”* (Aaron).

Making personal evaluations as to the legitimacy of an injury can create hostile environments for teammates and negatively influence their wellbeing. As one participant stated:

If people showed up with an injury or took an injury out for something that we couldn't physically see how bad it was then that language would definitely be attached to their situation, you know? (Xavier)

Other non-visible injuries, such as head injuries, may be questioned by teammates and, by influencing a player to play while injured, it can put their health at risk. Opinions can vary from player to player however, with one participant expressing that, *“Yeah, a concussion's a little more legitimate than a rolled ankle. But it depends on severity of the ankle”* (Kyle). By maintaining this practice of appraising physical injuries, athletes contribute to the continuation of an institutional discourse that measures masculinity according to hegemonic ideals centered on physical toughness and strength. This creates a social divide wherein an athlete is positioned between the desire to maintain dominant status and the need to focus on his personal health. The resulting conflict can persuade an athlete to push through pain to keep competing, potentially having an adverse impact on his physical health and wellbeing.

Summary

The construction of masculinity in competitive men's university sport has a significant influence on the way that men athletes experience and understand relationships with their

teammates, coaches, and physical health. Given competitive sport's association with traditional masculine values such as toughness and aggression, participants described how many men student athletes are perceived as dumb jocks by those outside the institution, negatively impacting how these men view themselves and manage their own masculinity. Coaches play an important role in an athlete's life and, by defining and promoting idealized masculine characteristics, they create and perpetuate physical discourses that value men who can play through pain above those who sit out due to injury. This may be largely fueled by a generational gap between senior coaches who prescribe to more traditional forms of masculinity and younger players who expressed resistance to dominant masculine values. There is evidence indicating that a new wave of younger coaches is influencing a shift toward a more inclusive form of masculinity that better prioritizes athlete health and wellbeing.

Chapter 5: Mental Health

This chapter will focus on the way that masculinity influences how men athletes experience and address mental health issues in competitive men's sport. Mental health is underemphasized in competitive men's sport, and this may negatively impact the wellbeing of men athletes. This chapter will describe the culture of silence around mental health in competitive men's sport, mental health stigma, the difference between how mental and physical health are addressed in competitive men's sport, a lack of resources and services, and the value of teammate supports.

A Culture of Silence

Participants revealed a culture of silence regarding mental health in competitive men's sport. While team environments are social places, there are limits as to what is considered acceptable for discussion by players. One participant said, *"It's not a topic where you hear it in the locker room and be like, 'Yo, guys, like I have a depression problem.' Like that's not how it is"* (Jeremy). Participants indicated that social discourses encourage men to actively refrain from talking about mental health or emotional wellbeing, with some reflecting a sense of acceptance in this practice. One participant said, *"You always have conversations about sports, girls, like stuff like that. The normal things you see. But no one actually sits down and just tackles real issues or real topics"* (Shane). Men athletes are socialized to discuss topics such as women and recreation, but more open conversation around mental health is seen as off limits. As one participant described, *"We don't open up and empathize with ourselves and say, 'hey, you're having a bad day, you need to go talk to someone'"* (Chris). This is echoed by another participant:

It just wasn't talked about... Someone could have a bad day, and you just don't know. Or

they just go through it. So, you really just don't know how someone's feeling. They could be really depressed. Like you just don't know. It's not talked about in the locker room in these things. It's sad to say. (Kyle)

Discourses that undervalue mental health discourage men from discussing emotions and qualities that do not align with dominant masculine characteristics such as toughness and stoicism.

The silence around mental health discussion is indicative of hegemonic discourses that value norms, beliefs, and behaviors associated with traditional masculinity. The institution of competitive men's sport has worked to socialize young men athletes to model physical toughness and aggression while suppressing their emotions (Salter, 2019; Wailing, 2019; Harrington, 2020). This value is reflected by one participant's comment that, *"Players are supposed to suck it up and go through it, but it shouldn't be that way, because every individual and every athlete deals with these types of pressures in a different way, and some cope better than others"* (Vince). Given their association with masculine values, there is an expectation that men athletes must convey strength and be able to handle mental health issues without taking time off or seeking a professional service. Players may desire the ability to speak freely about their mental health, but the influence of silencing discourses discourage men from speaking out.

Participants expressed a desire to be able to talk about mental health issues within a team environment, with one participant stating that *"It would be good if male athletes realized that its ok to talk about their feelings, its okay to talk about mental health issues"* (Vince). Despite this many other participants appeared to contribute to the culture of silence. One participant stated that, *"I've seen and heard like first-hand of like guys struggling with mental health like during the season. I've definitely seen on the team. I've never seen like somebody voice this type of thing in front of a team, no"* (Aaron). This participant demonstrates how players, through their own

silence, are complicit in maintaining discourses that undervalue mental health in men athletes. Participants also described mental health as a taboo subject that operated on a 'don't ask, don't tell' mentality (Eric, Xavier). As one participant said:

If someone were to just take a practice off, which happened multiple times – they just didn't go because they weren't feeling right mentally – it would be treated kind of like a taboo. They couldn't talk about it, coaches wouldn't talk about it, friends of the person who didn't attend wouldn't talk about it, questions about it wouldn't be answered you know. (Xavier)

Even though it may be glaringly obvious that a player is struggling with their mental health, an athlete would not likely be supported by their teammates or coaches. Masculine discourses that undervalue mental health within competitive sport influence men to disregard mental health, viewing it as a minor issue that players must handle by themselves.

When players allow the culture of silence around mental health to continue, they perpetuate ideals which undervalue those who experience mental health challenges. This can put the health and wellbeing of athletes in jeopardy by preventing a player from connecting to the appropriate resource or service needed to address an issue. One participant said:

I realized I had like severe anxiety in those two years... But it was just something where you just kind of like kept your head down and powered through it. If there wasn't like a resource like in front of me, I wasn't the type of guy to, like, go seek for that by himself (Eric).

With the expectation that men athletes should be tough enough push past or deal with any mental health issues themselves, some athletes may feel helpless and experience negative mental health due to lacking resources and services (Van Slingerland et al., 2018). Often men athletes are

unable or unwilling to seek help, as the culture of silence and stigma associated with mental health can deter those experiencing mental health challenges from openly communicating this to their athletic peers (Van Slingerland et al., 2018).

Mental Health Stigma

The culture of silence around mental health in men athletes seemed to be motivated by a stigma attached to anyone experiencing mental health challenges. As one participant noted, *“If we look at someone who has mental health issues then I feel like the person might be looked at as weak, not tough enough, he struggles mentally so he is not ready to participate in the physical activity”* (Vince). This view was echoed by another participant, *“You see, most people I would think that they would think that the anxiety is weaker”* (Aaron). The connection between mental health and weakness is influenced by discourses in sport that encourage men athletes to be tough and unaffected by emotion. Discourses that undervalue mental health in competitive sport socialize men athletes to associate mental health with masculinity, leading men experiencing mental health challenges to be viewed as weak for their inability to depict strength. As one participant said, *“I think initially it would be perceived as weakness by some players”* (Eric). By adhering to these dominant characteristics and expectations regarding mental health, players may be unaware of the way that they reproduce and subsequently entrench this stigma across competitive men’s sport.

One participant expressed the belief that, *“Depending on maybe which type of like status you had on the team, it would also be received differently”* (Eric). This view suggests a social discourse within teams that arranges men athletes according to social and masculine hierarchies. Men who present more dominant masculine characteristics may be placed atop this hierarchy and given leeway to be impacted by mental health issues or may be held to a higher standard given

their perceived levels of masculinity. Another participant said, *“I think there are people that would view it as weakness because I think it’s a lack of understanding”* (Tyler). Given that social discourses in sport perpetuate a culture of silence among players that restricts discussion about mental health, men athletes may be unaware of the impact mental health challenges can pose to health and wellbeing. In suggesting that a lack of understanding perpetuates this stigma, more mental health education and training might benefit players by giving them the ability to develop a counter discourse to the traditional connection between mental health weakness and masculinity.

Fearing that peers may question their masculinity because of this stigma, some participants expressed hesitancy and uncertainty in reaching out to teammates or coaches for help with their mental health. One participant described his hesitancy, *“I would kind of be hesitant to tell my teammates if I was reaching out to these services or if somehow they found out I would be. I don’t know, I think they might view me as I don’t know, weaker, like we talked about earlier, and just, uh, just being more sensitive around you and stuff like that”* (Robert). Another participant explained why he chooses not to discuss mental health with others, *“it’s tough to open up, for me at least, it’s tough to open up with people if you are struggling because I know how if people do it with me, I kind of get uncomfortable because I’m not exactly sure how to react”* (Kyle). These comments reflect the tension that some athletes feel regarding discourses that discourage them from reaching out and seeking help for mental health concerns. These athletes may desire to talk about their mental health openly, but the repetition of discourses that define mental health challenges as an indicator of weakness are a powerful deterrent that maintains a culture of silence. This illustrates how the institution of competitive men’s sport uses

repetitious language to frame reality, producing accepted notions of knowing that can influence how men athletes navigate their own mental health and wellbeing.

Discomfort with Vulnerability

Many participants cited vulnerability and a lack of comfort as key factors that, along with stigma, contribute to a culture of silence around mental health in men's competitive sport. When asked whether he's talked with teammates experiencing mental health challenges, one participant stated that *"I wasn't the most comfortable because I wasn't exactly sure how to handle it, I wasn't sure what to say, if I should say anything, what's the right thing to say, you know, if that person just needs someone to listen to them or they need advice"* (Robert). Another participant said, *"I do feel comfortable talking about it, but it has to be with a trusted person, so it can't be, it wouldn't happen in a room full of players"* (Vince). This was echoed by one participant's statement that mental health isn't a group discussion, but rather *"You would only hear that in one-on-one conversations"* (Xavier), illustrating how men feel uncomfortable about the prospect of vulnerability in front of large groups of their teammates.

Discomfort in discussing mental health reflects a lack of practice, which is not surprising given that the institution of competitive men's sport works to limit the discussion of topics that do not align with the hyperaggressive form of masculinity that athletes are repeatedly exposed to. Discomfort and vulnerability are maintained by social regulation, from both players and coaches, that discourage men from emotional action, instead encouraging stoicism and toughness. This is demonstrated by one participant:

I think that men in general are really bad at talking about their feelings and their emotions and stuff, so early on you would never, there would never be a conversation being like 'how are you feeling' like that wouldn't be a question that gets asked, it would

be more like sort of like 'toughen up, tough it out, suck it up' that kind of stuff. (Tyler)

This participant stated that some teammates are better at communicating about delicate topics than others, indicating the way certain men athletes challenge the discourses that discourage conversation among peers. This reflects a form of resistance to this silencing discourse, as some men recognize the importance of discussing mental health with teammates. In those athletes who refrain, the decision to avoid or confine talk about mental health challenges to private conversations reflects the fear that men athletes have about the way others view their masculinity.

Although participants stated that men in sport do not talk about mental health, follow up questioning revealed a social discourse among players that works to discretely resist the dominant culture of silence. Participants alluded to conversations where men utilize other descriptors to talk about mental health to try and resist silencing discourses that work to prevent men from talking openly. One participant explained:

It's like, 'man I'm so tired', when guys complain about fatigue like, 'I'm exhausted', they use those words as opposed to, 'I'm really sad'. That's the experience I've had and when you're looking back, you're like oh you probably were overwhelmed, you were rundown, you might've been depressed um, but it was always sort of – there were always synonyms used like, 'I'm exhausted', 'I'm tired', 'I'm rundown'. (Tyler)

Key words such as *tired* and *rundown* are evidence of an effort by players to resist dominant discourses and make space for discussion. The same participant discussed additional terms like “*burnt out*” and “*overwhelmed*” which, given the silencing discourses that discourage men athletes from openly discussing mental health issues, may represent a resistance strategy that is used to have these conversations without putting themselves at risk of speculation.

Given the concern that participants expressed in opening up about their mental health, other approaches are needed to facilitate effective discussion. One participant described how players utilize humour as a buffer in what are otherwise vulnerable and uncomfortable conversations about mental health. This participant explained:

I think that that humour almost acted as like a little in between. Between like your true vulnerability and the issues that was going on and allowed people to talk about how they were feeling without really having to get, you know, 100 percent vulnerable. You only had to get 75 or 80 percent vulnerable. Which is better than not being vulnerable and open at all, right. (Chris)

The need for these strategies is rooted in the acceptance of discourses that have socialized men to embrace stoicism and refrain from discussing mental health. While it is clear there is tension among players, few have used their agency to push back against dominant discourses to make space for mental health discussions. Although they expressed discontent regarding how masculinity is constructed in competitive sport, participants that described their own silence remain compliant due to the threat of social retribution or exclusion by their athletic peers, coach and sport. Silence is the result of pressure from norms and institutions that maintain these social forces.

Some players showed a desire to challenge these stoic discourses but are unsure of how to successfully do this. One participant described the problem:

If a player comes to his teammate and goes 'man, I don't know how to talk to this girl' they'd be like 'try this and try that'... but if someone says 'yo, I'm not fine. My mental health isn't there' then I feel like players might be backing away from that question and not showing support because they don't know how to handle it... I'm not saying they're

scared of it, but they probably don't know how to deal with it so therefore in that particular moment they aren't there for their teammate when they come out with that information. I hope that there's players who do take the time and sit down like 'yo what's on your mind, what is it that you feel like makes you mentally not as healthy'. (Vince)

Although locker rooms and other team settings are very social settings, strong silencing discourses have discouraged players from discussing their mental health. This has created an environment in which men do not know how to interact with emotional situations and mental health because this is not taught or associated with what it means to be a man in competitive sport. As a result, men may feel uncomfortable speaking out, fearing that their peers will question their masculinity. There is evidence suggesting that men in competitive sport are starting to make space for important conversations and take agency over their mental health.

Mental Health vs Physical Health

There is a perceived connection between dominant masculine values and mental health (Hutt & Numer, 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Stick, 2017). Participants described the way an athlete's availability to play is emphasized and how absences related to mental health are considered taboo. These are discourses that prioritize physical health over mental health, encouraging men to adhere to values such as toughness and strength through masculine language. Mental health is not widely discussed because of the way men are socialized to prioritize physical health over mental health. As one participant describes, *"When we're talking about injuries and physical versus mental injuries, I think that mental side of it needs to be checked in on more and be taken seriously, more than what it has been"* (Robert). This represents a conflict that some athletes have with dominant masculine values.

Although athletes can have their masculinity questioned for experiencing certain physical

injuries, participants described how the ability to prove an injury hinders advancements in mental health discussion within sport. Given that physical injuries are largely visible, participants suggested that the invisible nature of mental health contributes to the way that players see it as taboo. One participant said, *“With physical stuff it’s easy to be like ‘I’m hurt, here’s why’ and you point to it and explain like, whereas with the mental stuff no one knows what’s going on inside your head but you so it’s way harder for you to get across that this is really affecting me in a negative way”* (Tyler). Another participant outlined the difference between mental and physical health:

I think it’s viewed differently. It goes with the point I was making earlier when I was talking about someone having diabetes or acne or a broken knee. I feel like those type of physical injuries are looked at as normal, normal that needs time to heal, that needs an expert to be fixed or looked at... The thing is that mental health isn’t seen as another sickness. If somebody has diabetes, he has diabetes – that’s fine. If somebody has acne, he has acne, that’s fine. But if somebody has mental health issues then people go ‘oh he’s not mentally healthy’. (Vince)

Injury discourses have produced health inequity in competitive men’s sport, creating an environment wherein men athletes who experience physical injuries are normalized, and those who experience negative mental health may have their masculinity questioned by their peers.

Given the need to prove physical injuries as demonstrated in Chapter 4, men that experience mental health challenges may face scrutiny from their peers and have their masculinity questioned for sitting out from competition. One participant described how some players are *“faking it with physical injuries”* (Tyler). Despite this, he expressed a resistance to discourses connecting mental health and masculinity, saying, *“I think with the mental stuff you*

always have to give the benefit of the doubt with a person who's saying what they're saying" (Tyler). Another participant said, *"I think it's far more likely and far more common that people are missing time because they are actually struggling, and not because it's fake. And I think that the reaction of the team always reflected that"* (Chris). Although he acknowledged that every team, player, and situation was different, this participant illustrated how players challenge discourses connecting mental health and masculinity by outwardly voicing their support for teammates dealing with mental health challenges. Some participants expressed resistance against dominant discourses that undervalue mental health. This reflects an understanding of the serious nature of mental health in men athletes and represents a counter discourse from players where they utilize their agency to take control of their mental health and wellbeing. Through this, men athletes work to create space in which to support their teammates and challenge dominant forms of knowledge that ignore the significance of mental health.

Strength based discourses have created a connection between perceived masculinity and mental health. This connection not only delegitimizes mental health issues but discourages men athletes from discussing anything other than their physical health. Given that physical injuries are largely visible, participants suggested that the invisible nature of mental health contributes to the way that players see it as taboo. Some participants expressed a form of resistance against these discourses, reflecting an understanding of the serious nature of mental health in men athletes. In this resistance, men athletes work to create space in which to support their teammates and challenge dominant ways of thinking.

A Lack of Resources and Services

Many participants highlighted a distinct lack of mental health specific resources and services in their team environments. While the universities included in this study each offer

counselling services, none had services focused directly on the student-athlete population (Student Health and Wellness, n.d.). As one participant said, *“So like there's like obviously through the school, there's like counselling and stuff like that. But I don't know. So yeah, there is. But not like through sport”* (Aaron). Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating that, *“all in all I feel like athletes are kind of on their own in that regard”* (Vince). One participant described the way that teams prepare players for issues throughout the season, *“At the beginning of the year you get like a player handbook or a team handbook where you have your team protocol and your team guidelines. You have like your list of contacts- physio, athletic director, student tutors”* (Tyler). When asked whether mental health guidelines were mentioned, the participant stated that *“It was offered like, ‘If you need to go speak to someone, I can refer you to so and so.’ So, like, but that was through a one-on-one meeting”* (Tyler). By overlooking the significance of mental health issues, athletic directors convey to their teams that athlete mental health is not a priority.

Some participants spoke against the lack of mental health services, demonstrating a form of resistance against this dominant institutional discourse that underprioritizes mental health in athletes. As one participant said, *“It needs to be I think right at the front and not like something that you have to go digging for”* (Tyler). Another participant explained:

I think that athletes should be given mental health resources the same way they're given physical resources and academic resources because, like if you talk about a triangle of success you know that you need to be academically successful, you need to be physically successful, but you also need to be mentally successful and I think a lot of times if you do your digging you can find somewhere to go get that help but it wasn't always readily available, or easily accessible. (Chris)

Athletes clearly recognize the importance of caring for all aspects of health and wellbeing, yet feel their universities and teams are not providing them with sufficient resources. One participant explained how programs ask so much of student athletes, especially at a young age, giving them great responsibility and stress, yet they *“don't ask them or give them opportunity to talk to someone, have them go through someone to check on their mental health, to see how they're doing”* (Kyle). Institutions do not provide their men athletes with sufficient resources and services to efficiently address mental health issues resulting from practice, competition, and the academic responsibilities that come with being a student athlete.

As student athletes have schedules and experiences that are not uniform across the student population, resources tailored specifically to student athletes may be required. One participant expressed that student athletes *“are more likely to go to, like, someone who knows sports than someone who doesn't”* (Xavier). This indicates the belief that a non-athlete would not be unable to understand a mental health issue shaped by sport specific experiences such as playing time and performance pressure. Given this, participants spoke to the need for athlete-centered mental health resources. One participant stated, *“I want to talk to someone about not only sport, but everything outside sport, and it might help us perform better. We talk about physical, but we should go into the mental stuff”* (Kyle). Another participant suggested the use of peer-based resources with recent alumni or veteran athletes, *“So maybe you create different programs, mentor-mentee uh, programs or they come to you when they're feeling bad and you direct them to a resource right?”* (Xavier). Men athletes value those who have had similar paths, illustrating the relative discomfort they may feel in reaching out to a resource that they believe cannot properly understand their experience. This also suggests men athletes want to take agency over their health and wellbeing but feel under supported by their institutions.

All participants identified a gap in resources and spoke to the need for teams to have professional mental health services available to their athletes. Their responses indicated a resistance to the way that universities address athlete mental health. One participant said:

How come not every single team has a psychologist? There should be a sports psychologist, an expert that you know, if we develop a culture where a physio, for an example a physio and a psychologist is looked at the same way then, if we ever come to that point, no athlete will ever feel like its odd or weird to talk about what's going on inside of them. (Vince)

Another participant said, “*We should have a sports psychologist to help them do little things, to help them before games and after games to get them back in or a mental check each week or every day*” (Kyle). The connection between access to services and athlete comfort talking about mental health challenges illustrates how health discourses work to maintain dominant ways of thinking. By not providing services for athletes, competitive university teams discount the legitimacy of mental health issues and preserve the hegemonic definition of the ideal man, fueling the stigma of weakness. By demanding appropriate services, athletes take agency over their health and push back against discourses that ignore the significance of mental health.

Teammate Support

Participants not only cited their own individual challenges but described seeing teammates deteriorate mentally and even quit sport altogether. As one participant described, “*A lot of people came and actually became depressed because they're away from home and they didn't feel too supported by the team, so they went back home*” (Xavier). This reflects the social discourse among players that discourages athletes from discussing mental health, leaving men to handle issues themselves. Another participant stated:

“I’ve never had like anybody talk to me about this before. And I know that it’s like such a big thing with a lot of young athletes. Like I’ve seen people quit because of their anxiety. Like whether they want to tell me it was their anxiety or not, like I can tell like it was something to do with mental and not physical” (Aaron).

Participants suggested a communal understanding that players are dealing with mental health issues, some so severe that they result in the athlete quitting, yet there is still a social discourse that maintains a culture of silence, effectively preventing players from talking and helping each other. One participant described their experience dealing with their own mental health, *“I’ve been in a situation where like I’m struggling with like my mental health... And like I never had the support to help me through that”* (Kyle). Participants indicated the importance of mental health, yet they described sporting environments in which teammates see others experience challenges due to dominant masculine ideals that value strength and discourage men from addressing the mental side of their health and wellbeing.

Participants made it clear that a supportive team environment is significant in helping athletes deal with mental health challenges. Despite the stigma attached to mental health in men’s sport, participants suggested that teammates would be supportive of any peer that openly communicated about mental health issues. This reflects both the desire to challenge dominant discourses discouraging men from talking about their mental health, and how men athletes value a strong sense of community and team. This indicates a counter discourse that pushes back against the cultural silence and stigma, prioritizing the health and wellbeing of their team. Participants stated, *“I feel like the team will be supportive, I think”* (Jeremy), and *“I think the team would really rally around those people”* (Chris). One participant said:

I think it would be good for people be ok and open with that and I mean we have this

family kind of uh, I don't know what the word is, but we want to view our team as a family, so it would be nice if guys felt like they were struggling, to be able to talk to their teammates about that, but I do think it would be a bit of an adjustment for others to get used to hearing. (Robert)

The concept of creating a supportive environment and establishing a team as a family illustrates a shifting social discourse wherein players challenge institutionally strict masculine values by prioritizing athlete health through open conversation and help for those experiencing mental health challenges.

While dominant discourses in sport have constructed mental health issues as taboo and an indicator of weakness, participant responses centering on player support suggest resistance. By challenging the culture of silence around mental health, men athletes work to take agency over their health and wellbeing and that of their teammates. As one participant stated, *“I believe there'd be a lot of support if someone... Well, I would hope that there would be a lot of support if someone was able to say that in front of the team”* (Shane). The participant also acknowledged that many athletes are still committed to the dominant discourses in which they have been socialized throughout their sporting careers. He said, *“I also know that there would be some people who wouldn't quite support it, at least not like vocally”* (Shane). Given this, athletes can use their agency to carve out space in sport to challenge the dominant forms of thinking around mental health. By doing this, athletes take control of their health away from the institution, using their position as players to focus on factors of their health which health-based discourses in competitive sport have largely delegitimized and overlooked.

Summary

Dominant masculine values have a large influence in shaping the relationship that men

athletes have with mental health and mental health issues. Participants described a culture within competitive men's sport built largely around silence, stigma, and the connection between mental health and perceived masculinity. This connection fostered a competitive sporting environment that underprioritizes mental health in athletes, resulting in a distinct lack of tailored resources and services. Although participants contributed to maintaining the culture of silence, some expressed a desire to challenge this social discourse and create space for men athletes to openly discuss mental health and take agency over their overall health and wellbeing.

Chapter 6: Masculinity in Competitive Men's Sport

This chapter will focus on the way that men athletes are socialized by, understand, and navigate masculinity in competitive men's sport. Traditional masculine norms have been idealized, and violations are policed closely by peers and coaches in competitive sport. This chapter will examine masculinity in competitive men's sport by highlighting how dominant forms of masculine knowledge are normalized and how violations of norms based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and femininity are policed. Finally, it will discuss institutional changes and their potential for future.

The Ideal Man in Competitive Sport

Participants described how the culture in competitive men's sport defines the ideal man according to traditional masculine characteristics that value physical strength. One participant said, "*The way masculinity is described is as this well-built strong man, so what comes with this is good muscle tone or power or you know quickness and strength*" (Vince). Other participants confirmed the cultural emphasis on physical toughness, strength, and aggression. One said, "... *to be a man it's just kind of meant to be like big, strong, kind of take no shit kind of thing, say what we want, don't feel sorry for it, do what we want, don't feel sorry for it*" (Xavier). Another participant stated, "*I feel like there is a pressure that you have to be, you know, like, you know, one of the strongest guys or like the biggest looking guy on the team, I feel like*" (Jeremy). It is clear that men in sport initially judge an athlete's masculinity visually. Values such as strength, aggression, and the emphasis on physical characteristics are perpetuated in competitive men's sport through behavioural discourses that encourage men to look and act like the ideal man.

Physical strength is so valued in competitive sport that participants immediately gravitated to these characteristics when questioned about masculinity. As one participant

described, *“The first thing that pops into my head is someone who is physically fit, who is strong”* (Tyler). One participant described a practice in football known as the ‘eye test’: *“He looks like Tarzan, that kind of thing, so there's idealistic traits associated with, you know, looking like you're in good physical condition, looking the part for the role that you're about to play”* (Chris). Although physical strength is a main component in many competitive sports, an intense focus on body ignores the athletic value present in men who utilize intellect and skill. Further, this puts an athlete at risk of exclusion or social ridicule if they do not conform to this physical standard. One participant commented that, *“Like if you're like skinny, like people are going to like make fun of you for being skinny”* (Aaron). Participant comments about the body reflect the way that athletes are influenced by physique centered discourses that push physical strength, size, and power.

Although participants described how physical traits are valued in competitive sport, many noted the significance of mental characteristics as well. One participant said, *“people would be most impressed by in football like is the physical stuff. But you also wouldn't be able to achieve that typical cliché football persona if you're not also like mentally dominant”* (Shane). Another participant said, *“Like the emotional aspect of like being a man isn't really valued by a lot of people. But in my opinion, it's the most important aspect”* (Aaron). This is significant given that physical characteristics and traits are continually emphasized and encouraged through language, influencing how men athletes come to understand the ideal notion of masculinity based on the physical aspects of their personality. By instead focusing on mental characteristics, participants challenged the dominant idea of what a man should be.

Physical discourses not only influence men to display physical characteristics centered on strength, but also to adopt behavioural traits aligning with toughness. One participant said, *“I*

think it's more of a characteristic of a personality or a persona you put on in front of the cameras or in front of the people. And that's not really who you are. It's that locker room culture" (Kyle). Another participant described a man who is, *"stoic, loud at the same time, like assertive, and then just like not letting anything faze them in terms of like no one else or any injuries"* (Shane). Mental toughness appeared equally important to physical toughness in evaluating masculinity. Strength based discourses push physical and mental strength and toughness as vital parts of masculinity. Participants illustrated how men athletes are constantly exposed to language that associates masculinity with physical strength and toughness. Over time, this language influences how men athletes understand masculinity, motivating them to model their bodies and personas with these characteristics.

Participants highlighted the way that physical discourses influence men to adhere to traditional masculine characteristics such as physical strength and size from a young age. One participant described learning dominant masculine characteristics, *"I mean obviously, we're taught from a young age to be muscular, to be like the big, tough guy, and stuff"* (Aaron). Young men are socialized to accept traditional masculinity and, within competitive sport environments, must continue to project these characteristics to maintain their dominant position. Participants stated that the socialization process is continuous throughout their lives but becomes more covert as they reached university sport. One participant said, *"I think that those masculine ideals and types of things that people uphold are, you know...they're not necessarily as explicit. A lot of them are more implied"* (Chris). Another participant spoke about how more subtle forms of masculine encouragement influence men in and out of sport:

*I would say more so being told and encouraged to be a certain way on the field. I don't...
I can't say that they taught us or told us to act certain ways off the field. But I think when*

you like try to build those guys on the field, it probably carries over, you know. (Shane)

Men athletes are subjected to a hypermasculine sporting environment that rewards physical strength and toughness. Given the prominence of traditional masculine discourses that construct masculinity in this community, players are often compliant. Athletes are regulated by coaches that possess the ability to punish players who contest them, representing a learned inhibition against confronting a more powerful target. There is also the ever-present threat of being cut, and given that many collegiate players are on scholarship, this creates a ‘no choice’ scenario as they must maintain their athletic membership to earn the reward (Adams et al., 2010).

Athletic Ability

Participants described an association between an athlete’s talent and the way their teammates perceived their masculinity. In an environment that emphasizes dominant masculine values centered on physical strength and size, talent emerged as a tool to validate masculine status. One participant stated, *“I feel like if you are a good player, like if you're say the star player, I feel like that just automatically gives you I guess like the impression of masculinity”* (Jeremy). This sentiment was echoed by another participant, *“If you got skills on the field, you're kind of placed on a pedestal and you're seen as a very manly dude”* (Xavier).

Participants described how visible talent can be used to evaluate the masculinity of teammates or opponents. Participants said, *“I think people look at what you do on the court and they let that speak about your manhood”* (Tyler) and *“I feel like people who watch the game can see a guy who’s more talented and could see him as manlier”* (Vince). Another participant said, *“Being that kind of guy who’s on the billboards and scoring lots of points, if you’re that guy then I can see people kind of associating you with being that prototypical man”* (Robert). Participant responses revealed a powerful discourse between players that connects athletic ability and

performance to masculinity, redefining masculinity based on the characteristics of the person that holds the talent.

Although dominant masculine characteristics based on physical toughness and strength are valued in competitive men's sport, participants described how certain players can bypass these masculine expectations through skill-based contribution. This can be especially true for players in traditionally skills-based positions, such as the kicker in football. One participant said, *"The kicker is still a player in football, and you're not going to be more apt to see a really skilled kicker as more of an idealistic man or male figure than you would just another linebacker out there"* (Chris). One participant described how his teammate, who plays a skill-based position, used his ability to achieve masculine status, *"[Player] earned his status, his card, his masculinity card in the sense of what we're talking about when he started to add real value to the team"* (Xavier). Another illustrated this ability, stating that, *"it doesn't really matter who you are as long as you're helping contribute to the team to help us win games"* (Kyle). Athletic ability and success are prioritized above all else, providing reward and prestige even when skilled players may not meet physical expectations.

Masculine Hierarchy

Participants described a masculine hierarchy within their teams ordered largely by age and adherence to dominant masculine norms and characteristics. Participants also made a connection between seniority and perceived masculinity. One player said, *"It's like there's certain people that can do and say and joke about whatever they want. And then there's like the younger, lower on the chain people, they have a lot of unwritten rules"* (Shane). Given the assertion that men athletes must adhere to dominant masculine characteristics such as toughness and strength, veteran players may be seen as a symbol of this commitment since they have not

been criticized or excluded for norm violations. Some participants expressed complicity in this hierarchy, possibly because they were socialized to accept it as younger players, and now see it as a necessary part of competitive sport. One participant said:

To a degree and to an extent that that doesn't become a toxic thing, that can be healthy. Because it can give people a sense of, you know, like leadership qualities, and it can give people a sense of how to follow somebody who's been there longer and is trying to show them the way. (Chris)

Men athletes are socialized continuously by leaders within this constructed hierarchy, where they learn and are encouraged to model physical strength, toughness, and power to be successful.

Participants alluded to the way men atop the masculine hierarchy encourage those in lower positions to model behaviours around dominant expectations to gain greater masculine status. Given this, some men athletes construct newer, more masculine versions of themselves. One participant described feeling uncomfortable around his senior teammates, saying, *"I felt like I had to act a little different than how I would usually outside of basketball practice"* (Jeremy). Another participant spoke to the way that younger players are socialized, both overtly and subtly, to present dominant masculine characteristics in order to fit in:

'Oh I need to dress a certain way, I need to talk a certain way' like the slang that's used... it's always one of those things when you're thinking this is how these guys act so maybe I need to do that as well, so you sort of follow what's put out to you by senior guys. (Tyler)

Veteran players influence how their younger counterparts understand masculinity. One participant described how veteran teammates use their position to encourage younger players to accept and employ dominant behaviours. He said, *"they already had their time coming up the*

ranks so you kind of have to follow what they said, they were kind of like the masculine group that you kind of had to adhere to” (Xavier). Given the fluidity of status and power within the masculine hierarchy, other men may be motivated to model masculine behaviours such as aggression to advance masculine position. When men athletes make behavioural changes because of their desire to appear more masculine, they are changing their subject position to garner greater status which rewards them through popularity, prominence, and financial gain.

Some participants described how masculine hierarchies influence unwelcoming and unfriendly environments for some players. Participants indicated that some men in this hierarchy may experience adverse wellbeing, as those in lower positions are exposed to criticism and ridicule for their perceived lack of masculinity. One participant described his experience trying to advance up the ladder, saying, *“It's just like you're constantly getting kind of looked down upon and you just feel so like inferior” (Eric). Another participant echoed this experience, saying, “I've been on both ends of the hierarchy spectrum, and I know what it's like to feel like the rookie and that you're bottom of the food chain, and you feel like you can't say or do anything” (Shane). Men athletes have established a strong connection between age and perceived masculinity, as veteran players are largely awarded more masculine status than rookie players who have not proven their own. Young players who are physically dominant or skilled may accumulate status and transgress steps in this ladder. This creates an environment which can negatively impact men who are unable to meet physical or skill-based expectations.*

Some participants expressed a resistance to this hierarchy, challenging the perceived connection between masculinity and seniority. One participant said, *“If you're on the team, you're there for a reason. And I don't want the younger guys to feel like they can't talk or do anything without being like ridiculed or punished. So, it's not a very healthy hierarchy” (Shane).*

Still, many participants expressed an acceptance to this hierarchy. One participant described this social ordering as a “*natural hierarchy*” (Kyle), while another stated, “*that kind of hierarchy isn't going anywhere*” (Xavier). This illustrates how many players view this hierarchy as an expected and normalized part of competitive sport that players must navigate during their careers. This complicity allows men to perpetuate social discourses connecting masculinity and seniority, producing a competitive sport environment in which men athletes are ordered based on dominant masculine norms and values.

Race and Ethnicity

Participants spoke to the way that masculine norms and ideals can differ across cultures, races, and ethnicities. In acknowledging that different cultures and communities may have unique definitions of masculinity, one participant described his experiences, “*coming from the Black community, it's that same kind of like soldier mentality you know like um, take no shit... having a tough exterior, overcompensating in terms of confidence and aggression*” (Xavier). Another participant described an Asian understanding that focuses on “*mental and IQ*” while the “*physical part aspect weighs more in like North America*” (Jeremy). As one participant said, “*You're going to have a lot of different cultural norms and cultural ideals that, you know, you would see present in society as a whole that are sort of forced to mesh together as one locker room*” (Chris). As players from different lived experiences might have different understandings of masculinity, one player noted that, “*you have to understand sort of cultural differences, and racial differences, ethnic differences, and how those might come into play while you're communicating*” (Tyler). In sports like football and basketball, which tend to have more diverse roster populations, these differences can be challenging for players to navigate (Davis, 2019; Van Slingerland et al., 2018).

Participants indicated an understanding that masculinity is not universal across race, ethnicity, and culture. One participant said, *“I think the definition of like ‘man’ and the ‘ideal man’ differs from person to person, and it probably differs from culture to culture ...What I thought how a man should act and carry themselves would differ from someone else on the team”* (Shane). Participants seemed to accept diversity as an expected aspect of men’s competitive sport. One participant noted that, *“Unless you live somewhere like extremely rural for the most part, you're always going to have teammates of colour and like different ethnicities, and stuff like that”* (Eric). Although race, ethnicity, and culture create different understandings of masculinity, participants described how competitive men’s sport still revolves around a dominant form of masculinity that values physical strength, toughness, and aggression. In describing his experience playing on a diverse basketball team, one participant said, *“We all viewed masculinity as kind of the same thing where it was like, you know, be tough and play hard”* (Eric). Although players are socialized to display behaviours and characteristics learned within their families and communities, they are subjected to repeated behavioural discourses that overvalue traditional reproductions of masculinity within the competitive sport environment. In this, roster diversity is expected and accepted within competitive sport, but in terms of representative masculinity, finite versions are privileged and encouraged.

Violating Masculine Norms

The culture in competitive men’s sport is strict about dominant masculine norms and values centered on toughness and strength, and participants described how behavioural violations would be met with uncertainty, hesitancy, and even social exclusion. One participant stated, *“When people fail to meet that [masculine] expectation and do whatever it takes to get their self on the field to perform then I think that it can be very difficult for somebody else who really is*

giving their all to look at that person the same” (Tyler). Another participant described how masculinity is monitored in this environment, *saying, “Being that idealistic man and that big, tough guy’s like the standard. And when you’re not meeting that standard, people are inclined to let you know that you’re not meeting it” (Chris).* This is not surprising given that athletic peers, coaches, and sporting organizations have been identified as forces which actively police dominant masculine ideals in competitive men’s sport (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2017; Luisi et al., 2016). One participant said, *“I think that people have been cut out of groups and kind of the social circles for, you know, not keeping up their end of the bargain” (Shane).* This “*bargain*” refers to the expectation that men in competitive sport adhere to dominant characteristics and traits. The practice of penalizing violations illustrates how social discourses within the player population enforce and perpetuate dominant norms. Terms such as ‘*bargain*’ and ‘*standard*’ are used to establish expected characteristics and behaviours, justifying punishment or exclusion for any player who does not strictly follow them.

Participants described how men in sport are subjected to implicit discourses that pressure them to conform to dominant masculine norms without explicitly mentioning masculinity. One participant said, *“We’re not necessarily telling somebody to be an ideal man but you’re telling somebody don’t engage in the characteristics that don’t fit into that role” (Chris).* The participant continued, *“I think when somebody is not fulfilling their role, there’s always going to be somebody who will verbalize that to that person” (Chris).* Maintaining dominant masculinity becomes more of a practice of criticizing failure or difference rather than explicitly instructing men in sport to act a certain way. One participant said, *“Masculinity is talked about when somebody is like failing to meet that standard more so than when somebody is really meeting up to that standard” (Shane).*

This is an example of a microaggression, defined as everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Woodford et al., 2013). Over time and repetition, microaggressions teach men to stay in their place and meet these cultural expectations. In competitive sport, microaggressions produce an environment where men athletes are compliant to the taken for granted nature of hegemonic masculinity, as adhere to dominant traits and characteristics compliance permits their maintained membership.

Homophobic Discourse

Participants identified a perceived connection between sexual orientation and masculinity, describing it as largely negative relationship stemming from dominant discourses that have established heterosexuality as the norm. Participants described how peers police this norm, suggesting social exclusion and jokes would be the response to an openly gay player. One participant said, *“I don't think that there's necessarily a lack of like diverse sexual orientation in sport, but I do think that people will tend to hide it more until they're finished because of the negative repercussions”* (Chris). Another participant said, *“I think that guys probably are shyer and more confidential and secretive about coming out because they might feel like they could be less accepted within the team”* (Vince). Another participant described how players would talk about an openly gay player, *“They'd just be putting them down because of sexual orientation because it would just make them less of a man”* (Aaron). Given normalized heterosexuality in competitive sport, gay men are seen by their peers to be violating masculine norms and expectations, especially in hypermasculine sports that reward characteristics like physical strength. While teams may be inviting environments for some, participants indicated that their

peers might not have been as welcoming to an athlete who does not prescribe to normalized heterosexuality.

Participants indicated that competitive sporting environments may not be friendly to a player who openly contradicts normalized heterosexuality. One participant said, *“It would be a complete lie if I said there was no homophobic people on the football team... You didn't have to search hard for it... I saw and witnessed homophobia a lot in football”* (Shane). Participants spoke about negative language that would be attributed to an athlete who violated the straight masculine norm. One participant said, *“‘stop being a faggot’... That phrase wasn't let's say, shut down or questioned by other players. That statement as such was accepted”* (Vince). This illustrates a broader culture of homophobia within competitive men's sport that works to label gay men as norm violations that deserve to be punished. This occurs by associating gay men with femininity, two categories that, through derogatory language among teammates and coaches, reinforces how ideal masculinity is understood according to physical traits and strong behavioural actions. Another participant described how peers would use derogatory language to address other violations that might be indirectly associated with sexual orientation. They said:

It's not because they're gay, it's just that because, you know, say you were the person who happens to be skinny or happens to have like a, you know, high voice, like a very high-toned voice, or whatever that like associates with a female, I guess, aspect. (Jeremy)

These comments demonstrate how social discourses among players continue to reinforce the perceived connection between sexual orientation and masculinity. Participants indicated their compliance in policing norms, as any association with these violations risks social punishment or exclusion from the athletic community.

Misogynistic Discourse

Participants indicated a gender dichotomy, established by dominant masculine ideals such as aggression and competitiveness, that has constructed masculinity as strong while stigmatizing femininity as weak and undesirable in competitive sport. Given this misogynistic stigma, many participants described how men in competitive sport actively work to avoid being associated with characteristics or traits that might be linked with femininity, such as gentleness or passiveness. In discussing feminine and masculine labels, one participant said, *“I would say that guys try to avoid that label because they might think that that label would make them appear as like weaker or worse at the sport”* (Shane). It is clear that men athletes greatly value the way that peers view their masculinity, working hard to create themselves as the ideal man. One participant described how misogynistic discourses connect poor athletic performance to femininity and weakness. He said, *“If you come into the game and make bad plays, you're not a man... You're either like a female or a child”* (Aaron). Misogyny is accepted as commonplace in competitive men's sport, and participants expressed that misogynistic discourse is a motivating factor for men athletes to perform and meet masculine standards. This illustrates how athletes can contribute to the construction of an environment that is unwelcoming to men athletes who do not embody this heterosexual form of masculinity.

Participants revealed that when men athletes engage in behaviours traditionally associated with femininity such as emotion or affection, they may face ridicule and social exclusion from their peers. One participant gave an example of behaviours that are attached to femininity, *“If a guy is into art and drawing, he's viewed as less of a man than the guy who's on the basketball team”* (Robert). This reflects strong misogynistic discourses within competitive men's sport that emphasizes physical strength, toughness, and aggression while devaluing

intellect and emotion. Another participant noted that, *“If a player likes let’s say girly things, I don’t know – painting his fingernails or something. Then that wouldn’t be tolerated within male sports”* (Vince). This illustrates how misogynistic discourse serves as a mechanism for gender and player performance regulation when coaches felt that their players had not attained the appropriate form of masculinity established for them (Adams et al., 2010).

While men in competitive sport have been socialized by misogynistic discourses to believe that feminine characteristics and behaviours are indicators of weakness, some men athletes resist this association by achieving athletic success while violating these masculine norms. One participant noted that, *“I feel like people do associate [feminine characteristics] with being weaker. But you can think that then that person with painted fingernails comes out and scores 30 on you”* (Robert). This illustrates a flaw in the misogynistic nature of competitive men’s sport, and if a player has talent, it will be uninfluenced by either masculine or feminine behaviours. By achieving athletic success, the misogynistic discourses that connect femininity and poor performance are challenged, bringing the taken for granted nature of this connection into question and creating space for new forms of knowledge.

A Lack of Change and Required Action

Many participants described little change to the culture of masculinity during their playing careers. One participant said, *“I don’t think it got any better in four years. I think it’s in terms of like accepting that kind of thing, I think it’s still the same in my opinion”* (Shane). Another commented that, *“It’s not going to change while I’m still an athlete, because society is just so brainwashed with that image of a man that is you know well-built and has all the muscle and is tall”* (Vince). Participants reflected a communal acceptance of masculine discourses in sport, indicating that the dominant construction of masculinity is deeply ingrained in competitive

men's sport. One participant said, *"That culture for it to shift, there's going to have to be some major changes and some... I just think football's a long way off accepting anything but like that typical masculinity"* (Shane). This illustrates the commanding effect that hegemonic masculinity has in influencing how men athletes think about and shape their masculinity.

Participants indicated that age and changing generations were keys in shifting the way masculinity is constructed in competitive men's sport. One participant stated that, *"I think the newer era of players and coaches is kind of fading that out because of society around them is kind of fading that out"* (Robert). After commenting that masculine stereotypes were very evident in his sport, one participant stated that, *"I think slowly, like generation by generation, that assumption can change. But I think that young people have to have a good example set for them. I would say it would happen slowly over time, but by setting good examples for younger generations"* (Shane). Participants indicated a desire to challenge traditional discourses which have historically dominated competitive men's sport. One participant said, *"I think it has to be player lead um, and I think alumni lead, like recent graduates like you and I having gone through it and seeing where the holes are and then being able to address them"* (Tyler).

Participants showed an understanding that the institution would not voluntarily change, and that athletes should work for change themselves. One participant said, *"I think that the change has to come from leadership in the community"* (Chris), reflecting the importance of veteran players and captains in generating change. Given the lengthy period for which many of these participants have been socialized by hegemonic discourses in sport, they acknowledged that creating a new space for younger players was important in shifting the way masculinity is constructed.

While discussing mental health and emotion has been discouraged in competitive men's sport, participants expressed a desire to defy this dominant norm by acknowledging that creating

a more inclusive team space is central to challenging hypermasculine discourses. One participant said, *“I think a healthy locker room and a healthy culture on a team will make those rookies and those younger guys feel welcome and feel comfortable on the team. So, like a healthy locker room should be encouraging those younger guys to speak more and be comfortable”* (Kyle). One participant reaffirmed the importance of student athletes taking agency regarding health and wellbeing, *“The SAMHI [Student Athlete Mental Health Initiative] athletes, that acronym for like mental health within student athletes, I think stuff like that's definitely awesome”* (Eric). He emphasized the importance, *“student athlete leaders being a part of [SAMHI], so that those lessons and that support and the messaging is being passed into the respective teams by those individuals”* (Eric). While participants reported a lack of significant change in their team and sport, many expressed the need to challenge the culturally accepted forms of knowledge that operate within competitive men’s sport to create an environment which prioritizes and fosters positive health and wellbeing.

Summary

Physical strength, aggression, and toughness have been constructed as the idealized form of masculinity in competitive men’s university sport. Participants described a culture that overvalues dominant characteristics such as physical strength, toughness, and aggression, while norm violations are policed and punished by social ridicule and exclusion. This has influenced the creation of a masculine hierarchy in sport wherein the more talented, stronger, and veteran men are placed above other players. Interestingly, players described how athletic ability is at times valued above other masculine norms and values. Given the dynamic nature of masculinity across races, ethnicities, and cultures, participants described how men navigate dominant masculine ideals to avoid norm violations. Misogyny and homophobia also impacted how men

athletes experience and understand masculinity. Participants described only minimal cultural changes during their athletic careers, suggesting that dominant masculine values have a deep root in competitive men's sport. Despite this, participants highlighted generational shifts, increasing mental health discussion, and the importance of student leadership as key in moving toward a future sporting environment that has a more inclusive version of masculinity.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This research explored how the experiences of masculinity in competitive men's university sport relate to health and wellbeing. Through interviews with eleven men-identified university athletes, it was found that dominant masculine values influence the way men navigate relationships with their teammates and coaches, understand their physical and mental health, and respond to masculine norms and expectations in competitive men's university sport. This chapter will focus on discussing the implications of these findings for health promotion and sport and will conclude with the study's strengths, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Implications for Health Promotion and Sport

This research provides an opportunity to better understand how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the health and wellbeing of its athletes. A thorough understanding of the experiences of masculinity in competitive men's sport is important for sporting organizations and leagues in developing policy and practice that encourages inclusion and supports the health and wellbeing of athletes. Given that masculinity is experienced differently according to a number of social and cultural variables such as race and social status (Davis 2019; Messner, 2002) it is important to examine the experiences of a diverse participant group. This study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge on the relationship between masculinity and the health and wellbeing of men in competitive sport by examining athletes in basketball, football, and soccer. Despite being from different backgrounds, masculine discourses had very similar organizing effects in the culture of competitive men's sport, and the pressure to conform to the white, heterosexual masculine mantra within this space produced a specific type of masculine discourse that influences how these men athletes experience and shape their masculinity. Through participation in this study, athletes helped to increase the

understanding of masculine experiences in these specific sporting contexts. These experiences could aid health promoters in sport to develop policy and practice that works to improve athlete health and wellbeing based on study findings. The dissemination of the study's results may motivate other men in competitive sport to discuss masculinity more actively.

Using a poststructural approach and discourse analysis, this study found all participants had experienced or witnessed negative health or wellbeing as a result of the construction of masculinity within competitive men's university sport. Highlighting the way men athletes experience masculinity may inform health promoters and athletic bodies in prevention efforts aimed at fostering healthy and inclusive sporting environments. The findings from this research provide insight into the world of competitive men's university sport and the discourses that shape men athletes' relationships with masculinity. To challenge gendered discourses in competitive men's sport that influence how athletes understand health and wellbeing, health promotion initiatives should focus on a cultural shift toward more inclusive forms of masculinity. There are many challenges to shifting the culture of competitive men's sport, but disrupting everyday practices of men athletes has the potential to change how they understand and navigate masculinity. This starts with educating coaches, athletes, and other key players in competitive men's sport as to how the continuation of traditional notions of masculinity can influence negative health and wellbeing in men athletes. Challenging the way that men athletes come to understand masculinity could contribute to changing the culture in competitive sport that allows traditional masculine values to flourish. Given social pressure and encouragement to adhere to these values can impact athlete health and wellbeing, change is needed to create a more positive space for athletes.

The Institution of Sport

In the institution of competitive sport, coaches shape how men athletes experience masculinity and physical health through masculine language and dumb jock stereotypes. This contributes to the creation of competing discourses about behavioural characteristics and physical injury. Conflict develops between discourses pushing hypermasculine characteristics and counter discourses prioritizing physical health. Through conflicting discourses, it becomes apparent that coaches are critical in shaping men athlete's relationship with masculinity and physical health, often encouraging athletes to engage in unsafe practices such as playing through injury to prove masculinity. Through the repetition of gendered language from their coaches, players began to take on an understanding of masculinity that does not focus on properly managing physical health. Some participants expressed their frustration with this, even reporting further injury as a result of being pressured into competing (Aaron, Robert).

There is a strong 'dumb jock' discourse that is associated with men athletes in competitive sport. Many people, especially those outside the institution of sport, presume that all men athletes in traditionally high contact sports such as basketball and football are fully entrenched in dominant masculine values such as physical strength, toughness, and aggression (Luisi et al., 2016; Sierra, 2013). There is a generalization across these athlete populations, and many do not consider that men athletes have value beyond the traits and characteristics they display in athletic competition (Wininger & White, 2008). Many participants felt that their non-athletic characteristics are undesirable and not valued in sport, and that their identity stopped at athlete. This is consistent with Wininger and White (2015) who found that student-athletes felt that professors and other students had significantly lower academic expectations for them. In some circles, this dumb jock stereotype may be intended as a joke, but jokes constitute

knowledge for athletes about what is acceptable in terms of appearance and behaviour. Humour is often unconsciously accepted but is in fact discursively forming the athlete's relationship with masculinity. Over time and repetition, players take on this understanding of masculinity and either willingly or reluctantly conform to societal expectations. Coaches can play a role in perpetuating stereotypes by constructing team environments that do not value academics or interests outside of sport (Davis, 2019). Promoting personal growth in the face of dumb jock narratives is an important step in the creation of a more well-rounded generation of men athletes. Doing so will help to challenge the current forms of knowledge that influence how men athletes navigate their own masculinity.

Coaches have a significant influence on athletes, and for young men athletes who are growing physically, emotionally, and mentally, the language they hear can shape how they experience masculinity and physical health (Sierra, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Given their position of authority, the language used by coaches carries important influence. Participant responses align with the theory that young men are mentored by coaches who went through the same system of masculine reproduction, establishing coaches as influential in the construction of traditional masculine norms (Sierra, 2013; Wilson, 2003). Athletes are exposed to language that encourages physical strength and aggression, and those who cannot meet proposed standards are openly criticized and belittled in front of their teammates (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2017; Luisi et al., 2016). Participants seemed aware that senior coaches come from generations that valued more traditional masculine behaviours and characteristics which are being increasingly questioned. This creates a conflict for athletes who recognize the personas they are encouraged to don may not be accepted outside the institution of competitive sport. Some athletes understood the damaging impacts that gendered language can have on a player's confidence and self-esteem

over time. Coaches should be more mindful of not only the critical impact that their language has on athletes, but also the cyclical nature of competitive sport that continues to perpetuate damaging forms of knowledge around health and wellbeing.

Consistent with previous research, participants described how their bodies are policed by coaches and teammates through discussion about physical injury (Ramaecker, 2016; Schwenk, 2000; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). When participants were asked about players sitting out due to injury, they described how hypermasculine discourses promote physical toughness and resilience, labelling those who experience injury as weak. Through the promotion of dominant masculine characteristics, player discourses value those who can play through pain above those who submit to injury. This can have a negative impact on not only an athlete's physical health, as many feel pressured to play through legitimate injuries, but also their wellbeing, as the mental toll of being classed as weak can be harmful. Although the nature of competitive sport is fundamentally physical and at times violent, it is important for coaches and players to promote and prioritize physical health. There is evidence indicating that a new wave of younger coaches is influencing a shift toward a more inclusive form of masculinity that better prioritizes athlete health and wellbeing. If these coaches could disrupt the problematic injury discourse that has been present in competitive sport, the status quo could be challenged.

Mental Health

Participants identified how masculine discourses influence the way men athletes experience and address mental health issues in competitive men's sport. These discourses contribute to a culture of silence and stigma that influences men to undervalue and ignore mental health. This is particularly evident in the differences between how mental health and physical health issues are viewed and addressed by coaches, teammates, and the self.

Delegitimizing discourses discourage men athletes from discussing mental health and emotion. Over time, men experiencing negative mental health have been associated with weakness, as masculine discourses describe how men who display dominant traits and characteristics possess unwavering strength (Van Slingerland et al., 2018). Men athletes perpetuate a culture of silence and stigma by allowing these discourses to convince them of this claim (Gavriolva & Donohue, 2018; Sebbens et al., 2016). When asked about mental health, all participants stated its importance and described their own challenges or those of a friend. It seems that while men are impacted by mental health challenges, they are unaware of this commonality because silencing discourses prevent them from discussing it with their peers. This creates a compounding problem wherein men do not know how to navigate discussions that require them to take social risks and be vulnerable. Despite the stigma attached to mental health in men's sport, participants suggested teammates would be supportive of peers that communicated about mental health issues. This suggests that players feel the same way about mental health challenges but may be afraid to speak against a culture which has traditionally ignored it. Although these silencing discourses are not easily malleable, enough resistance can influence change. This cannot be immediate though, and long, subtle changes over time can begin with the use of more inclusive and health centered language. By challenging the way that men athletes are socialized to understand mental health, counter discourse can create the opportunity for shift toward the prioritization of mental health and services.

Coaches and stakeholders in competitive sport have not done enough to demonstrate support for men athletes experiencing negative mental health. Many participants described lacking resources and services, illustrating how mental health in men's sport is underprioritized and underfunded compared to physical health. This is consistent with Van Slingerland et al.

(2018) who found that mental health services for men in competitive sport remain limited, especially for men who come from diverse cultures such as those participating in sports including football, basketball, and soccer. This may be the result of senior coaches who, in line with traditional masculine values, may not recognize the legitimacy of mental health challenges. Instead, the language they use when players are visibly impacted by mental health challenges reflects assumptions of weakness and lacking dedication. Athletic programs should utilize mental health programming for both coaches and players to promote open discussion and develop athletic environments that influence positive wellbeing. This is important given that many athletes expressed their desire to have access to have athlete-specific mental health resources and services. As the mental health of student athletes has been a growing concern across Canadian campuses, this demographic continues to be at great risk of mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide (Van Slingerland, et al., 2018). For men athletes who may be afraid of seeking professional help outside their immediate athletic environments, this makes the need for sport specific resources and services even greater.

To address resource gaps, there have been a growing number of student athlete lead mental health advocacy groups (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014; Pac 12, 2021). This may prove to be a stronger support strategy than outside resources given the powerful social bonds that teammates, and athletes as a whole, share. Participants made it clear that a supportive team environment is significant in helping athletes deal with mental health challenges. The concept of creating a supportive environment and establishing a team as a family illustrates a shifting social discourse wherein players challenge institutionally strict masculine values by prioritizing athlete health through open conversation and help for those experiencing mental health challenges. Athletic communities should continue to expand the reach of student athlete

lead programs, as it is important for players to take agency over their own health.

Masculinity in Competitive Sport

Athletes constantly compare their own abilities and masculinity to that of teammates and peers across sport, acting as a form of policing that ensures men adhere to dominant ideals (Atteberry-Ash & Woodford, 2017; Luisi et al., 2016). While traditional masculine values work to sit atop the hierarchy in sport, participants described how there are different avenues an athlete can use to bypass these norms and expectations. Athletic ability is valued in competitive sport, and an athlete's contributions to his team may give him leeway if he does not fully adhere to the prescribed set of masculine characteristics and traits. This creates a different understanding of masculinity that allows players opportunities and privileges they would not have based on physical and behavioural characteristics alone. This has influenced the creation of a masculine hierarchy in sport wherein the more talented, stronger, and veteran men are placed above other players (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schwalbe, 2014).

Masculinity is also understood differently across race, ethnicity, and culture, yet the expectation remains that men athletes will only display the hegemonic characteristics valued by the institution of competitive sport. This creates an environment which pressures men to develop what might be completely different masculine personas inside sport. When these men are judging or being judged by their peers, this can negatively impact wellbeing and create internal identity conflicts. By challenging traditional masculine values in competitive men's sport, a more welcoming environment can be constructed in which players are able to grow physically, mentally, and emotionally as they explore their relationship with their masculinity. These elements shape how men athlete's understanding of masculinity influences their health and wellbeing. While these are not uniformly negative experiences, it is likely that if a healthier and

more inclusive culture of sport were created, the masculine influencers present in the world of sport would have less of an impact.

Misogynistic and homophobic discourses are used to police the violation of masculine norms and expectations among men athletes (Anderson, 2010; Connell, 2005; Stick, 2017). As there is the expectation that to be successful in sport men must adhere to these dominant values, masculinity becomes more of a process of punishing failures rather than rewarding successes. For example, some participants described how players can be cut out of social circles and even teams for not living up to expectations based on performance and masculine expression. This creates another added pressure within sport that, when compounded with the already intense pressures in competition, can weigh on an athlete and negatively impact his wellbeing. In this environment, heavily homophobic and misogynistic discourses are used to criticize perceived masculine failures, rhetoric that can be damaging to athlete self-esteem and contribute to the construction of a hypermasculine and hateful atmosphere. This can be as simple as a first-year soccer player being ridiculed by senior players for wearing pink, and therefore 'feminine', socks during practice (Adams, 2011).

Misogynistic discourses can be challenged over time, and differing, more inclusive language should be considered as a healthy alternative that maintains the competitive nature of sport without negatively impacting athlete wellbeing. Combined with the overwhelming expectation that a man in competitive sport must be physically strong, intimidating, aggressive, and heterosexual, those who display any indication of femininity are ostracized and attacked for what sport considers weakness (Stick, 2017). This places athletes in a potentially hostile environment that attacks anything that is different, and men who do not prescribe to traditional notions of masculinity are negatively impacted. Anderson (2009) theorized a shifting sport

environment in which a softer, more emotionally expressive form of masculinity affords men the opportunity to employ a wider range of behaviours without fearing their perception outside a masculine norm (Coufal, 2018). This theory of inclusive masculinity was based on the social inclusion of those traditionally marginalized by hegemonic masculinity (Robinson, Anderson & White, 2017), and included the acceptance of homosexuality, bisexuality, physical tactility, and emotional intimacy among men (Adams, 2011). Although it is perhaps unlikely that counter discourses could ever push the institution of competitive men's sport to this point, I would suggest the use of discursive practices that gradually chip away at dominant notions of masculinity will influence a shift that creates a healthier environment for men athletes.

When asked about masculine culture in competitive sport, participants described minimal changes. Dominant masculine values are deeply rooted in this institution, and although participants highlighted how younger coaches and shifting generations are key to creating change, it will not be a quick or easy process. Participants highlighted the importance of student leadership in moving toward a sporting environment with a more inclusive masculinity. Men athletes are clearly aware of how dominant masculine values can negatively influence them, and by using their position in sport they can take agency over their health and wellbeing.

Hypermasculine forms of masculine knowledge in competitive sport will not change willingly, but rather it can happen through strong challenge by player lead lobbying and initiatives.

Strengths and Limitations

This study was designed to address gaps identified in the literature. Previous literature examining masculinity has tended to ignore diverse perspectives, using a narrow view that has primarily focused on the examination of white, middle class, American men aged 18 – 22 years (Anderson, 2011, Anderson 2015; Pariera et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2019; Southhall et al., 2011).

This study aimed to address this gap by examining men's competitive university basketball, football, and soccer; three sports that often have racially and socially diverse participation groups (Abdel-Shehid, 2005; Carrey, 2011; Stick, 2017; Wilson, 2003). I used purposeful sampling to increase diverse participation, aiming for a participant pool that was comprised of at least half BIPOC men athletes. I also reached out to key community partners and student organizations such as the Dalhousie University Black Student Advising Centre, the African Nova Scotian Student Association, the Saint Mary's University International Student Centre, and the Mount Saint Vincent International Society to broaden my participant pool and increase diversity.

As a former student athlete at two of the included universities, I used my position as an insider of both the dominant masculine and collegiate student-athlete groups to recruit participants. I successfully recruited a pool of eleven participants, five of whom identified as BIPOC men athletes. My personal experiences and perspectives as a former men's university basketball player had an influence on this research process. The use of a poststructural approach and discourse analysis helped to develop an understanding that is beyond the perspectives of the participants. A poststructural approach strengthens the quality of this study because poststructuralism works to de-naturalise or de-familiarise that which other theories and common sense take to be self-evidently true and morally desirable (Merlingen, 2013). Rather than simply describing, these strategies helped me to explore the construction of masculinity in depth. Through my interpretation of the data, I am situated in this research. As described in Chapter three, my position as a straight, white, cis-gendered, settler man brings an inherent bias that I worked to mitigate during data analysis. This served as both a strength and a limitation given my familiarity of the culture and my past experiences navigating health and wellbeing in competitive men's university sport.

The COVID-19 pandemic limited participant recruitment, requiring a modified data collection strategy. Given the current circumstances related to the COVID-19 virus and Nova Scotia public health guidelines, all interviews were conducted using the online platform Microsoft Teams instead of in person. It is possible that important non-verbal cues such as body language may have been missed during video interviews, potentially impacting how participant responses were analyzed during discourse analysis. Recruitment was conducted primarily through social media and word of mouth. As a result, men athletes from the four Halifax colleges and universities that did not see my social media postings or who I do not previously know may not have had the opportunity to participate. Although men athletes in this study participated voluntarily, there is still the possibility that some may have been uncomfortable discussing certain topics, recalled certain events poorly, not disclosed certain information, or were untruthful in their responses. This study was unable to successfully recruit a men's soccer player. Future research could utilize restrictive sampling to obtain a participant group that more effectively represents the desired sports. Although not intended to be, the findings of this study are not generalizable across men's competitive university sport. Findings are based on the individual's experiences, and interviewing participants from different sports, teams, and schools may produce different results.

Recommendations for Future Research

Participation in this study was limited to those basketball, football, and soccer athletes playing at four Halifax universities and colleges. Given racial, ethnic, and geographic differences that may be present between Canadian post-secondary institutions, a more complete examination of this population is warranted. Basketball, football, and soccer were selected for this study given the claim that athletes in men's collision and contact sports demonstrate the strongest conformity

to the perceived norms of masculinity (James, 2019). Future research may benefit from an examination of a wider number of Canadian men's competitive university sports, developing a more comprehensive understanding of how masculinity is situated across sport and country. As well, an examination of men athletes who participate in individual sports such as tennis or swimming may produce vastly different perspectives than those who participate in team sports.

As findings in the current study highlighted the influence and importance of coaches and other athletic program staff, future research may benefit from investigating the perspectives of these key stakeholders. Coaches and staff should be included in the interview process in order to examine their perspectives to generate a richer understanding of how the culture in competitive men's sport is produced and maintained over time. The interviews conducted in this study were successful in producing participant perspectives and a large data set to analyze. Despite this, future research may benefit from ethnographic research that could produce more organic observations of how men athletes and coaches interact in sport settings.

Formal mental health resources and services appear to be absent in the world of competitive men's university sport. Two participants, however, discussed their involvement and knowledge in student led mental health advocacy groups such as the Student Athlete Mental Health Initiative (SAMHI). Future research could investigate to determine whether implementing initiatives such as SAMHI help to improve athlete mental health. Future research may also benefit from interviewing key stakeholders within athletic departments, such as athletic directors and coaches, to get their perspectives on mental health in competitive men's university sport and the alleged gap in resources and services.

Findings from this study suggest that traditionally hyper masculine environment in competitive men's university sport may be shifting toward accepting less aggressive and

inclusive forms of masculinity. Given this potential shift, future research may benefit from closely replicating the present study at three-, five-, or ten-year increments to identify whether any change has occurred during this period. Although the main emphasis of this study was masculinity in competitive men's sport, findings that highlight the use of gendered and homophobic discourses may warrant exploration into women's sport as well. Future research may benefit from a similar study of competitive women's university sport to explore the role, if any, that these discourses play in organizing this competitive culture.

Knowledge Translation

Knowledge translation for this study will take multiple forms. First, dissemination will occur through the successful completion and defense of the thesis, thereby making it publicly available in the Dalhousie Faculty of Graduate Studies Online Thesis archive. I also plan to publish the study in a health promotion or sport related journal, allowing for the results to be easily accessible on the internet. I intend to present the study results at any available and relevant conferences, such as the Dalhousie Crossroads Conference, which takes place in Halifax every spring and is intended for student researchers studying any topic related to health and wellness. Although the conference has been postponed twice due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the intention is to return to an in-person conference in 2022 pending public health directives. Should the event be cancelled again, I will work to get the study published in the Crossroads Special Edition of the Healthy Populations Journal. Although I intend to publish this research, athletes, coaches, and parents are more likely to access this information through non-academic forms of communication. I will prepare a final report of this research in lay language and distribute it widely through social media, sending it also to municipal, regional, and national sporting organizations and leagues. These organizations will include Sport Nova Scotia, Atlantic

University Sport, U Sports, Saint Mary's University, Dalhousie University, Mount Saint Vincent University, and the University of King's College Halifax. The goal of this dissemination is to aid universities and collegiate leagues in developing structures and policies to promote inclusivity and athlete wellbeing within men's competitive sport.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore how masculinity in men's competitive university sport relates to the health and wellbeing of its athletes. The use of a poststructural approach and discourse analysis provided a critical method to explore the beliefs, values, and practices of men athletes. Through interviews with eleven men-identified university athletes, it was determined that dominant masculine discourses largely shape relationships with health and wellbeing in the world of competitive men's sport. Coaches and athletic peers perpetuate discourses that reinforce idealized masculinity in sport centered around traditional masculine norms and values. Men athletes can be complicit in allowing these dominant discourses to continue, consequently putting the health and wellbeing of themselves and their teammates in jeopardy. For significant change to occur, competitive men's sport should focus on generating a cultural shift where adherence to traditional masculine ideals are not valued above an athlete's health and wellbeing. This research provides an opportunity to better understand how to successfully shift problematic competitive sport culture and challenge the status quo. The ultimate goal of this research is to support change that improves health outcomes for men athletes, both within and outside of competitive university sport.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Dear [NAME OF ATHLETIC DIRECTOR],

My name is Brent Martindale, and I am a graduate researcher at Dalhousie University. I am conducting research under the supervision of the School of Health and Human Performance that explores the experiences of masculinity in competitive men's university sport. I am emailing you to ask for your assistance with this research. If you can, please circulate the following message to the coaches and members on your men's varsity [INSERT RELEVANT SPORTS] teams in order to help me to recruit participants for one-on-one interviews. Each participant in this study would complete a single 1-hour interview. If you have any questions, please contact me at brent.martindale@dal.ca

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Brent Martindale

Message:

Hello,

Brent Martindale, a graduate student researcher at Dalhousie University, is looking for athletes to participate in a study exploring masculinity in competitive men's university sport. This research is being conducted through the School of Health and Human Performance and has been reviewed by the Dalhousie University Social Sciences Research Ethics Board. To participate in the study, you must complete a one-on-one interview lasting approximately one hour. If you choose to participate in the study, you are not obligated to answer any question that you do not wish to, and you are also able to stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to complete it. You will be compensated \$15 cash for your participation.

If you have any questions, please contact Brent Martindale at brent.martindale@dal.ca

Thank you,

Sincerely,
Brent Martindale

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster



WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A VARSITY MEN'S ATHLETE?

The research study "Masculinity and Wellbeing in Competitive Men's University Sport" is looking for varsity men athletes to share their sport experiences in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately 1 hour.

You will be compensated \$15 for your participation.

The study is interested in how masculinity in sport has impacted your health and wellbeing.

To participate in the study you must:

- Identify as a man (men in this study is inclusive of transgender men and/or non-binary male participants)
- Have been a member of varsity basketball, football or soccer for at least one of the last five collegiate seasons
- Be proficient in speaking and reading English

If you are interested in participating, contact Brent Martindale at:
Brent.Martindale@dal.ca



DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

Appendix C: Email Message to Participants

My name is Brent Martindale and I am currently working on my master's degree in health promotion at Dalhousie University. I am researching how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the health and wellbeing of its athletes. You may be eligible to participate in my study if you meet all the following:

- 1) Have been a member of one of men's varsity basketball, football or soccer team for the entirety of at least one of the past five collegiate seasons.**
- 2) Identify as a man. For the purposes of this study, men is inclusive of transgender men and/or non-binary male participants.**
- 3) Are proficient in speaking and reading English.**

Participation will include one 60-minute interview that will be audio recorded and will focus on your experiences in competitive men's sport. Your participation may contribute to knowledge that can aid sport's governing bodies in developing policy to encourage inclusion and support the health and wellbeing of competitive men's athletes. You will be compensated \$15 cash for your participation.

If you are interested in participating or have any further questions, please contact me at brent.martindale@dal.ca. If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating, please feel free to pass this message along.

Your participation will be kept private and confidential.

Thank you,

Brent Martindale

Appendix D: Recruitment Email for Organizations

Dear [ORGANIZATION NAME],

My name is Brent Martindale, and I am a Master of Arts in Health Promotion student at Dalhousie University. I am emailing you today to see if you may be able to help me recruit participants for my study on the experiences of masculinity in competitive men's university sport.

I am conducting this study because I have firsthand experiences in university sport, and I have learned and seen how the masculine culture of sport can sometimes impact the health and wellbeing of men athletes. As much of the past research in competitive men's sport has ignored and excluded diverse perspectives, I am hoping to include the many diverse voices that exist in Halifax in this study.

Attached to this email is a study recruitment poster. I ask that you please share the poster on your social media account and/or distribute it to any of your members who may also be student athletes. Should you have any questions or concerns about the study, or simply want more information, please do not hesitate to reach out by responding to this email.

Sincerely,

Brent Martindale

Appendix E: Pre-Interview Telephone Screening

Hi, I am looking for [INSERT PARTICIPANT NAME]. This is Brent Martindale following up on your interest in participating in my study for Dalhousie University. Do you have a moment to answer a few questions regarding your participation?

- 1) In the last five years have you been a varsity athlete at one of Dalhousie University, Saint Mary's University, Mount Saint Vincent University, or the University of King's College?
- 2) Are/were you a member of the men's football, soccer, or basketball team in the last five years?
- 3) Do you identify as a man? For the purposes of this study, men is inclusive of transgender men and/or non-binary male participants.
- 4) Do you agree to complete a one-on-one interview lasting approximately one hour?
- 5) Do you agree to read and sign an information and consent form prior to completing the interview?

If yes to all: Thank you so much for answering my questions! I would love to schedule a time and place for our interview. When are you available?

Appendix F: Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form

Project title: Masculinity and Wellbeing in Competitive Men's University Sport: A Poststructural Analysis



Researcher: Brent Martindale, MA in Health Promotion Candidate, Dalhousie University, Brent.martindale@dal.ca, (902)292-7715

REB file number: 2020-5328

Other researchers: Dr. Becky Spencer (Becky.spencer@dal.ca)

Introduction.

We invite you to take part in a study being conducted by Brent Martindale, a Master of Arts in Health Promotion student at Dalhousie University under the supervision of his supervisor, Dr. Becky Spencer. Choosing whether to take part in the study is entirely your choice. If you choose not to take part in the study there will be no negative impact. The information below tells you what is involved in the study, what you will be asked to do and about any benefit or risk you might experience by participating. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Brent Martindale. Please feel free to ask as many questions as you like, and contact him at any time.

Study purpose and outline.

The masculine nature of competitive sport may impede the physical and mental health benefits of sport, yet these impacts have been largely understudied outside of an American context. To date, there has been no research that focuses on Canadian university men athletes' experiences of masculinity. This study will explore how the experiences of masculinity in men's competitive university sport relate to the health and wellbeing of its athletes.

Who can take part in this study?

You may take part in this study if you have been a member of the soccer, basketball or football team at one of Saint Mary's University, Dalhousie University, Mount Saint Vincent University, or the University of King's College for the entirety of at least one of the past five collegiate seasons. Additionally, you must identify as a man, be interested in engaging in the data collection plans described below, and be proficient in speaking and reading English. For the purposes of this study, men is inclusive of transgender men and/or non-binary male participants. We are looking to recruit six to ten participants.

What you will be asked to do.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the lead researcher. During this interview, you will be asked to share your experiences of masculinity throughout your competitive university career and how they may have impacted your wellbeing. All interviews will be recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher.

Possible benefits, risks, and discomforts.

Participating in this study might not benefit you directly, but it could produce results that may aid sport's governing bodies in developing policy to encourage inclusion and support the health and wellbeing of competitive men's athletes. Allowing participants to express their feelings relating to masculine experiences in sport may be therapeutic to those who would've otherwise been unwilling or unable to have these discussions. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, it could also evoke strong emotions. You may choose to skip any question in your interview and are free to stop participating at any time. You will be compensated for your time by receiving 15 dollars in cash at the end of your interview. Should you require a metro transit ticket to and/or from your interview, please email the researcher and he will arrange to provide you with one.

How you will be protected.

Your name and any identifying information will not be published in any study findings, and only the researchers (Brent Martindale, Dr. Rebecca Spencer) will have access to the study data.

Direct quotes may be used in study reports, but will not be associated with any individual name.

No information about your participation in this research will be disclosed to anyone unless compelled to do so by law. Due to Covid-19, interviews will follow public health guidelines for gatherings. Currently, these include staying two meters apart at all times, and wearing masks if indoors. Due to public health guidelines, interviews may also take place virtually via the Microsoft Teams platform. All interviews will be audio recorded.

If you decide to stop participating.

You are free to stop participating and leave the study at any time should you choose to do so. If you have completed a one-on-one interview, there will be a period of one week before the data will have been transcribed. During this period, you may request that your data be removed from the study without any consequence.

How to obtain results.

The lead researcher, Brent Martindale, can provide you with a short summary of the study findings when it is finished, as well as updates on future publications or presentations including study findings. To obtain a summary and updates, please provide your contact information at the end of the signature page.

Questions.

The researchers are happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this study. Please contact Brent Martindale at (902)292-7715 or Brent.martindale@dal.ca or his supervisor Dr. Becky Spencer at Becky.spencer@dal.ca. If you

have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902)494-1462, ethics@dal.ca

Appendix G: Signature Page

Project Title: Masculinity and Wellbeing in Competitive Men’s University Sport: A Poststructural Analysis

Researcher: Brent Martindale, MA in Health Promotion Candidate, Dalhousie University, Brent.martindale@dal.ca, (902)292-7715

I have read the explanation about this study and agree to participate in *Masculinity and Wellbeing in Competitive Men’s University Sport: A Poststructural Analysis*. I have been given the opportunity to discuss any concerns and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I agree that the researcher may audio-record my interview and use direct quotations. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Signature (research participant):

Date:

Signature (student researcher):

Date:

Provision of Results

- I would like the researcher to provide me a summary of the research via the provided email address.
- I would like to be updated (via email) regarding publications, events, or presentations associated with this study.

Email address: _____

Appendix H: Verbal Consent Script

My name is Brent Martindale and I am a Masters of Health Promotion student at Dalhousie University conducting a research project titled, Masculinity and Wellbeing in Competitive Men's Sport, along with the guidance of my supervisor Dr. Becky Spencer.

This study seeks to understand men athletes' experiences of masculinity in competitive sport. I would like to learn about your experiences in your university sport, and how it may or may not have impacted your health. You have been asked to take part in an interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. You will be compensated for your time by receiving 15 dollars in cash at the end of your interview.

Every effort will be made to keep your data confidential. Interviews will be recorded, and all recordings will be deleted once they are transcribed. Transcriptions will be saved on a password protected hard drive, and only myself and my supervisor will have access to the transcripts. Although your individual quotes may be used in study results, they will not be attached to your real name, and any identifying information in them will be taken out (i.e. your school, sport, etc.).

You may feel discomfort while discussing topics of gender, masculinity, and mental health. You are welcome to skip anyone question that you may not feel comfortable discussing, and you can stop participating in the study at any time without any negative consequences to you. You may ask to have your data retracted from the study up to a week after your participation by emailing myself.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study or the study as a whole, please feel free to ask me now or contact myself, my supervisor, or the Dalhousie Research Ethics board.

To be read aloud and checked off by the researcher:

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Yes No

I understand that I have been asked to take part in a one-on-one semi-structured interview.

Yes No

I understand that the interview will be audio recorded, and direct quotes of things I say may be used in presentations and/or publication, but will be attributed to a pseudonym and will not contain identifying information such as my school, sport, etc.

Yes No

I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Yes No

Provision of Results

Would you like to receive a copy of a summary of this study's results? **Yes No**

Would you like to be updated (via email) regarding publications, events, or presentations associated with this study? **Yes No**

If you said **Yes** to either of the above questions, please spell out your name and email for me.

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Hello,

I am Brent Martindale, the primary researcher for this project. I am a former AUS basketball player, and I have a lot of experience talking about competitive sport and health. I am interested in hearing about your experiences playing [INSERT SPORT] and how these experiences may have shaped your health and wellbeing. I have a list of questions prepared, but you should think of this process as more of a friendly conversation.

This interview will be recorded and transcribed, but your identity will be kept private throughout the entire process. You are free to refrain from answering any questions if you choose, and you may elect to end the interview at any point without consequence. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Question List

- What sport do you play?
Probes:
 - a. How long have you been playing?
 - b. Can you tell me a bit about your sporting career?
- How would you say playing [INSERT SPORT] affects your health and wellbeing?
Probes:
 - a. How does playing impact your physical health?
 - b. How does playing impact your mental health?
 - c. What positives would you say you experience from playing?
 - d. What negatives would you say you experience from playing?
- How do people talk about masculinity, or what it means to be a man in [INSERT SPORT]?
Probes:
 - a. How do you think [INSERT SPORT] defines the ‘ideal man’?
 - b. What are some traits you would associate with this image?
 - c. How might men in [INSERT SPORT] be pressured to look or act?
 - d. Would you say that you fit this image?
 - i. Why or why not?
- How do you and your teammates talk about what it means to be a man?
Probes:

- a. How do you think _____ impacts how you or others think of themselves as a man?
 - i. Race
 - ii. Sexual orientation
 - b. Have you ever heard or seen someone be treated differently based on this?
 - i. Can you tell me about it?
 - c. Can you tell me about a time when someone has used stereotyping language?
 - i. Do people use language such as “Be a man” or “Toughen Up”?
 - 1. Can you tell me about an example of this happening?
 - ii. How do you and your teammates respond to this?
- Are there certain things that men can or cannot do in [INSERT SPORT]?
Probes:
 - a. What happens to players who break the ‘rules’?
 - b. What do you think about breaking these ‘rules’?
 - c. What ‘rules’ if any, would you change?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - How do you think masculinity impacts the competitive environment in sport?
 - a. How might athletic performance relate to masculinity?
 - i. Do you think people consider a talented player to automatically be manlier than a less talented player?
 - 1. Why or why not?
 - b. Do people ever talk about mental health issues such as being sad, depressed, or anxious?
 - i. How do others respond to this?
 - ii. Do you feel comfortable talking about this?
 - 1. Why or why not?
 - c. How are injuries talked about in the competitive sport environment?
 - i. What do people say about those who get injured?
 - ii. Do people say things like ‘take it like a man’, ‘toughen up’, or ‘don’t be a pussy’?
 - 1. What do you think about these?
 - Can you tell me about your coach’s coaching style?
 - a. Do they make references to being or acting like a man?
 - b. Do they use terms like ‘pussy’ or ‘don’t be a girl’?
 - c. Do they ever reference gender, masculinity, or sexuality?
 - i. Can you give me an example?
 - ii. How do you react to these kinds of statements?
 - d. To what extent do you think ideas about manliness or masculinity impact the team dynamics?
 - i. What kind of things can or cannot be said?
 - Can you envision a different way for men to interact in competitive sport?
 - a. Since your career started, how have your experiences changed?
 - i. Do you think this is a good change?

1. Why or why not?
- b. Are there any changes you would want to see in universities, your sport, rules, etc.?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - ii. What would or could you do to change these?

Appendix J: List of Local Resources & Services

For immediate/emergency assistance:

Mental Health Crisis Line, available 24 hours, seven days a week: 1-888-429-8167 (toll-free)

Saint Mary's University

The Counselling Center

- (902) 420-5615
- counselling@smu.ca

Dalhousie University & University of King's College

Dalhousie Student Health & Wellness

- (902) 494-2171
- Book online at https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/health-and-wellness/services-support.html

Mount Saint Vincent University

Counselling Services

- (902)-457-6567
- counselling@msvu.ca

Additional mental health organizations:

Good2Talk 1-833-292-3698

A free, confidential helpline for post-secondary students in Nova Scotia. Speak anonymously, receive information and supports for mental health, addictions and well-being on and off campus.

Healthy Minds Navigator (902) 404-3504

Provides a variety of peer-based services to people living with mental illness and their families, including assistance with navigating the mental health system.

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) – Nova Scotia Division (902) 466-6600

Part of a nation-wide charitable organization. It promotes positive mental health and supports those experiencing and recovering from mental illness.