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Communication, Coaching and Positive Youth Development:  
Insights into the Female Athlete Experience

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in  
Education

by

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December 2022

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December 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Communication, Coaching and Positive Youth Development: Insights into the Female

Athlete Experience

By

Kelsey Marie O'Brien

This study investigates the experiences of fifty-one high school female wrestlers as they navigate the development of their athletic and individual identities. This study comes fifty years after the passage of Title IX which called for equal rights for women in sports and may serve as a checkpoint in evaluating where we are as a society as we strive for gender equity in sports. The female wrestlers in this study were interviewed about how they saw themselves fitting into the world of wrestling, how others perceived them as female athletes, and their coaching preferences. This study aims to shed light on the complex identity development that is navigated by female athletes, especially those in a male dominated sport, such as wrestling. The findings within this study indicate that while female athletes are still faced with gendered language that often “others” them and downplays their abilities, they experience identity empowerment and boosts in self-confidence through their participation in wrestling. Additionally, participants in this study identified communication and interpersonal support with coaches as two of the most important characteristics for coaches to possess. This study adds to the literature that supports the potential positive outcomes that girls can experience through their participation in sports. It also makes space for the voices of female athletes as they navigate the male dominated world of sports. Implications from this study can also inform the development of coach training programs and/or curriculums so that the needs of female athletes can be better met in the future.

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## **I. Introduction**

Sports have the potential to provide many positive developmental outcomes and opportunities for adolescents and young adults (Danish et al., 2005; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2007). However, it remains a pro-masculine domain which may impact its female participants' identity development as athletes and their abilities to progress in sports over time. Since the passage of Title IX in 1972, the number of girls participating in high school sports has increased drastically (NFSHS, 2019). Female athletes and women's sports are more visible in popular media whether it be for lawsuits fighting for equitable pay, investigations of gender equity within high profile organizations, or fighting for equal media coverage as their male counterparts. Girls and women in sports are using their platform more than ever to support younger generations and to earn the recognition they deserve. However, the world of sports remains distracted with the female/athlete paradox (Clasen, 2001) and riddled with gendered language that perpetuates harmful stereotypes (Bigler & Leaper, 2015). In order to reach a future where female athletes have the same opportunities and respect as their male counterparts, it is imperative to disassemble the limiting concept of femininity that has been constructed by a society that values masculinity and heterosexuality above all else.

As more girls join sports programs and continue to play sports for longer periods of time, there is a growing need to investigate the ways in which language impacts their identity development as athletes and as human beings. Communication between coach and athlete (Davis et al., 2019) and a coach's ability to teach (Stewart, 2016) are important parts of every sport and are crucial factors in the type of coach-athlete relationship that can be established. Historically, high school sports teams were coached by full-time teachers who offered up their time before and after school to support the school athletics programs. This meant that



high school coaches were first and foremost formally trained educators (Sage, 1989). However, more recently the trend has shifted towards hiring community coaches to take over unfilled coaching positions (Camiré, 2014). College coaches, on the other hand, have never been required to have any formal training or education in how to teach and develop student-athletes.

In recent years, there has been a global push for the improvement of sport coaching education led primarily by the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE) (Hedlund et al., 2018). As children and adolescents in general continue to spend more time playing sports, it is the responsibility of coaches to address the cognitive, social, cultural, and moral development of their student-athletes, with the added interest of developing physical competence (Bennett & Culpan, 2014). Furthermore, as girls and women continue to participate in sports at a high rate, it is important for coaches to have exposure to gender responsive methods of coaching (Norman, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is first to make space for the voices of adolescent females as they address their identities as student-athletes in a male dominated sport. It is my aim to highlight their perspectives of themselves within the female/athlete paradox that has been set forth by society. The second purpose of this paper is to add to the literature that links athlete's perspectives and preferences of coaching behaviors with practices of positive youth development. In doing this I argue for the development and implementation of a coaching curriculum guided by an asset based framework of positive youth development.

## **II. Positionality**

As a researcher committed to investigating the developmental outcomes of sports participation, the phenomena of the female/athlete paradox, and the complexities of the coach-athlete relationship, my identities as a white female former collegiate and professional

athlete play essential roles. My research is guided by the lenses of feminist and positive youth development theory which drive me to identify the inequities experienced by female student-athlete and recenter their abilities. As a qualitative researcher, I acknowledge the power that my interpretations hold when shaping and delivering the narrative of my study's participants (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Understanding that it is impossible for me to separate my identities and experiences from my research has led me to critically reflect on the questions I ask and how I ask them. It has also led me to slow down and question the initial conclusions that I come to throughout the analysis processes.

Until I became a researcher, I had never genuinely reflected on my identity as a female student-athlete. Beginning this research called for me to take time to authentically reflect on how I saw myself within the world of sports participation and how it impacts the way I carry out my work. I concluded for myself that the roles of being female, and an athlete are one and the same. Being a female did not stop when I put my water polo suit on, or when I was squatting my own body weight, or when I was studying as hard as possible so that I could remain eligible to play each season. Being an athlete did not stop when I was trying to find clothes that fit my muscular and ever fluctuating body, or when I was deciding which food would fuel me best for practice the next day, or when I was turning down vacations with friends to train. I never felt less feminine wrestling in the water or yelling in excitement with my teammates after scoring a goal and I never felt less like an athlete lifting weights with a gym full of professional NBA athletes.

Coming to this understanding of myself has led me to fully appreciate how intimately personal the identity of female athletes can be. My goal is never to speak for the girls and young women that I write about, but rather to make space for their perspectives in the male

dominated world of sports where female voices are still marginalized (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). In a world that views female and athlete as contrasting concepts while also constructing standards of beauty and athleticism impossible for girls and women to meet simultaneously, it is important to highlight the individualities that make us all unique. It is my hope that my research can be meaningfully added to the existing body of literature that is working towards a time in which the female athlete is no longer a paradox but a continuum of unique individuals.

### **III. Asset Framework for Positive Youth Development**

In order to contextualize the experience of adolescent female student-athletes in a way that acknowledges their unique position in the male dominated sport of wrestling, I utilize the Assets Framework for Positive Youth Development constructed by Wiese-Bjornstal and LaVoi (2007). This framework highlights the development of three assets specific to girls in sports: physical assets, psychological assets, and social assets (Wiese-Bjornstal & LaVoi, 2007). Within this framework, physical assets are developed through exercising certain decisions such as good health habits and risk management; psychological assets are developed through engaging in positive experiences such as commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity; and social assets are developed through experiencing productive use of time, support, empowerment, and connectedness (Wiese-Bjornstal & LaVoi, 2007). Possessing these physical, psychological, and social positive assets has been associated with successful development among youths (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Utilizing this framework allows for a better understanding to develop of how female student-athletes experience the phenomena of sports participation. Figure 1 was developed from Wiese-Bjornstal and LaVoi's (2007) *Assets Framework for Positive Youth Development through Physical Activity Participation*

among Girls chart to provide a visual representation of how each of the assets interact with each other in the production of positive developmental outcomes.

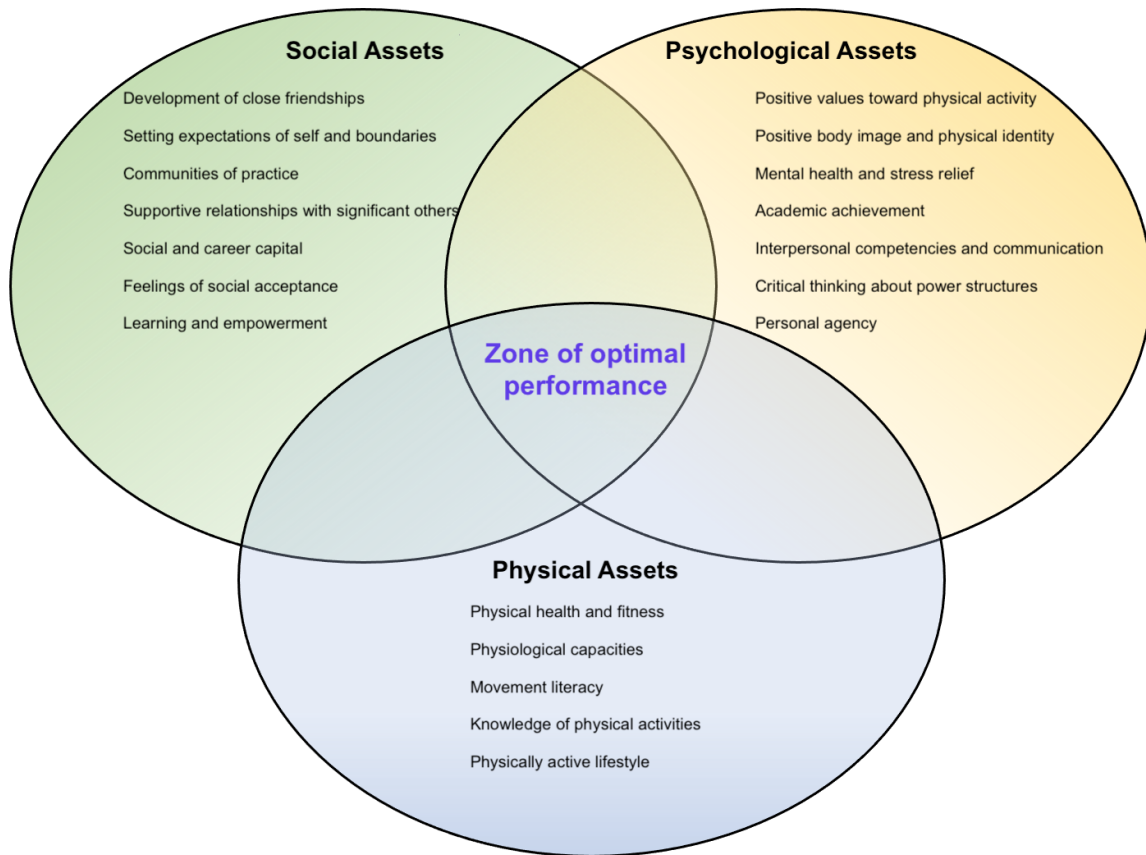


Figure 1: Revisualization of Assets Framework for Positive Youth Development through Physical Activity Participation among Girls

Note. The above assets were taken from Wiese-Bjornstal and LaVoi's (2007) framework.

Wiese-Bjornstal and LaVoi's framework is unique in that it focuses on outcomes of positive youth development specifically among girls participating in sports.

#### IV. Gendered Language in Sports

We are socialized to become our gender through a heterosexual paradigm which organizes specific ideas of what is feminine and masculine, as well as, organizing males and masculinity as dominant and females and femininity as subordinate (Kolnes, 1995). Within this heterosexual paradigm emerges the use of gendered language that is persistent

throughout all areas of life. The world of sports remains a patriarchal area of our society riddled with the use of gendered language which may have a strong influence over the identity development of young athletes. Gendered language is prevalent throughout all aspects of sports and disproportionately impacts those athletes who do not identify as heteromale (Adams et al., 2010; Tomlison and Yorganci, 1997; Halbert & Latimer, 1994; Messner et al., 1993). Gendered language can be defined as the use of words that assume an individual's gender identity, which in turn perpetuates gender bias and reinforces gender stereotypes (Bigler & Leaper, 2015). The use of gendered language can impact the ways in which children categorize and conceptualize people, actions, and objects around them. Using the findings of Waxman and Booth (2003) on infant categorization, Bigler and Leaper (2015) argue that "children raised in the presence of pervasive noun labels for gender (men, women, girl, boy) are likely to categorize the individuals that they encounter by gender and assume that same-gender individuals are similar to each other" (p. 189). The same concept could be applied within the realm of sports. Sports in which male participation is highlighted over female participation or vice versa (Halbert & Latimer, 1994; Messner et al., 1993), the use of aggressive or violent language that is often anti-feminine (Adams et al., 2010), and the labeling of sports as either pro-male or pro-feminine (Boiché et al., 2014) are just some examples of gendered language use in sports that may impact the ways in which young children and adolescents associate who can participate in them.

In the context of sports, gendered language is most visible within the media and through sports commentators. Studies that have analyzed the language use of commentators covering female and mixed gender sport events have established six areas in which the minimization of female sports participation can be categorized: asymmetrical gender

marking, gendered hierarchy of naming, ratio of praise to criticism, type of praise, character portraits, and gendering of athletic events (Halbert & Latimer, 1994; Messner et al., 1993; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). Examples of how female athletes' participation is minimized by sports commentators are marking women's sports events as a "women's" event while the men's event is just considered an athletic event, referring to female athletes as girls, ladies, and women while only referring to male athletes as men, regardless of age, criticizing the performance of women more than men, and praising women for their physique and the way they look instead of their hard work and abilities (Halbert & Latimer, 1994; Messner et al., 1993).

While gendered language use is best documented in sports media and sport commentating it is also present –albeit not as thoroughly researched– within the communication of coaches (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997; Adams et al., 2010). As the number of female athletes continues to rise, there is a need for male coaches to rethink the ways in which effective communication can be achieved in order to produce significant coach-athlete relationships.

#### **V. Who Becomes a Coach and How?**

The first coaches of high school athletics programs were subject teachers or physical education teachers who volunteered their time after school (Sage, 1989). Many coaches have been and still are Physical Education teachers who have gone through similar training as subject teachers (Lyle, 2002). As sports continue to grow, it is becoming more common for schools to hire community coaches (Camiré, 2014) and the current coaching workforce is mainly represented by former student-athletes (Krasilshchikov, 2015). The three primary sources of knowledge that often determine who becomes a coach are an individual's level of experience playing a sport (Cushion et al., 2003), observation of other coaches, and their

level of applied experience as a coach (Cushion et al., 2003; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001). Currently, some of the most common backgrounds possessed by coaches are in exercise science, physical education, and sport management (Zakrajsek et al., 2015). While understandings in these fields are appropriate to have, they do not offer much in the way of understanding human cognitive development and the social aspect of coaching diverse groups of adolescents or young adults. While it is important for coaches to have ample experience playing their sport there may also be a downside to having fewer coaches who have been formally trained as teachers.

There are currently no official standardized occupational standards for coaches to meet to be hired at any level within the United States. There are, however, programs such as American Sport Education Program and the National Federation of High Schools coaching education program that are considered to minimally prepare coaches for their role (Zakrajsek et al., 2015). The most recent publication of the Directory of College and University Coaching Education Programs reports that there are 148 undergraduate minor, 10 undergraduate major, and 21 graduate programs that focus on sport coaching (McMillin & Reffner, 1999). Although it is not required to earn a degree in sports coaching or complete a certification program, there is evidence that these types of programs do successfully support the skill development of individuals. In their review of intrapersonal coach development programs, Da Silva et al. (2020) found that coaches who participated in coach development programs “reported developing self-awareness, an awareness of players’ feelings and concerns, and an understanding of how to improve their coaching practices through reflection” (p. 833).

The Society of Health and Physical Educators now proposes 42 national standards that sport coaches should be aware of. These standards are divided into seven groups: 1) set vision, goals, and standards for sport program, 2) engage in and support ethical practices, 3) build relationships, 4) develop a safe sport environment, 5) create a positive and inclusive sport environment, 6) conduct practice and prepare for competition, and 7) strive for continuous improvement (SHAPE, 2022). These standards may help provide a roadmap for coaches to follow but without the proper training it may be difficult for them to attain all 42.

The amount of coach education programs, training programs, and college degree opportunities are a positive indicator of a general awareness that more support is needed for the development of sport coaches. However, the fact that these are not requirements for the field is still worrisome. Not requiring any sort of certification, training, or degree leads to a devaluation of these programs which I would argue in turn, keeps coaching from becoming a more recognized and serious profession, nationwide. After researching the curriculum of some of the master's programs offered in the US for Sport Coaching (West Virginia, Ball State, Michigan State, Western Michigan University, University of Northern Colorado, Ohio University, University of Southern Mississippi) I found that all of them required courses related to sport psychology, theories of skill acquisition, and developing an understanding in strength training. All programs also required some type of practicum, apprenticeship, or internship experience with some programs stating that individuals could participate as graduate assistant coaches. Very few of these programs had courses focused on theories of learning, human development, or positive youth development and many of the programs were only offered online. I bring this up to highlight my argument that it is imperative for coaches to develop an understanding of how adolescents and young adults learn and how best



to communicate with them, and that it is the responsibility of youth programs, high schools, and colleges to support the education of coaches for the sake of their athletes.

The main critique that sport coaching education programs receive is the lack of connection between the theoretical aspects of development and coaching, with the practical application (Callary et al., 2014; Lyle, 2002). While lecture-based courses around the elements of sports coaching are important, research shows that the most vital experience an aspiring coach can receive is the real-world experiences of being in a leadership position. In a review of seven national high performance coach education programs completed in 2014, researchers found that participants reported that the applied experience part of these programs were by far the most valuable requirement (Callary et al., 2014). Researchers argued the applied experience component was frequently combined with participating in a reflective process, mentorship, and becoming a part of a community of practice that called on the individuals to convert their experiences into knowledge (Callary et al., 2014). Some scholars argue that the future of sport coaching education should be centered around gaining field experience in multiple contexts to allow individuals opportunities to try out different methods, make mistakes, and reflect on their own knowledge in real time (Cushion et al., 2003).

While all these programs look and sound great for the future of coaching, the reality is that having a bachelor's or master's degree in sport coaching is not a minimum requirement to be a coach at any level. In my experience participating in multiple sports for 20 years and being around college athletics departments my entire life, most coaches are hired based on their personal accomplishments when they were an athlete. This is not necessarily an issue, but I do believe that there is value in coaches gaining a better

understanding of how people learn and develop, and how they can become better teachers, leaders, and mentors.

## **VI. What Makes a ‘Good Coach’**

The question of “what makes a good coach?” or “what does a good coach look like?” may be too complex to answer definitively. A good coach in one sport may not be considered as good of a coach in another. Coaches themselves all have different opinions on what makes them a good coach and what they wish to improve on to become a better coach (Jacobs et al., 2016). However, there are some characteristics and practices that are commonly agreed upon as best practice when it comes to being a good coach. What separates the good coaches from the mediocre is their constant engagement in critical reflection practice (Jacobs et al., 2016), their ability to develop a positive relationship with their student-athletes (Davis et al., 2019), their dedication to developing a unique sense of community (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), and their understanding of how to implement a constructivist-based framework in their teaching (Bennett & Culpan, 2014).

### ***A. Critical Reflection***

Critical reflection can be defined as the “intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to gain new understandings” (Voldby & Klein-Døssing, 2020, p. 540). The intrapersonal skill of critical reflection and self-awareness are both foundational skills that all coaches need to possess and practice to be successful (Da Silva et al., 2020). The strengths and areas of improvement that coaches possess change depending on the individual. There is not one set thing that all coaches across all sports need to focus on. Therefore, the process of critical reflection is important because it forces individuals to look back on their actions and behaviors, consider their own past experiences, and consider what their student-athletes need from them.

### ***B. The Coach-Athlete Relationship***

Within sociocultural theories of development, it is believed that an individual's identity is influenced and shaped by the world in which they interact with. The sociocultural practices that an individual performs aids in the forming of their identity (Vygotsky, 1978). Players within the macro- and micro-environments of an individual's life, such as parents, peers, community members, and teachers are often thought of as the main influencers in sociocultural practices that help shape their identity (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Boiché et al., 2014). However, with the growing number of adolescents that are taking part in sports, coaches must be included in this list (NFSHS, 2019).

The relationship that is formed between an athlete and their coach can contribute greatly to the athlete's identity development, self-efficacy, overall performance, and enjoyment of their sport. The coach-athlete relationship is a more recent topic of interest in literature surrounding youth development with little research focusing specifically on female athletes and their interactions with male coaches. The term coach-athlete relationship refers to the relationship that is formed between an athlete and their coach (Jowett, 2007). It can be defined as the inter-related emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are experienced between an athlete and their coach (Nicholls & Perry, 2016). It is also often described as the commitment, closeness, and complementarity that an athlete and coach are connected by (Jowett, 2007; Davis et al., 2019). The relationships experienced between coach and athlete are complex and vary depending on the personal values of each individual. Many studies have documented how an athlete's experience in their sport and their opportunities to experience positive developmental outcomes depend greatly on the behaviors exhibited by their coaches (Gould & Carson, 2010; Vella et al., 2013; Cruz & Kim, 2017; Choi et al., 2020).

The current literature around the coach-athlete relationship has found that athletes prefer their coaches to focus on training and instruction (Sherman et al., 2000; Cruz & Kim, 2017), provide positive feedback (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2012; Sherman et al., 2000; Norman, 2016), have a developed ability to teach (Stewart, 2016), offer social support (Sherman et al., 2000; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2007; Norman, 2016; Tucker & Black, 2017), and exercise democratic behavior styles of leadership (Tucker & Black, 2017). Democratic behavior in coaching has been defined in past research as a style of leadership in which coaches “work with their athlete to help make appropriate decisions and set their own goals” (Tucker & Black, 2017). In this type of relationship, the athlete and coach have more of a partnership in which the athlete is able to set their own goals and make their own decisions, as opposed to an autocratic relationship where the coach makes the decisions and tells their athletes what to do.

While there are some studies that offer insight into the coaching preferences specific to girls and women, most studies focus on the preferences of all athletes. As the world of sports has historically been dominated by males, it is important to highlight the voices, preferences, and needs of female athletes. One obstacle that female athletes continue to face is the inadequacy of coaches to efficaciously engage and bond with them (Norman, 2015). Current research supports the importance of building strong interpersonal communication between athletes and their coaches in order to produce positive developmental outcomes through sports (LaVoi, 2007; Avci et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2019). While communication is an important aspect of building a coach-athlete relationship for both male and female athletes, the ways in which the types of athletes wish to be communicated with differ (Stewart & Taylor, 2000; Cruz & Kim, 2017). However, due to the world of sports remaining

stereotypically masculine and with most coaches being male, female athletes encounter more perceived communication and relationship obstacles than their male counterparts, especially with their male coaches (Norman, 2016).

## **VII. Gendered Communication in Sports**

Communication and coaching practices of male coaches have been seen to differ across genders, but not always in an equitable way. Male coaches have been observed holding men and women to different standards within sport such as, having a winning expectation for men and a ‘try your best’ expectation for women (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). While some coaches may do this unknowingly, it continues to perpetuate gender stereotypes within sports that female athletes are not as capable or competitive compared to male athletes (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Norman, 2016; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). For girls and women athletes, progress and retention within their sports relies greatly on their relationships with their coaches (Stewart & Taylor, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that those coaches who are able to effectively communicate with and foster an environment to promote closeness with their female athletes are better able to support the development of their athletic identities (Felton & Jowett, 2013; Roşca, 2010; Norman, 2016; Choi et al., 2020).

## **VIII. Identity Development and Dualism**

Language shapes the way in which individuals are able to perceive and understand the world around them. It also impacts the ways in which individuals develop their own identity and the ways in which identities are forced upon them. On the dynamics of identity, Andrée Tabouret-Keller (1997) stated:

At any given time a person’s identity is a heterogeneous set made up of all the names or identities, given to and taken up by her. But in a lifelong process,

identity is endlessly created anew, according to very various social constraints (historical, institutional, economic, etc.), social interactions, encounters, and wishes that may happen to be very subjective and unique (p. 316).

Identity is not only chosen but given.

The types of language, words, and phrases that are used by adults shape the roles that children believe they should take on. When young children and adolescents are exposed to gendered language that categorizes certain types of people and activities into a binary feminine or masculine, it can impact their ideas of their own roles and abilities (Bigler & Leaper, 2015). Gendered language within the context of sports can challenge an individual's athletic identity and impact the types of sports that they participate in (Boiché et al., 2014). In a study of adolescents who participated in sports it was found that those who perceive gender-sport stereotypes to be present within their environment were more likely to adhere to those stereotypes (Boiché et al., 2014). Endorsement for pro-masculine stereotypes for girls and pro-feminine stereotypes for boys was associated with adolescent athletes dropping out of sports (Boiché et al., 2014). Rather than challenging the perceived norms of society, many adolescent athletes would rather quit the sports they enjoy participating in, demonstrating how pervasive gender stereotypes are within sports.

Evidence shows that even at higher levels of sport participation gender bias and stereotypes are still prevalent. For example, Tomlinson and Yorganci (1997) studied a track team with male and female athletes in the UK and observed many instances of gendered language and gender bias stereotypes. Female athletes were perceived as weaker, less committed, and as potential distractions to the male athletes by their male coaches. The female athletes were also given less assistance compared to their male teammates and one

female athlete was dismissed from the training program due to her “sexual activities”.

Gendered language such as “be a man” was used to berate athletes when they did not perform well. Challenging an individual's masculinity and thus setting masculinity as the standard is a well-documented practice of gendered language use in sports (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997; Adams et al., 2010). Setting the standard as heteromasculine effectively positions all other individuals who fall outside of this identity as lesser than or less successful (Kolnes, 1995), which perpetuates gender bias stereotypes that impact the participation of female and non-heterosexual identifying athletes (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997; Adam et al., 2010; Halbert & Latimer, 1994; Messner et al., 1993). Tomlinson and Yorganci (1997) discuss how gender bias language and behaviors are produced by coaches and society and then reproduced by athletes themselves. They found that 27% of athletes in their study reported feeling that female coaches lacked control and expertise with coaching groups, while 38% believed that male coaches were more effective motivators (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). The reproduction of gender stereotypes through gendered language use in sports may impact the roles that female athletes see themselves playing (Bigler & Leaper, 2015). For example, again in the Tomlinson and Yorganci (1997) study, many female athletes shared that they preferred male coaches to females because they saw them as more effective and were more closely associated with winning. This finding is also supported by other research in which athletes perceived female coaches as lacking competence compared to male coaches (Manley et al., 2008). I argue that this suggests that female athletes may also question their own abilities and explains why few female athletes become coaches.

While gendered language is often used to ‘other’ female athletes, another aspect of the coach-athlete relationship that research suggests may impact the retention and identity

development of female athletes is the lack of effective communication. There is much evidence to suggest that one of the most common reasons for female athlete dropout is directly related to issues with coaches that stem from difficulties in communicating effectively (Stewart & Taylor, 2000; Choi et al., 2020; Norman 2015, 2016). The link between positive coach-athlete relationships and effective communication has been well documented for decades. However, with the increase in the number of female athletes being coached by male coaches, research is now focusing its lens on how to best support female athletes. While both male and female athletes have similar expectations and needs of their coaches in terms of developing closeness within their coach-athlete relationship, it is important to recognize that the modes in which they achieve this relationship are different (LaVoi, 2007; Norman, 2015, 2016). The needs of men and women vary in recall of experiences and details of performance, responses to stressful situations and conflict, communication methods in which closeness is built and maintained, therefore coach-athlete communication should reflect the needs of the athletes (Norman, 2016).

This is not to say that female and male athletes training need to be more or less challenging than the others, but it is crucial that coaches recognize the impacts that gender identity produced by society has on female and male participation in sports. Due to the current pro-masculine bias that is pervasive within sports, male coaches must be aware of the gender relations between themselves and their female athletes (Stewart & Taylor, 2000; Norman 2015).

In 2001, Clasen wrote about the prevalence of the masculine/feminine dualism in U.S. sports. She stated that “by placing masculinity and femininity on opposite ends of a dichotomy, women have been excluded from the sporting world, because sports are defined



by masculine characteristics” (Clasen, 2001). This idea of masculine/feminine dualism is the foundation of the female/athlete paradox. Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013) define the female/athlete paradox as:

the struggle of attempting to maintain the mental and physical characteristics of what society has labeled as the essential elements of being a woman, or the hegemonic feminine ideal, while attempting to increase their hegemonic masculinity to achieve athletic superiority. (p. 86)

This paradox highlights the near constant juxtaposition that female athletes must juggle in order to be culturally accepted as both feminine women and serious athletes. The beliefs about gender that are still held by society today continue to restrict girls’ participation and access to sports (Rauscher & Cooky, 2018).

## **IX. Positive Youth Development**

Positive youth development theory’s roots spread out over many different fields such as child and adolescent development psychology, public health, sociology, social work, and education (Benson et al., 2007). Due to its characteristics as an umbrella term covering both multiple fields of research and areas of practice, there is no one set definition of positive youth development theory (Benson et al., 2007). With that being said, most, if not all definitions seem to agree that the theory of positive youth development shifts the focus away from a deficit perspective and highlights the potentialities of youths as they develop physically, psychologically, and socially (Damon, 2004). As a philosophy, positive youth development aims to develop the competencies, skills, and abilities that youths and adolescents need to flourish in life (Smith, 2016). Damon (2004) argues that positive youth development theory “begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world” (p. 2).

Within the past thirty years, the body of literature around the relationship between positive youth development and sports has grown considerably. Sports participation has been associated with student-athletes experiencing higher levels of self-esteem, problem solving, goal-attainment, and social skills compared to their non-athlete peers (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles et al., 2003; Richman & Shaffer, 2000; Holt & Neely, 2011). It has also been associated with higher GPA and lower rates of school dropout (Eccles et al., 2003; Marsh & Kleitman; Holt & Neely, 2011). Much of the research that has been conducted around positive youth development in sports focuses on entire sports programs or male teams. As the number of girls and young women participating in sports continues to increase, there is a growing need for research to focus on the phenomena of girls and young women entering the world of male dominated sports (LaVoi & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2007; NFSHS, 2019).

#### **X. The Present Study**

Presently, women and girls are still fighting for equality and equity in sports. While female athletes are being paid more and being provided more media coverage than ever before, gender inequality in sports begins with the interactions that young athletes have with their teammates, coaches, parents, and additional significant others. The language that is used to address adolescents shapes how they see themselves as athletes and individuals (Boiché et al., 2014). In the present study, previously collected open-ended interviews were analyzed through the lens of three guiding research questions:

RQ 1: How often and in what contexts do female athletes experience gendered language and gender bias in wrestling?

RQ 2: How does gendered language and participating in wrestling impact self-perception and identity development?

RQ 3: Based on their experiences as female athletes, what characteristics do they perceive to be most important in coaching?

## **XI. Method Participants**

Participants of this study consisted of 51 girl wrestlers from six high schools, who were between the ages of 14 and 17 with the mean age being 15.9. All the participants were recruited in central California, and all participated on the varsity girl's team. The ethnic breakdown of the participants was Latino/Mexican,  $n = 31$ ; White,  $n = 8$ ; Mixed/Multicultural,  $n = 5$ ; African American,  $n = 4$ ; Native American,  $n = 2$ ; and Asian,  $n = 1$ . Six high schools representing six unique school districts were contacted based on the existence of a girls' wrestling program (5 schools) or girls who wrestled on a boys' team (one school).

## **XII. Procedures**

Between the months of December 2018 and February 2019, participants were recruited at various wrestling tournament locations. The leading researcher drove to several sites to connect with athletes after gaining approval and support from their coaching staff. Additionally, girls interested in the study were required to return signed parental consent forms and assent forms prior to their participation. Human subjects' approval from the university was granted, allowing the study to be carried out during wrestling season. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a team of researchers. The purpose of the initial study for which the interviews took place was to "explore the nature of experiences related to wrestling in high school" (Cecchine & Mireles-Rios, 2020). The researchers of the initial study and for the current study were granted human subjects approval from the University of California, Santa Barbara. After each interview, the participant received a \$5 gift card to thank them for their time. All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

For the data collection, a semi-structured interview protocol was used. The participants were recruited by one of the researchers who was familiar with high school wrestling in the central and southern coast areas. The participants were given the choice to determine where the interviews would take place: on school site or off campus. Interviewees were asked several probing questions centering around varying areas of interest such as, their physicality; identity; body image; and relationships with significant others. For example, we asked questions similar to, *“Do you feel that your participation in wrestling has changed how your peers perceive you? If so, how?”* Each interview was approximately thirty minutes and were carried out in person or over the phone. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a team of researchers.

#### ***A. Qualitative Data Analyses***

Following the protocol, each interview was transcribed. Two graduate student researchers read through the transcripts and code emergent themes. For the present study, all interviews were analyzed using the methods of “focused coding” and inductive analysis. The utilization of “focused coding” allowed for the generation of predominant themes while simultaneously ruling out inconsistencies (Emerson et al., 1995). An inductive analysis approach allowed for findings within the raw data to emerge by analyzing the frequency and significance of certain themes (Thomas, 2006). By utilizing this approach, no preconceptions were held up to this data thus allowing for prominent themes to emerge organically. Throughout the analysis process, the researcher was able to keep an open mind and approach this research from an exploratory standpoint. The emergent themes were identified and developed by repeated review of the interview transcriptions (Thomas, 2006). The software program Nvivo was also used to organize codes and develop themes more clearly. The use of both “focused coding” and inductive analysis gave way to the surfacing of four dominant

themes: gender validating language, the female/athlete paradox, identity empowerment, and coach-athlete relationship. The four themes that emerged had responses from at least 50 percent of the participants. Together with another graduate student we reviewed 10 interviews together and then coded the rest of the interviews separately. Afterwards, we met together to compare our coding and resolve any discrepancies.

### **XIII. Findings**

While addressing the three research questions of this study, four themes emerged.

Theme 1: gender validating language, emerged in response to research question 1, which looked to identify how often and in what contexts did female athletes experience gendered language in wrestling. Theme 2: the female/athlete paradox and theme 3: identity empowerment, emerged in response to research question 2, which aimed to investigate how gendered language and participating in wrestling impacted the ways in which female athletes perceived themselves and shaped their identity as female athletes. Theme 4: coach-athlete relationship emerged in response to research question 3, which aimed to examine what characteristics the girls perceive to be most important in coaching.

#### ***A. Theme 1: Gender Validating Language***

Gendered language in sports is oftentimes most visible in the use of gender validating phrases. A classic example of gender validating language is “you’re strong for a girl”. In most cases, this statement may be meant as a compliment. However, by using it, the speaker is centering hegemonic masculinity and comparing the female subject to a standard that she can never reach because of her sex. During the interviews, participants shared their experiences with their success being answered with gender validation. When asked if they felt physical success was answered with gender validation, over 50 percent stated that they had either had an interaction in which their success had been answered with gender

validating language or that they had heard it happen to someone else. One of the participants stated:

I do find that kind of offensive when guys say you're strong for a girl because literally any girl can be strong and it's not just...oh you're a girl you must be weak no it's not like that...every girl can be strong mentally and physically. (LHS016)

Another participant shared how she has experienced this type of language carry over into her life outside of wrestling.

yeah...exactly...I've had—I've had that my whole life...even with family not even just sports it's...oh you could do this but it's pretty good for a girl or you're pretty strong for a girl or you know you're pretty good at wrestling for a girl I mean it's always...a gender thing. (NHS003)

In these two interactions the efforts and hard work of the female athletes is being compared to that of male athletes. It is within these types of interactions that the male hegemony that has been constructed by society is upheld (Bryson, 1987).

Although not as many participants shared the following experience, a few spoke about how teammates, peers, coaches, and parents will often have lower expectations of their abilities compared to the boys they compete against. Two participants stated:

If I'll wrestle a boy and like I lost or something... they'll be like "oh well you were wrestling a boy, so it's okay you're just impressive for wrestling them in general". (AHS002)

*Discussing an interaction with a male teammate:*

...I pushed him and used my legs...and he told me after "wow you're actually really strong and I wasn't expecting that from you". (AGHS001)

Many of the participants explained that they believed this type of language was used to try to downplay their capabilities or tell them what they can and cannot do. One of the student-athletes discussed how this type of language and the low expectations placed on them can create a perceived barrier but has also become a motivating factor. She stated:

I feel like that even within my view that you know girls aren't as good as guys... with you know sports there's definitely a barrier there... and that's why I, you know, train as hard as I can to get past that... and it kind of you know disappoints me and myself because... I feel the same way that other guys do... "Oh yea because she's a girl" or whatever...yeah... (AHS001)

Some participants shared how they had never experienced their success being validated with gendered language but that they knew it happened. One athlete stated:

...I don't really hear any of those comments, but I feel like that's kind of...messed up in a way because just because you're a girl doesn't mean you can't do things...you can do whatever you want you know. (SPHS016)

One participant brought up how she has been "othered" by people throughout her time participating in male dominated combat sports.

... I guess I have in elementary school I was always known as the tough one because I always did martial arts and I guess they would always be like "oh don't mess with her" or like I've heard some you know sexist things before about like "oh but your just a girl that nots-not as much as what a guy can do," I've witnessed it on like social media to like how you know women are sometimes put down on because they're women and they cant.. People think they can't do as much or what they do is cool, but you know you're still a girl. (NHS016)

While not all girls reported experiencing gendered language firsthand, we see that it did contribute to the girls perceiving lower expectations about their performance, comparison to their male counterparts, or a feeling of “otherness”.

***B. Theme 2: The Female/Athlete Paradox***

Throughout the interviews, the participants revealed their awareness of how they, as young women, fit into the world of wrestling through the lens of the greater society and how they viewed themselves as athletes. Often, the participants discussed how these views, the external and the internal, did not align with each other. These young women discussed having to navigate their own identity through the perceptions of society as female athletes. Many acknowledged how society does not see wrestling as a sport that girls and women should participate in such as one participant who stated that, “A lot of times I feel like male's kind of looked at us and they're like well that's a guy sport why are you doing that... that girls shouldn't be fighting and things like that...” (LHS005). Some also discussed separating their femininity from being an athlete. Although none of the athletes mentioned the female/athlete paradox directly, many participants acknowledged the complexity of females fitting into the male dominated sport of wrestling and expressed their awareness of how the greater society perceived them. One participant discussed her experience of the complexities of girls participating in wrestling. She stated:

... I feel they [women] fit in because ... we get underestimated a lot in certain things so wrestling being one of those things I feel like people look at you in a different way or some people may look at you like “ oh she's a girl wrestler like don't mess with her” or like ... it—it can go both ways people can see it as a good thing because women are out there putting themselves in a circumstance that like a male but some



of them could also see them being a circumstance like “ oh women don’t belong in wrestling and they shouldn’t be on the mat” type of thing. (NHS009)

Throughout the interviews, participants provided insight into how they perceived themselves as individuals and as wrestlers. Many participants disclosed how just simply participating in wrestling had changed either how they saw themselves and/or how their peers perceived them. Some of the young women shared that because they participated in an aggressive and male-dominated sport, many of their peers were intimidated by them or thought that they were mean. For example, one participant expressed how people assume what they are like as a person based on stereotypes created by society. They stated that “people that get to know me say that I'm really kind and stuff and funny so...the people that don’t know me, they would be scared of me or not want to talk to me because I guess I'm intimidating” (SPHS016). The language that was used by peers to describe and label these young female wrestlers was often in opposition to how they viewed themselves thus challenging their own identities. Two participants shared their personal experiences with these exchanges:

Yeah so for example if I tell a friend or something oh yeah I do wrestling they’ll automatically think I'm just this really strong mean human being and I'm really not I'm really nice I swear but people I guess think of me as being mean and that I just want to fight everyone but I don’t I really don’t and yeah it just makes me seem for other people it make me seem like a meaner person. (SPHS006)

Some people just think just because I'm a wrestler I'm scary or...I shouldn’t be messed with— which it’s kind of true and not true because just because I'm a wrestler doesn’t

mean I'm going to beat you up or something it's just a sport that I do and... some people see me as a stronger person or more athletic because wrestling is a really hard sport to continue for a long time...over the years it's hard to stick with it so people see me as more determined than others. (NHS005).

Not only do girls in sports need to navigate the societally constructed female/athlete paradox, but they are also faced with societally constructed stereotypes of what combat athletes are like: mean and aggressive. One participant detailed being confronted with similar stereotypes:

Um yes actually I first met this girl in the beginning of this year 9th grade I'm not going to say her name but we were—I mean I guess we're friends but I mean when she found out I was a wrestler she was—she would say that I don't want to get you mad you might hurt me and stuff like that which I don't--it's—I've told her many times it's—I wouldn't--if I get mad I wouldn't hurt people but now that she knows I'm a wrestler she's kinda like scared of making me mad or something which kinda sucks. (NHS011)

Some participants discussed the perceived pressures that are placed on them by outsiders to conform to a certain identity as female wrestlers. When telling these young women what they should be like or act like as females and as wrestlers, comments were often centered around keeping to a heteromasculine status quo.

Yeah, I do feel that because you know I feel like people tell you have to look a certain way to be a wrestler and uhm no you don't you can be a girly girl and you can be a wrestler. I'm a girly girl and I'm a wrestler. It doesn't matter what you look like, but I do feel like the pressure is like why are you wrestling you don't look like you'd be a

wrestler and stuff like that I guess there is a little pressure to look a certain way.

(NHS012)

Another young woman shared that she tries to look less feminine when she wrestles. In this instance, this student-athletes opts to transform their identity in certain spaces to avoid having their feminine identity ridiculed.

I've kind of had a bad experience being on a boys' team when it comes to going to boys' matches because I see the other teams you know making faces when they're about to wrestle me... making jokes... and I always make sure to look as less feminine as possible... because of it...yeah. (AHS001)

### ***C. Theme 3: Identity Empowerment***

The theme of identity empowerment seemed to emerge in opposition to the female/athlete paradox. While over 50 percent of the participants discussed elements of experiencing the female/athlete paradox, over 90% revealed that participating in wrestling helped their self-confidence. Most of the young women discussed how being a wrestler has helped them feel strong and powerful. One athlete noted:

We're both equally as powerful I guess... and then definitely going up against a guy and being able to take him... definitely feels more empowering to me. (AHS001)

Many athletes also commented on how having characteristics that are usually defined by society as masculine, such as developing more muscle or being more toned, are a source of confidence. One participant expressed:

When we work out basically, we obviously grow muscle and we get fitter so it does help me but I mean—like earlier I said I don't really care about that... Me personally, I don't care... This is how I want to look rather than other people want to look like....

So, the wrestling team—just wrestling overall it really helps me you know I guess achieve that goal and become fitter and healthier. (LHS002)

Another participant addressed feeling confident in her body that did not fit into the stereotypical petite feminine female form.

oh yeah, for sure because you can be super strong and built... and be really really good and you can feel totally good about your body, and you don't have to be this small little petite thing that everybody else likes. You can feel really good about your body for having muscles or having whatever your body has. You feel good about yourself, and you don't have to feel bad about not being a petite little girl with no muscle or hardly any muscle just to feel good. (NHS013)

Many participants discussed their awareness of how others saw them within the sport of wrestling. They shared how people often discussed how girls should not wrestle, or that you cannot be feminine or a “girly girl” and be a wrestler. However, they all challenged these statements, many stating that being a wrestler does not change who they are as individuals.

Two addressed the concepts of being “girly girls” versus being “tomboys”, they stated:

Well, some people think that girl wrestlers have to be tomboys but that is not the case I'm actually really girly but I still love the sport. (MBHS007)

Yeah I do feel that because you know I feel like people tell you have to look a certain way to be a wrestler and uhm no you don't you can be a girly girl and you can be a wrestler like I'm a girly girl and I'm a wrestler it doesn't matter what you look but I do feel like the pressure is like why are you wrestling you don't look like you'd be a

wrestler and stuff like that I guess there is a little pressure to look a certain way.

(NHS012)

When thirty-five of the fifty participants were asked “Do you feel you can play both roles? The female and the athlete?”, thirty-four of them answered in the affirmative that they felt they could play both the role of female and athlete. Four student-athletes shared how they felt that they fit into the sport of wrestling and how they felt even more like themselves when they participated in wrestling. They stated:

yeah... I definitely think so... because there is a female athlete... you don't have to be a male to be an athlete...even if it is any sport in general...I mean they have boys' and girls' basketball or stuff like that and... even if it is a male dominated sport it's still possible for females to participate in it... so I think it's more than... it's totally okay to be a female and an athlete. (AGHS001)

Yes, I can I feel I don't feel like wrestling should limit at all... in actuality wrestling does make me feel more being myself and more confident so yeah. (CHS001)

Yeah, I mean I guess the sport that I play like again it's like a male dominated. My style isn't exactly feminine 100%. Like I'm not wearing a dress or anything so for me it's not difficult I guess to play the feminine role and then the athlete role. (NHS015)

I just don't think being an athlete affects femininity and who you are as a female.

(SPHS010)

The one participant that did not respond in the direct affirmative, shared only that they thought of the roles of female and the athlete as separate, but did not indicate that they did not feel like they could play both roles. Other participants who stated that they felt they could play both the role of female and the athlete also alluded to the two roles being somewhat separate. Three of these girls explained:

I feel like I can participate in both because one I have—when I have a match I am worried about my match I'm not worried about how my hair looks I'm not worried about anything because it's match time it's time to compete it's time to wrestle but once that's over I could go home and get ready and put on a dress and do my hair and look as much as a girl as anyone can. (SPHS011)

Mhmm, yeah there's definitely a time to like be a girl, get pretty, and do your make up and there's definitely a time to you know really push yourself and to enjoy your hobbies and what you do. (NHS016)

Yeah, I mean I've done it for...years you know what I'm saying... you know it's kind of just during wrestling season I'm more focused on keeping my grades up of course and stuff so I don't really...hang out with my friends as much or do...getting my nails done because we can't have that during wrestling...I do clean myself of course. (SPHS016)

***D. Theme 4: Coach-Athlete Relationship: Communication and Support***

Within the current literature of organized sports programs, positive developmental outcomes depend on the collaboration of multiple factors such as the perceived support of parents, community, peers, and coaches, the type of culture that a given sport or program

possess, and the types of prosocial relationships created through participation (Trulson 1986; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005; Laser & Leibowitz, 2009; Gould & Carson, 2010; Coakley, 2011; Cruz & Kim, 2017). Coaches are responsible for shaping the environment of a sports program and making sure it is well suited for adolescents and young adults to be a part. Throughout the interviews, over 50 percent of participants expressed that forms of communication with their coach were a main contributing factor to feeling supported as an athlete and individual. Many girls shared how they felt supported by coaches who provided thorough explanations, were able to demonstrate skills physically and verbally, spoke with them about their lives and interests outside of wrestling, and provided constructive criticism. One participant expressed:

One of my coaches really pushed me a lot... he really was thorough in his explanations... and he... he made me want to work harder than what I was doing... he always told us we were doing a good job or what we could improve on and let us try you know appreciate to and try to do better put more effort into what I was doing and just go harder... (SPHS017)

When discussing the desired characteristics of their dream coach, many athletes also focused on the importance of communication and support. Three athletes stated:

supportive...oh also someone who is really good at communicating too... because I feel like if a coach couldn't communicate to you what maybe... you could have done better... how to—oh good teaching ethics [laughs] because [coach's name] does try to... demonstrate rather just verbally tell me how to do something so that's always really helpful... because her new techniques of take downs or stuff like that... she's been able to teach me in a couple different ways in case I didn't understand the first

way... so I'd say... kind of those kinds of characteristics... it's just a lot of... being able to work with different kinds of athletes a coach would have to deal with... and not putting too much pressure on the athlete or ever making the athlete feel like they've ever failed unless...[pause]... yeah I don't know it's just a lot of... a lot like [coach's name]... she's been one of the best coaches I've had as far as any sport in general and I've participated in couple different sports so. (AGHS001)

I feel like a supportive coach, a thorough coach. I feel like to thoroughly explain things and... I think a patient coach because I feel like a lot of coaches get frustrated often but yeah, I think that's pretty much it. (SPHS017)

My dream coach... they could be both I don't really care if they're a girl or a boy—male or female... They just have to be really supportive, really talk to you, communicate with you, not hard on you and push you to your limits. (SPHS007)

Current research has found that an athlete's overall experience and the success of a team depend greatly on behaviors that the coach exhibits and their ability to create lasting relationships with one another (Gould & Carson, 2010; Vella et al., 2013; Cruz & Kim, 2017; Choi et al., 2020). When discussing characteristics of their dream coach, some girls also brought up the importance of their coaches demonstrating interest and concern about their lives beyond wrestling. Some of the girls stated how their dream coach would be someone they could talk to outside of wrestling, expressed interest in their family life, and cared about the mental and physical health of their student-athletes. Three of these participants stated:



I'd say strict at times I guess female. I mean it doesn't really matter but I guess female and someone that I'd be able to feel comfortable talking to outside of just coaching like as a person too. (MBHS001)

probably to...have more...deeper--not conversations but get to know their athletes really well and what their--what their weaknesses are and what goes around in their families and stuff. (NHS006)

To be honest I don't really have a preference over male or female but definitely like caring about the athlete, health, and mental and physical. Has experience as a wrestling coach and has wrestled. Motivating, positive, but still willing to discipline and make sure that what need to happen... happens (MBHS003)

When reflecting on the ways in which they felt supported by their current coaches, some girls brought up how meaningful it was that their coaches checked in with them and supported them in their plans beyond high school wrestling. Two student-athletes shared:

I would say mostly Coach [name] because he's always...he's always checking up on us and asking us about our personal lives and stuff and he keeps pushing us for better and stuff...so I would say definitely him. (SPHS016)

He cares more about us getting into college he pressures on our seniors making sure they have their applications in on time (SPHS013)

As more girls participate in sports, especially male dominated sports, it is crucial for coaches to recognize what their student-athletes need from them and what attributes they

value. By understanding the needs of their student-athletes, coaches will be able to continue to create mentally and physically safe and supportive spaces for young women to experience positive developmental outcomes.

#### **XIV. Discussion**

The four themes of this study produced three main findings that will be elaborated on within this section. The first finding emerged within the first two themes of gender validating language and the female/athlete paradox. While the participants divulged that gender validating language and the female/athlete paradox are still present within the world of sports, we should not assume that their presence impacts all female athletes the same way. The second finding arose from theme three which focused on identity empowerment as a female athlete. Throughout the interviews all the participants discussed how participating in wrestling was an overall positive experience. As the interviews were analyzed it became apparent that wrestling for these girls was a site of development for the physical, social, and psychological assets needed to produce outcomes of positive youth development. The final finding emerged from the fourth and final theme of the coach-athlete relationship. As the participants of this study addressed their wants and needs from their coaches, they shed light on the role that coaches play in fostering the production of positive youth development. Participants also revealed invaluable insights into what it means to be a good coach which can and should be used to inform coaching curriculum development.

Based on the findings of this study, despite having to navigate gendered language, stereotypes, and the female/athlete paradox, the participants experienced social, physical, and psychological benefits through their participation in wrestling. Not only do the experiences of the girls speak to the possible positive developmental outcomes of sports they also shed light on the valuable roles that coaches play. As more female athletes continue to participate

in male dominated sports, such as wrestling, it is important to continue to create spaces in which they can explore their identities as athletes and individuals. However, it is even more important to acknowledge and center the work they have already done for themselves.

The first theme regarding the use of gender validating language spoke to the prevalence of this issue. In this study, most of the participants reported having been in some way exposed to female success being answered with gender validating language. Some of the participants also shared about instances in which they were “othered” within the sport by being labeled “just a girl”. Within the context of sports by being labeled “just a girl” the identity of being female is being “othered” within a male dominated space while her efforts are also being diminished because they are perceived as not being good enough compared to the male athletes. These responses show how even as more girls and young women continue to participate in sports, the greater society continues to use sexist language to challenge their identities and diminish their hard work. This highlights the need for coaches, peers, administrators, and parents to be aware of the language they use to communicate with both female and male athletes in order to level the playing field.

Throughout the interviews, it was found that most of the girls detailed occurrences of their success being validated with gendered language, being “othered” in some way, or having their hard work downplayed. However, none of these instances deterred the girls from continuing to participate in wrestling. In fact, many of them used these experiences as sources of motivation; to show others that girls can be just as strong and successful as their boy counterparts. This finding aligns with other research that finds that sports participation can be a source of empowerment for girls and young women (Macro et al., 2009; Duncan, 2007; Garrett, 2004).

Furthermore, the results of this study build on the work of Krane et al. (2004) who also found that female athletes face the socially constructed female/athlete paradox but in turn, take pride in their physically strong bodies and are empowered by their abilities. We see this in the way the girls express how they love their muscles, support, and empower their teammates, embrace their feminine and/or masculine qualities, develop confidence in their identities as female student-athletes, and continue to participate in wrestling.

Throughout the interview, many of the participants shared how their identities did not always align with the perceptions of society giving rise to the second theme of the female/athlete paradox. Although the girls were aware of this dualistic notion of gender it did not hinder their sense of belonging within the sport of wrestling. When some of the girls were asked if they felt like they could play both roles of female and athlete, all but one said yes. Many of the participants cited their participation in wrestling as an important part of their heightened self-esteem. This study furthers the argument that sports participation has the potential to promote self-acceptance (Ross & Shinew, 2008), positive body image, and identity empowerment (Macro et al., 2009).

The third major theme identified within the study revealed how wrestling and more specifically becoming stronger and more muscular led the participants to feel even more empowered in their identity as female athletes. This finding contradicts the societal construction of the female/athlete paradox and aligns with past research in which female athletes were found to utilize their identity empowerment to create their own realities that allow for them to embrace their athletic identities (Krane et al., 2004; Ross & Shinew, 2008; Macro et al., 2009). It was also during the analysis of this theme where the three developmental assets (social, psychological, and physical) were most clearly observed.

While the girls did report experiencing gender validating language and the female/athlete paradox they stated that participating in wrestling led to the development of social, physical, and psychological assets. By reflecting on Figure 1, we can see that some of the social assets are empowerment, supportive relationships with significant others, communities of practice, and setting expectations of self. The girls in this study shared that they experienced these assets by being able to compete against and take-down their boy competitors, realizing their capabilities both mentally and physically, and by contributing to and benefitting from a supportive environment with teammates and coaches.

Figure 1 lists positive body image, interpersonal competencies and communication, and personal agency as some of the psychological assets developed by participating in sports. Within this study, many athletes revealed how they experienced these psychological assets through wrestling by overcoming insecurities and becoming more comfortable with themselves, achieving personal fitness and health goals despite what society deems to be the ideal, building a relationship with their coaches in which they can discuss what they want to improve and receive constructive critiques in order to achieve their goals, and by not letting the opinions of others who do not think girls should be wrestlers or that girls can be as good as boys in wrestling impact their commitment to wrestling.

Finally, the physical assets from Figure 1 that were experienced by the girls were physical health and fitness, physiological capabilities, movement literacy, knowledge of physical activities, and leading a physically active lifestyle. The girls stated that they experienced these physical assets by learning more about their bodies and being able to gain an appreciation for their strengths, experiencing physical results in the gym and during

practice, feeling like they could defend themselves, and creating and staying committed to a routine.

It is important to note that when many of the girls were discussing the development of these assets, there was much overlap between each outcome. For example, gaining an understanding of how to move their bodies and investing their time into a physically active lifestyle (physical asset) gave way to the girls setting expectations for themselves and developing supportive relationships with their teammates to help each other reach their goals (social asset). As a result of continued commitment, girls gained confidence within their body image and physical identity through physical changes such as losing weight, becoming stronger, observing more muscle definition, and doing well in competitions (psychological asset). Based on my analysis of the interviews gathered for this study, I argue that the overlap between each of these assets leads to the development of the zone of optimal performance.

The zone of optimal performance embodies what coaches should strive to facilitate for each of their athletes. The development of each asset and thus the zone of optimal performance relies on the coach's ability to create a physically, mentally, and emotionally safe space for all student-athletes. When balance has been achieved across these areas, student-athletes may then begin to realize their own development and thus become aware of what goes into producing their zones of optimal performance. In summary, Figure 1 represents the responsibility of the coach to facilitate the development of each asset (put the pieces together) and the overlapping areas is what is actualized by the girls.

The student-athletes who participated in this study also shed light on what they considered to be the most important characteristics they wanted in their coaches. The main attributes that emerged as most important were forms of effective verbal communication,

sport specific support, and interpersonal support. I have interpreted sport specific support to also mean the use of democratic behavior which was discussed within the literature review section of this project. Within this study, effective verbal communication and sport specific support were exemplified through instances of positive feedback, thorough explanations of skills, and words of encouragement. This follows current research that argues that student-athletes prefer their coaches to focus on training and instructional behaviors (Sherman et al., 2000; Cruz & Kim, 2017), providing positive feedback (Sherman et al., 2000; Norman, 2016), and interpersonal social support (Sherman et al., 2000; Wiese-Bjornstal, 2007; Norman, 2016; Tucker & Black, 2017). These findings also align with other research that have also found that female athletes prefer social support (Cranmer & Sollitto, 2015) and democratic behaviors (Norman, 2016; Tucker & Black, 2017).

These findings related to the coaching and leadership preferences of female student-athletes can be translated into best practices for coaches to learn from (Weiss et al., 2021). The outcomes of this study support past research that argues that the coach-athlete relationship remains one of the most influential aspects of the types of developmental outcomes experienced through sports. The presence of effective communication is a strong predictor of a positive coach-athlete relationship (Norman, 2015). However, it is important to recognize that effective communication looks different for individuals based on the societal norms that they believe governs them in different environments. The findings from theme four revealed that the girls valued verbal communication and supportive behaviors from their coaches more than anything else.

The insights gained from this study, such as the obstacles that girls in sports continue to face; the interactions between peers and significant others, empowerment experienced

from taking pride in their physical and mental abilities that lead to the development of physical, social, and psychological assets; and the coaching preferences of female student-athletes should all help to inform the development of a curriculum for aspiring coaches.

As more girls and young women continue to participate in sports their ability to experience positive developmental outcomes depends greatly on the types of environments created by coaches, and the language used within these spaces (NFSHS, 2019). Gender responsive, relationship, and communication-related training is needed to create a safer, more empowering environment for female athletes in order to dismantle the pro-masculinity bias in sports (Norman, 2016; Bigler & Leaper, 2015; Davis et al., 2019). Parents and community adults should work to openly contradict gendered language and stereotypes that adolescents are exposed to (Boiché et al., 2014). Coaches must consistently become aware of their own implicit bias when instructing mixed gender or opposite gender athletes, while also creating intentional practice plans that fit the strengths and needs of different athletes (MacKinnon, 2011; Vella et al., 2013; Norman, 2016).

## **XV. Limitations and Future Directions**

While there is a plethora of research that analyzes the types of gendered language used in sports media and by sports commentators, there is little research that investigates how gendered language used by coaches impacts the identity development and overall well-being of female athletes at any level. Similarly, in terms of research focused on the link between developmental outcomes and close-relationships, the coach-athlete relationship is left under-researched (LaVoi, 2007). Future research that focuses on the impacts of exposure to gendered language and female perceptions of their own athletic identity development could lead to important insights on how to better support female athletes. Hearing from the coaches' perspectives as well would contribute to our understanding of how coaches can



better support adolescent female athletes. Gaining an understanding of the perceived obstacles that coaches face when coaching female athletes would allow for the development of relevant training and support resources.

Although this study did not explicitly focus on factors of race and ethnicity of female student-athletes, I would like to acknowledge how important these intersectionalities are when researching the female athlete experience. While the pool of research around production of positive youth development through sports participation, the coach-athlete relationship, and perspectives of female athletes and their body image has grown considerably, there remains a large gap in the research centered around the unique experiences of girls and women of color navigating the societally constructed concept of the female/athlete paradox.

## **XVI. Conclusion**

As more girls and women continue to play sports, it is imperative that they have allies supporting their continued participation in order to dismantle the societally constructed notions of what an athlete should look and act like. Future research should continue to make space for and uplift the voices of female athletes as they continue to carve out their own spaces within the male dominated world of sports. Significant others such as coaches, administrators, parents, and peers must also work to challenge and reject societal norms of heteromascularity within sports in order to support the progress, retention, and wellbeing of female athletes. While experience playing a given sport and applied experience coaching are arguably the two most important pieces of a coach's background, coaches need more training and education that mirrors that of teachers. The future of coaching education and training programs rely on the ability of curriculum developers to find ways for their programs to better connect theory to practice. In order for coaches to understand how to support their

student-athletes holistically, they need to fully recognize that their role stretches beyond being a coach and into being a teacher, leader, and mentor.

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