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'IT'S LIKE FLIPPING A SWITCH': UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES, EXPECTATIONS, AND IDENTITY OF HIGH SCHOOL WRESTLERS

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‘IT’S LIKE FLIPPING A SWITCH’: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES,
EXPECTATIONS, AND IDENTITY OF HIGH SCHOOL WRESTLERS

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the
College of Communication and Information
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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2023

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

'IT'S LIKE FLIPPING A SWITCH': UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES, EXPECTATIONS, AND IDENTITY OF HIGH SCHOOL WRESTLERS

This study aims to understand the challenges and expectations of high school wrestlers, and how they are managing their social identities within the parameters of the sport. The rise of female wrestlers within the last decade and the hegemonic masculine roots of the sport show how imperative it is that research shed light into the unique experiences of high school wrestlers. Social identity theory was used as a theoretical framework and participants answered interview questions that discussed the three components of their social identity (i.e., cognitive, affective, and evaluative). They also identified challenges that they faced, the kind of expectations that were put on them, and the origin of those expectations. Interviews were conducted with 24 individuals who formerly wrestled in high school and graduated within the last five years. Results identified nine challenges that participants faced that often stemmed from expectations put on the individual (i.e., none, medium, high) by several sources (i.e., themselves, family, coach, community) and ended in either positive (e.g., expectation was met) or negative (e.g., expectation was not met) outcomes. Questions regarding identity revealed both consistent and unique experiences among participants, highlighted stereotypes, and evaluations of the sport, and determined whether participants felt emotionally tied to their team. Practically, this thesis offers a suggestion for how to combat one of the challenges noted by many participants and recommends that wrestling be used as a case study for understanding the growing pains associated with participation in a male or female dominated sport.

KEY WORDS: Gender, hegemonic masculinity, social identity, wrestling

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Wrestling is one of the oldest forms of sport and continues to be widely contested throughout the world (Grasso, 2014). It is often referred to as being one of the toughest sports to participate in, simply because of the physical stamina and mental fortitude required to be successful. While elite athletes compete in wrestling at the Olympic and collegiate level, many young athletes develop a love for the sport at a young age that they carry with them through their high school wrestling careers. Though the sport continues to be overwhelmingly saturated by men's participation, it has undergone recent changes, as the exponential rise in female participation has led states to sanction women's wrestling as its own sport. In fact, Kirby et al. (n.d.) reported that women's participation has grown over 500% from 2001-2018. Unfortunately, the changes in rules, or sanctioning of women's wrestling, has not always been widely accepted, leaving these athletes to experience unique circumstances concerning their place in a male-dominated sport. This, coupled with the hegemonic masculine ideology the sport is rooted in, creates challenges for young athletes to navigate. While hegemonic masculinity is not a new construct within the context of sport, everything from the history of Greco-Roman culture to the jargon and uniforms wrestlers wear suggests that it is a sport for men. Therefore, this thesis aims to use social identity theory as a theoretical framework in understanding the nuances of what it means to be a high school wrestler, and how athletes are managing their social identity.

Research on wrestling has primarily been studied from a health perspective (e.g., weight management (Gibbs et al., 2009), injuries (Boden et al., 2002), therefore, there is opportunity to extend within a sports communication context. Further, to fully understand

the demands of the sport and how wrestling is shaping high school wrestlers' identities, one must also consider the challenges they are facing and the expectations that are being put on them. Understanding such challenges and the way that they are managing their social identities within the parameters of the sport could have positive theoretical implications, but also practical implications to help alleviate some of the challenges wrestlers are facing. Most importantly, understanding this phenomenon and the inclusion of women into a male-dominated space can create positive implications for how sports can continue to evolve in the future. Given this, the following research questions were used to guide this thesis:

RQ₁: What are the expectations and challenges of being a high school wrestler?

RQ₂: How are women managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?

RQ₃: How are men managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?

This thesis uses qualitative methodology to hear the stories of former high school wrestlers told through their own voices. Along with hearing these stories, this thesis consists of five chapters. In this chapter, I provided a brief introduction to wrestling, provided context to the problem, and introduced the research questions that guided my work. The next chapter will be a comprehensive literature review of the skills of wrestling, the rise of women's wrestling, hegemonic masculinity within the context of wrestling and sport, and social identity theory. Chapter three provides detail into my methodological approach, including who I chose to interview and how I collected and analyzed my data. In the fourth chapter I discuss my results and then finally wrap up in chapter five by discussing the limitations of my research, and how it provides theoretical and practical implications and can be expanded upon in future research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REIVIEW

While wrestling is one of the oldest forms of sport, some of the earliest competition dates to the Olympic Games in ancient Greece in 708 B.C. (Grasso, 2014). Since the sport was developed and practiced by the Greeks, it is deeply rooted in Greek culture and ideals – which is traditionally known as being hypermasculine (Opplinger, 2007). United World Wrestling (n.d.) explains that for the Greeks, wrestling was a science, a form of art, and a training mechanism for only the most elite young men. Wrestling, otherwise referred to as *palē*, is found within the epic tales of the Homer and the Odyssey and involved Greek men fighting each other in attempts to cause physical injury and engage in psychological warfare, where they seek out opponents’ weaknesses and exploit them as an advantage (Lovano, 2020). More specifically, fights resembled modern day freestyle wrestling, where the competitor who first threw or took his opponent down was victorious (United World Wrestling, n.d.). Before it was recognized as an athletic event at both the Olympic and International level, it also served as a hobby, a folk activity during the colonial era and inexpensive entertainment during the antebellum era (Beekman, 2013). Though it is often referenced as being entertainment, there are two distinct styles of wrestling that differ in terms of objectives, purpose, and those who participate – these being amateur and professional.

While amateur and professional wrestling have stark different in terms of rules, aim, and outcome, they share the same roots and require their participants to be in top physical shape (MMA Chanel, n.d.). Mazer (1998) explains that professional wrestling is an integral part of American culture and is categorized as sports entertainment. Rather than taking place on a mat, professional wrestling takes place in a ring and “its display of

violence is less a contest than a ritualized encounter between opponents, replayed repeatedly over time for an exceptionally engaged audience” (Mazer, 1998, p. 3).

Organizations such as the World Wrestling Entertainment Incorporated (WWE) or World Wrestling Foundation (WWF) have created franchises and capitalized on this form of entertainment for monetary gain. It is important to know and understand that these organizations and this style exists, however, amateur wrestling is the focus of this study.

As Canton (2013) of Bleacher Report suggests and as aforementioned, there are both significant differences and connection between amateur and professional wrestling. Many amateur wrestlers go on to become performers or professional wrestlers. In recent news, Coppinger (2022) reported that Olympic gold medalist and former University of Minnesota heavyweight, Gable Steveson, was transitioning into the world of professional wrestling and training full time at WWE headquarters in Orlando, Florida. Kurt Angle, a 1996 Olympic champion and one of the top fifteen best NCAA collegiate wrestlers of all time, also went on to have a very successful career within the professional wrestling industry (Olympics, n.d.). Unlike traditional sporting events or amateur wrestling matches, the end of the match and the winner are predetermined in professional wrestling (Mazer, 1998). Amateur wrestling operates at the scholastic level and consists of high schools, colleges or universities, clubs, and international participants that compete at events such as the World Championships or Olympic Games. There are different styles that athletes can participate in, that include different objectives and ways to win. For example, athletes will participate in Folkstyle during a traditional season (i.e., at the high school and collegiate level); Freestyle and Greco-Roman are practiced in the summer months and at the elite or international level. Understanding the differentiation between

professional and amateur wrestling is imperative, given the focus of this study. Therefore, the objectives and important skills needed to be a successful wrestler will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

2.1 Skills of Wrestling

Every year, more than 247,441 high school wrestlers push themselves to their limits and past their breaking points, exceeding any expectations set by their coaches or themselves (Abbott, 2019). However, there is a specific skillset that wrestlers must have in order to meet the rules and objectives of the sport. According to USA Wrestling (2022), wrestling “obeys rules that constitute the ‘rule of the game’ and define its practice, the aim of which is to ‘pin’ the opponent or to win by scoring more points” (p. 3); pinning can be achieved by holding the opponents shoulder blades against the mat for approximately one second. Getz (2021) explains that if a wrestler is unable to pin his or her opponent, then more points must be accumulated throughout the six-minute match to win the bout. The wrestler may be successful or victorious, insofar that he or she gains and maintains control against the opponent. If a wrestler loses control, they must work to regain control to score points offensively. To gain control, an athlete may score by taking down the opponent from the standing position (i.e., a takedown), escape a disadvantageous position and try to achieve control (i.e., an escape), or reverse a scoring situation from his or her opponent to score themselves and regain control (i.e., a reversal) (USA Wrestling, 2022). While all different types of wrestling have similar styles of scoring, each have a different set of rules and regulations. Martin and Margherita (1999) note that for a wrestler to be successful, they must have a high-level of strength, endurance, and technical skill. It requires a balance of individuality and team

participation. Meaning, athletes can receive accolades and qualify for large tournaments on an individual level, however, teams are still scored and ranked among others and teammates are integral to the training and success of individual athletes. While the sport is known for the sheer physicality that athletes must have (Chaabene et al., 2016), it is unique because it also requires some degree of mental toughness that contributes to athletes winning percentage or overall success (Drees & Mack, 2012).

Mental toughness has been applied to many different areas of sport; however, Jones et al. (2007) explain that mental toughness is the psychological quality that aids in helping athletes cope with sport pressures through focus, control, motivation, and confidence. Newland et al. (2013) concluded that higher levels of mental toughness enhance performance. Further, mental toughness is what gives athletes the ability to stay composed under situations of great pressure, and to concentrate on the goal or task at hand (Bhardwaj et al., 2014). It is vital for wrestlers to have mental toughness, not only because of the physicality of the sport, but also because it relies on the individual and the team. Wrestlers may face individual pressures to win, while also navigating the expectations to benefit the team. For example, a wrestler may be expected to win to better a season record or help with seeding at tournaments, but they are also expected to earn points towards the team score by winning matches. In addition, research by Levy et al. (2006) concluded that athletes with high levels of mental toughness perceive any injury as being less threatening and have an easier time coping with any pain during rehabilitation and treatment. This is fitting within the sport of wrestling, given that in 2010, there were an estimated 152,710 emergency room visits for wrestlers ages 12-17 (Myers et al., 2010). Wrestlers are prone to experience injuries, and thus, should be

mentally tough if they have hopes of rehabilitating injuries that they receive. In fact, Walton (2002) noted that to be successful, wrestlers should have physical strength, conditioning, and mental strength. When asked about how wrestling differs from other sports, Dr. Bill Allyson, a sports psychologist from Minnesota, was quoted saying:

Wrestling is dynamic. A wrestler has to deal, dynamically, with what the other wrestler is doing if he or she is going to compete ... or ultimately, defeat his or her opponent ... Every move someone makes has consequences. It's not like soccer where someone across the field can make a move and you don't even have to know what happened. You have to know every single nuance of the moves these guys are making. Due to its dynamic nature, it may be harder for a wrestler to make a mental breakthrough. The water is always the same for a swimmer, but in wrestling, the other person is trying to defeat you (Klingman, 2020, para. 5).

Newland et al. (2013) notes that literature shows gender differences are likely to exist between men and women's levels of mental toughness, though research findings are inconclusive and not consistent. Bhardwaj et al. (2014) found that women had significantly higher levels of concentration compared to men. This concentration or level of self-discipline is imperative for wrestlers when they are dealing with the grueling task of cutting weight or maintaining unrealistic and unnatural weight standards.

Aside from the physicality and the need for mental toughness, wrestling often takes a psychological toll on an individual as they are battling weight cut and unrealistic weight maintenance. Fasczewski et al. (2022) explains how the NCAA separates wrestlers into ten weight classes, to ensure fairness in competition. Although weight cutting is seen as a competitive advantage because it offers wrestlers a high strength to

weight ratio and attempts to maximize their potential by competing in lower weight classes, it has negative implications for the health and well-being of the athletes (Fasczewski et al., 2022). For example, it often leads athletes to monitor food intake, participate in excessive physical exercise, (Baghurst, 2013) or in extreme cases take laxatives, diuretics, or engage in self-induced vomiting (Austin, 2004). Hammer et al. (2023) found that rapid weight cutting was associated with a higher risk for injuries for collegiate Division I wrestlers and “for every percent in body weight lost, wrestlers had an 11% increased hazard of injury during competition” (p. 164). These behaviors and practices raise concern for the athletes’ health but are also consistent with those of eating disorders and have negative effects on body image (Goltz et al., 2013). Extant literature has found that women are more likely to suffer from eating disorders (Hoek, 2006) and body image issues are exacerbated in sports that reinforce having strong physiques (Fortes et al., 2013). Pavachich (2019) of *Global Sport Matters*, explained that while eating disorders are less common in men, 10-25% of individuals with eating disorders are men. It is likely that wrestlers are suffering from eating disorders while participating in these unhealthy and psychologically tortuous practices, however, this concern warrants a larger conversation that extends beyond the parameters of this study. Rather, attention should be focused on the rapid increase of women’s participation in wrestling and the way that it is changing the trajectory of the sport and its future participants.

2.2 Rise of Women’s Wrestling

At the beginning of 2022, *The Columbus Dispatch* reported that the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) had officially sanctioned girls wrestling as its own sport. This pivotal change has been in the works for many years, as the number of girls

interested in the sport continued to grow exponentially. In 2011-2012, it was reported that only 123 women wrestled in the state, whereas 800 wrestled in 2022 (Johnson, 2022).

Broadly across the United States, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) reported that women's participation in wrestling has grown consistently for over 28 years, increasing over 500% from 2001-2018, including 16,562 participants (Kirby et al., n.d.). However, the Buckeye State has continued to make news headlines since announcing that the 2023 OHSAA state wrestling tournament would be the inaugural year for the girls wrestling state championships to be held at the Jerome Schottenstein Center in Columbus, Ohio. This event was monumental, as it allowed young men and women to compete for state titles alongside each other for the very first time. RUDIS wrestling co-founder, CEO, and sponsor of the OHSAA state championship, Jesse Leng, commented on the inclusion of women by saying, "Winning a state championship is very special. It's the *first* dream in many athletes' lives, and in that way, it is often the most meaningful" (RUDIS, 2023, para. 3). In accordance with the OHSAA state championships, RUDIS, a successful and well-known wrestling brand housed in Marysville, Ohio, displayed custom wrestling mats and apparel, provided media spotlights, and offered shoe and poster signings with various Olympic wrestlers (RUDIS, 2023). This partnership and event brought in over 13,560 fans for the OHSAA's opening day of the tournament. The addition of women also added 244 wrestlers to the tournament, therefore, it is likely that other states will continue to follow suit or reconsider the way that they are currently hosting their state tournaments (Peterson, 2023).

In addition to the sport growing at the scholastic level, many collegiate teams have created their own women's teams to compete. For example, the University of Iowa, a power five school for men's wrestling, announced that it would be adding the first Division I women's wrestling program for the 2023-2024 season (Meaney, 2021). As of 2020, 37 NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics), 42 NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), 7 JUCO (Junior College), 4 Division I club, and 50 NWCA (National Collegiate Wrestling Association) women's teams exist (American Women's Wrestling, 2020). It is important to consider that without Title IX legislation, these opportunities for women would not exist and as Title IX celebrates its 50th year of enactment, many young girls are turning to participate in sports that are traditionally dubbed for boys (i.e., football and wrestling), therefore leading to the exponential growth in popularity and participation by girls (Porter, 2021). Women's wrestling is also represented at the elite level, with it first being contested at the World University Championships in 2001 and the Athens Olympic Games in 2004 (Kirby et al., n.d.). Female wrestlers like Tamyra Mensah-Stock have become exemplars for girls within the sport of wrestling. Mensah-Stock is notable because she became the first black woman to win Olympic gold in wrestling and the second American woman to ever win gold (Porter, 2021). Not only have successful women wrestlers like Mensah-Stock and (Adeline) Gray advocated for the participation of other women, organizations such as Wrestle Like a Girl (WLAG) have been created to advance the sport at the scholastic and collegiate level. Other campaigns like "She Can Wrestle," "Sanction OH," or "Sisters on the Mat" have helped bring awareness to the sport and fund both female-specific coaching education and scholastic youth initiatives. While WLAG advocates for the participation of women

in the sport, it also argues that adopting women's programs contributes to the longevity and the success of men's programs (WLAG, n.d.). Even though organizations like WLAG promote growth in women's participation in wrestling, there are some drawbacks to their participation and the growth.

National Wrestling Coaches Association (n.d.) explains there is a lack of qualified women's wrestling coaches, leaving athletes to be coached by men. This is demonstrated through Swim and colleagues (2021) research on gender and coaching self-efficacy for Division III athletes. Participants within the study recognized that they were fit to coach the next generation of youth but had no desire to hold these coaching positions in the future. The authors attributed this to a lack of strong mentoring programs between female coaches and student-athletes, and the need for an increase in representation at the institutional level, or in athletic departments (Swim et al., 2021). In addition to the lack of qualified coaches, smaller division high schools do not have the interest, nor the participation to create all-girl teams. Therefore, women are left with few options for participation; either they travel to practice and compete against other women, or wrestle men. Macro et al. (2009) noted that that by women joining the sport, they are challenging stereotypes, like the sport being simply for men, or that women participating in the sport are simply attention-seeking. Unfortunately, women are left to navigate a very complex sport due to the physicality and hegemonic masculine ideologies that the sport is rooted in.

2.3 Theoretical Perspective: Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemony is the ideal practice that legitimizes the interests of the powerful in society, throughout historical periods (Gramsci, 1971). Further, hegemonic masculinity is a theoretical construct that has been widely studied within gender relations to look at power differences between men and women (Jewkes et al., 2015; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It originated in a field study of social inequality in Australian high schools (Kessler et al., 1982). Idealized forms of masculinity are considered hegemonic, insofar that they are widely accepted within a culture, therefore reinforcing a dominant gender ideology (Connell, 1990). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the power structures between men and women, further emphasizing the patriarchy and the dominance of men (Connell, 1995). By privileging this idealized masculinity, a hierarchy of power is upheld and groups of people, such as gay men and women, are marginalized (Fahey, 2007). Grindstaff and West (2011) explained that masculinity is not “a fixed identity, role, or set of personality traits. Rather, ‘masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting’” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). In other words, the masculinities present in a certain social setting are reflective of the cultural values, ideologies, and practices, within a given setting or environment (Grindstaff & West, 2011). In Westernized cultures, hegemonic masculinity is treated as synonymous to being aggressive, assertive, violent, and acting with physical force; it also serves as an excuse to men’s negative behavior (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018; Bederman, 1995; McVittie et al., 2017). Despite focusing within the context of sport, Trujillo (1991) explained that media scholars and critics have defined hegemonic masculinity within American culture based on five distinct characteristics, which should be elaborated on to understand the construct.

As aforementioned, hegemonic masculinity is often associated with acts of violence or power (e.g., physical force), however it can also be associated with occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality. Occupational achievement essentially refers to the idea that work or divisions of labor can be classified based on gender. For example, Game and Pringle (1983) determined there was an obvious paradox between the characteristics of work that were appropriate for men and women (i.e., skilled/unskilled, heavy/light, interesting/boring). In today's workforce, construction, trades, or information technology jobs are associated with hegemonic masculinity because it is assumed that those who work in these fields must have some degree of skill, strength, and physicality that are required and appropriate from men (Smith, 2013). Further, women who work in such industries may invoke a sense of crisis in the gender order or makeup of these organizations or groups (Smith, 2012). Occupational achievement is also related to the third characteristic of hegemonic masculinity, familial patriarchy, because men are often seen as being the breadwinners of the household, or the individuals who make a suitable income to support the family (Trujillo, 1991). This idea is an extension of Lerner (1986) who explained that a man's dominance over the wife and children in the family is parallel to the way that men and women are viewed within society. Men who are unable to provide for their families, or uphold the patriarchy, are seen as having a loss of power and influence on the wife and children. In fact, wives who uphold a job are also seen as a threat to the husband's position as the head of the household (Aldous, 1969). Masculinity has also been represented by the frontiersman, or a traditional white man with working-class values (Carpenter, 1977). It (i.e., masculinity) is also deemed hegemonic, insofar that it is

defined heterosexually (Trujillo, 1991). Men had to prove that they were ‘real men’ by showing that they were not gay, further demonstrating that heterosexuality was at the core of American manhood (Kimmel, 2006; Eck 2014). Norman (2011) explained that men and boys often formulate their own masculinities when they discuss and objectify women’s bodies or appearance (Robinson 2022). Within sport, this is often seen through female athletes’ media coverage or differences in sports commentary between male and female athletes. When considering magazines like *Sports Illustrated*, Frisby (2017) found that cover photographs feature well-known athletes that tend to focus on aesthetics (e.g., gymnastics), have little clothing on, and pose in sexually objectifying poses (e.g., laying down with back arched), rather than actively partaking in an athletic event, skill, or contest. Billings et al. (2002) found that in the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament, male basketball players were discussed by commentators for their physicality and athleticism, whereas female basketball players were discussed in terms of topics like appearance and personality. The discussion of gender, power differences, and the five characteristics that define hegemonic masculinity have been interwoven into many different contexts and studied within numerous disciplines, including communication.

Many scholars have taken a critical approach to looking at masculinity across various subdisciplines of communication. For example, Fahey (2007) noted that election campaigns are ritualized performances of masculinity because candidates demonstrate their gender ideals while running for public office and it is expected that candidates exhibit masculine qualities that are deemed necessary to serve as president of the United States. Therefore, in her review of news media, she concluded that republicans sought to show democratic candidate, John Kerry, as a woman, effete, elitist, or a weak and

emasculated man during the 2004 presidential race (Fahey, 2007). Most importantly, this study highlighted that hegemonic masculinity is “deeply embedded in language and American cultural understandings” (Fahey, 2007, p.146). Within an organizational context, Scarduzio et al. (2018) applied hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical framework in understanding same-sex harassment in the workplace and noted that sexual harassment can occur simultaneously via different contexts (e.g., face-to-face and mediated), and men tend to withhold instances of sexual harassment from others because it threatens their masculine identity. It has also been used as a theoretical framework in different media studies, for example, Chess and Shaw (2015) analyzed masculinity and the patriarchal norms that are cultivated within online gaming culture. As women, Chess and Shaw (2015) further discuss how they have accepted, if not embraced, the hegemonic masculinity embedded within gaming culture, while still attempting to dismantle it (2010). Consistent with the realm of media and television, Hatfield (2010) conducted a thematic analysis on hegemonic masculinity within the sitcom, *Two and a Half Men*, and determined that the show clearly positions the character Charlie as being the dominant male figure, whereas the character Alan is seen as effeminate and often confused for being gay. This only solidifies the notion that men who are in touch with their feminine side, or do not inherently flaunt their masculinity or heterosexuality, are deemed inappropriate and are often ridiculed. Even thirty years after its theoretical conceptualization, Messerschmidt (2019) argues that hegemonic masculinity continues to remain salient; thus, it is important to also consider how hegemonic masculinity manifests within sport studies and how it can be critically studied both on a macro-level

(Connell, 1995) or within specific sports, like ice hockey (Alsarve, 2021) or wrestling (Walton, 2005).

2.3.1 Hegemonic Masculinity in Sport & Wrestling

Connell (1995) explained that historically, sport has come to be what defines masculinity in mass culture because “the institutional organization of sport embeds definite social relations” (p. 54). In other words, sports are one way to define what is considered masculine in today’s culture (Trujillo, 1991), especially given that there are distinct separations between men and women’s sports. Sport continues to be a place that emphasizes, reproduces, and naturalizes men’s privilege (McKay et al., 2000) while keeping out individuals who may not fit within the parameters of what it means to be masculine because of background or sexual orientation. Not only does the culture of sport itself reinforce masculinity, coaches and players contribute to the way that sport interacts with masculinity. For example, Adams et al. (2010) observed a semiprofessional soccer (i.e., football) team in sporting and nonsporting contexts and looked specifically at the power dynamics and discourses presented through interactions and how such discourses are associated with the construction of the athletes’ masculine identities. Through providing an ecologically valid look at the soccer team, the authors found multiple overlapping masculine discords. For example, coaches situated soccer as a sport that was simply for men, despite being played by women and governed by the same rules; they also made homophobic and misogynistic comments when they did not feel that players had performed to a specific standard or what was expected. This was consistent with other sport literature that states men often police gender through homophobic and misogynistic discourse or comments, using terminology like “fags” and “sissies”

(Kimmel, 2007; Pascoe, 2005). On the other hand, players felt that they had to be outwardly masculine if they wanted to “(a) save face in front of their teammates, (b) avoid further individual feminizing and homosexualizing ridicule, (c) keep their place on the team and thus be financially rewarded, and (d) not ‘let the team down’” (Adams et al., 2010, p. 288). Despite these findings being within the context of soccer, they demonstrate that there are often negative consequences for those who do not perform at the level that they are expected, or the way that sport has conditioned men to be (i.e., competitive, tough, and have a strong desire to win) (Robertson, 2003).

Whitson (1990) pointed out that combative and confrontational sports (e.g., football or hockey) strive to maintain hegemonic masculinity while other sports (e.g., swimming) deviate because there is no physical contact or “body-to-body” physical dominance (As cited in MacDonald, 2014, p. 6). Those who participate in combative sports but deviate from the masculine expectations are oftentimes ridiculed. For example, Dak Prescott, quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys, was vocal to the media about his personal struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic and his brother’s suicide. While some praised Prescott for his vulnerability and willingness to share his internal battles, others were quick to criticize him for emasculating himself. Skip Bayless, a well-known Fox Sports One (FS1) host was quoted saying, “He’s the quarterback of America’s team, and you know, and I know, it’s a dog-eat-dog world (...) If you reveal publicly any little weakness, it can affect your team’s ability to believe in you” (Kleen, 2021, para. 21) Aside from excluding men who do not fit within the mold of what it means to be masculine, Grindstaff and West (2011) explain that masculinity within sport,

Excludes women on a symbolic level, implying that because ‘real’ men are strong and aggressive, ‘real’ women cannot or ought not to be. Meanwhile, ‘feminine’ sports like gymnastics or figure skating – deemed socially acceptable for women and socially unacceptable for men – are trivialized by the sports establishment, not considered legitimate sports at all. Those who embrace the ‘wrong’ sort of sport – male cheerleaders, for example, or female wrestlers – are seen as gender-nonconformists (p. 861).

Royce et al. (2003) notes that women who participate in male-dominated athletics, believe their participation to be deviant from norms and when women participate in sports that are male-dominated and inherently masculine, they are left to balance different facets of their identity, oftentimes resulting in a struggle of identity maintenance (Malcom, 2003). Halbert (1997) explained that when women participate in gender-deviant sports, they often rely on coping strategies or defensive techniques to combat public opinion about their participation. For example, they may downplay their achievements, or they may quit the sport if they cannot handle the stereotyping and join a sport that is less stigmatized. While American sport is very much rooted in masculine ideology, there are separate, albeit-related issues within sport that hegemonic masculinity has infiltrated, such as media coverage that reinforces traditional masculinity and the lack of female representation within coaching.

There is a lack of female representation within coaching; only 3% of the coaching positions in men’s sports are held by women, whereas 50% of coaches in women’s sports are male (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Whisenant (2008) also determined that less than 15% of athletic directors are women. Female underrepresentation could be attributed to

fact that sports are seen as a masculine space (Wallick, 2018). Women coaching men's teams have additional unique challenges, as "there is an underlying, heavily gendered assumption that because women have not competed in the realm of men's sports, they lack toughness, both mentally and physically, to be a competent coach for a men's team" (Wallick, 2008, p. 3). Gender ideology has led to the widespread belief that coaching is considered a job for men and the only good coaches are men (Kamphoff, 2010). Walker and Satore-Baldwin (2013) noted that women coaching men's basketball teams are considered an anomaly, therefore, their work sought to investigate men's basketball coaches' perceptions and attitudes towards women within men's college basketball and within sport culture overall. By conducting semi-structured interviews, they found results that were at the core of hegemonic masculinity; male coaches were aware of and honest about how their institutions discriminated against female coaches and female coaches accepted this as a norm. Coaching and leadership positions are not the only place where women are unrepresented; there have been disproportionate levels of media coverage for women's sports (Alper et al., 2002) and such coverage tends to detract from women's athleticism (Berstein & Kian, 2013).

Despite the rises in women's participation in sport, sports media coverage has been dominated by men, and the coverage of women is less concerned with their athleticism and more concerned with their looks or pushing specific narratives. For example, Fink (2015) illustrates that there has been a consistent decline of female coverage within the last 40 years, and only 5-10% of sports coverage is for women. Wolter (2021) explained that within the last 30 years of research on female media representation, there were four major themes present: (1) low volume coverage that was a

result of the time period, location, and news medium, (2) media coverage is focused on athletes that have traditional white, middle-class, and heterosexual ideology (3) there is emphasis on female athletes' sexualization rather than their athleticism, (4) there are contradictory beliefs about women's physicality needed for sport, their femininity, and weakness. Work by Cranmer et al. (2014) further emphasizes that the media presents frames that may subtly display sex differences and its common practice in America for media to sexualize female athletes that participate in sports like tennis (Billings, 2003), soccer (Christopherson et al., 2002), and basketball (Billings et al., 2003). Sexualization of female athletes within media can be attributed to the sport being cultivated in hegemonic masculinity, or the fact that women are taught from a young age to regard themselves with an objectified gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Unfortunately, this media coverage has negative implications for these athletes, as there is a correlation between self-objectification, depression, body shaming and disordered eating (Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003). While there has been a swath of sport research concerned with women and media, there has also been a shift towards looking at individual athletes' experiences, rather than looking at team dynamics.

Though much of early sport research looked at the more institutionalized team sports (e.g., football or basketball) and how they (i.e., teams) ritualized, rewarded, and reproduced attitudes that mistreated women and marginalized men, recent literature concerning masculinity within sport has taken two different directions. First, research began looking at individual sports, or those that place less emphasis on team dynamics (i.e., swimming or wrestling), and found "a more paradoxical mix of practices that simultaneously reproduced and disrupted (or even overtly resisted) hegemonic

masculinity” (McKay et al., 2000, p. 8). A second direction, including more nuanced research within men’s sports, has looked at the potential for gender play, and even a certain degree of resistance to hegemonic masculinity. Given the fact that wrestling emphasizes both the team and individual success and is widely known as being male-dominant, current research should determine how hegemonic masculinity is cultivated within the sport and whether the inclusion and rise of women has positive implications for its future.

The sport of wrestling is arguably one of the most masculine sports and is rooted in a culture that conformed to a hierarchy of masculinity. Specifically, Greco-Roman culture considered those who were white, adult men to be exemplars of masculinity, and those who were a different gender, race, and sexuality to be seen as inferior (Askianien, 2018). Even the sport’s objectives and language emphasize masculine ideals; men are left to put down their opponents in a submissive position, or playing the role of men in what is commonly known in Westernized cultures as sexual intercourse. Wrestling language or jargon emphasizes sexual symbolism, as common phrases include double grapevine, riding time, and wrist control. Additionally, wrestling and its culture is passed down through generations of families. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Tim Fader, a successful collegiate wrestling coach was quoted saying, “It’s (wrestling) is a sport that really runs through generations of families” (Couch, 2015, para. 3). It is likely that young athletes are engaging in gender socialization, or they are socially learning what values, attitudes and gender norms are expected within the sport through the familial unit. When individuals grow up in families that have an affinity for sports, not only does it increase the likelihood of participation (Strandbu et al., 2019) but it also influences the

individual's identity formation. However, there are some scholars who push back on this, or directly contradict these findings.

Baker and Hotek (2018) specifically observed the participation of wrestlers, parents, fans, and coaches during youth and high school wrestling events across seven wrestling seasons. Moreover, they found high school wrestlers' behaviors fell a within gender continuum and were not purely masculine or feminine. Rather, "gender is not dichotomous, and even in the highly masculinized sport of wrestling, feminine behavior by men is evident" (Baker & Hotek, 2018, p. 49). More specifically, they separated and categorized ethnographic observations concerning wrestlers' bodies, performances, and emotional practices on a continuum as traditionally masculine, androgynous, or feminine. For example, wrestlers who were observed as being physically strong, took pain, never wrestled a girl, kept a strategic demeanor, and never cried, were seen as being overtly masculine. Whereas wrestlers who appeared to be indifferent after a win or a loss, rejoiced after a big win, or were tasked with making weight were categorized as being androgynous. This is because these behaviors are not necessarily masculine or feminine, rather they are acceptable for both male and female athletes who are participating in the sport. Lastly, acts that were deemed feminine were when a wrestler had intimate interactions with teammates, appeared manic or lacking control, or expressed care or an outpour of support for teammates or coaches (Baker & Hotek, 2018). These findings are interesting because they show how (a) behaviors are viewed through the lens of the masculine-feminine dichotomy and (b) the ways that wrestlers are struggling with balancing different facets of their identity or perform their identity within the rigid structure of wrestling. When athletes are left to deal with these various issues and

challenges, it often results in a struggle of identity maintenance. Nonetheless, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of the innerworkings of high school wrestlers' identities, including the ways that they are forming, managing, and perceiving themselves or the ways that they fail to fit into the social expectations of wrestling, using social identity theory as a theoretical framework.

2.4 Social Identity Theory

Proposed by Tajfel & Turner (1979), social identity theory (SIT) explains intergroup relations and how being part of groups give individuals a sense of belonging. Social identity differs from personal identity, as personal identity is how one sees themselves as a distinct individual, whereas social identity is how an individual sees themselves as part of a collective group with a sense of shared traits (Turner et al., 1994). In other words, social group membership assumes that everyone has consistent identities and group perspectives (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Melton and Cunningham (2014) explain that people evaluate a variety of characteristics or factors when determining whether they belong to a certain group or when differentiating one group from the other; this process is oftentimes referred to as social categorization. These characteristics may include, but are not limited to, “demographics (e.g., race, sex), religious beliefs (e.g., Muslim, Christian), political views (e.g., progressive or conservative), or other distinct affiliations (e.g., Yankees fan, Boston Red Sox fan)” (p. 22). Being in social groups help shape the individual but vary in salience to one's own self-concept (Hogg et al., 1995). When individuals engage in the process of social categorization, they cognitively group themselves and others that fall within a category as being similar (i.e., us) or contrasting (i.e., them), therefore exacerbating differences and similarities between things or people

within the same group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This is the notion of our sense of belonging to the in-groups, and our differences between the out-groups. There may be times when an individual may cycle through identities to determine which best fits a given context, or more than one identity is seen as being appropriate (Stryker, 1968). For example, Reimer et al. (2020) notes there are three components that make up an individual's social identity: a cognitive component (i.e., self-categorization), an evaluative component (i.e., evaluating the group on positive or negative terms) and an affective component (i.e., feeling emotionally tied to the group). To reach this evaluation, individuals must move through three separate stages: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison.

It is only until the individual truly adopts the group's identity that they formally belong and through this stage (i.e., social identification) individuals tend to conform or adhere to group norms, and act in a way that they believe members of the group should. Despite an individual's identity being aligned with the group, oftentimes there are certain discrepancies that can arise, otherwise referred to as identity gaps (Zanin et al., 2021). While discrepancies between identities are common and inevitable due to the fluidity of the construct, Jung and Hecht (2004) note that it is not the gaps themselves that are the issue, but rather the "degree and type of gap, as well as the implications of these gaps for social relations" (p. 268). However, it is worth noting that the process of social categorization and social identification are not involuntary (Melton & Cunningham, 2014), instead individuals consciously are trying to fit in with the in-group, because in-group membership offers a higher degree of social status and boosts individual self-esteem (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This degree of social status and the desire to have a

favorable self-esteem leads groups to compare themselves to others, engaging in a process known as social comparison (Tajfel et al., 1979; Festinger, 1954). The hostility that occurs between groups is not only an effort to maintain a high self-esteem, but it is a direct result of conflicting identities. Although SIT can be applied to a variety of different disciplines and has been extended to examine topics like off-field behavior of athletes and team identification (Fink et al., 2009) and how team leaders can enhance team confidence and performance through a shared sense of identity (Fransen et al., 2015), current research should look at the social identities that are being created through specific sports. By readjusting the focus to specific sports, like wrestling, it will shed light into the nuances of what it means to be a high school wrestler, through the aspects they name as challenging, and how they are constructing and making sense of their identities. Identity is interwoven into social structures and a group's identity is often referred to as being "intensely personal" (Drayton & Prins, 2009, p.113). Thus, a group's identity is also a historical and cultural representation of norms and beliefs. Insofar that an individual adopts the group identity or adheres to group norms and practices that legitimize hegemony, he or she may be playing a part in reinforcing such ideology.

2.5 Summary of Research Problem

The sport of wrestling creates a unique environment because of its hegemonic masculine roots and the implications that these roots create for athletes as they are navigating the physical demands and the social identification process. For example, women are likely navigating complex and unique challenges that differ from men because of the monstrous growth in their participation. They may be specifically analyzing how they fit in with their team, whether they feel a sense of belonging or

emotional attachment towards their teammates, and their overall evaluation of the team or sport in general. As female wrestlers are left to balance their athletic identity and a certain degree of femininity, it is plausible that they are experiencing identity gaps. This balance can be explained succinctly by Kian et al. (2013):

The mismatch between femininity and athleticism has been well rehearsed in the literature since attributes associated with sport – physical strength, mental toughness, speed, and muscle – are also signifiers of masculinity, so much so that the concept of the female athlete can be viewed as an oxymoron (p. 40).

While the identity gaps that women are facing, their management strategies, and experiences should be explored further, Baker and Hotek's (2018) findings in comparison to typical wrestling literature demonstrates that men may too be facing difficulties with their social identities. Moreover, male wrestlers may not categorize themselves as fitting the masculine standards the sport expects, potentially causing issues with their self-esteem and exacerbating differences between teammates. This study adds to a body of literature that has focused on health, to examine the lived experiences, challenges, expectations, and perceptions of identity from the voices of high school wrestlers. Using qualitative interview methodology, the following research questions are posed:

RQ₁: What are the expectations and challenges of being a high school wrestler?

RQ₂: How are women managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?

RQ₃: How are men managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?

2.6 Summary of Chapter

In this chapter I began by briefly introducing the history behind the sport of wrestling, including the exponential growth of female wrestlers and the necessary skills

to be successful. I then reviewed literature covering hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity within the context of sport, and social identity theory. Lastly, I highlighted why this area of study warrants attention and outlined the fact that most wrestling literature is concerned with health. Therefore, this provides a great opportunity to extend theory within a context that has had little to no exploration. The next chapter will detail the methodological approach I took to answer my research questions and steps for data analysis.

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

As Seidmann puts it straightforwardly, “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories” (p. 22). He elaborates by explaining that the purpose of interviewing is not to seek answers, or to test hypotheses or research questions, rather, it is more about gaining a deeper understanding about lived experiences and how individuals are making sense of such experiences (Seidmann, 2006). Therefore, I conducted semi-structured interviews to learn more about high school wrestlers’ experiences, the challenges they faced, the expectations that were put on them, and how they were constructing their identities through the context of the sport. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because they are more organic, and “simulate discussion rather than dictate it” (Tracy, 2020, p. 158). Additionally, I knew that using a semi-structure guide would prompt interviewees to answer questions pertaining to my content area, but potentially even open up about emotions or feelings towards the sport or the challenges they faced (Tracy, 2020).

3.1 Participants

To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) 18-25 years old, (2) wrestled in high school, and (3) graduated from high school within the last five years. I recruited participants through snowball sampling and convenience sampling. This was the best recruitment method for my study because convenience sampling helps recruit participants faster and keeps costs low (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, the sport of wrestling was often referred to as a community, therefore, many of my participants were willing to share my information with current and former

teammates, friends, and even siblings who fit the recruitment criteria. While snowball sampling is often critiqued for the lack of diversity it allows within a sample, Small (2009) explains that snowball sampling results in more individuals who are willing to participate, compared to random sampling. My inclusion criteria and the nuanced nature of the phenomenon also contributed to the decision of using snowball sampling.

I primarily used Facebook and Reddit to reach participants. Using a key word search, I first searched for Facebook groups that were related to amateur wrestling and narrowed my search to include groups that were active within the last year and had over 1,000 members. This was to ensure that my recruitment script was reaching as many people as I could, or that it was going to be shared among individuals who fit the criteria. I intentionally chose only active groups, as it would not be fruitful to post in a group where members did not regularly engage with each other or post. As a result, my recruitment script was posted within 18 different Facebook groups. There was one Facebook group that did not fit the criteria, but I had personal connections to the members within it (i.e., Bulldog Wrestling Edgerton Ohio). For Reddit, I posted my recruitment message within three threads (i.e., r/wrestling, r/highschoolwrestling, r/wrestlingwomens) using an account created solely for the purpose of this research study. Before choosing the threads, I engaged in a key word search, similar to the Facebook groups, however, many of the wrestling threads did not have many members. Therefore, I made sure that the threads were active within the last year and were related to amateur wrestling. I also recruited participants via the School of Information Science's Research Subjects Pool (RSP) for undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky.

Lastly, I posted the recruitment message on my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts.

There were five individuals (i.e., two males and three females) who I initially contacted to set up interviews, but they were unable to meet because of scheduling conflicts and one male I was unable to interview because he was a student of mine. This did not result in any unusable data because it happened before the interview stage. The final sample ($N = 24$) was evenly split between women ($n = 12$) and men ($n = 12$), and the participant age range was between 18-24 ($M = 20.58$, $SD = 1.89$). Additionally, all participants graduated from high school between 2018-2022. Participants identified as being White ($n = 20$), Hispanic ($n = 1$), Native American ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 1$) and African American ($n = 1$). Participants were from 12 different states: Arkansas ($n = 2$), Oklahoma ($n = 1$), Tennessee ($n = 1$), Wisconsin ($n = 1$), Colorado ($n = 1$), Florida ($n = 1$), Alaska ($n = 1$), California ($n = 1$), Texas ($n = 2$), Iowa ($n = 1$), Michigan ($n = 2$) and Ohio ($n = 10$) which was important, given some states had sanctioned girls wrestling as its own sport and others had not.¹

3.2 Procedure

Following IRB approval, I messaged Facebook group moderators asking for permission to post within the groups and to ensure that my recruitment script did not violate any group guidelines. After receiving permission from the moderators, I posted my recruitment message within the various Facebook groups, Reddit threads, on my personal social media pages, and within the RSP. Participants who were interested

¹ There were significantly more participants from Ohio because that is where I am from.

contacted me either via email or Facebook messenger to set up a voluntary interview. Interviews took place either by phone ($n = 18$) or via Zoom ($n = 6$), at the participant's discretion. Before the interview, an informed consent document was sent to participants, and they were asked to read it over and note any questions they had. Those who opted for a Zoom interview could choose to enter the Zoom room with their cameras on or off. Participants were informed of their rights prior to the start of the interview (i.e., they were able to end the interview at any time without penalty and they were allowed to skip any questions that they did not want to answer). After answering any participant questions and providing some background information on my study, I obtained verbal consent before proceeding with the interview questions.

I intentionally chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants one-on-one and use a combination of narrative and respondent type for a couple of reasons. First, I chose to use a respondent type because participants had experiences that were directly related to my research goals, and all had the capabilities to speak for themselves about their own experiences. Further, Tracy (2020) explains that respondent interviews are worthwhile in understanding any similarities or differences within cultural groups. In my case, I was not inherently looking for gender differences, as that warrants a different methodological approach, however, through keeping my research questions broad and looking at how both men and women are managing their social identities, it was likely that there would be certain experiences that were relative to one group over another. This implication paired nicely with the fact that narrative interviews allow participants to really tell their own personal stories, rather than just answer rigid, or structured questions (Tracy, 2020). Because my study was exploratory in nature, I structured my interview

guide to predominately focus on three different topics: (1) the participants experiences and expectations, (2) challenges the participants faced, and (3) the participant's identity within the sport. The identity category included questions that pertained to the three components of an individual's social identity (i.e., affective, cognitive, and evaluative). I was careful to include a variety of different question types, as Tracy (2020) notes that "the best interviews are characterized by a range of questions" (p. 164). When writing my interview questions, I also took note of Seidman's (2013) suggestions to write open-ended questions, avoid leading questions, and write questions that are straightforward and avoid any jargon.

Thus, my final interview guide resulted in about 25 questions. Sample questions included, "What, if any, expectations did your coach have for you?", "Can you tell me about a challenge you faced in wrestling and whether you were able to overcome it?", "Did you feel that you embodied any of the stereotypical characteristics or image of wrestlers?", "What was the most rewarding thing about being a high school wrestler?", and "How do you see the lessons or skills that you learned in wrestling carrying over into other areas of your life?" (See appendix 1 for the complete interview guide). During the interview, I took a deliberate naïveté stance which allowed me to drop any preconceived notions and refrain from judgement, instead focusing on remaining open to new findings (Tracy, 2020). This allowed me to go into the research process without any schemes and reflect on what participants did and did not say during the interviews.

The interviews lasted between 17 and 48 minutes ($M = 32$, $SD = 9.63$). All identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and participants were referred to by a number, rather than their names. Interviews that were conducted on

Zoom were audio recorded via the platform and interviews that were conducted over the phone were audio recorded on an iPad. Following transcription from Otter.ai, a third-party professional transcription service, all audio files were uploaded to a password protected one drive account and deleted off the iPad. The data resulted in 310 single spaced pages. As Brinkmann (2013) notes, this is appropriate because the aim is not statistical representativeness or generalizability, rather it offers a chance to take a detailed look at how participants experience the world, or wrestling culture.

3.3 Data Analysis

To analyze my data, I took a multi-step iterative approach. Tracy (2020) explains that this approach allows a researcher to “alternate between considering existing theories, research interests, or predefined questions/goals with emergent qualitative data” (p. 11). In other words, this approach is both a top down (i.e., deductive or etic) and a bottom up (i.e., inductive or emic) way of understanding (Tracy, 2020). This was appropriate for my research, given that iteration is meant to be a reflexive process that provides both insight and meaning into a given phenomenon (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). More specifically, it involves the process of visiting the data, determining what is occurring, connecting what is occurring with existing theory, and then drawing conclusions based on such connections. While using this approach, I was able to answer a few guiding questions, proposed by Srivastava and Hopwood (2009): (1) “what are the data telling me?”, (2) “what is it I want to know?”, and (3) “what is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me and what I want to know?” (p. 78). As a result, my research was guided by social identity theory, while providing new information about

how a specific group of individuals were managing their identity within the context of high school wrestling.

To facilitate a better understanding and aid in my own sensemaking of what my participants were experiencing, I listened to transcriptions and edited them for accuracy (Tracy, 2020). Next, I engaged in line-by-line coding to develop my initial theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2014), which included all descriptive or first-level codes (Tracy, 2020). I coded approximately 20% of my data with the first-level codes and used them to create a codebook with definitions and exemplars of the first-level codes. After verifying that the codes were consistent across participants, this resulted in multiple codes. Examples of these codes include the challenges that participants experienced (e.g., cutting weight, lack of support, injuries, and lack of experience). Because I was using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), I was comparing data that fit into each code and then modifying the code to fit new data. This process also led me to begin lumping or collapsing codes. For example, individuals who noted being injured during wrestling season, dealing with an opponent who deliberately attempted to cause personal injury, or competing while suffering from an illness, was collapsed into one code labeled “health.”

After coding all the data with first-level codes, I moved into second-level or axial coding. This was a muddled process that resulted in numerous codebook drafts and analytic memos to help define the codes carefully, determine how they were related to other codes, and provide examples within the raw data that illustrated such code (Charmaz, 2014). Using an iterative approach proved to be valuable in this phase of data analysis, as I was able to use social identity theory as a loose framework but did not

necessarily force participants' experiences to fit within the theory's stages. Axial coding allowed me to bring together the expectations that were put on participants, the support they received for their participation, the challenges they experienced, and the different facets of their identity that were affected by their participation in wrestling. For example, expectations were coded based on a set of levels (i.e., high, low, none) and the outcome of the expectation (i.e., positive or negative), whereas support the individuals received for their participation was also coded using the same set of levels and the origin of support (i.e., coach, community, family, or outside support). After finalizing the codebook, which can be found in Appendix 2, I imported my transcripts into MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software for coding.

3.4 Reflexivity & Ethics

I am personally interested in the sport of wrestling because I have grown up going to wrestling tournaments to support my siblings, and for a good five months out of the year, wrestling dominates and affects our family dynamic. Like Couch (2015) noted, wrestling is a family affair, as participation in the sport was passed down from my dad to my brother and sister. While the sport is tough both mentally and physically, I have seen first-hand the different experiences, struggles, and triumphs that my brother and sister have faced and overcome. For example, I have seen my sister try to manage her identity of being a 16-year-old, feminine teenage girl, who loves all things clothes and makeup, but also a competitor who can do everything her male teammates can. I recognize that my close tie to the sport is a strength, but also something that needs to be ethically considered because it does offer some weaknesses.

I was able to use my personal experiences of watching my siblings and my knowledge of the sport of wrestling to connect and build rapport with my participants. However, because I recruited many participants from my personal network, I had to reflect on how this, coupled with my experiences, affected my data collection, analysis, and the way that I approached my results. I tried to remain mindful of ethical questions concerning the confidentiality of my participants, which were adapted by Scarduzio et al. (2013). For example, I had to consider how I would ensure confidentiality to my participants and explain to them my process for safeguarding their responses to my interview questions. While my thesis was IRB approved, I also employed relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), which means that I was cognizant of my personal role in my study and I strived to “treat participants as whole people rather than as subjects from which to wrench a good story” (Tracy, 2020, p. 285). I understand that the intimate conversations I had with participants required a dialectical but delicate pull between disclosure and restraint (Bochner, 1984), therefore, it was imperative that my participants felt a sense of comfort, confidentiality, and willingness to share.

3.5 Summary

This chapter discussed the methodological approach that I used for this study, including participant demographics, the recruitment procedure, and data analysis. I elaborated on the reasons why I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants, and explained why using qualitative research methodology was best suited for this kind of exploratory research. I ended this chapter by discussing my own positionality and how I have remained mindful and reflexive of this position throughout the entire research process. Most importantly, I noted that I engaged in a process that

allowed me to ethically reflect on and critique the decisions I made throughout my research. The next chapter will feature stories told through the voices of my participants in the form of my results.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This chapter will formally answer my research questions: (1) “What are the expectations and challenges of being a high school wrestler?”, (2) “How are women managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?”, and (3) “How are men managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?” Participants noted nine major challenges when it came to their participation in wrestling, recognized expectations that were put on them, including the outcome of those expectations and where the expectations originated from, and then answered questions related to wrestling and his or her social identity.

4.1 Weight & Health

Many participants noted struggling with weight in wrestling, which took multiple different forms. On one hand, participants who struggled with weight frequently participated in the act of “cutting” which is where wrestlers will rapidly lose weight to try and fit in a lower weight class. While this act is commonly associated with wrestling, it often includes unhealthy practices to meet the lower weight standard, which is illustrated by Participant 8:

I woke up for a week and a half and I ate one banana in the morning, and I drank like a small water bottle (...) I lost 20 pounds in a week, and I’ve lost seven pounds in a night once. I would do a hot bath, run, do a hot bath. I even ate a little bit of Tabasco to try and get the food out of me.

Participant 2 also noted engaging in other unhealthy weight cutting practices. For example, “I wrapped myself in a trash bag, cranked up the heat in my coach’s office and

just did push-ups and squats.” Others, such as Participant 5, simply limited their food intake, “only eating about 700 calories per day.” While weight was a challenge that both men and women in my sample faced, some women, like Participant 1, described feeling misunderstood by her coaches because she experienced frequent weight fluctuation due to her menstrual period. This was something her male teammates obviously did not experience, and it can be represented through her words,

Something that coaches didn’t understand was it was a lot different for a girl to lose weight than it is for boys. We had our periods, and our bodies are just a lot different than boys.

It is worth noting that women’s fat cells house estrogen, a hormone necessary for healthy bone density and strength. Therefore, when there are no fat cells left to house estrogen, the athlete’s bone density will be compromised and can lead to other issues with menstruation, potentially even resulting in amenorrhea (i.e., the absence of menstruation). Thus, the process of cutting weight can be even more detrimental to women. These unhealthy practices consequently left many wrestlers with traumatic and lasting feelings of regret, illustrated by Participant 20,

I’d be hanging out with my friends and be like, no, I can’t eat, I’m just going to hang out. Looking back on it now, man, I just wish I would’ve been able to be a normal person, a normal teenager, and enjoy all the little things.

Most notably, the disturbing practice of cutting weight left many female participants with body dysmorphia and other issues with body image. For example, Participant 24 explained,

I remember thinking that I looked so good, and I was so lean and skinny. Looking back at those pictures, oh my gosh, I look ill. I don't look good at all. My waist would be so small, and I also remember thinking, it's crazy how I feel like I look my best when I feel my worst.

Participant 6 brought a unique perspective, as she explained that body image issues are only exacerbated by the uniforms (i.e., singlets) that wrestlers are required to wear. She said,

Being a teenage girl in today's society, it's already very hard to deal with body image. With wrestling, you must be on weight and you must be in good shape. The uniforms are also extremely tight, so it shows every little imperfection. Not only that, but boys also naturally have more muscles than girls too. So, you are in a weight room with all these guys who are shredded and super jacked, and you're staring at yourself and thinking, I look nothing like these people.

Not only does this quote reiterate that even the uniforms that wrestlers wear can negatively affect a wrestler's body image, it also demonstrates that women are engaging in social comparison when comparing their own physiques to their teammates. While Participant 8 may have noted cutting weight was "just a part of the sport that everybody does," it can make wrestlers more susceptible to injury or health problems.

Weight cutting, coupled with the intensity and physicality of the sport, regularly leaves participants to suffer from a great deal of injuries or health complications.

Participant 9 noted challenges with his health after cutting weight,

I was walking around all day with a terrible headache. I ended up having a couple of stomach ulcers from it and terrible acid reflux.

From this quote, it is obvious that there are lasting and detrimental effects to health from cutting weight, however, a wrestler's health can be compromised from the number of injuries the sport causes. For example, Participant 8 suffered from an ankle injury, and then tore his meniscus. Likewise, Participant 2 noted getting her ankle snapped. Not only do these injuries leave a wrestler out of the sport, but it also leaves them with a long road to recovery that is often met with more challenges. For example, Participant 11 said that because "wrestling is such a fast-paced sport, you can't be out for over two weeks." She went on to further explain that being out of the sport is a challenge within itself because it affects your endurance and athletes generally gain weight back during the time that they are out or not participating in physical activity. However, by attempting to hasten the healing process, wrestlers are not allowing themselves to fully nurse their injuries which can leave them in pain or susceptible to other injuries. Sickness is also detrimental to a wrestler and while it is normal to suffer from sickness, it also creates more challenges. Participant 5 explained this effectively when he said,

I had to wrestle a big tournament after getting over the flu and I had been out over a week and a half. It impacted me the rest of the season because my stamina during that time went down. I felt like my stamina was my strong point and I was able to go eight or nine minutes if I had to. After the flu, I was barely able to make it through a three-minute period. I feel like I never fully recovered.

Although recovering from sickness and injuries is at the hands of the individual, there are additional challenges that wrestlers noted experiencing that were caused by external factors, such as coaching and inappropriate behavior by opponents and teammates that were at the hands of coaches.

4.2 Coaching & Inappropriate Behavior

Coaches play a pivotal role in a young wrestler's development, therefore, challenges associated with coaching can interfere with both a wrestler's success and wellbeing. Participants in this study recounted three specific challenges regarding coaching. First, Participant 4 expressed feelings of frustration when describing the turnover for coaching during his high school career. He said, "we had different head coaches every year, which was a struggle because it was hard to have consistency throughout my four years." His former teammate, Participant 19, echoed his statements adding,

One of the biggest challenges was having four different coaching staffs throughout my four years of high school and adapting to their different coaching styles. They all had different pressures they put on us, and different standards that they wanted in practice and what they expected out of us at tournaments.

Along with new coaching staffs, oftentimes coaches did not have a lot of experience coaching wrestling. For example, Participant 24, who was from Texas, noted a lack of focus in wrestling at the state level, which therefore contributed to the lack of qualified wrestling coaches:

In Texas, there's not a lot of focus on wrestling programs, and a lot of times you're going to get a coach who isn't super experienced. Most of the time the coach is also the football coach who has never wrestled before, but they just needed a football coach so they hired him.

Not only does this bring up the lack of qualified coaches, in this case, it also highlights that wrestling was often a sport put to the backburner. In a similar experience to Participant 24, Participant 19 also noted that the constant turnover in coaching staffs left

him to have to “push (himself) because they (i.e., coaches) did not understand how to push him to get to where he wanted to be.” This creates an interesting dichotomy to the last challenge regarding coaching, which can be voiced by Participant 15, who had her father as her high school coach. She said,

It did have its struggles. If we were arguing about something else at home, it did make its way onto the mat and it did cause a little bit of drama. He was always so incredibly hard on me, and it was sometimes more than the other wrestlers.

In this case, Participant 15 had a contrasting experience than other participants who mentioned challenges with coaching. Rather than feeling like she was abandoned or unable to be pushed to her full potential like Participant 19, Participant 15 felt like she was pushed harder than her other teammates because of the familial relationship she had to her coach. In fact, this parent-daughter relationship is interesting when considering traditional coach-player dynamics. One additional challenge with coaching should be discussed, however, it is also an appropriate segue into the next challenge of interest because it highlights inappropriate behaviors that wrestlers dealt with at the hands of their coaches.

Much of the inappropriate behavior reported was towards women. Inappropriate behavior broadly referred to any issue surrounding teammates, fans, or opponents, however, many of the instances’ participants referenced were directly or indirectly associated with coaching. For example, Participant 2 remembered during a wrestle-off at practice, her coach pulled her male teammate to the side and said, “you don’t want her wrestling in your spot at that tournament, do you? And he obviously said ‘no.’ So, my

coach said, ‘hurt her.’” Other times, coaches told men to take it easy on female competitors, like in an example from Participant 14:

My coach told me to be very, very gentle. No big throws. He told me to snap her down, go behind her, cross face cradle, and pin her. That’s all I had to do. He told me to make it last 15 seconds.

While Participant 14’s coach may have given him that advice with positive intentions, it offers a disservice to women wrestlers who want to be seen as true competitors. In other cases, coaches do not stop inappropriate behavior. For instance, Participant 2 had one match with a competitor who groped her breast and would not let go; he also left bruises. When she told her coach about the inappropriate behavior, her coach told her “That’s just what happens in wrestling.” She also had issues with her own teammates, as one said he was unable to wrestle her “because she would tell people that (he) raped her.” Other participants faced similar issues, like Participant 13 who explained that growing up, she learned that some wrestlers who did not support her participation would repeatedly headbutt her during matches. Similarly, Participant 15 learned from a young age that some males were out to hurt her, and she recalled it was “a little scary being out there.”

Despite some women not experiencing any inappropriate physical behavior like Participant 2, others reported dealing with teammates inappropriate behavior in the form of insults towards them or ridicule. For instance, Participant 20 noted that once after beating a male teammate during a wrestle-off for a varsity spot, he quit the team.

Participant 11 explained that oftentimes opponents would:

Turn around and look at their teammates, point, laugh, and be like ‘oh easy win.’ Or, they would get on the mat, look at me and try to intimidate me by staring me down.

Multiple other women recalled men forfeiting matches to them. This was seen as an insult, as women were more interested in being seen as true competitors than they were being labeled a female wrestler. Whether it was allowing inappropriate physical behavior or ridicule to teammates or opponents, it is partially a coach’s responsibility to advise athletes to adhere to a certain code of conduct created by a state athletic association. One challenge that extended beyond a coach’s control, was a wrestler’s lack of experience.

4.3 Experience

Jellum (2018) noted that technique in wrestling is often referred to as a double edge sword. This is because it can allow you to bounce back from a deficit quickly, or a simple error in footing or weight distribution can cause you to get pinned or for you to lose control. Because of this factor, wrestling is often a sport that takes years to perfect. Participants noted that their simple lack of experience, including technical skills, knowledge of moves, situations, and rules, created challenges for them and led to poor performance. One example includes Participant 7 who said,

I was brand new at this and everyone seemed to have been in it for a while. I didn’t know any of the proper moves, or how to get of certain situations. There were definitely moves that took me a long time to get a good grasp on and understand.

Despite now participating at the collegiate level, Participant 17 started wrestling when she was in eighth grade. Therefore, she also felt like she struggled due to her experience level. She reflected on this by saying,

The biggest challenge I've faced in wrestling throughout my career, especially in my high school days, was the fact that I was just late to the game. Wrestling is such a game of instants where if just know one more thing than the other girl, you could win a match. I was just green and brand new.

This statement highlights both the metaphor of technique being a double edge sword and the challenge of inexperience. Though this challenge was something only a small subset of the participants dealt with because they began wrestling as youth, it is important when considering and evaluating the challenges wrestlers face on a broad level or a larger scale. Given the discussion of technique, the next challenge addressed should concern the physical nature of the sport, and the mental fortitude it requires athletes to have.

4.4 Physicality & Mentality

As aforementioned, wrestling is a sport that requires a great deal of physical stamina. The sheer physicality of the sport and the struggle of being able to wrestle for up to six or more minutes can be best encapsulated through Participant 3's words,

Wrestling is the most taxing sport I've ever done, and conditioning is unreal. The hardest part wasn't the moves, it wasn't the strength, it was the durability to last through the whole season. Even in single matches, you'd get extremely gassed.

Along with the need for stamina, wrestlers must also have strength to successfully beat their opponent. Strength proved to be a challenge that women specifically faced. For example, when Participant 22 reached middle school, she started to realize how much

stronger her opponents were after they began going through puberty. Participant 1 experienced a similar situation when she first began wrestling, noting that it felt like every time she lost, it was a result of just being outmuscled by male wrestlers. While it is expected that the sport has some degree of physicality, participants demonstrated that it is a sport that requires an equal, if not more, amount of mental fortitude to be successful.

The mental challenges that participants experienced stemmed from a few key factors, including intimidation from being a first-year wrestler, self-doubt, burnout, and anxiety. Participant 1 explained that she felt intimidated wrestling her first year, because she knew that she and her female opponents had a lot to prove, especially given the OHSAA recent sanctioning of women's wrestling. She noted feeling "all alone and like no one else was feeling the way she felt." On the other hand, Participant 16 noted that he would oftentimes get down on himself or be harder on himself than he should have. This seemed to be a consistent theme across many participants, as Participant 12 also mentioned the fact that when you aren't getting the results that you want, there's no one to blame but yourself. Unfortunately, an individual's mindset had the ability to affect performance, as Participant 20 explained when she said,

It got hard mentally going into a tournament, getting your ass kicked all day long, going home, working hard, coming back, and doing it again. I just had to keep telling myself, you're going to get it. You're going to get it and it's going to be ok. Then, it just made every time you won that much better.

Participant 22 felt a heightened sense of anxiety before a match, especially when she considered the fact that all eyes were on her, and the sense of unknown after a loss. Meaning, she felt ambiguity in the way she would feel after a loss, how others would

react, or any repercussions from said loss. Individuals who saw their mentality as a challenge also reported feeling a sense of burnout which could hinder their performances. For example, Participant 13 explained that she faced burnout at certain points in her career because she has been wrestling at the elite level for so long. Oftentimes the burnout causes her to take a step back and remember to have fun or rediscover her passion for the sport. For instance, Participant 10 said, "I've had a couple of times where I'm like, 'is this really for me?' 'Do I really want to do this?' That thought definitely comes after a hard practice or a hard loss." As aforementioned, one's mentality oftentimes affected his or her performance in matches, however, performance itself was an additional challenge that participants faced.

4.5 Performance

Although it is common to have frustration after defeat, wrestling is unique because it is a highly individualized sport, therefore wrestlers often carry the burden of a loss or an unsuccessful performance on their shoulders. Performance as a challenge, encompassed any issue surrounding a wrestlers' perspective of success or meeting goals, oftentimes seen as winning or being competitive. While straightforward, Participant 12 exemplified this challenge when he said,

Wrestling is a sport where it's solely on you. There is a team to fall back on for help and support, but really when you go out there it's just you. It's hard sometimes when you fail at what you want to do, like when I went to districts three years in a row and didn't get to the state tournament. It got harder each year to take it. When you're a freshman, you think, 'oh I'm just a freshman, and then

sophomore year comes, oh, I've got two more years. Then you're a junior and you don't make it and think, 'what am I doing wrong?'

In this example, Participant 12 was critical of his performance and suffered from self-doubt every year that he did not meet his end goal of making it to the state tournament. In the same vein, Participant 8 wished that he could have done more or had more success. This was interesting, because it serves almost as a sense of regret for how he finished his final wrestling season. Although it seems that performance challenges often result in negative outcomes (e.g., regret), Participant 14 experienced a positive outcome. More specifically, Participant 14 noted that striving for success resulted in him becoming a perfectionist. When discussing how, he explained that "I got two Bs on my report card and I thought my GPA was going to drop way down. I'll have to work harder next quarter to get all A's so my semester average can balance out." Despite this being a good outcome, only a handful of wrestlers experienced something positive as a result of a bad performance. In fact, many of them reported negative outcomes from performance due to the pressure that they were under or the high expectations that people put on them. However, before discussing the expectations that were put on participations, including the origin of the expectation and the outcomes, participant's responses that did not fit neatly into the categories will be elaborated on in more depth.

4.6 Other

There were a few challenges participants noted that were not clearly encompassed by the categories established. For example, Participant 7 admitted to having issues finding a practice partner or someone who could drill with her during practice. She noted that "everyone was 20 pounds heavier" than her, which made it hard to execute certain

moves, or even realistically compete, even if it was simply in practice. However, she explained that she felt like she was able to overcome this challenge and it made her a better wrestler by increasing her strength and allowing her to realize showing tenacity in practice can help you win close matches. Another challenge participants faced was conflict associated with having a sibling on the team. In fact, there were several participants within my sample that had a sibling on the same team. Regarding this issue, Participant 12 said,

Since it's a family member, they always think they are right in every situation, 100% of the time. That's just not the case. I really liked my sister on the team, it's just really hard sometimes. I think it's harder to be on a team with a family member than on your own, truly.

While Participant 12 had a sister on the team, Participant 4 had a brother, but echoed having similar struggles. He said,

It was difficult because I felt like we wrestled each other differently than we wrestled other people. He was a lot more tense, and he took it way more seriously. If he couldn't get something in on me, he would throw a tantrum because he was hot-headed.

Participant 1 had a unique experience because she felt frustrated by the way her brother was treated and looked at for struggling with the mental aspect of wrestling. In fact, she said that he was oftentimes referred to as being "weak," despite suffering from the same mental obstacles that she was also navigating. Though Participant 1 and her brother did not experience the same degree of conflict as Participant 12 and 4, it was Participant 24 who noted that wrestling tends to pit families against each other.

As sophomores, Participant 24 got third at the state tournament, while her sister got second. Many people pointed out this difference in an attempt to create conflict or competition between her and her sister. Instead, she explained that she was ecstatic for her sister, but was frustrated because she knew comments like those affected her sister, who already felt immense pressure to follow her success or footsteps. The challenges associated with having a sibling for a teammate may be unique to a small subset of my sample, however, wrestling is a sport that is passed down through generations of families. Moreover, it is not uncommon in the sport to have siblings or family members on the same teams, which increases the likelihood that these challenges extend beyond just my sample. The final challenge that participants mentioned that did not inherently fit within my categories, was just an overall lack of school support. While more on support, or lack thereof, will be elaborated on in a later section, it is important to note that this is occurring on the scholastic level.

A common thread among participants was a general lack of support from their school. This varied from lack of recognition, to lack of resources or funding. For example, Participant 21 said they were often compared to the men's basketball team, further explaining that "the athletic director (AD) and some of the other teachers were the basketball coaches, so they thought they were the top dogs of the school. Our AD used to lock up our mat tape in the closet." Although Participant 19's high school has a rich history of producing state qualifiers in wrestling, he explained that there were sports that seemed to be more important and got more attention from athletic boosters who purchased other teams new jerseys, helmets, and even a new basketball court. Participant 22 echoed these statements when she explained that her school did not care about

wrestling at all, which was reflected in their equipment – a singular mat that stretched wall-to-wall with barely enough space for the team to practice. It was not until after Participant 22 won the first state championship in her school’s history that her team got its own locker room and two mats to drill on. Participant 24 had a very similar experience, as she felt like wrestling was not acknowledged much at her high school. Regarding her experiences, she said,

There was a point where an announcement was made about the girls wrestling team placing at a tournament and I remember hearing someone say, ‘we have a girls wrestling team?’ I was like, ‘yeah I won state. I was the first state champ for all sports.’ After I won state in March, the baseball team proceeded to win their very first state title in June. Them winning state became a big thing and it was recognized.

She attributed the lack of recognition to the fact that baseball is more of a team sport and schools do not tend to take as much pride in an individual winning. On the other hand, Participant 9 attributed a lack of support to the fact that wrestling has a complex scoring system that many do not understand. Further he said,

It’s not a simple thing like football where you get the ball, you go over here, you get six points and then a PAT (i.e., point(s) after touchdown). For wrestling, you have to know so much about what is going on that it just doesn’t make sense to people who aren’t familiar with it.

Nevertheless, the lack of support in the form of withholding resources or funding cannot be justified. The following section will discuss the expectations put on high school

wrestlers (RQ₁) which oftentimes became a catalyst for the challenges that participants faced.

4.7 Expectations

To answer the first part of RQ₁ (i.e., what are the expectations and challenges of being a high school wrestler?), participants were asked to identify the expectations put on them which was coded based on three levels (i.e., no expectation, low expectation, or high expectation). Participants also included who initiated the expectation (i.e., coach, family, community, individual/self) and whether the expectation resulted in a positive or negative outcome. The code 'no expectation' included any time a participant mentioned there being no expectations associated with their participation in wrestling. For example, Participant 19 explained,

I don't think they really had any expectations for me. My dad didn't do any sports in high school and my mom was a cheerleader. They didn't expect much then I was on the mat in school.

Here, Participant 19 described that his family did not initiate any expectations put on him, since it seemed that they lacked knowledge of the sport or what it takes to be successful. Moreover, Participant 21 indicated that he had a similar experience with his family. He said that his parents were supportive, but because of his dad owning and managing a farm, he was unable to make it to a lot of meets or events, therefore, he did not have any expectations because he had not seen him compete. However, there were times that no expectations resulted in a positive outcome for a wrestler. Sticking with Participant 21, he experienced this firsthand after making it to the state tournament. He said,

Going into my junior year when I placed second, there were no expectations from my coaches because I was not supposed to be there. I started wrestling in eighth grade and didn't even have a winning record my sophomore year. I was probably 90% wins going into the state tournament and just had a phenomenal state tournament.

Despite there being no performance expectations for Participant 21, he was able to achieve a positive outcome since he achieved success at the state tournament. Another example comes from Participant 9 and his community's expectations for him:

My first-year wrestling, back when I was 65 pounds, I got third at state. From there it became, give him some time to develop and he has some potential to be good and represent this community well. But there were never really any expectations for it.

Participant 9 achieved a positive outcome by representing his community through his wrestling success. He went on to become a four-time state champion and is now a Division I collegiate wrestler. It is worth noting that there were also a strong mix of both low and high expectations put on athletes which should be discussed.

On several occasions participants mentioned low expectations being put upon them. Generally, these expectations consisted of "just to do my best" (Participant 4), "have fun" (Participant 18), or "to get beat up in practice and quit" (Participant 11). However, there were more times where the low expectations resulted in a positive outcome, or expectations changed as a result of good performance. For example, when Participant 14 was at the state tournament, he was seen by the community as the underdog. He explained this in his own words when he said,

My sophomore year I had the number one ranked kid in the state. I was the four seed. He was completely undefeated and hadn't lost a single match and was going for his second state title. I was going for my second state title too. They all made predictions of the state tournament, and everyone picked me to lose that match. I ended up winning 7-5 and the whole arena blew up. It was an amazing feeling.

In this case, the community had low expectations for Participant 14. Nonetheless, they did not expect him to win his second state title. However, these low expectations resulted in a positive outcome of him winning. The same could be said for Participant 10 with her family, who did not believe that she would have the success she did. Regarding her own experiences she said,

When I first started out my family did not expect me to succeed as far as I did.

Once I started having success, the standard went up. My dad would push me to go further. He would bring me to tournaments and expect me to place well because of all the training I was putting in.

While the expectations for Participant 10 were originally low, this is a prime example of how the expectations changed because of her performance. In one final example of low expectations with a positive outcome, Participant 11 recalled the low expectations that she put on herself and how these were consistent to those of her coach. She said,

My expectation for myself in the beginning was just to be able to stick with it because I knew coming into high school and having no youth experience that it would be harder on me (...) the head coach's expectation was for me to be able to make it through the guy's season.

However, she went on to explain how the expectations shifted by saying, “it was kind of an expectation from my junior year and up that I would just do fine, and I’d be winning everything. It went from being like very low expectations to very high expectations once girls wrestling was sanctioned.” While all these examples highlight positive outcomes from nonexistent to low expectations, many wrestlers also recounted having high expectations put on them that often resulted in negative outcomes or unattainable standards.

High expectations were those that encompassed any mention of pressure or actions that corresponded with being held to a high standard (i.e., winning or success). One example includes Participant 9 who created a personal or individual goal of making it to the OHSAA state tournament by the end of his senior year. Similarly, Participant 17’s family was constantly encouraging her, telling her that she would be an Olympian from the minute she stepped foot on the mat her junior year of high school. Though it is good to have goals to strive for, oftentimes those high expectations can be detrimental if they are not met. For example, Participant 24 said,

I was struggling and thinking, well, I don’t deserve to live. If I can’t win any wrestling matches, what am I doing? I’m so worthless. And that was hard to go through.

This quote truly shows the negative outcomes from putting excessively high expectations on oneself, or the price that an individual can pay from trying so hard to maintain success. Participant 24 also mentioned an experience she had when she first began wrestling where the expectations were automatically placed on her:

I had my first wrestling practice with one of my dad's friends, who is a coach. My dad asked him 'How do you think she is? Is she going to be any good?' and he said if she keeps at it and keeps working hard, she could be a two-time state champ. Immediately I felt that pressure was put on me. When I went to state once, I was like 'oh shoot, well, now I have to do that because I have to meet these people's expectations.'

Even though Participant 24 was able to channel the expectations put on her and create her own success, they did take a mental toll on her. While she (i.e., Participant 24) had expectations put on her by her family, Participant 2 explained that no expectations her coach, family, or community put on her would ever live up to the expectations she placed on herself. In fact, she even said that she, "spent a lot of time crying" because her expectations were so high. She also would measure her success based on the matches she won. She did note that she believed the reason she was successful was because she "forced herself into being good by practically bullying herself." Unfortunately, the expectations that participants had on themselves oftentimes outweighed the good moments in wrestling, which can be seen through Participant 8:

When I like about the fun moments in wrestling, I think about the close matches I won. To be honest the heavier moments still weigh heavier than the wins I had, just because that was how critical of myself I was.

Echoing Participant 8's sentiments, Participant 19 mentioned that there were times the pressure he put on himself took the fun out of the sport. While these high expectations commonly result in negative outcomes, these implications will be further addressed in the

discussion section. It is worth mentioning that there were times that the high expectations resulted in positive outcomes.

There were many challenges individuals faced that were a result of high expectations, however, there were many examples of times that individuals were able to successfully live up to the expectations placed on them and it ended in a positive outcome. As aforementioned, Participant 17 noted feeling challenged because of her lack of experience, but her family always knew that she had the potential to wrestle at a higher level. As a result of these expectations she said,

I knew I could be the best in the room, and then when I progressed through the regional and state level in high school, I really believed it. I knew I could beat anybody at any given day If I just put my heart into it, even if I didn't know many moves at the time.

Though she is not an Olympian yet, she was able to go on to become a World Silver Medalist and a three-time NAIA National Champion. Few participants demonstrated that sometimes a positive outcome does not always come in the form of winning. Some mentioned that it comes from building relationships with family members, others recounted that it was more about the life lessons gained through adversity (e.g., cutting weight), or the ability to be a good role model to the next generation of wrestlers.

Building off this point, Participant 15 said,

I really just wanted to make sure I was representing my community and my high school. When I was little, I always looked up to the girls on the high school team. For little girls now, and even the community, I always enjoy being a role model. I would always go help coach the little kids club after our season was over.

Obviously, it's mostly about winning state championships, but I held myself to a very high standard.

While expectations and the origin of the expectations vary amongst participants, perhaps something even more important is the way that athletes are constructing and managing their social identities within the sport of wrestling.

4.8 Summary

This section answered RQ₁, further explaining what challenges high school wrestlers faced and the common expectations put on them, including the origin or who initiated the expectation and whether such expectations resulted in positive or negative outcomes. Challenges included (a) weight, (b) mentality, (c) physicality, (d) health, (e) experience, (f) performance, (g) coaching, (h) inappropriate behavior, and (i) other. Expectations put on wrestlers were categorized as either no expectations, low expectations, or high expectations. Participants also determined whether expectations put on them were from themselves, their family, community, or coach. Lastly, either a positive or negative outcome from the expectation was recorded. While there were a mix of outcomes, participants who had extremely high expectations put on them, regardless of the origin, faced a negative outcome when they did not perform to the expected standards. The next section will answer RQ₂ and RQ₃. For the sake of clarity, results are organized based on the three components of one's social identity (i.e., cognitive, affective, and evaluative) and are separated based on men and women's responses.

4.9 Identity

There are three components that make up an individual's social identity: cognitive, affective, and evaluative. Collins (2000) notes that identity is often predominately cognitive because it allows individuals to place and define themselves as being members of a group or organization, whereas the affective and evaluative components allow the individual to feel a sense of belonging to the group and reflect on whether their membership is seen in a positive or negative light. As a result, the answer to RQ₂ and RQ₃ will largely come from participants' discussion of the cognitive component of his or her social identity. When considering the cognitive component, his or her sense of belonging should be evaluated on a broad level of the sport (i.e., self and sport), a more intimate level of the team (i.e., self and team) and through interactions with teammates (i.e., self and teammates). Other considerations include whether he or she felt like they fit any of the common stereotypes associated with being a male or female wrestler and whether they could manage the inner conflict of who they were inside and outside the sport.

4.9.1 Cognitive Component (Women)

On a broad level, many women reported feeling an overarching sense of belonging within the sport of wrestling. This was especially important, given that women's participation in the sport has only rapidly increased within the last decade. In fact, a lot of women noted that wrestling was a large part of who they were, and that wrestling was a community. For example, Participant 13 started wrestling at the age of five years old and she said that since it was her main focus her entire life, it eventually came to consume her. She also mentioned that she "had to work on finding an identity

outside the sport of wrestling.” This was interesting because she noted how invested in the sport she was, but also recognized that she needed to find who she was outside of the sport too. Similarly, Participant 17 noted that she also found a lot of her identity in wrestling. Further, she said,

Every time I met another wrestler, it was an instant bond. We felt understood because we knew how much internal determination comes with wrestling. At one point in high school, you couldn't separate me from wrestling. Everything I did in my day would cater back to wrestling, from what I ate to what exactly I wore, to even my attention on homework. I would eat so I could feel better at practice, I would wear baggy and loose clothing during the day when I wasn't at practice because I had just spent four hours in a tight singlet. I felt more powerful when I was wrestling and more directed like I had a purpose.

What is interesting about Participant 17's response is that even small things, or things that others would consider trivial, all relate back to the sport of wrestling, which is a price many pay for success. Participant 17 dedicated so much of her time to wrestling, that she often missed out on traditional high school activities like homecoming. She even noted feeling estranged from her peers because of their varying priorities. She mentioned that,

Sometimes I would go hang out with the kids at my school and they are talking about the get-together they had the other week, or fun things they are going to do after graduation. I couldn't participate in the conversation because my plans, goals, and my purpose is directed at my next tournament or my next practice.

While Participant 17 might not have been able to share priorities with her classmates, she did find support through the bonds she created with wrestlers who understood her

unconventional path. In a similar experience, Participant 2 mentioned how she loved the sport of wrestling because of how accepting it was. Before joining the sport, she admitted to being socially awkward, or an outcast. After joining the sport, she “realized how many people are alternative or different in wrestling” and felt “a lot more confident and like (she) actually belonged in this world, and (had) people who liked (her) and want to be (her) friend.” Participant 20 echoed this when she described the sport of wrestling as being “welcoming,” while Participant 22 said, “just because you are a wrestler, then you are automatically family to everybody in the wrestling community.” These are compelling statements by women, given that they are all positive reflections of the wrestling community. Contrarily, these positive feelings do not necessarily carry over when they were asked about their relationships with their coaches (i.e., self and team) and teammates (i.e., self and teammates).

Female participants noted having generally positive relationships with their coaches, but not always with their teammates. This is not to say that participants always got along with their coaches. Participant 10 reported that her coach was not receptive to women participating in wrestling and refused to take her to all-female tournaments, so her father had to sign up to be an unpaid volunteer assistant coach. She also recalled her coach being overly focused on her teammates and not paying any attention to her in practice. However, many other women noted that they looked to their coach for a sense of belonging but felt like they were excluded or did not get along with their teammates. For example, Participant 2 said that she really relied on her coach to learn and to make sure she was working to her full potential. She went on to describe her relationship with her coach, saying,

He gave me a sense of belonging in the fact that he invited me to everything and made sure that I was always there, and that I could make it to the things he planned. That made me feel like I was something important to him.

Moreover, women felt appreciative towards coaches who did not pamper them and “treated them the same” (Participant 1) as their male teammates. This was valued among many women, as Participant 13 admitted she transferred schools because her coach was treating her like a “princess.” When asked about her coach, Participant 20 said, “my coach never gave me special treatment; he never took it easy on me and treated me like I was a normal wrestler.” Despite coaches generally treating female athletes the same as their teammates, male wrestlers were not always as open or accepting to their female teammates. Participant 10 said that her teammates would often circle up and talk amongst themselves, always leaving her out of conversation and telling her that she should not be there. Participant 2 recalled only having one teammate who was supportive of her, and it was because he was also bullied for having a disability. Her teammates often made fun of her not being able to do things and said, “if you can’t even do this, then you shouldn’t even be on the team.” Though these issues could be attributed to social or peer pressure from other teammates, they did not always come in the form of arguments; sometimes the women simply had a hard time identifying with teammates. For example, Participant 17 mentioned feeling like an outsider because she was on a path that her teammates were not and “it was hard to identify with people when you are chasing a dream that people do not understand.” Participant 24 explained that if her teammates were not doing club wrestling, or if they were not doing extra to get better, they would not see eye to eye because of the differing philosophies. Lastly, Participant 22 said that she felt like her

teammates looked up to her, but she also was a lot more driven and wanted to succeed farther than her teammates ever imagined, therefore, it resulted in her feeling isolated at times. This was not the case for all the women, as others had very positive relationships with their teammates.

Though each had their own individual struggles associated with wrestling, some women mentioned that their teammates were overly accepting of their participation. Participant 1 was an exception because she was already familiar with her teammates because she had a brother on the team who helped her assimilate to the culture. However, when she was struggling with her lack of experience, she felt an outpour of support from her teammates. She recalled one experience, saying, “I just broke down and the boys came over and hugged me and said, ‘it’s ok.’ That’s one thing I loved about the sport; it really helped me with the anxiety that I had been dealing with.” After Participant 20 was named captain of her mixed-gender team, she recalled her teammates being incredibly receptive to her being in the leadership role. In fact, she said her male teammates just saw her as “one of the guys.” These relationships that the women are facilitating with their team, coaches, and even the connection they have to the sport on a broad scale, contributes to the way that they are self-categorizing themselves as high school wrestlers. An additional factor to consider is whether women are acting in the way that they believe high school wrestlers would act or adhering to stereotypes commonly associated with wrestling. Women are likely behaving the way that high school wrestlers should, insofar that they have self-categorized themselves as being a high school wrestler. Stereotypes and norms occur on the group level and individuals tend to use those beliefs to guide actions towards members of such groups. Thus, the next sections will focus on describing

stereotypes commonly associated with women wrestlers' temperament, how they behave in matches and determining whether women felt like they fit the stereotypes identified.

When asked about the stereotypes associated with being a woman in wrestling, participants reported a mix of responses with both positive and negative connotations. For example, Participant 2 reported that she was commonly stereotyped as being masculine and aggressive, though she felt she very nurturing. Participant 24 said that people generally picture women wrestlers as being very "butch" which is why she was confused for being gay after shaving her head her sophomore year of high school. Similarly, Participant 17 said that the minute she started wrestling, people started questioning her sexuality and gender identity and assumed that she was aggressive because she wrestled in the highest weight class for women. Regarding this experience she said,

I train with Olympians, and I am very dedicated, but after people get to know me, they are really surprised. They're like, 'Wow, you're just not who I thought you would be.' I would say, 'why would you think that?' and they would say, 'because you are a wrestler.'

Whether Participant 17 surprised individuals in a positive or negative way, there are preconceived notions or assumptions just because she is a female wrestler. Participant 22 had a similar experience with her peers in school and the way she was seen. She explained,

A lot of people didn't like me, or they were scared of me. I was super nice to everybody, and some people would come talk to me finally after I've gone to them for six years, and they would be like, 'Oh you're really nice. You're not

mean at all.’ That would really upset me - just because I wrestled doesn’t mean that I am mean, and it doesn’t mean I am going to hurt you.

These stereotypes are interesting because they call into question the temperament or character of female wrestlers, but do not necessarily explain stereotypes associated with their behavior or skill during matches.

There are varying responses between men and women when considering what it means to ‘wrestle like a girl’ or how women behave during matches. From a male wrestlers’ perspectives, women were oftentimes described as being “wimpy,” “soft,” “not winning” (Participant 3), “indecisive,” or “timid” (Participant 4). When asking Participant 9 what it meant to ‘wrestle like a girl,’ he explained,

It means you were just half-assing takedowns, or trying to take down people super lightly so they don’t get hurt. I guess you could say it’s just a softer way of doing something. My dad wouldn’t tell me to stop wrestling like a girl, he’d say, ‘don’t be a pussy.’

Similarly, Participant 23 described wrestling like a girl as “you’re wrestling a pussy, or you are not doing the things you’re supposed to do.” When men believe these stereotypes to be true, they often guide their behaviors or actions towards women wrestlers. This is shown when men treat their female opponents with extra caution, or when they do not view them as being true competitors. Referring back to a quote previously mentioned within the challenges section of this paper, Participant 14 explained that one of his matches against a woman lasted approximately 15 seconds and he was advised to be gentle, avoid big throws, and pin her quickly. Contrary to many men, a few did associate

female wrestlers with positive qualities. For example, Participant 12 called women wrestlers “trailblazers” and said,

I initially saw women in wrestling as a negative thing, but it’s flipped with the emergence and growth of women’s wrestling. In the past if someone said you ‘wrestled like a girl,’ you would have been seen as someone who isn’t good at the sport. I think women are setting the platform for the sport to grow. I see the growth of the sport and what it has done not just on a national level, but at the collegiate level too, which is a really cool thing.

Participant 12’s words were echoed through Participant 19’s response,

When I started wrestling in 5th grade, I looked at girls as being sissies or bad wrestlers. I think that it has changed as more girls become involved in the sport. Girls can be just as successful as a boy can in the sport. I think most of them work just as hard as boys, and I think that even wrestling in the boys’ tournaments they can go just as far. Some girls have proven that by placing in state tournaments across the U.S., so I think watching girls wrestle at the Ohio state tournament (OHSAA) has opened my eyes to that. They are the same as male wrestlers; they work and drill just like we do.

This is interesting because it shows that there has been a shift in opinions or attitudes of how women behave since the sport was sanctioned. These positive regards for women wrestlers are consistent with the way they view themselves as athletes or true competitors.

Women were incredibly positive when discussing the ways that they compete in matches, or the positive stereotypes that are cultivated by their participation. Instead of

being referred to as “weak” or “timid,” women used adjectives like “strong” (Participant 2), “experimental” (Participant 6), or “passionate” (Participant 20). Participant 22 recognized that female wrestles often carry negative assumptions, but it does not bother her. Rather,

Some people take those stereotypes as an insult, but in my case, I know I’m kind of a badass. If you want to wrestle me, go ahead. I take it as a compliment. Have you seen Helen Maroulis and Adeline Gray? If you want to say I wrestle like them – thanks! There’s a lot of badass girls out there that can wrestle and probably beat half the boys on the mat, so I’ll continue to take it as a compliment.

On the other hand, Participant 20 understood that women in wrestling have always had “the short end of the stick,” and have had to prove their place on the mat. However, she said that the lack of support and respect took a toll on her:

It takes a lot more out of us and a lot more gumption to wrestle a girl. They boys can just walk out, and they don’t have to even be good, everyone still supports them. Girls don’t get that. Even now in college, we see it with our spectators at tournaments. They guys will draw a full gym and we’ll have the parents of our team. It really starts to take a toll on you when you pay attention to it.

Lastly, Participant 11 explained that women have a competitive edge that comes from wrestling men. She explained that there is a different kind of intensity that women bring because they are so used to defending themselves. Therefore, when she thinks of women wrestlers, she’s thinking of “the mental fortitude, and the physical and emotional strain you must have to go out and do a sport that is considered controversial.” These experiences are important because they highlight that not only are women navigating

issues with their coaches or teammates, but they are also trying to navigate stereotypes that are not true reflections of who they are and their identity as high school wrestlers. Along with facing stereotypes, many women noted feeling an internal conflict between who they were in the sport of wrestling and who they were outside of the sport.

Women who adopt the behaviors or conform to the norms associated with wrestling, noted facing an internal conflict. In other words, they explained they had a hard time ‘flipping the switch’ between who they were on the mat and who they were off the mat. This could be attributed to various things; however, it is likely that this is because of the demand and dedication wrestling requires. Participant 15 explained this best when she said,

Wrestling is a lifestyle at the high level, and you have to sacrifice a lot. I think in the past I have not been good at changing or being able to switch between wrestler me and school me. It was a tricky balance that I think I have gotten better at through the years. I’ve gone through struggles where I had nothing else except wrestling and that is hard.

This is consistent with Participant 1, who explained that she felt like she had “two different identities” between going to school and wrestling practice. School was not the only time where participants felt inner conflict, sometimes this occurred at wrestling tournaments or in matches. For example, Participant 11 said,

There are times where I’ve gone into a match, got off the mat and looked at myself like ‘what the hell am I doing?’ There are times where you feel like you have a personality change all the sudden, like you go from super sweet or super nice to aggressive. Sometimes I feel like I want to rip people’s faces off; I am

aggressive for no reason. But at the same time, there are some tournaments where I'll feel like normal me.

Participant 22 also had a similar experience:

When I step on the mat, I'm very focused. Whereas daily, I'm having fun, laughing, joking with everybody. But as soon as it was go time and it was serious, I had my tunnel vision. In high school there was wrestling me and then outside of wrestling me.

While participants felt that they had two different identities in different situations, many found comfort in wrestling. For instance, Participant 20 said that she felt like her truest self at wrestling tournaments. After stepping away because of life complications, she realized she had to go back because it was who she was, and it would never go away. Participant 13 admitted to having anxiety on a normal basis, but she was able to channel it through wrestling. Nonetheless, when individuals are facing conflicting identities, they may discard one identity, use one over another, or try and integrate both (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). When an individual is unsuccessful in the way that they are managing their identities, it could affect the degree to which they are affectively tied to their team or even the sport in general. Before discussing the affective component of participants' social identity, it is imperative to also shed light on the cognitive component of male wrestlers' social identity.

4.9.2 Cognitive Component (Men)

Similar to the women who wanted to be successful or wrestle at an elite level, men noted that wrestling requires a lot of dedication. When considering the relationship of the individual and the sport of wrestling (i.e., self and sport), many indicated that the

sport actually became their entire identity. For example, Participant 8 said “wrestling became my life from the end of October to the beginning of March. Your diet changes because of it, how much you drink, it’s easy to get lost in that at times.” Participant 9 echoed this when he said,

I kind of made the sport my identity. So, in high school, I’d wake up at four in the morning and go work out, go to school, make good grades, then go to wrestling practice. And then I’d go home, maybe eat like a chicken breast or something, work out again if I needed to, or just go to bed.

A recurring theme among both men and women was that wrestling dictated even simple and mundane things that we often take for granted, like what we eat, or going home after a long day to relax. Nonetheless, male wrestlers mentioned the sport allowed them to create bonds that they may not have otherwise. Oddly enough, Participant 14 created a bond from wrestling that he never expected to create. While he was visiting his grandparents in their gated community for seniors and playing a backyard game of kickball, he met a former wrestler. He explained this interaction, saying,

There was a guy on my team with cauliflower ear, so I asked him if he wrestled when he was younger. He mentioned that he was a four-time Iowa state champion, and I told him how I was a four-time Florida state champion. We talked the entire time; we didn’t even really play much kickball. It’s kind of funny how you can go from being complete strangers to best buds in five minutes.

While this interaction is just one example, Participant 14 admitted that he felt like he was entwined with the rest of the wrestling community, since he had been around the sport for so long. The lasting bonds that participants created with others who shared a similar

interest contributed to their understanding of the sport as being overly accepting of everyone. Participant 23 explained that he believes wrestling is a sport for everybody, no matter who you are. He believes that men and women of all shapes and sizes participating is the best thing about the sport. Similarly, Participant 18 explained that wrestling celebrates differences, especially because someone's downfall could be an upside for another individual or opponent. Further, someone's uniqueness, quirkiness, or their disabilities can be an advantage. This was true for one Ohio wrestler who was diagnosed with autism and bilateral retinoblastoma as a baby, which left him blind. These disabilities did not keep him from wrestling; in fact, he participated in the 2021 OHSAA state championships (Hall, 2021). All in all, male participants had positive regards for their sense of belonging within the sport on a broad level (i.e., self and sport). However, the relationships that men are fostering with coaches (i.e., self and team) and teammates (i.e., self and teammates) should also be assessed for how they are contributing to their social identity.

Most men mentioned positive sentiments regarding their relationships with their teammates and coaches. Time after time, men referred to their relationships with their teammates as a "brotherhood" (Participant 23). In fact, Participant 23 said that when it came to wrestling, he did not have friends, instead, he had brothers. Others, like Participant 5 said that when new teammates came in, he just became friends with them. Participant 18 felt that he had a unique bond with his teammates because of the individual nature of the sport. He said,

It creates a bond that not many other sports can create, because for football or basketball, you're a team, so the person's always going to be supporting you, but

this is completely different. It's not them supporting you because you're objectively going for a common goal. It's them supporting you because they can be empathetic for your goal, and that you are consistently laying it all out there in a way that no other high school sport really offers.

Participant 3 said something similar when he explained that “there is literally nothing like being part of a wrestling team. The guys are close all the time and there is nothing better. No other sport has come close to the camaraderie you get with wrestling.” These quotes speak to the physical nature of the sport, but also help differentiate wrestling from other sports.

Many participants attributed their sense of belonging to the fact that their coaches created a safe space or supportive environment where there was no favoritism. Participant 23 explained that his high school coach held wrestlers to an extremely high standard, regardless of whether they were a freshman, senior, on varsity or junior varsity. However, there were a few men who were outliers because they had unique individual experiences and some who did not feel like they belonged with their team. For example, Participant 8 felt like he fit in with his team and teammates during his early career, but a shift in coaching led team dynamics to fall apart. He explained that he felt like it was his responsibility to straighten everybody out which ultimately left him with a target on his back. Participant 18 also took a leadership role on his team and explained at times he was treated differently, and he felt like he had a sense of belonging because he could cultivate the team around himself and his interests. Further he explained,

We had a small team and originally I was wrestling because it was socialization for me. Then it became, how can I cultivate my friend group around this because

we have a similar state of mind. As I got more serious, my coach came to my house after practice, and he was like, look, you're the only one here that I can tell wants it, so I am going to support you in any way possible. You've really got to go out there and get after it because you're honestly the only one who gives a damn.

Participant 9 said that while he was friends with his teammates outside of practice, they avoided wrestling with him during practice because of his aggression. He also admitted that whenever he was drilling with his teammates during practice, someone always ended up hurt. Whether it was a bloody nose or a dislocated finger, his teammates tried to avoid him. Despite struggling with being aggressive in practice, Participant 4 explained that there were times he felt isolated from his teammates because he felt like he had to try harder than most due to his lack of experience and because he was slower at picking up on moves. Similarly, when asked whether he felt like he fit in with his teammates, Participant 16 replied "here and there," but emphasized that it really depended on the teammate. He also explained that he felt like he would often get taken advantage of by his teammates because he was on the smaller side and he stood out because he had long hair. He even went as far as referring to himself as an "outcast" because he had a heart and skin condition that required him to sit out from drills during practice. Consistent with women wrestlers, it is imperative to consider the stereotypes that men are also navigating and how they are affecting the way that they are self-categorizing within the sport.

Men mentioned several stereotypes that they both fit and did not fit into. One of the most common stereotypes associated with male wrestlers is that they are considered

hypermasculine. There were only a few participants who noted feeling like they fit this stereotype, with Participant 23 explaining,

I'm definitely hypermasculine, but it's a good thing. I definitely consider myself more masculine, especially for what my generation is turning into. I use that for how I conduct myself, whether that be hitting the weight room every day, accomplishing goals, being a protector or a provider, things like that.

In this instance, Participant 23 was associating his hypermasculinity as being a positive character trait. Similarly, Participant 21 admitted to seeing himself as hypermasculine, but it was because he was raised on a farm. Being from Iowa, he noted that many great wrestlers were farm kids who grew up throwing hay bales rather than lifting weights. Generally, men explained that they felt like they did not fit the hypermasculine stereotype. For example, Participant 18 referred to himself as being a "big teddy bear" who was involved in the sport for socialization more than anything else. When asked if he fit the hypermasculine stereotype, Participant 8 disagreed and described himself as "easygoing." The hypermasculine stereotype was oftentimes looked to as being synonymous with displaying aggression.

Despite both men and women wrestlers describing aggression as being critical to the success of a wrestler, it was something that men described having trouble embracing. For example, Participant 5 said that he actually lacked aggression in wrestling, even though it was something you have to have. Participant 4 pushed back by explaining that he thought wrestlers tended to be shy and keep to themselves, while Participant 14 agreed and said aggression is not something that can be taught, rather it varies from person to person and must come from the inside. While aggression is consistent with the

temperament of wrestlers, there were several physical characteristics that men associated wrestlers with having. Notably, participants associated wrestlers with being “short, stout and very muscular” (Participant 16). Participant 5 explained that when he first started wrestling he considered himself to be a short and chubby kid, which left him no other choice than to get more fit for the physical demands. Participant 19 said there were a few times when he was in high school that people said he looked like a wrestler, but he did not necessarily think he fit the stereotypical description. Another stereotype with contrasting viewpoints was wrestlers’ intelligence level. For instance, Participant 8 believed there was an assumption that wrestlers were “really stupid, or only dumb kids wrestle.” On the flip side, Participant 14 believed wrestlers were associated with having a high intelligence level. He said, “when teachers learn we are part of the wrestling team, they are like, ‘oh then we definitely have smart kids in the class and all our GPAs are high.” Though only a few participants mentioned intelligence level as being a stereotype, it is important because it carries varying connotations that have no true association or reflection of the sport.

Lastly, many participants recalled being stereotyped as gay because they were wrestlers. Participant 3 said that he was oftentimes perceived as being different, or that he and his teammates would “get hit with it being a ‘gay’ sport.” Echoing this, Participant 8 said that many people described wrestling as the opportunity to simply “touch other men.” While Participant 16 explained that “looking at two sweaty guys rolling around with each other, you could see it as being gay, but when you really look into it, these guys are strong, aggressive, and just really athletic.” It is worth noting that while men recognized that they were stereotyped as being gay for their participation in the sport,

they reiterated that it did not bother them or affect their desire to participate. However, something that did affect them, was their ability to ‘flip the switch,’ or find a delicate balance between managing facets of their identity that were and were not associated with wrestling.

To reiterate, ‘flipping the switch’ was an in vivo code to describe the inner conflict wrestlers were facing when they were managing who they were inside and outside of the sport. Generally, they associated ‘flipping the switch’ as synonymous to being aggressive while wrestling. However, they also recalled struggling at times to turn this aggression off when they were outside of wrestling, whether that be literally outside the proximity of a wrestling mat, or figuratively outside of wrestling season. Participant 19 described this internal battle best when he said,

In my day to day, I’d lash out and be in a bad mood. When you get in the wrestler’s mindset of things, you want to be aggressive when you’re on the mat, or right before you’re getting ready to go out on the mat. Some days, I would embody that throughout my whole day, throughout practice, and then when I went home. In high school, I saw wrestling as the definition of myself as a whole person. If I lost a match I should have won, I looked at that loss at me losing in all aspects of my life. I wasn’t able to ‘flip the switch’ and leave those emotions of anger or frustration on the mat.

Likewise, Participant 21 explained that immediately following a loss, it is really hard to turn off those upset, “disappointed, pissed at yourself emotions.” Some participants really did struggle to get to a place of aggression, or truly ‘flip the switch.’ For example, Participant 18 admitted that for him to ‘flip the switch’ before a match, it required him

“to go to a dark mental place where he (I) was a little unstable.” Regardless of whether that was a place of aggression, it reiterates that there was an internal battle for these individuals to try and embody a certain persona or characteristic. This was further supported by Participant 3, who explained that he did have an edge socially, but it really takes a lot for him to get there. Participant 16 explained that he really had to try and switch moods when he was in a match because he was a very positive and nice individual. However, he said,

If you would meet me on the mat, you would see me as being a jerk, because you have to be that way. I go out there and just wrestle. Whatever happens, happens. If they get hurt, then that’s just a part of wrestling. It’s harder for me because others can actually be like that on a daily basis, but I’m not like that at all.

Wrestlers had to ‘flip the switch’ for issues aside from aggression. For example, Participant 12 explained that he did not fit into the physical stereotypes associated with wrestling. In fact, he struggled because he did not look like other wrestlers and had to come to terms with the fact that he was not as big, or as strong as some of his opponents. Rather, he said,

I kind of walk around and I look like a skinny nerd. And when I’m wrestling, I feel so much different than that. Kids are much bigger and stronger than me, but I am able to do things against them that you wouldn’t think I would be able to do because of the way that I look.

This example demonstrates that ‘flipping the switch’ involves having a skillset that is specific to wrestling. Though not related to looks, Participant 14 explained that wrestling prompted him to have a certain level of focus that he did not have in his typical day-to-

day. More specifically, he said, “I’m not really focused inside of school, but as soon as I step on the wrestling mat, I’m like ok, my focus is on wrestling.” Understanding certain issues male wrestlers face that may affect their self-categorization is necessary, as this may be a precursor for the emotions an individual feels towards their identification. For example, Phinney (1995) explained that in order to feel a sense of pride towards a particular group membership, individuals must first self-categorize themselves as being part of the group. Therefore, the next section should concern affective identification, or as Johnson et al. (2012) describes the feelings of oneness with the group.

4.9.3 Affective Component (Women)

Albert et al. (1998) explains identification includes more than just the cognitive component, or self-categorization, it also engages our hearts. In fact, Kessler and Hollbach (2005) note that both the cognitive and affective components reinforce one’s identity. To determine whether participants were affectively tied to the group, they indicated whether they felt emotionally invested in their team. Emotional investment is not a new construct, as Pinherio dos Reis and Puente-Palacios (2018) defined it as “the relation to one’s awareness about belonging to the group and evaluations of the group” (p.143). Further, I defined emotional investment as the degree to which participants felt a sense of attachment towards their team, or felt supported, which generally came in the form of cheering, supporting teammates, or relational closeness with teammates and coaches. Interestingly enough, women generally felt emotionally invested in their teams regardless of if they felt a sense of belonging. This is not surprising, as Ashforth et al. (2008) explains that the affective dimension individuals experience is generally positive

because they want to feel positively towards group membership. For instance, Participant 24 had a hard time identifying with her teammates because she saw herself as being more driven and interested in competing at the elite level. However, she still reported being emotionally invested in her teammates. In fact, she said,

I'm a person who wears my emotions on my sleeve. When my teammates had trouble or they were new to the sport, we would see them succeed and it was something special. When they took those hard losses, it hurt. When my best friend and training partner made it to the state finals, she ended up losing and took a really hard loss. It was hard for me to even celebrate because I felt for her more than I wanted to feel my victory.

This quote highlights how Participant 24 wanted her teammates to succeed, even more than herself at certain times.

Participant 2 also mentioned feeling like she had no support system from her teammates, in fact, she went as far as to say she was bullied by her teammates, but she still felt emotionally invested. She explained that she always had a talk with her teammates after they lost, and she would try and sympathize with them and tell them ways to improve. Those who took leadership roles on their teams, like Participant 11, took responsibility for their teammates' hard losses. She said, "when my teammates would have a big win or loss, that would affect me because it was my job to train the girls on our high school team." Participant 17 explained that she felt invested in her team because she knew the demands of the sport. For example,

You see her cutting weight, you see her running miles, you see her taking that extra shot even when her last two or three shots were perfect. And you can't help

but get invested in that. You see girls get bruised from wrestling and then they still get back up and go out there and fight. You can't help but buy into the story that you're seeing in real time.

The emotions women felt towards their teammates or felt as a result of their teammates triumphs or tribulations serve as a factor in the affective component of their identity. In the event that females felt emotionally invested in their teammates, or positive emotions towards their teammates or participation in wrestling, it could have positive implications for their identity, or even contribute to their success. Contrastingly, if individuals experience negative emotions towards their teammates or participation, it could result in negative implications. This is consistent with Kessler and Hollbach's (2005) findings that describe identification as increasing with happiness (i.e., or positive emotions) towards the ingroup or anger towards the outgroup, or identification decreasing with anger (i.e., or negative emotions) towards the ingroup and happiness towards the outgroup. In short, identification with certain groups is stable, whereas it can be ever-changing with others. Assuming that women consider their teammates to be part of the in-group, experiencing negative emotions or not feeling emotionally tied to their teammates could decrease their identification with the team, or even broadly within the sport of wrestling. Moreover, it could even affect an individual's self-esteem as that is typically bound by group membership.

4.9.4 Affective Component (Men)

Similar to women, men felt emotionally invested in their team regardless of whether they felt like they belonged. In fact, many of them referred to emotional investment as being an extension of a good teammate. This shows that many male

wrestlers must be categorizing themselves as part of the team and believe emotional investment (e.g., cheering for teammates, being empathetic after a loss) was part of the expected behavior of a teammate, or they were behaving in a way that they believe teammates should. For example, Participant 3 explained, “everyone would be happy and cheer during the exciting matches and celebrate afterwards. When you lose a tough match, somebody’s got to be there to pick you back up – I mean, that’s just how teamwork is.” Also consistent with the women, some men participants noted that they felt a teammate’s loss was partially on their shoulders because they did not adequately prepare them. This was demonstrated through Participant 12’s response when he said,

When you’re with each other throughout the year, by the end of it, you want to see them succeed almost more than you want yourself to succeed. Being with them the whole year, you see them at their highest points and their lowest points. It’s that ‘you win as a team; you lose as a team’ mentality no matter what. If your drilling partner that you train with everyday loses, you feel kind of like you lost yourself. Or you didn’t do a good enough job to prepare them.

Participant 23 felt similarly, and even expressed that seeing teammates win was almost like seeing himself win. Participant 9 explained that watching his teammate win his first state championship, and seeing how much it meant to his family was far more rewarding than winning his second state championship. Though it seemed that many of the participants responses echoed each other, Participant 16 referred to very conflicting viewpoints.

First, Participant 16 explained that he would get excited for his training partner, and when his training partner lost, he was the first to show him how he could get out of

that situation the next time. He also explained that performance during meets and duals were indicative of how much effort wrestlers put forth at practice. As a result, he was only emotionally invested in some of his teammates. He described this saying,

Sometimes for other wrestlers on the team, I wouldn't think they deserved a win, because they wouldn't show any effort at practice. They just liked to mess around and wouldn't take it as seriously as they should.

This is interesting because when asked if Participant 16 felt like he belonged with his team, he said "here and there" and explained that his sense of belonging varied based on each of his teammates. Contrary to many of the other male participants, Participant 16 may categorize himself as a wrestler on a broad scale, however, he has not fully adopted the identity of a wrestler within the context of his team. In fact, it is not unlikely that Participant 16 viewed himself as being different from his teammates because of the effort level he put forth, or that he experienced hostility from teammates he did not get along with as a result of not being part of the in-group. Despite an individual's social identity typically being referred to as a unidimensional construct, the cognitive, affective, and evaluative facets serve as vital components. The next chapter, concerning the evaluative component, should serve as a wrap up to the discussion of identity.

4.9.5 Evaluative Component (Women & Men)

The evaluative component of identity explains how individuals are describing their group membership in a positive or negative manner (Ellemers et al., 1999). Stets and Burke (2014) explain that the evaluative component is also related to an individual's self-esteem, as "the verification of social/group identities provides a general sense of being found" (p. 410). In this instance, the evaluative component of wrestlers' social

identities explains the extent to which they are evaluating their identity of being a high school wrestler or being part of a wrestling team in positive or negative terms. Broadly, this can be seen through evaluations of their participation in the sport in general. Participants noted the positive impacts of the sport through skills they learned or things that they see themselves using from wrestling, even after graduating high school. Oddly enough, there were consistent themes among both men and women that warranted combination of this section. For example, participants mentioned gaining skills like “stepping outside of one’s comfort zone and learning self-defense” (Participant 6), to “confidence” (Participant 10, 4, 5, 8). Most notably, Participant 2 explained that she made strong bonds with other women in wrestling and many coaches. In fact, creating friendships and bonds was a theme consistent amongst the female participants. For example, Participant 20 explained that she learned acceptance and finally felt a feeling of community. Specifically, she said, “it makes you feel like you can be open and talk to new people, you can meet new people freely because you do it every time you go to a tournament with thousands of people.” Participant 13 said “I think it teaches people about life and how to make strong relationships and bonds.” Aside from relationships, it taught both men and women participants how to take accountability and self-discipline.

Participant 11 elaborated on this when she said,

If you can go to a two-to-three-hour long practice in a 100-degree wrestling room and then still go home and do your homework, you have some kind of mental fortitude. For lack of a better word, wrestling makes you become used to feeling like shit constantly. If I can feel like this and still function, I can go get a job that’s only like five hours and I’ll be fine. Wrestling is an individual sport, so if

you mess something up, that was you, you can't blame that on your team. To be able to put yourself through that, take responsibility for your own wrongdoings and then go out and fix them, that builds your character as a person.

Likewise, Participant 16 said,

It'll teach you a lot of difficult lessons, maybe even some lessons that you don't want to be taught but you need to be taught. It really does make you the best version of yourself because in life, you have to keep going. If you get fired from a job, you'll find another. You get evicted from your house or your apartment, try to find a better place. It just teaches you how to continue moving forward.

Participants 12 and 21 had somewhat different takeaways from the sport, as Participant 21 mentioned that his biggest asset was the ability to take the knowledge that he learned from the sport and transfer it to other people. He explained that while his accomplishments are rewarding, they do not compare to the ability to take the knowledge he gained and try to grow the sport in some capacity. While Participant 21 has now graduated college, he explained that he took lessons from his high school coach with him in his collegiate wrestling career and now the workforce. He said,

My coach always told me, your next match is the most important match of your life. It's not because it's the biggest match, no, it's just the one you can control. It's the only thing in front of you that you have an impact on. Let's say I'm thinking about my nutrition, and I want to be fit for the rest of my life. That's a really hard thing to grasp, and I have to be disciplined to not eat this, only eat that. Instead, I am going to say, alright, what is my next meal? I'm focusing on one thing at a time, or the one thing that I have control over.

Comments or lessons like these were repeated by participants over and over, but this did not mean that participants did not carry any negative traits from wrestling beyond their high school career.

Similar to the challenges elaborated on at the beginning of this results section, many participants mentioned carrying certain negative characteristics with them. Participants consistently mentioned injuries, or their physical health being negatively affected by their participation. For instance, Participant 2 experienced ankle injuries that she is still suffering from and a broken tooth, whereas Participant 15 described it as being “mentally wearing.” Participant 11 referred to his body being that “of a 40-year-old,” while Participant 3 got his third concussion in wrestling. Both men and women explained that they are still experiencing the negative implications from cutting weight and weight challenges have affected their current and ongoing relationship with food. This is seen through Participant 20 when she said,

There are times when I just gorge, and gorge and I can't stop myself and I gain 20 pounds in two weeks. And there's other times where the sight of food, the smell of food, anything mentioned about food absolutely disgusts me and I don't eat for three weeks or once a day for a month.

Participant 11 had a similar experience stating that she constantly has people commenting on her eating habits because she has trained herself that she is not hungry. Likewise, Participant 9 mentioned that even as a college student, he is still in the habit of eating on \$25 a week. Specifically, he said,

I eat like two meals a day at best, and that's including a workout and a full day of school. I put a lot of pressure on myself to keep a good body figure. I still hold

myself to the standard that I have to have super cut arms, and I have to have a six pack at all times, because that's how I was when I wrestled.

Additionally, Participant 11 is dealing with negative impacts of wrestling that are unique to her individual experiences. Specifically, she explained that the hurtful comments her teammates used to say to her have really stuck with her. As a result, she feels like she must always keep persevering, even if that means through injuries, because she fears that she will be referred to as weak. She also admitted that because she participated in wrestling at a time when it was still up and coming, and she was routinely teased and confused for being gay, this caused her family with strong religious and southern values, to believe she was bullied into being gay. This is obviously not the case, and she has always been cognizant of her sexuality, however, it has taken a toll on her mental state. All in all, participants were incredibly thankful for what wrestling gave them. Nonetheless, by being able to evaluate their participation, especially focusing on their positive takeaways, this can have positive implications for their overall self-esteem and their regard for wrestling in general.

4.9.6 Summary

This section's purpose was to answer RQ₂ and RQ₃, "how are women managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?" and "how are men managing their social identity as a high school wrestler?" By breaking down an individual's social identity into three components (i.e., cognitive, affective and evaluative), it is clear that there are some consistent themes in the ways individuals are managing their social identity, but also some experiences that are unique to men and women. For example, multiple women reported having a hard time identifying with some of their teammates when they were not

putting in any outside or extra effort to train at the elite level, which was not something that men mentioned. Both men and women used adjectives like “accepting” or “community” to describe the broad sport of wrestling, though women noted that their male teammates tended to ridicule them for their participation. However, when asked if they were emotionally invested in their teammates, all but two participants mentioned yes, regardless of their sense of belonging. For one individual who mentioned not being emotionally invested, he included a caveat, saying that he felt invested in some of his teammates, just not all.

In terms of stereotypes, women described embodying stereotypes that were consistent with those of men (i.e., hypermasculine, aggressive, gay), but also described stereotypes that were strictly related to their skillset. For instance, when asked what it meant to wrestle “like a girl,” men generally used words or phrases that carried negative connotations, whereas women saw their participation as being a sense of empowerment. Both described having troubles with ‘flipping the switch’ or managing who they were inside and outside of wrestling, being aggressive, or even finding interests or different facets of their identity outside of the sport. Lastly, both men and women evaluated the sport of wrestling and mentioned positive takeaways in the form of skills or life lessons (e.g., self-discipline, confidence, relationship building, determination), and some negative effects of their participation (e.g., body image issues, injuries). Furthermore, these results provide insight into the unique phenomenon of high school wrestling and give an opportunity for theoretical extension, practical application, and to bring attention to a sport that is often referred to as “being in the shadows” (Participant 16) of other sports.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This thesis sought to understand the challenges and expectations that are put on high school wrestlers and the way that they are managing their social identities within the context of the sport. First, I revealed that there were nine challenges that participants faced: (1) weight, (2), mentality, (3) physicality, (4) health, (5) experience, (6) performance, (7) coaching, (8) inappropriate behavior, and (9) other. Challenges often stemmed from expectations that were put on the individuals (i.e., none, medium, high) by a number of sources (i.e., themselves, family, coach, community). These expectations ended in either a positive (e.g., expectation was met) or negative (e.g., expectation was not met) result. Lastly, questions pertaining to the individuals' three components of identity (i.e., cognitive, affective and evaluative) were asked. This revealed that there are consistent experiences across participants, some that are unique to one group over another, stereotypes associated with wrestling, the degree to which individuals were emotionally tied to their teammates, and their overall evaluations of the sport. The following paragraphs connect these results to the theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for new studies and future research.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This thesis extends theory in a few ways. First, social identity theory did help capture my participant's experiences to some degree, however, there were some issues in the way that I categorized and organized my data. While I organized the results based on the three dimensions of an individual's social identity (i.e., cognitive, affective, and evaluative), responses indicated that individual experiences are not always clear-cut and

oftentimes there is some overlap between the dimensions. For example, when participants reported feeling a sense of belonging, I associated that with being part of the cognitive dimension, or that it was a way of them self-categorizing with the group; however, it seems that it could also fall under the affective dimension, as a sense of belonging is also associated with positive feelings towards group membership. Therefore, I intend to restructure and look further into the nuances of my participants responses, to find a better way of organizing and differentiating the dimensions.

Next, the emphasis my participants put on the identity gaps they were experiencing warrants a different theoretical framework than social identity theory. While I did not ask specific questions related to the four postulates or frames associated with Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) (Jung & Hecht, 2009), participants responses suggested that this theory is more aligned with what they were experiencing. For example, when participants described struggling to ‘flip the switch’ or turn off a certain degree of aggression (i.e., Participant 19) they were experiencing conflicting frames. More specifically, participants had a hard time returning to who they were (i.e., personal frame) on a normal day after they had been aggressive towards others during a wrestling match or practice (i.e., enactment and relational), since aggression is natural within the parameters, or the culture of wrestling (communal). Rather, it may be that these four frames working in tandem explain more about the identity gaps participants were experiencing and that this process can affect an athlete’s long-term development of their identity and the way that they are identifying with groups “may increase or decrease over time because of the positive or negative interactions, messages, or events that enhance or threaten identities” (Zanin et al., 2021, para. 4).

Generally speaking, my results indicated that there is an odd dichotomy between the way that women are assimilating within the culture of the sport versus their teams. Specifically, women indicated that they feel like the sport has been accepting of their participation, but they have not received the same support from their teammates. Despite the exponential growth in female participation, my findings indicate that they are still being ridiculed or face issues assimilating within male-dominated teams. This creates a further issue of determining on what level the disconnect is occurring. The short answer could possibly be societal and gender norms; or its important to also consider what sports are considered culturally appropriate for women to participate in. In a study on homophobic language within rugby, Denison et al. (2020) suggest such may not inherently be a product of homophobic attitudes, but rather, it may be a result of normalized banter. In a context where acceptance is paramount and athletes are trying to gain approval of both their teammates and coaches, they may conform to these norms or behaviors. Given that wrestling is a male-dominated and highly physical sport like rugby, it is likely that these behaviors are carrying over. For example, in the event that males are discriminating against or isolating a female teammate, it is safe to question whether it is a true testament of their feelings towards her or her participation, or rather an attempt to conform to normal (i.e., descriptive norms) or approved (i.e., injunctive norms) behavior.

Along with making intergroup comparisons and evaluating the group in comparison with others, humans value self-enhancement. Therefore, another answer could lie in the fact that the need for positive self-esteem influences all social identity processes (Turner, 1978). In fact, low self-esteem is what drives individuals to self-categorize with others and social identification only reinforces self-esteem (Abrams &

Hogg, 1988). Thus, when individuals conform to the behavior of the in-group, or behavior of an in-group prototype, they may feel a higher degree of self-esteem. This also calls into question those who take leadership positions on teams (i.e., captains), the examples that they are setting, and how coaching styles could also be influencing these dynamics within a team.

It is not a surprise that the most successful sports teams have strong leadership. Oftentimes, some of the most influential leaders are team captains. In a study by Dupuis et al. (2006), researchers found that team captains collectively agreed that there were specific personal characteristics needed to be a strong leader: effective communication, honesty, respect, and a positive attitude. Participants also mentioned that a good captain is one who serves as a liaison between the coach and the players, further stressing the need for a positive coach-captain relationship and effective communication. While a handful of the men and women in my study mentioned being selected as captains of their team and expressed statements consistent with certain leadership styles (i.e., autocratic, democratic), it seems that gender could be a moderating variable between the styles and teammates perceptions of such styles. For example, in her thesis research on athletic peer-leaders on co-ed teams, Tanner (2016) found that when female and male captains enacted the same leadership style (i.e., heroic), women faced more social backlash. It is worth noting that a heroic leadership style is oftentimes seen as being assertive. These findings are consistent with my results, as Participant 2 explained that she was not taken seriously by her male teammates when trying to lead and advise them through drills at practice. Participant 20 said that her teammates just thought that was how she was, and often said, “yeah, there goes *participant name,* she’s in charge” and then they would

snicker. While Participant 20's teammates did not necessarily push back on her leadership, it is obvious that her teammates still had issues with her taking charge. Correcting or even challenging these assertions can lead to more practical implications, nonetheless, it is important to choose team leaders who demonstrate the aforementioned personal characteristics, but also encourage female athletes to continue taking leadership roles and recommend that male teammates treat female captains with the same respect that they would a male teammate. Dupuies et al. (2016) noted that participants in their study found that observing effective and ineffective practices from previous leaders, whether that be a captain or a coach, influenced their own leadership style. Therefore, it is also important to consider the influence coaches have and how it is affecting team cohesion, athlete satisfaction (Kim & Cruz, 2016), and social support (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015).

Most participants mentioned having satisfaction towards their coach or admitted to having a positive relationship with their coach. Cranmer & Sollitto (2015) found that social support received from a head coach predicted athletes' satisfaction with a head coach and athletes considered coaches to be effective insofar that they communicate information to them, demonstrate concern, and respond to their needs. Kim and Cruz (2016) noted that while it is common for coaches to handle co-ed or mixed gender teams, it is still important to consider numerous factors, like group norms, or expectations that would not be consistent across gender-exclusive teams. Further, coaches who are overseeing co-ed teams should try and understand the sociocultural situation of the group and use this to help motivate athletes towards success (Kim & Cruz, 2016). While my findings indicate that most coaches were supportive of their athletes, it only emphasizes a

need for research in the area of social support from teammates and the need for inclusivity on team. This research could help participants who did not identify with the in-group on their teams or could help increase one variable associated with an overall sense of satisfaction towards the sport of wrestling.

5.2 Practical Implications

Some participants mentioned functional ways that they were able to manage their social identity. A few of the women in my study explained their issues with assimilating to the culture of their teams, or fitting in. This caused them to seek outside support on social media. While seeking outside support can be viewed as both a positive (i.e., experiencing support from individuals associated with the sport) and a negative (i.e., a result of not having support from individuals associated with the team, school, family, community, etc.), it offered them guidance and connections. For example, Participant 2 felt like people were always willing to comment on videos she posted of her matches and offer advice and ways to improve, which was more than she received from her teammates. Likewise, Participant 17 created a Twitter and Instagram account to keep in contact with wrestlers she met at different tournaments and national events. Therefore, one suggestion for individuals who may not be self-categorizing with members of their team is to find others that share common characteristics or are willing to help. Similarly, individuals should remain willing to give support to others seeking it, as identity can be formed and managed through the communities created. However, it is also important to remain mindful of some identity management strategies that may not be as effective. For example, Participant 22 explained that she experienced tunnel vision in wrestling, which limited her to only interact with those who were within her 'line of vision' and ignore

those who were not part of it. As a result, she missed out on many fundamental moments and experiences with her teammates. Consequently from her experiences, other wrestlers can learn that once again, identity is built through interactions, relationships, and communities built. Though this is only one example, it is recommended that athletes be mindful of the tunnel vision they are experiencing and be mindful of how that is contributing to their ability or inability to identify with their teammates or coaches.

Additionally, it was not surprising to learn that many wrestlers noted struggles with weight management, cutting weight, and discussions of body dysmorphia, as the majority of research into the sport of wrestling highlights the very dangerous and unhealthy practices of cutting weight (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2009; Kinningham & Gorenflo, 2001). In addition to the discussion of weight management and cutting, other research into the sport documents the number of injuries sustained due to its physicality (Agel et al., 2007). However, the discussion of the mentality and experience level needed to be successful in wrestling, the struggles with coaching and inappropriate behavior that athletes, especially women are enduring, is relatively new within this context. As with all sports, there is some level of pressure to perform, however, my findings revealed that there are incredibly detrimental effects of putting high expectations on young athletes. One participant questioned her life after not winning, another mentioned that she cried often, while another mentioned that he carries regret with him, and the negative moments outweigh any fond memories of high school wrestling. This highlights the unique and intense stressors that high school wrestlers are under and calls into question when such stressors and feelings are worth participation. A survey conducted by the NCAA in 2021 of more than 9,800 collegiate athletes showed that the numbers for mental health

concerns were 1.5 to 2 times higher than those reported by athletes in 2020 (Johnson, 2022). Findings by the NCAA are consistent to those of Rice et al. (2016), who argue that the mental and physical demands placed on athletes may increase their susceptibility to mental health issues. Additionally, they argue that peak competitive years for young athletes overlap with the peak age that individuals tend to be diagnosed with mental disorders and athletes do not seek support or help for these diagnoses because of “stigma, lack of understanding about mental health and its potential influence on performance, and the perception of help seeking as a sign of weakness” (Rice et al., 2016, p. 1334). Given that there were multiple instances where participants mentioned being seen as weak, or their teammates being seen as weak, wrestlers specifically may be less inclined to report any mental health issues. Wrestling is also a highly individualized sport, where athletes obviously carry the burden of loss and expectations weight greatly on their shoulders. Therefore, I recommend that coaches, teammates, family members, or even athletes themselves, learn to understand the difference of weight in expectations from highly individualized sports vs. team sports and develop valuable coping mechanisms for when such expectations are not met. I also recommend that high school athletic departments broadly, or teams specifically, implement Purcell et al.’s (2019) elite athlete mental health and wellbeing framework.

5.3 Strengths, Limitations & Directions for Future Research

I consider my sample to be both a strength and weakness to this thesis. Because I recruited many participants from my personal network, I was able to get an equal number of both men and women to participate. This is important, given the exponential rise of women wrestlers within the last decade and because it makes sure that they are being

accurately represented in sport research. A large percentage of my sample were wrestlers from Ohio, as that is where I am from and that is where the majority of my personal connections currently reside or formerly resided. This, coupled with the issues I had with recruiting on Reddit, geographically limited my sample. However, my participants noted that there are some states where wrestling is more common, more popular, and better supported than others, which corresponds with my ability to access more participants from Ohio. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of my sample was White. Though I was able to give women a voice in this study, future research should continue to try and equally represent underrepresented populations (e.g., people of color).

Next, I intentionally chose to take a deliberate naïveté stance throughout the interview process and attempted to remain open to new findings. Through conducting interviews, I recognized that this was difficult for me to do, given the fact that I had my own experiences and close ties to the sport. While I do believe that this approach was best suited for this study, I offer this as a limitation and understand my position as a bias.

Despite many participants mentioning that they had been participating in the sport since they were young, I did not explicitly ask them how long they had been participating in wrestling, or how long they wrestled in high school, nor did I explicitly ask them whether they wrestled at the collegiate level. This could have contributed to the severity of their challenges or their evaluation of whether wrestling affected them positively or negatively. Future research should also consider how the length of an individual's involvement affects their participation, evaluation, or the challenges that they experienced.

Lastly, the context of wrestling, its roots, and the potential to experience identity gaps, suggest the importance for diving deeper into this phenomenon. However, future research could use wrestling as a case study for other predominantly masculine or feminine sports to look at how participation is managed. This is timely and relevant now more than ever with the rise of gender-nonconforming athletes and the way the trajectory of sports is changing. Wrestling suggests that gender is not a black and white construct in sport, and the rise of women's wrestling is both breaking barriers and changing its ideology. Further, it highlights that even sports that are deeply rooted in masculine or feminine ideology can make positive and inclusive strides within the context of gender.

5.4 Conclusion

This thesis investigated the challenges that high school wrestlers face, the expectations that are put on them, and the way that they are managing their social identities. As a result, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 participants who were former high school wrestlers. Participants had some consistent experiences with each other, though many had diverse individual experiences. Results indicated that despite an exponential growth in female participation, there is still a disconnect happening between men and women which could be attributed to different things. However, most men and women felt emotionally invested in their teammates and had positive evaluations of the sport of wrestling because of the life lessons and skills it gave them. Practically, my results highlighted that high school athletes are experiencing mental health struggles as a result of expectations not being met, challenges they faced, or poor performance. Therefore, I offer practical implications for how to combat these mental health issues and explain how I believe wrestling could be used as a case study for

other highly feminized or masculinized sports experiencing similar issues with gender. Lastly, I indicated that social identity theory might not fully capture the nuances of my participant's experiences as high school wrestlers, therefore, future research should also consider using the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as a framework in understanding the communication strategies women and men are using to negotiate their experiences.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Experiences & Expectations

1. What are your most memorable moments from your career?
2. What, if any, expectations did your coach have for you?
 - a. Probe: What, if any, expectations did your parents or community have for you?
 - b. Probe: What about your own expectations of yourself?
3. During any point in your high school career, were there any women on your team?
 - a. WOMEN: During any point in your high school career, were there any other females on your team?

Challenges

1. Can you tell me about a challenge you faced in wrestling and whether you were able to overcome it?
2. Have you ever wrestled in a mixed-gender wrestling match?
3. Can you describe some of the challenges that you faced during a mixed-gender wrestling match?
4. Did you feel a sense of support towards your participation in wrestling?
5. How, if at all, do you feel like you were treated differently than other wrestlers or athletes?

Identity

1. How would you describe your sense of belonging on the team?
 - a. Probe: I could prompt them by asking whether they felt like they fit in with their team.
2. How would you describe your sense of belonging with other wrestling communities like clubs, online communities, or interacting with/following wrestlers on social media?
3. How would you describe your emotional investment in your team?
4. Did you feel that you embodied any of the stereotypical characteristics or image of wrestlers, like being hypermasculine?
5. In what ways do you feel like you differ from or struggle to embody the stereotypical characteristics of a wrestler?
6. What does the phrase “wrestle like a girl” mean to you?
7. How, if ever, have you felt like a different person when you were wrestling versus just being you?
 - a. Probe: Did you have a hard time managing these conflicting identities?
8. Can you describe a time when people’s expectations for you in wrestling didn’t match how you see yourself?
9. What was the most rewarding thing about being a high school wrestler?
10. How has wrestling impacted you positively?

11. How has wrestling impacted you negatively?

General

1. Given your experiences or participation, how would you talk to others about an interest in wrestling?
2. How do you see the lessons or skills that you learned in wrestling carrying over into other areas of your life?
3. What advice would you give to someone who is just starting high school wrestling?
4. Are there any other memories you care to share from your experiences?

Demographics

1. What is your age?
2. What is your biological sex?
3. What is your race or ethnicity?
4. What year did you graduate high school?
5. What state are you from?
6. Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX 2. CODEBOOK

Level of Expectation	Definition	Example	Outcome of Expectations	Example
High	Any mention of high expectations, pressure, or actions that correspond with being held to a high standard.	I set a goal at the start of high school to place at state by the end of my senior year (9). My family believed I could be an Olympian the minute they saw me step on the mat for the first time my junior year (17).	Positive Negative	(-) I was so tough on myself that I spent a lot of time crying. I always thought that I had to win this match or I'm not a good wrestler (2).
Low	Any mention of low expectations, little pressure put on the athlete, or actions that correspond with being held to a low standard.	She didn't expect me to be like super amazing (6). When I first started out, they did not expect me to succeed (10).	Positive Negative	(+) It was an expectation from my junior year up that I would just do fine, and I'd be winning everything. It went from being like very low expectations, to very high expectations once girls wrestling was sanctioned (11).
None	Any mention of no expectations being associated with a wrestlers' participation.	None of my parents came from wrestling so they didn't really have any expectations (8). There weren't really any expectations (7).	Positive Negative	(+) In my freshman and sophomore years, I didn't necessary be that guy (who won key matches) and I wasn't. But in my later years, the pressure was on me because I had to be the guy to get it done because I normally did (8).
Level of Support	Definition	Example	Origin	
High	Any mention of high levels of support, or	One time my mom set up a GoFundMe and lots of people	Coach	

	wrestlers' perceptions of whether they felt their participation in the sport was welcomed or accepted.	from my town donated. Everyone also gives my grandma pop bottles and then people I don't even know who my grandma's Facebook friends are always wishing me luck.	Family Community Outside Support		
Low	Any mention of low levels of support, or wrestlers' perceptions of whether they felt their participation in the sport was partially supported or welcomed.	In Texas, wrestling is not popular, so we don't have a lot of support. It's about football, so the school didn't really care about wrestling. We had a tiny mat room that we could barely practice in (22).	Coach Family Community Outside Support		
None	Any mention of no support, or wrestlers' perceptions of whether they felt their participation in the sport was unwelcomed or not accepted.	When I was at the high school I wrestled at, I didn't feel any support. Actually, it was quite the opposite until my senior year (11).	Coach Family Community Outside Support		
Challenge	Definition	Example	Expectation	Origin	Outcome
Weight	Issues with weight including cutting weight, engaging in unhealthy weight loss practices, or body dysmorphia.	You have to be on weight, you have to be in good shape (...) the uniforms are also extremely tight, so it shows every little imperfection (8).	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Mentality	Mental blocks or references to mindset that can affect participation.	I would always doubt myself, even though I knew I could win (16).	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Physicality	Describes the intensity or the need for conditioning and physical shape within the sport.	Wrestling is just the most taxing sport. It was the durability to last through the season, even in single	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative

		matches you'd get extremely gassed (3).			
Health	Includes injuries, fear of injuries, deliberate attempt to cause injury or sickness that affects participation.	I had to wrestle a big tournament when I had just gotten over the flu (5). The goal was to go out there and hurt you. There were a couple of times that it was a little scary being out there (15).	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Experience	Lack of experience or knowledge with the sport, including moves, how to get out of situations, or rules.	I was brand new at this and everyone else seemed to have been at it awhile. I didn't know moves, or how to get out of situations (7).	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Performance	Issues surrounding the wrestlers' perspective of success or meeting goals, whether that be winning or simply being competitive.	When I got third at state, I just kept thinking, damn, now I have to win the next two years in a row, or I didn't accomplish my goal of being a two-time state champ. That was hard to process (24).	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Coaching	Issues surrounding changes in coaching, or conflict with coaches.	I had four different coaching staffs in my four years of high school. It was hard to adapt to their coaching styles. (19).	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Inappropriate Behavior	Issues surrounding referees, teammates, fans, coaches or opponents.	He full on groped my breast and would not let go (...) there was one guy on my team that said, 'I can't wrestle her	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative

		because she will tell people that I raped her' (2).			
Other	Encompassed challenges that did not neatly fit into the aforementioned categories/codes.	Finding a practice partner Having siblings/family on the team Lack of supper or funding from school	High Low None	Coach Family Community Self	Positive Negative
Identity (cognitive, affective, & evaluative)					
Male Wrestler Stereotype	A widely held belief or expectation for what a traditional male wrestler should look like, act like, or resemble.	Physique Lack Intelligence Temperament Gay			
Female Wrestler Stereotype	A widely held belief or expectation for what a female wrestler should look like, act like, or resemble. Also includes athletes' perceptions of how females wrestle during a match. Can include (+/-) perceptions that may change as a result of female sanctioning across states.	Soft Wimpy/Sissy Trailblazer Badass A wrestler Equality Experimental Losing Insulting			
Turn/Flip the Switch	A phrase to describe an inner conflict athletes faced when managing who they were inside the sport and outside of the sport. This is	I was going out there to do business. Outside of wrestling, I loved being social. You can be two different people when you turn the switch (3). Everyday me, I'm kind and positive. And then if you met me at practice or a wrestling meet, you see me as a jerk. Again, you have to be that and flip that switch (16).			

	synonymous with an identity gap.	
I vs. Them/Us vs. Them	<p>Phrasing that indicates participants saw differences between themselves and teammates, or a small subset of the team vs. the broader group.</p> <p>This includes participants acknowledgement of differences between treatment or perceptions that the participant defines membership to and the other group in comparison.</p>	<p>There was one person that supported me. He was blind and got bullied for it and I was this weird goth kid that nobody liked so we helped each other. I got made fun of (...) they were always like, well, if you can't do this, then you shouldn't even be on the team (2).</p> <p>They would talk amongst themselves, and I was always left out of a lot of things. They would tell me that I shouldn't be there (10).</p>
Emotional Investment	<p>Describes whether participants felt a sense of attachment/support towards their team, which can come in the form of cheering and supporting teammates, or relational closeness with teammates or coaches.</p>	<p>When you're with each other so much throughout the year, you want to see them succeed more than you want yourself to. You see them at their highest and lowest (12).</p> <p>It was hard seeing defeat and heartbreak, but it was also cool seeing the big wins and feeling those emotions, win or lose (19).</p>
		Emotional Investment
Self and Sport	<p>Wrestlers' perceptions of whether they felt like they belonged within the sport of wrestling.</p>	<p>When I started wrestling and I realized how many people were alternative or different, it made me feel confident that I belonged in this world (2).</p>

Self and Team	Wrestlers' perceptions of whether they felt like they belonged on their team, which can be shown through interactions with coaches and whether they were treated differently by coaches.	<p>Even at the end of my career, I still felt like an outsider, but in my little group, I felt like I belonged (11).</p> <p>My team was like a family. Everyone got along and we hung out every chance we got. (13).</p> <p>I think that there were a lot of expectations for me, but also leniency. My coaches let me do whatever I wanted (...) it has to do with who I was, and I was winning, and they weren't going to tell me no (24).</p>	Yes No
Self and Teammates	Wrestlers' perceptions of whether they felt connected with their teammates, which can be shown through interactions with teammates, or whether they felt like they were treated differently by their teammates.	I would get taken advantage of because of my weight, my long hair, and my heart. Taking a break made me feel like an outcast (16).	Yes No
(+) Impacts of Wrestling	Participants reflections of positive implications or gains from their participation in wrestling, including life lessons that they have taken with them from the sport.	It's learning that work ethic is a serious thing you develop and everything that you go through in the sport makes everything so much (18).	
(-) Impacts of Wrestling	Participants reflections of negative implications of their	<p>My body hurts all the time because of wrestling (12).</p> <p>I spent so much time focusing on wrestling that I kind of just forgot about everything else around me. I didn't balance it good enough (6).</p>	

	participation in wrestling.	
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Professional Publications

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Scott, A., Harrington, N., & **Herman, A.A.** (2023). Oncologists' perceptions of strategies for discussing the cost of care with cancer patients and the meaning of those conversations. *Health Communication*.
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Limperos, A.M., & **Herman, A.A.** (in progress). Uses and Gratifications Theory. *Handbooks of communication science: Entertainment Media and Communication*. Gruyter Mouton.

Conference Presentations

Wagner, T.R., Wolkins, K., **Herman, A. A.** (2021, March). *Social Approval, Social Comparison, and Digital Alteration as Predictors of Image Fixation*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association Conference (virtual meeting).

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