

**Identifying Hegemonic Masculinity in Youth Ice Hockey
Programmes and Investigating its Effects on Male Players'
Conduct On and Off the Ice**

Michal Drobny
MA by Research (Sport and Coaching Sciences)

This thesis is submitted as fulfilment of an MA by Research, as part of a degree awarded by
Oxford Brookes University.

Submission date: June 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this work to the unwavering guidance, wisdom, and support of Dr Stuart Whigham and Dr Simon Phelan. Alongside Dr Matt Fiander and Dr Adam Bibbey, they were instrumental in inspiring my decision to join, and remain, within the Health and Life Sciences faculty at Oxford Brookes University. Their encouragement, particularly during the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, provided both stability and motivation. Amidst uncertainty and adaptation, their professionalism and humanity stood as a beacon, and for that, I am deeply thankful.

I also want to thank my mother, whose main interest was always to make sure she raises kids, who one day can have a better life than herself.

Next, I want to thank my girlfriend Ema, her parents Gabriela and Roman, for their patience, encouragement, and unwavering support throughout this journey. Their generosity with time, resources, and presence allowed me to fully commit to this work.

Last but by all means not least, my friends and family from the void, thank you. Your authenticity, creativity, and companionship have shaped who I am, and your examples have consistently inspired me to grow.

Special thanks goes to Dr Tim Donnison and Dr Nils Lager for their early advice and encouragement, which helped ignite the spark that led to the development of this research.

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Abstract

This research investigates how hegemonic masculinity is constructed, reinforced, and contested within youth ice hockey programmes, and how these gender norms influence male players' behaviour both on and off the ice. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with adolescent athletes and a thematic analysis of their experiences, the study explores the ways in which youth sport serves as a formative environment for the development of masculine identity. Situated within the theoretical frameworks of Connell's hegemonic masculinity and Anderson's inclusive masculinity, the research critically examines how cultural expectations of toughness, emotional stoicism, dominance, and heterosexuality are embedded in the institutional and social structures of youth ice hockey. Findings reveal that these programmes function as key sites for the reproduction of hegemonic masculine norms. Physical aggression, emotional suppression, and hierarchical team rituals such as rookie treatment and locker room banter were found to shape not only players' sporting behaviours but also their broader social conduct. However, the research also uncovers emerging tensions, as some players express discomfort with exclusionary practices and display a desire for more inclusive and emotionally expressive forms of masculinity. These findings suggest that youth sport is both a site of social control and a potential space for renegotiating gender norms. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, ethnographically informed approach that privileges the voices of young athletes and situates their experiences within broader socio-cultural contexts. The research contributes to a growing body of scholarship on gender in sport by highlighting the early stages of masculine socialisation and the lasting effects of sport-based identity formation. It concludes by calling for further investigation into intersectional and cross-cultural dimensions of masculinity in youth sport and advocates for more inclusive coaching practices and institutional reforms to challenge exclusionary gender norms.

Introduction

In contemporary society, sport occupies a central place not only as entertainment and physical activity but also as a space for performing and negotiating identity, power, and cultural meaning (Coakley and Pike, 2014; Giulianotti, 2005). From grassroots participation to professional leagues, sport functions as a mirror reflecting dominant societal norms and as a stage where these norms are constantly contested and reconfigured (Messner, 1992; Hargreaves, 1986). It has increasingly become a lens through which broader questions of gender, identity, and social structure are examined (Connell, 1995; Anderson, 2009). Within this context, the study of masculinity and its expression in sport offers valuable insights into the ways in which gender norms are internalised, enacted, and reproduced (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Cleland and Magrath, 2021).

Current literature on hegemonic masculinity has largely focused on professional or adult sporting contexts, overlooking how these gender norms are formed, reinforced, and resisted within youth ice hockey programmes, making this research crucial for understanding the early socialisation of masculine identities and their broader behavioural impacts. As Messner (1992) and Anderson (2009) have argued, sport is not just a reflection of gender norms but a powerful institution that actively shapes them. The institutionalisation of masculinity in sport has deep historical roots. Guttman (2004) and Elias and Dunning (1986) trace the modern emergence of competitive sport to processes of secularisation and the regulation of violence. These transformations placed physical prowess within frameworks of discipline and order, aligning athletic competition with masculine ideals of control, endurance, and dominance. In this way, sport has evolved into a key arena for performing masculinity, particularly in societies where male identity is closely tied to physical capability and competitive success.

Ice hockey, with its emphasis on speed, physicality, and endurance, provides a particularly rich site for examining the construction and performance of masculinity. Its culture of rituals, codes of toughness, and an acceptance of aggression, has long been associated with traditional masculine ideals (Robidoux, 2001; Allain, 2008). While the sport's popularity and cultural meaning vary by country, its symbolic alignment with hegemonic masculinity is consistent across many contexts. Whether in Canada, where hockey is a national symbol of identity, or in emerging hockey cultures across Europe, the sport continues to project images of male strength, resilience, and dominance. The locker room, as both a physical space and a cultural institution, plays a pivotal role in reinforcing these norms. It operates as an epicentre of masculine socialisation, where values such as emotional restraint, hierarchy, and conformity to group codes are ingrained from an early age (MacDonald, 2016; Anderson and McCormack, 2014). The language, rituals, and expectations cultivated in these environments shape not only athletes' behaviours on the ice but also their conduct in wider social contexts. The persistence of homophobic slurs, sexist banter, and glorification of violence in many locker room cultures speaks to the deeply embedded nature of hegemonic masculinity within sports institutions (Kehler, 2016; Adams et al., 2010).

At the same time, shifts in social attitudes toward gender and sexuality have begun to challenge these long-standing norms. Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, for instance, highlights how younger generations of male athletes increasingly resist traditional scripts of masculinity in favour of more inclusive and fluid expressions of identity. This tension between entrenched norms and evolving attitudes creates a dynamic and contested landscape within sport - particularly for youths, whose identities are still forming. Understanding how young athletes navigate this terrain is crucial for both academic inquiry and policy intervention. Youth sport serves as a formative space where identity, behaviour, and values are shaped. Participation in sport during adolescence is often associated with social development, discipline, and confidence. However, it can also be a site of exclusion,

pressure, and conformity to rigid gender expectations. In male-dominated, contact sports such as ice hockey, these dynamics are particularly acute. From early training sessions to competitive play, young players are exposed to both implicit and explicit expectations to perform a particular version of masculinity, one that often prizes toughness, emotional suppression, and dominance (Smith, 2017; Szto, 2020).

The national context further influences how these gender norms manifest. In countries where ice hockey is a deeply entrenched aspect of national culture, such as Canada or Slovakia, the sport becomes more than just a game, it becomes a vehicle for expressing national identity and values. In such settings, the performance of masculinity on the ice is also a performance of national pride and belonging. This interplay between sport, masculinity, and national identity complicates efforts to introduce more inclusive or critical perspectives into youth sport programmes (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Kidd, 2017). Despite the wealth of scholarship on masculinity in sport, research specifically examining how hegemonic masculinity is reproduced or resisted within youth ice hockey, and how this influences players' behaviour both on and off the ice, remains limited. While scholars like Robidoux (2001) and MacDonald (2016) have explored professional and semi-professional contexts, there is a critical need to extend these insights into youth settings. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to social pressures, and the expectations placed on them within sports can have long-term effects on their attitudes, relationships, and mental well-being.

Furthermore, while much of the existing literature focuses on either national identity or gendered behaviour in isolation, fewer studies consider how these two factors intersect in shaping players' conduct. In countries undergoing social and political transitions, such as post-communist Slovakia, ice hockey may play a unique role in shaping notions of both masculinity and national cohesion. Here, sport serves not only as a cultural export but also as an internal mechanism for reinforcing or challenging societal values. Given these

dynamics, exploring the influence of hegemonic masculinity in youth ice hockey provides a critical opportunity to examine how gendered norms are transmitted, contested, and internalised by young men during a key stage of identity development. By situating this analysis within the specific institutional and cultural context of youth ice hockey programmes, this research aims to contribute to broader debates on gender, sport, and youth socialisation. In doing so, it also addresses a gap in the literature and engages with ongoing discussions about the future of inclusive and equitable sporting cultures.

This study has three key aims. First, it seeks to identify how hegemonic masculinity manifests in youth ice hockey programmes across different national contexts. Second, it investigates how this form of masculinity influences the conduct and identity development of young male players both on and off the ice. Third, it explores how national identity and cultural narratives intersect with gender norms in shaping these behaviours. Together, these objectives support a deeper understanding of the early socialisation processes that occur within youth sport and the broader implications they may have for individual wellbeing and group dynamics.

This thesis is structured to guide the reader through a comprehensive analysis of these themes. Following this introduction, the literature review synthesises key scholarly debates around sport, masculinity, hegemonic norms, national identity, and the specific cultural frameworks of ice hockey. The methodology chapter outlines the qualitative research design, including data collection and analysis strategies. The findings and discussion chapters explore emerging themes from participant narratives, focusing on how gender norms are experienced and interpreted within youth hockey environments. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader significance of the research, offering insights into its contributions and implications for future scholarship, policy, and practice.

Literature Review

Masculinity in Sport

The popularity of male, team-based, contact sports is deeply intertwined with historical and cultural constructions of masculinity. Traditional ideals of masculinity centred on physicality, aggression, and dominance have long been celebrated as markers of manhood, particularly in patriarchal societies (Connell, 1995). Historically, these traits were valorised in contexts such as war and labour, and over time, they found expression in competitive sports, which became arenas for men to demonstrate their physical prowess and resilience (Messner, 1992). Sports such as football, rugby, and boxing emphasise direct physical contact, and often aggressive gameplay, became emblematic of these traditional masculine ideals (Wellard, 2009).

Scholars have explored how physicality and aggression in sport are tied to broader cultural narratives of masculinity. For instance, Messner (2007) highlights how team-based sports foster hierarchical relationships that reinforce dominance and submission, while Anderson (2009) critiques these dynamics as perpetuating homophobic and hypermasculine values. Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity is particularly relevant in this context, emphasising how certain forms of masculinity, characterised by physical dominance and emotional stoicism, are normalised and valorised in competitive sports, marginalising other masculinities. Fans are drawn to these sports not only for their entertainment value but also because they resonate with deep cultural narratives of masculinity. Cleland and Magrath (2021) discuss how fan culture often mirrors traditional gender norms, with male athletes celebrated as symbols of courage and resilience. This cultural framing reinforces societal perceptions of men as providers and protectors, with the physical contest in sport symbolising a battle of dominance. Furthermore, Kidd (2013) observes that sports fandom is

frequently tied to a sense of identity, as fans project societal ideals of masculinity onto their favourite teams and athletes.

However, the relationship between masculinity and sport is not without challenge or critique. Anderson's (2009) work on inclusive masculinity theory highlights the shifting dynamics in modern sport, where younger generations are increasingly rejecting rigid, traditional norms of masculinity in favour of more inclusive and fluid expressions of gender identity. This shift has created tensions within sports culture, particularly in contact sports, which remain deeply tied to historical ideals of physical dominance and aggression (Wellard, 2009). This body of literature highlights how male, team-based, contact sports have served as key sites for the construction and reinforcement of traditional masculinities, while also reflecting evolving societal norms. The continued interrogation of these dynamics is critical for understanding the intersection of sport, gender, and cultural identity in modern contexts. Gender stereotypes significantly influence the construction and perception of sports culture, shaping expectations for athletes and fans alike. Masculinity has long been associated with aggression, competitiveness, dominance, and emotional restraint, while femininity is tied to empathy, cooperation, and emotional expression (Connell, 2005). These cultural binaries have historically positioned contact sports as a "natural" domain for men, reinforcing patriarchal ideals of strength and dominance.

Consequently, women have been marginalised within this realm, as their participation in or even interest in contact sports has often been seen as a challenge to traditional gender norms (Hooks, 2004; Messner, 2007). Sports media plays a critical role in perpetuating these stereotypes. Scholars like Fink (2015) and Cooky et al. (2013) argue that media coverage of male and female athletes continues to reinforce gender hierarchies. Male athletes are frequently praised for "toughness," "aggression," and "warrior-like" qualities, language that upholds traditional masculine ideals. Female athletes, by contrast, are either criticised for

lacking these traits or excessively praised when they display them, reinforcing the idea that they are exceptions to the norm. This framing not only perpetuates gender disparities but also diminishes the achievements of female athletes by evaluating them against a masculine standard. The lack of equitable representation extends beyond language to visibility. Studies by Bruce (2016) and Godoy-Pressland (2014) highlight how women's sports receive significantly less media coverage, and when they are covered, the focus is on their appearance or personal lives rather than athletic performance. This perpetuates the idea that women's sports are secondary to men's, aligning with Messner's (1988) assertion that sport is a site where hegemonic masculinity is continuously reproduced and legitimised.

Cultural expectations also shape the participation and experience of athletes themselves. Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory critiques how traditional sports culture often marginalises athletes who fail to conform to rigid gender norms, particularly women in contact sports. This is compounded by Cleland and Magrath's (2021) analysis of fan culture, which reveals how fans often police gender boundaries through ridicule or exclusion when athletes or participants deviate from these expectations. Despite these challenges, the growing visibility and participation of women in traditionally male-dominated sports have sparked important shifts in attitudes. Scholars like Krane (2001) and Wellard (2009) note how women in contact sports are increasingly challenging the boundaries of traditional femininity, embodying a form of "muscular femininity" that redefines societal expectations. However, these shifts remain fraught, as the success of female athletes is often framed in ways that undermine their contributions to the broader sporting landscape. This body of research underscores how gender stereotypes continue to shape the cultural landscape of sport, creating barriers for women while reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity. To fully understand these dynamics, it is essential to critically examine not only the structural inequalities embedded in sports institutions but also the cultural narratives that perpetuate these divisions.

The passion and emotional engagement associated with contact sports are deeply intertwined with traditional ideals of masculinity. Contact sports, such as rugby, football, and boxing, evoke intense emotions among players and spectators alike. The physicality and competitive nature of these sports create a visceral thrill, particularly during closely contested matches. For spectators, especially within predominantly male groups, the shared experience of watching such sports fosters a sense of camaraderie and collective identity. Scholars such as Segrave and Chu (2010) argue that sports provide a socially sanctioned outlet for men to express emotions, a behaviour traditionally stigmatised in non-sporting contexts due to cultural norms around masculinity and emotional restraint. The stadium, pub, or living room becomes a "safe space" for these emotional displays, reinforcing bonds within male-dominated communities.

The professionalisation and commercialisation of male-dominated, contact sports throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have further solidified their cultural significance. As Bale (1973) observed, the spectacle of physically demanding, high-stakes competitions has become a symbol of national pride, cultural identity, and entertainment. Guttmann's (1978) analysis supports this view, noting that the increasing organisation and institutionalisation of these sports have amplified their appeal, particularly as they reflect and perpetuate narratives linking masculinity to strength, endurance, and dominance. The aggressive and high-impact nature of these sports appeals to fans who value the display of traditional masculine traits, reinforcing the long-standing association between physicality and masculinity (Messner, 1992).

However, as contemporary scholarship has shown, the relationship between masculinity and sport is not static but evolving. Anderson (2009) and Magrath (2017) highlight how changing societal attitudes toward gender have started to challenge traditional norms within sports.

Inclusive masculinity theory, for example, posits that younger generations of male athletes are increasingly rejecting hyper-masculine ideals in favour of more inclusive and diverse expressions of masculinity. Similarly, Wellard (2009) and Cleland and Cashmore (2016) discuss how alternative masculinities are emerging within sports contexts, with some athletes and fans embracing non-traditional traits such as empathy, vulnerability, and emotional openness. Despite these shifts, the enduring popularity of contact sports among male fans demonstrates that traditional associations between masculinity and physicality remain deeply ingrained in cultural consciousness. The intersection of sport, gender, and power continues to resonate, both reflecting and shaping societal understandings of masculinity in a globalised and commercialised world. Moving forward, it is crucial to engage with the ways contemporary masculinities are being renegotiated within sporting cultures and how these shifts reflect broader societal changes.

Hegemonic Masculinity

'Hegemonic masculinity' refers to a dominant form of masculinity that perpetuates and legitimises male dominance over women and subordinate masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The term, introduced by sociologist R.W. Connell, describes how certain ideals of masculinity become culturally exalted and accepted as the standard by which all men are measured. These ideals often emphasise traits such as physical strength, aggression, emotional stoicism, heterosexuality, and competitiveness, reinforcing a hierarchy not only between men and women but also among men themselves. Connell's (1995) foundational work highlighted how hegemonic masculinity is not a static concept but is maintained through cultural, social, and institutional practices that legitimise male dominance.

Subsequent scholarship has expanded upon Connell's framework. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) revisited and refined the concept, arguing that hegemonic masculinity is context-dependent and can shift across time and place while still upholding male privilege. This dynamic nature of hegemonic masculinity is evident in sport, where physicality, aggression, and dominance are often glorified, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies (Messner, 1992; Trujillo, 1991). Hearn (2004) further critiques hegemonic masculinity by examining its intersections with power and privilege, noting that it operates through both coercion and consent, making it deeply embedded within societal norms. Additionally, Schippers (2007) expands the discussion by highlighting how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to "hegemonic femininity," further entrenching gender inequalities. Within sporting contexts, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced through structures that reward aggression and physical dominance while marginalising alternative masculinities, such as those associated with emotional expressiveness or homosexuality (Anderson, 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This has been particularly evident in studies of male team sports, where rigid gender norms continue to influence player conduct, media representation, and fan expectations (Adams et al., 2010; Magrath, 2017). However, evolving societal attitudes and the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ athletes have begun to challenge traditional models of masculinity in sport, suggesting that hegemonic masculinity, while resilient, is subject to renegotiation (Anderson and McCormack, 2018).

Hegemonic masculinity plays a critical role in shaping the culture and perception of male, contact, team sports. Connell (1995, 2005) conceptualises hegemonic masculinity as the dominant form of masculinity that maintains male superiority by reinforcing traits such as toughness, dominance, emotional stoicism, and heterosexuality. Within sports like football, rugby, and ice hockey, these traits are not only encouraged but are often seen as essential to success (Messner, 1992). The aggression and physicality associated with these sports are frequently interpreted as natural extensions of masculinity, creating an environment

where male athletes are expected to embody these ideals to gain acceptance from peers, coaches, and fans (Anderson, 2009). As a result, players often push themselves to physical and mental extremes, enduring injuries and emotional suppression to align with these socially constructed expectations (Wellard, 2009).

Historically, sport has been a space where masculinity was constructed and reinforced. From the ancient Olympic Games, where athletic competition was linked to warfare and political prestige (Guttmann, 2004), to medieval jousting tournaments that celebrated physical combat and honour (Futrell, 1997), sport has consistently served as a battleground for demonstrating masculine ideals. In the modern era, this legacy persists, though it has evolved into new forms through professional sports and global media. Magrath (2017) argues that the commercialisation of sport has amplified hegemonic masculinity, as media representations of male athletes often glorify physical aggression and dominance while downplaying traits such as emotional expression or vulnerability. The emphasis on the "warrior mentality" in sports broadcasting and advertising further entrenches the expectation that male athletes must be physically resilient and emotionally restrained (Cleland, 2016).

The influence of hegemonic masculinity extends beyond the playing field, shaping the broader culture of male-dominated sports. Locker room environments have been widely criticised for fostering toxic masculinity, where homophobia, misogyny, and aggressive behaviour are normalised as part of team bonding (Anderson and McCormack, 2014). Cleland et al. (2018) highlight how hyper-masculine sporting cultures often marginalise those who do not conform to traditional gender norms, including LGBTQ+ athletes and men who do not embody the idealised traits of physical dominance and aggression. This exclusionary culture is reinforced by fans, whose expectations of male athletes often demand physicality and dominance while ridiculing expressions of emotion or perceived weakness (Magrath, Cleland, and Anderson, 2020).

Despite growing awareness of the need for inclusivity in sport, hegemonic masculinity continues to exert a powerful influence. While recent years have seen some challenges to traditional gender norms in sport, such as increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ athletes and calls for more mental health awareness, hegemonic masculinity remains deeply embedded in both professional and amateur sporting contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The persistence of these ideals underscores the continued need for critical engagement with how masculinity is constructed and reinforced within male, contact, team sports.

Hegemonic Masculinity – Role of Sport

Sport plays a significant role in shaping societal values and fostering social cohesion, particularly through its deep connection to hegemonic masculinity. Male-dominated, team-based sports such as football, rugby, and ice hockey act as powerful cultural institutions that reinforce dominant gender norms while also creating a sense of unity and collective identity (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1992). These sports serve as social rituals that transcend individual participation, binding together fans, communities, and even entire nations through shared emotional investment and symbolic representation (Giulianotti, 2005). For many, the teams they support become more than just sporting entities; they act as vessels of local, regional, or national pride, embodying values associated with toughness, resilience, and dominance, which are core attributes of hegemonic masculinity (Hargreaves, 1986; Maguire, 1999). The celebration of these qualities within the sporting arena reinforces traditional gender hierarchies, as the physicality, aggression, and endurance displayed by athletes are often idealised and projected onto the broader social sphere (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Cleland, 2016).

The role of sport as a tool for political and social cohesion has been widely examined in academic discourse. Houlihan (2003) discusses how sport has historically functioned as a political instrument, particularly through international sporting events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, which have been leveraged by governments to promote national unity and project strength on the global stage. Similarly, Hargreaves (1986) explores how sport has reinforced class, race, and gender divisions, often serving as a mechanism for elites to maintain social and political control. More recent scholarship has extended these discussions, examining the evolving role of sport in contemporary global politics. For example, Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) argue that sport has become increasingly central to processes of globalisation, influencing cultural identity and transnational political agendas. Additionally, Grix and Houlihan (2014) highlight the strategic use of sport by modern states, demonstrating how international sporting success can serve as a soft power tool to enhance national prestige and legitimacy.

Hegemonic masculinity, which reinforces the idea that sport is a space for men to assert their physical power and competitive nature, plays a significant role in shaping fan cultures and social dynamics within male-dominated sports. Contact sports such as football, rugby, and ice hockey act as arenas where broader societal ideals of masculinity—strength, dominance, and endurance, are performed and validated (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1992). Supporting a sports team often transcends mere entertainment, providing an avenue for fans, particularly men, to engage in collective expressions of passion, loyalty, and camaraderie. This aligns with Cleland's (2016) assertion that male sports fandom offers a socially sanctioned space for men to express emotions in ways that might otherwise be restricted by traditional masculine norms. Moreover, Wenner (2013) discusses how sports media play a crucial role in sustaining these narratives, frequently framing male athletes as warriors whose performances reinforce conventional ideals of masculinity.

However, the link between sport, hegemonic masculinity, and fandom is not without its challenges. One of the most notable examples is the rise of football hooliganism, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, where hyper-masculine fan groups engaged in violent confrontations to assert dominance both inside and outside stadiums (Dunning, Murphy, and Williams, 1988). The aggressive and exclusionary nature of these fan cultures reflects the darker consequences of hegemonic masculinity in sport. Cleland and Cashmore (2016) argue that while football hooliganism has declined in many regions, elements of toxic masculinity continue to persist within certain supporter groups, particularly in the form of discriminatory behaviours towards women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and racial minorities. Additionally, research by Kerr (2019) suggests that while modern stadiums have become more regulated and commercialised, the underlying themes of aggression, territoriality, and tribalism among fans remain evident, highlighting the continued intersection between sport, masculinity, and social identity.

Major sporting events such as the Super Bowl, the Olympics, and the UEFA Champions League continue to generate intense emotional reactions and foster social cohesion among fans. These events function as shared cultural experiences, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to unite in collective support of their team or nation. The narratives surrounding these competitions, overcoming adversity, demonstrating resilience, and achieving glory, appeal to deeply ingrained societal values, many of which are linked to hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Anderson, 2009). While sport can serve as a unifying force, it also has the capacity to reinforce social divisions, as the same characteristics that foster in-group solidarity may contribute to the exclusion of those perceived as "outsiders" (Maguire, 2011).

The ability of sport to forge identity, cultivate belonging, and evoke powerful emotional responses is inextricably tied to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity that dominate many

sporting cultures. Fans and nations frequently project ideals of strength, dominance, and pride onto their teams, reinforcing the intersection between sport, masculinity, and national identity (Kusz, 2007; Cho, 2013). Sporting events, therefore, become cultural flashpoints where hegemonic masculinity and nationalism intersect, often manifesting in hyper-masculine fan behaviours, territorialism, and even aggression towards opposing teams or marginalised groups (Cleland, 2014). Furthermore, Wenner (2013) argues that sports media play a significant role in reinforcing these narratives, celebrating athletes who exemplify physical toughness and competitiveness while downplaying moments of emotional vulnerability.

However, displays of emotion by athletes, particularly in high-pressure moments, present a challenge to the traditional ideals of stoicism and emotional restraint that are central to hegemonic masculinity in sport (Messner, 1992; Kian, Anderson, and Shipka, 2015). In male-dominated, contact sports, athletes are typically expected to exhibit endurance, aggression, and composure, aligning with long-standing conceptions of masculine strength (Connell, 2005). Yet, when athletes break from this mould and display emotions—whether through tears, visible joy, or frustration, it can humanise them, adding depth to their public persona and reinforcing their dedication to the game. Kian and Anderson (2009) highlight that emotional expression in sport is often tolerated or even celebrated when it is framed as a reflection of passion and commitment, rather than weakness. This is particularly evident in moments of victory or defeat, where athletes' visible emotions resonate with fans who are equally invested in the game's outcome. Fans often interpret these emotional expressions as authentic, further strengthening their platonic, social relationships with athletes (Sanderson, 2013). Given that sports fandom is deeply rooted in personal and social identity, fans frequently experience their team's victories and defeats as an extension of their own emotional experiences (Guschwan, 2016). As a result, athletes' emotional displays can

serve to reinforce the broader cultural mythology of sports, where suffering, sacrifice, and perseverance are integral to success (Butterworth, 2008).

Nonetheless, certain expressions of emotion, particularly those that contradict dominant masculine norms, continue to be met with resistance. Research by Adams, Anderson, and McCormack (2010) suggests that while acceptance of emotional vulnerability in sport is increasing, it remains constrained by traditional notions of masculinity, particularly in hyper-masculine team sports such as football and rugby. In many cases, when athletes express emotion, particularly in moments of victory, it enhances the narrative of their achievement and contributes to their public image (Kian, Anderson, and Shipka, 2015). Emotional displays in sport can transform an athlete's victory into a compelling human story, reinforcing the cultural significance of sport as more than just physical competition. For instance, Rafael Nadal breaking down in tears after a hard-fought match or Lionel Messi's visible emotion after winning the FIFA World Cup serves as a poignant reminder that sport is as much an emotional and psychological endeavour as it is a physical one. These moments elevate the athlete beyond just a figure of strength, they become symbols of resilience, sacrifice, and passion, making their triumph resonate more deeply with fans (Butterworth, 2008; Wenner, 2013).

This emotional transparency does not contradict hegemonic masculinity but rather redefines it, as athletes are now permitted to express vulnerability while still being perceived as dominant and successful (Messner, 1992; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This shift in how emotions are perceived in sport mirrors broader cultural transformations regarding masculinity. In recent years, there has been greater acceptance of emotional expression, even among men, as traditional gender norms are challenged (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack, 2010; Kian and Anderson, 2009). Historically, sport has been a key site for reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, where men were expected to exhibit toughness,

self-control, and emotional restraint (Connell, 2005). However, the visibility of athletes displaying raw emotion in moments of triumph or defeat has gradually reshaped these expectations. Emotional outbursts, such as Michael Jordan's tears after his first NBA championship or Cristiano Ronaldo's visible distress following key defeats, are no longer seen as signs of weakness but as authentic reflections of passion, commitment, and sacrifice (Maguire, 2011; Sanderson, 2013).

Moreover, emotional displays can enhance an athlete's connection with their fans, particularly when they convey humility and gratitude (Guschwan, 2016; Cho, 2013). Emotion is often perceived as an indication that the athlete comprehends the magnitude of their accomplishment, reinforcing their relatability and further endearing them to their supporters. This humanisation of elite athletes who are often viewed as distant, almost mythological figures, bridges the gap between sporting heroes and their audiences (Wenner, 2013). By expressing vulnerability, athletes allow fans to engage with them on a more personal level, making their achievements not only impressive but also emotionally significant. This is particularly important in national identity construction, where the success of athletes is often framed as a reflection of collective pride, unity, and perseverance (Cho, 2013; Cleland, 2014).

Masculinity and National Identity in Sport

Sport has evolved into a symbolic arena where national identity and masculinity are both performed and contested (Guinness & Besnier, 2016; Hoberman, 1984). It serves as a dual force: fostering unity through cooperative displays between nations while simultaneously acting as a battleground for rivalry and dominance. This dynamic interplay highlights the cultural significance of sport and mirrors broader societal perceptions of strength, discipline,

and values, often reinforcing militaristic and hegemonic masculine ideals (Jenkins, 2013). As Benedict Anderson (1983) argues in 'Imagined Communities', nations are not naturally occurring entities but are socially constructed through shared rituals, symbols, and narratives. Sport plays a crucial role in this construction, reinforcing collective identities through the spectacle of competition and camaraderie. International sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games, become sites where nations assert their presence on the global stage, often in a manner that mirrors historical military conflicts.

The connection between sport and war is particularly evident in pre-match rituals, aggressive play styles, and the language used to describe sporting encounters. For instance, American professional sports frequently adopt militaristic symbolism, from the national anthem performances before games to jet flyovers at the Super Bowl, reinforcing the link between athletic and military prowess (Jenkins, 2013). The haka, a traditional Māori war dance performed by New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team; a striking example of how national identity and masculinity intersect. Historically a battlefield ritual, the haka has been adapted into the sporting world, symbolising strength, aggression, and unity. However, its use in sport has often been reduced to a spectacle, overshadowing its deeper cultural significance. Recent instances of its performance in political protests demonstrated its broader role beyond sport, reclaiming it as an instrument of resistance and identity (Guinness & Besnier, 2016).

Sport functions as a proxy battlefield where athletes serve as representatives of their nations, embodying ideals of resilience, dominance, and honour (Hoberman, 1984). This phenomenon has been particularly evident in Cold War-era sports, where the Olympics and other international competitions became ideological contests between the United States and the Soviet Union. More recently, geopolitical tensions have surfaced in sport, such as Ukraine's national football team being seen as a symbol of defiance and resistance following

the 2022 Russian invasion. These examples illustrate how sport continues to be intertwined with national struggles, reinforcing traditional masculinity and warrior-like narratives (Kelly, 2016).

The intersection of sport, masculinity, and national identity is not exclusive to male athletes. Bowes and Bairner (2018) examine how female athletes, particularly in contact sports, navigate traditionally masculine spaces, often facing expectations to embody militarised and nationalistic ideals. This was evident in the 2019 Solheim Cup, where the rhetoric surrounding the event closely paralleled the language of war and national defence, positioning female athletes as “proxy warriors” for their respective nations (Bowes et al., 2020). The study highlights how national identity in sport is not solely a male-dominated discourse but extends to women who are often forced to conform to warrior-like imagery.

Furthermore, emotional expression in sport plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of masculinity and national identity. Historically, athletes have been expected to display stoicism and control, aligning with traditional hegemonic masculinity. However, recent shifts in cultural norms have allowed for greater acceptance of emotional displays in sport. White and Hobson (2017) argue that athletes who show emotion, such as Rafael Nadal weeping after a major victory or Lionel Messi’s tearful celebrations after Argentina’s World Cup win, challenge rigid definitions of masculinity while simultaneously reinforcing national pride. These moments resonate with fans because they humanise athletes, making their achievements appear even more extraordinary while fostering a deeper emotional connection between them and their national supporters. Ultimately, sport functions as both a unifying and divisive force, reinforcing national identity through its association with hegemonic masculinity. The militarisation of sports culture, the portrayal of athletes as warriors, and the symbolic significance of emotional expression all contribute to this complex interplay. As nations continue to invest in sport as a tool for political and cultural

representation, the relationship between masculinity and national identity remains a defining feature of the sporting world (Kelly, 2016; Hoberman, 1984).

R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a crucial framework for understanding how sport functions as a platform to reinforce ideals of strength, dominance, and heteronormativity, embedding these into national identities (Connell, 1995). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally idealised form of masculinity that legitimises male dominance over women and other forms of masculinity. Within this framework, subordinate masculinities are often associated with non-dominant traits, whereas marginalised masculinities arise in contexts of intersectionality, such as race or class oppression. By contrast, complicit masculinities do not actively enact hegemonic norms but still benefit from their systemic dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In the realm of sport, hegemonic masculinity remains the dominant social construct due to the cultural association of athleticism with physical strength, competitiveness, and aggression, qualities emblematic of this ideal (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1992). Sport serves not only as a venue for performing these traits but also as a mechanism for legitimising their social value, often excluding or stigmatising other expressions of masculinity. The valorisation of toughness and endurance in sports like rugby or American football perpetuates the marginalisation of men who do not conform to these ideals, as well as the exclusion of women and non-binary individuals from these spaces (Messner, 1990; Huebenthal, 2013). Connell (1995) argues that sport reinforces hegemonic masculinity by celebrating these norms publicly and embedding them into national and institutional identities. This entrenchment maintains its dominance, as sport remains a powerful site for defining societal values and hierarchies.

Michael Messner's work further explores the intricate relationship between gender, sport, and power structures, positioning sport as a critical site for the construction and reinforcement of masculinity (Messner, 1992; 2013). In 'Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity' (1992), Messner examines how sports perpetuate traditional masculine ideals, such as dominance, competition, and physical strength, aligning with broader societal expectations of masculinity. His theory focuses on institutional and cultural frameworks that position sport as a male dominated arena, fostering what he describes as "gender hierarchies" (Messner, 1992; 1988). These structures privilege athletes who embody hegemonic masculine traits while demeaning women and non-conforming men (Messner, 1990; Fowler, 2021). Messner's analysis is particularly relevant when examining the intersection of masculinity and national identity in sport, as athletic competition becomes a medium where men are socialised into roles that reflect broader societal power dynamics.

The militarisation of sport, as discussed by Jenkins (2013) and Kelly (2016), further entrenches these hierarchies, positioning athletes as symbolic warriors for their nations. This link between sport and nationalism reinforces the expectation that athletes exemplify hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating resilience, aggression, and dominance on an international stage. By situating sport within these power hierarchies, Messner's framework provides a lens to analyse how masculinity is performed and sustained on both national and global scales (Messner, 2013; Bowes & Bairner, 2018). Messner's work closely correlates with R.W. Connell's theory on hegemonic masculinity, particularly in exploring how sport puts forward specific gender norms whilst silencing others. Both scholars emphasise how hegemonic masculinity operates within sports to reproduce dominance and maintain existing social hierarchies. For example, Messner's analysis of locker room cultures complements Connell's concept of complicit masculinities, where men who may not exhibit overt aggression still uphold these norms by participating in or benefiting from the system.

Furthermore, Messner's insights into the institutional role of sport as a gendered space resonate with Benedict Anderson's theories of national identity. Anderson's concept of shared rituals and symbols, such as national sports events, mirrors Messner's exploration of how these spectacles not only unify communities but also reinforce masculine ideals tied into national pride. The convergence of these theories highlights the dual role of sport in shaping both gender and national identities. Together, Connell, Messner, and Anderson provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how the masculine ideals celebrated in sport influence societal perceptions of power, identity, and cultural values.

Additionally, the works of Eric Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, and Nira Yuval-Davis have significantly shaped scholarly perspectives on masculinity and its relationship with national identity, offering critical frameworks that deepen our understanding of these constructs in the realm of sport. Their contributions are important because they illuminate how cultural and national narratives are constructed, maintained, and performed, often intertwining with gendered power dynamics. In "The Invention of Tradition" (1983), Hobsbawm explores how traditions are deliberately created to forge a sense of continuity and collective identity. This is particularly relevant in sports where rituals like national anthems, flag ceremonies, and symbolic acts (e.g., New Zealand's haka) link performances of masculinity with expressions of national pride. Stuart Hall's work, namely 'The Question of Cultural Identity' in 'Modernity and its Futures' (1992), emphasises the role of media and cultural representation in shaping societal views. His insights are crucial for analysing how sports media projects athletes as embodiments of idealised masculinity and national strength, reinforcing dominant cultural narratives. Similarly, Nira Yuval-Davis in 'Gender and Nation' (1997) highlights the inherently gendered nature of nationalism, where men symbolise the nation's power and endurance, whilst women are positioned as cultural and biological reproducers.

Scholars have applied these theories to the study of sport, masculinity, and national identity in various ways. For instance, Thompson-Morley (2018) examines how American nationalism is performed through sports, arguing that sporting events function as “invented traditions” that sustain hegemonic masculinity and reinforce national myths. Dyreson (1998) explores how the Olympic Games serve as a platform for nationalistic expression and the construction of collective identity, particularly in the United States. Similarly, Gems (2011) discusses how baseball has been framed as a nationalistic tradition, embedding ideals of masculinity and national pride within historical narratives. These works illustrate how sport functions as both a site of social control and a medium through which national identity is solidified.

Further perspectives on the intersection of sport, masculinity, and nationalism can be found in the work of Agergaard and Lenneis (2024), who explore how national borders influence the inclusion and exclusion of athletes based on ethnicity and gender. Agergaard (2019) specifically examines media representations of minority athletes, highlighting how dominant national identities in sport often marginalise those who do not fit traditional conceptions of masculinity or national belonging. Black (1997) extends this discussion to the Irish diaspora, analysing how cultural identity is negotiated through sport, gender, and nationalism. Additionally, Horne, Tomlinson, and Whannel (2005) provide a broader sociological perspective, arguing that sport serves as a powerful mechanism for reinforcing both national and masculine ideals.

In conclusion, the intersection of masculinity and national identity in sport is shaped by deeply ingrained cultural traditions, media representations, and institutional structures that privilege hegemonic forms of masculinity. The theoretical contributions of Connell, Messner, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Hall, and Yuval-Davis provide valuable insights into the ways sport operates as a site of both inclusion and exclusion, reinforcing dominant gender norms while

also serving as a platform for contesting them. By critically examining how nationalism and masculinity intersect in sport, scholars can better understand the broader implications of these constructs on societal values and power dynamics. Future research should continue to explore how evolving gender norms and increasing diversity in sports challenge and reshape traditional notions of masculinity and national identity.

Ice Hockey, Identity and Masculinity

Ice hockey has long been associated with ideals of toughness, aggression, and resilience, making it a prime site for the construction and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. The sport's deeply ingrained physicality, including body checking, fighting, and endurance, has solidified its cultural image as a hypermasculine domain (Robidoux, 2001). Unlike other sports, where physical aggression is often penalised, ice hockey historically not only permits but also glorifies violent confrontations, reinforcing a notion of masculinity that celebrates dominance and physical superiority (Holman and McKelvey, 2021). This constructed culture has been embedded within the sport's institutions, shaping how players, fans, and media perceive gender norms in hockey (Adams, 2006). Michael Messner (1992) argues that sport is a key site for constructing and maintaining masculinity, and ice hockey exemplifies this through its emphasis on physical strength, toughness, and emotional restraint. The ritualised violence in hockey, particularly fighting, has been extensively studied as a mechanism through which players assert their masculinity and establish dominance (Bernstein, 2006; Atkinson, 2010). This culture of sanctioned aggression aligns with R.W. Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, in which certain forms of masculinity, particularly those emphasising physical prowess and competitiveness, are privileged over others. As a result, ice hockey has not only perpetuated specific masculine ideals but has also marginalised alternative expressions of gender identity within the sport (Allain, 2008).

The nationalistic undertones of ice hockey further amplify its role in reinforcing masculine ideals. In Canada, for instance, ice hockey has been intricately tied to national identity, often serving as a symbol of the country's ruggedness, endurance, and strength (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993). This connection is also evident in the United States and parts of Europe, where hockey is framed as a space for heroic masculinity and national pride (Kidd, 2017). The sport's association with nationalist discourse often elevates traditional masculine values, portraying hockey players as warriors who embody the resilience and aggression expected of both athletes and national representatives (Miller, 2020). Such narratives reinforce a particular brand of masculinity that not only dominates within the sport but also influences societal expectations of male athletes across broader cultural contexts (MacDonald, 2014).

Beyond its physicality and aggressive play, ice hockey has historically been positioned as a space where masculinity is both performed and regulated. The sport's emphasis on toughness and endurance aligns with long-standing cultural ideals of masculinity, often reinforcing the expectation that male athletes must suppress vulnerability while demonstrating resilience and dominance (Robidoux, 2001; Gee, 2009). This notion is deeply embedded within hockey's developmental pathways, where young players are socialised into a culture that values aggression, sacrifice, and emotional restraint (Smith, 2017). The culture of hockey demands conformity to these ideals, leaving little space for alternative expressions of masculinity, particularly those that reject aggression or emphasise inclusivity (Allain, 2015). This hegemonic framework is further reinforced through institutional and media representations of hockey.

As Gruneau and Whitson (1993) argue, the professionalisation and commercialisation of hockey have led to a commodification of masculinity, where players who best embody traditional masculine ideals, such as physical toughness and leadership, are celebrated and

rewarded. The NHL, for example, has historically glorified enforcers, players whose primary role is to engage in physical altercations to protect teammates and uphold the team's dominance (Bernstein, 2006; Coulter, 2019). Media portrayals of hockey further amplify these narratives, often framing physicality and aggression as necessary components of the sport while downplaying or dismissing injuries and the long-term health consequences associated with this culture (Holman and McKelvey, 2021). Such portrayals contribute to the normalisation of violent masculinity within hockey and shape public perceptions of the sport as an inherently masculine domain (Poniatowski and Hardin, 2012).

However, recent scholarship has challenged these traditional narratives, highlighting the exclusionary nature of hegemonic masculinity in hockey and the ways in which non-dominant masculinities are marginalised (Chiasson, Comeau, and Morrow, 2016). Studies on LGBTQ+ athletes and racialised players in hockey reveal the significant barriers they face, from homophobic locker room cultures to racialized stereotypes that question their toughness and legitimacy as competitors (Travers, 2008; Adams, 2011). The experience of Black hockey players, for instance, underscores how racial and gender expectations intersect to shape who is accepted within the sport's traditional frameworks (Farred, 2018). The work of scholars like Hargreaves (2000) and Szto (2020) further illustrates how hockey culture reinforces exclusionary narratives by prioritising a white, working-class, and hyper-masculine ideal. These perspectives offer a necessary critique of how hegemonic masculinity operates within hockey, challenging the assumption that the sport's inherent nature is purely physical and aggressive rather than socially and culturally constructed.

Despite the growing critiques of hegemonic masculinity in ice hockey, the sport continues to serve as a cultural battleground where national identity, gender norms, and historical traditions intersect. The persistence of hypermasculine ideals in hockey can be understood as part of a broader effort to maintain national sporting traditions that align with established

gendered hierarchies (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Adams, 2011). In many hockey-dominant countries, such as Canada, Slovakia, and the UK, the sport plays a fundamental role in shaping collective identity, often reinforcing narratives of toughness, resilience, and unity that parallel nationalistic ideals (Kidd, 2017; Holman and McKelvey, 2021). The association between ice hockey and masculinity is not accidental but rather historically and socially constructed through decades of institutional reinforcement, media representation, and cultural reproduction (Robidoux, 2001; Szto, 2020). However, as scholarship increasingly critiques these traditional frameworks, there is a growing awareness of the need to reimagine hockey culture in a way that accommodates diverse expressions of gender and identity (Allain, 2015; Chiasson, Comeau, and Morrow, 2016).

Ice Hockey and Masculinity

Ice hockey, as one of the most physically demanding and culturally significant sports, has long been a focal point for scholars studying the intersections of masculinity and sport. Its aggressive, fast-paced nature and emphasis on physicality make it a prominent site for the performance and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Adams, 2006). Scholars such as Robyn Jones, Nancy Theberge, and Michael Robidoux have explored how ice hockey culture perpetuates traditional masculine ideals, including toughness, dominance, and emotional disconnection (Theberge, 1997; Robidoux, 2001; Allain, 2008). These studies highlight how the culture of the sport often marginalises alternative expressions of masculinity while reinforcing a rigid, hierarchical structure in which strength, endurance, and aggression are valorised (Smith, 2017; Szto, 2020).

Among these, Michael Robidoux's work stands out for its in-depth analysis of how the sport's institutional and cultural frameworks normalise violence and physicality as markers of masculinity. In 'Men at Play: A Working Understanding of Professional Hockey' (2001),

Robidoux examines how the professionalism of hockey codifies masculine norms, creating a system where players are celebrated for their ability to endure pain and assert physical dominance. This framework not only shapes players' identities but also reinforces broader societal ideals of manhood (Robidoux, 2001; Holman and McKelvey, 2021). Furthermore, Theberge's (2000) work on gender relations in ice hockey highlights how these hegemonic norms exclude women and non-dominant masculinities from fully participating in the sport. This perspective is further reinforced by Allain (2015), who argues that hockey culture sustains hyper-masculine ideals through media representations and institutionalised expectations. By examining these dynamics, scholars contribute to an understanding of hockey as a site where masculinity is not only performed but also systematically reproduced through structures of power and cultural reinforcement (Gruneau and Whitson, 1993; Adams, 2011; Szto, 2020).

Robidoux (2001) is a foundational exploration of the cultural and institutional dynamics within professional hockey, particularly its relationship with hegemonic masculinity. Through ethnographic methods, Robidoux investigates how the sport constructs and reinforces rigid notions of masculinity, where physical toughness, aggression, and emotional control are celebrated as key markers of success. He identifies violence, such as fighting and body-checking, as not only normal but integral to the sport's identity, serving as a demonstration of strength and dominance. This culture is further propagated by coaches, peers, and media representations that valorise athletes who conform to these ideals while sidelining those who challenge them. Robidoux critiques the role of commercialisation in perpetuating these norms, with leagues and broadcasters marketing players as embodiments of national pride and hyper masculine strength. His work also addresses the exclusionary practices embedded in hockey, noting how locker room behaviours, rituals, and language belittle individuals who do not align with the sport's traditional masculine ethos. Overall, Robidoux's analysis positions hockey as a microcosm of broader societal gender

dynamics, highlighting the need to question and reframe the values celebrated in professional sports. His findings continue to influence critical discussions on gender, identity, and inclusivity in athletics.

Through ethnographic studies, historical analysis, and critiques of institutional practices, Robidoux sheds light on the intersections of masculinity, identity, and sport, making his contributions essential for scholars examining these dynamics. In 'Stickhandling through the Margins: First Nations Hockey in Canada' (2012), Robidoux investigates the dual role of hockey as both a platform for empowerment and a site of marginalisation for Indigenous communities. By exploring how systemic racism and colonial legacies impact Indigenous players' experiences, he highlights the exclusionary practices of hockey culture and its implications for national identity. This work situates masculinity within a broader context of cultural and racial dynamics, emphasising how marginalised groups challenge and redefine the dominant narratives of masculinity in sport. In 'Hockey Canada and the Body Checking Debate in Minor Hockey' (2006), Robidoux and Trudel critique the emphasis on body checking as a defining aspect of youth hockey. The study underscores how physicality in the sport reinforces ideals of toughness and aggression, key components of hegemonic masculinity. By calling attention to the risks associated with these practices, the authors challenge traditional norms that prioritise aggression over player safety, advocating for a cultural shift that prioritises inclusivity and well-being.

Robidoux's 'Artificial Emasculation and the Maintenance of a Masculine Identity in Professional Hockey' (1997) examines how professional players navigate pressures to conform to hyper masculine ideals. He critiques the institutional and cultural structures that equate masculinity with dominance and emotional stoicism, shedding light on the psychological toll of these expectations. This work also explores the role of media and organisational rituals in perpetuating these norms, contributing to a critical understanding of

how masculinity is both constructed and maintained in professional hockey. In “Historical Interpretations of First Nations Masculinity and its Influence on Canada’s Sport Heritage” (2007), Robidoux explores how colonial narratives have shaped representations of Indigenous masculinity within Canadian sport. He highlights the role of hockey in both reflecting and challenging these historical stereotypes, further linking masculinity to issues of race and cultural identity.

Robidoux’s studies collectively illuminate the ways hockey culture perpetuates hegemonic masculinity while offering insights into how these norms can be deconstructed to foster greater inclusivity and equity. His work is indispensable for examining the cultural and institutional dynamics of masculinity in ice hockey. His ethnographic and cultural analysis continues to shape discussions on the systemic challenges within ice hockey, from grassroots to professional levels. In ‘One step forward, two steps back: The struggle for child protection in Canadian sport’ (2020), Kerr, Kidd, and Donnelly discuss systemic issues in Canadian sports that affect child protection, focusing on the tension between tradition and modern reforms. The authors highlight how cultural practices and organisational structures often reinforce hegemonic masculinity, particularly in sports like ice hockey, which valorise aggression and toughness from a young age. Robidoux’s work is relevant here as it critiques the normalisation of violence and hypermasculinity in ice hockey, a culture that perpetuates unsafe environments for young athletes. An example of this is evident in the current rules Hockey Canada’s top three youth development programmes. When a fight occurs at this level of play, both players are sent out on personal misconduct for five playing minutes. The punishment mirrors rules set out for adult, professional ice hockey. The authors draw on Robidoux’s findings to argue that the entrenched values in ice hockey resist reforms aimed at safeguarding players, particularly youth.

The study 'Reaching out: Help-seeking among professional male ice hockey athletes' (2023) investigates the barriers to mental health support in professional ice hockey, emphasising how traditional notions of masculinity deter athletes from seeking help. The authors cite Robidoux's "Men at Play" to contextualise how the culture of emotional stoicism and toughness in hockey creates a stigma around vulnerability. Robidoux's exploration of masculinity in hockey aligns with the findings of this study, as both emphasise the detrimental effects of hegemonic masculinity on players' mental health. The authors extend Robidoux's critique by demonstrating how these cultural norms persist in professional hockey and shape attitudes toward mental health interventions.

In 'Rural sport spectacles: Ice hockey, mythologies, and meaning-making in rural Canada' (2022), Rich examines the symbolic and cultural significance of hockey in rural Canadian communities. The book draws on Robidoux's exploration of hockey as a site of identity formation, particularly in his studies on First Nations hockey and its connections to Canadian nationalism. Rich highlights how rural hockey culture perpetuates myths of rugged masculinity and resilience, reinforcing the values Robidoux identified as central to Canadian hockey. Furthermore, Rich extends Robidoux's analysis by exploring how rural communities use ice hockey as a medium for cultural storytelling and mythmaking, further entrenching the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. An example of myth making within rural communities is in the biography of an ice hockey player from Canada, Bobby Orr. In 'Orr: My Story' (2013), Orr brings up the myth of how an ice hockey coach saw him shoot the puck so hard that it "went through a concrete bridge", at the lake he played as a kid. In his biography, Orr states how the story was enhanced to create myths about why he was good at the game.

Cheryl MacDonald conducted her doctoral research at the University of Alberta (2016), where she explored the attitudes of Major AAA hockey players toward homosexuality and masculinity. She is a leading researcher in examining ice hockey culture and

hypermasculinity, particularly within locker room settings. Through qualitative studies, including interviews with young hockey players, MacDonald (2016) uncovers how locker rooms function as spaces where hegemonic masculinity is both performed and perpetuated. Her findings reveal that this culture promotes emotional suppression, hyper-competitiveness, and a reliance on exclusionary language and rituals, reinforcing traditional masculine ideals. Moreover, MacDonald examines how players navigate evolving societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality, identifying a tension between entrenched norms and emerging inclusivity. While some players are increasingly open to challenging homophobia and sexism, the prevailing locker room culture remains resistant to change, often prioritising conformity to traditional masculine expectations (MacDonald, 2016; Alsarve and Angelin, 2020).

MacDonald's work aligns with Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities," as hockey locker rooms become microcosms of collective identity formation, mirroring how nations use shared symbols and rituals to construct belonging. Just as Anderson describes the power of shared narratives in fostering nationalism, MacDonald illustrates how locker room rituals—such as bonding through banter or physical competition—create a sense of unity predicated on rigid gender norms. This perspective is further reinforced by Alsarve and Angelin (2020), who argue that the perceived openness of the locker room setting paradoxically reinforces hierarchies of masculinity by maintaining established social structures through coded language and symbolic interactions.

MacDonald's findings also resonate with Michael Robidoux's (2001) work, which critiques hockey's institutionalised celebration of aggression and dominance. Both scholars emphasise the role of violence, whether physical or symbolic, as a mechanism for asserting masculinity and maintaining social hierarchies within the sport. While Robidoux primarily focuses on professional hockey, MacDonald extends this analysis to youth levels, offering

insights into how these dynamics are ingrained early and persist across generations. This early socialisation into hegemonic masculinity aligns with studies by Alsarve (2021), who underscores the need for violence prevention programs in hockey, illustrating how the sport's culture fosters and legitimises violent behaviour as an expression of masculinity. Similarly, Katz (1995) explores how masculinity is reconstructed in locker room settings through intervention programs aimed at challenging these dominant norms, a perspective that supports MacDonald's argument for the need to foster more inclusive team environments.

Taken together, these studies underscore the urgent need to address the entrenched norms within hockey culture to foster greater inclusivity. Kehler (2016) highlights how locker room spaces have long been sites of gendered policing, reinforcing the notion that masculinity must be performed in accordance with rigid expectations. This perspective, alongside MacDonald's and Robidoux's research, illustrates how institutional structures and cultural traditions work together to sustain a version of masculinity that resists change. By critically engaging with these entrenched norms, scholars continue to challenge the ways in which masculinity is constructed, performed, and policed within ice hockey, advocating for a shift toward more inclusive and diverse representations of identity within the sport.

Ice Hockey, Masculinity and National Identity in Canada

Ice hockey holds deep cultural and national significance in Canada, serving as a vital part of the country's identity. For many Canadians, the sport is woven into the fabric of their history, community, and sense of belonging. Ice hockey reflects core aspects of Canadian life, such as resilience, endurance, and a strong sense of camaraderie, values shaped by the country's harsh winters and vast, rugged landscapes (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). More than just a pastime, the game has evolved into a symbol of collective identity, pride, and tradition, playing a crucial role in shaping Canadian masculinity and national consciousness.

Historically, ice hockey has been closely tied to Canada's development as a nation. While various forms of stick-and-ball games were played by First Nations peoples and settlers in Canada, modern ice hockey took shape in the 19th century, with Montreal recognised as a birthplace for the codification of the sport's rules (Mason, 2002). The sport quickly spread across the country, providing a shared national experience during the long winters. By the early 20th century, hockey had become synonymous with Canadian life, with the establishment of professional leagues such as the National Hockey League (NHL) further cementing Canada's global influence in the sport. The Stanley Cup, initially donated in 1892 by Lord Stanley of Preston, became the most coveted trophy in professional hockey and a symbol of excellence in Canadian sports culture (Holman, 2018).

Canadians have long viewed ice hockey as a reflection of their national spirit. The sport exemplifies traits that resonate with the Canadian ethos, such as teamwork, toughness, and humility. Canada's winters provide ideal natural conditions for outdoor hockey, making the sport a rite of passage for many Canadians (Robidoux, 2001). From playing on frozen ponds in small towns to competing in massive urban rinks, ice hockey binds communities together and fosters a sense of identity. It transcends class, region, and generation, with families passing down love for the game across decades (Baird, 2012).

Beyond its national significance, hockey also plays a crucial role in defining regional identities within Canada. One of the most prominent examples is the historic divide between English-Canadian and French-Canadian hockey cultures. The Montreal Canadiens, known as "Les Canadiens" or "Le Tricolore," represent more than just a hockey team; they are a symbol of Quebecois pride and cultural identity. Montreal's logo also holds a big "H" letter inside the red "C", standing for "Habitants", engraving Montreal as home of ice hockey. The team's success in the NHL has reinforced Quebec's distinct place in Canadian society, with

hockey serving as an outlet for expressions of nationalism and resistance to anglophone dominance (Jackson, 2014). The longstanding rivalry between the Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs has further reflected broader tensions between English and French Canada, making hockey an arena for not just sport but also political and cultural assertion.

Ice hockey's dominance in Canadian sports culture has also influenced the construction of masculinity in the country. The sport has traditionally embodied ideals of hegemonic masculinity, emphasising physical toughness, aggression, and endurance (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). The expectation for players to engage in fights, play through injuries, and display emotional restraint aligns with traditional masculine norms. This association between hockey and masculinity reinforced gender expectations in Canadian society, where young boys are encouraged to embrace the sport as a key element of their identity formation (Allain, 2015).

While hockey remains the pinnacle of Canada's sporting hierarchy, other sports also contribute to national identity, albeit to a lesser extent. Lacrosse, recognised as Canada's official national sport, has Indigenous origins and continues to hold cultural importance among First Nations communities (Forsyth & Giles, 2012). However, its mainstream popularity is overshadowed by hockey's deep-rooted presence. Similarly, Canadian football has a devoted following, particularly in Western Canada, while basketball has grown in prominence. Despite these developments, hockey remains the primary sport through which Canadian identity and masculinity are expressed and reinforced.

In conclusion, ice hockey's role in Canada extends far beyond the rink. It is a cultural institution that shapes national identity, regional loyalties, and expressions of masculinity. The sport's historical significance, geographic accessibility, and symbolic representation of Canadian values solidified its place as the nation's most revered athletic pursuit. However,

the intersection of masculinity and national identity within the sport raises important discussions about inclusivity, representation, and the evolving nature of Canadian identity in the 21st century. Canada's successes in international hockey have only deepened this connection. Perhaps no event demonstrates the sport's impact on Canadian identity more than the 1972 Summit Series between Canada and the Soviet Union. This iconic eight-game series, played at the height of the Cold War, was framed as a symbolic clash between competing political ideologies, reinforcing nationalistic fervour in Canada (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Canada's victory became a defining moment in the country's national consciousness. It reinforced the idea that hockey is not only Canada's game but a marker of national strength and perseverance (Mason, 2002).

Ice hockey plays a significant role in Canada's multicultural identity. Historically, the sport has been dominated by white, male athletes, but in recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis on inclusion and diversity. Indigenous players, women, and athletes from diverse ethnic backgrounds have contributed significantly to the game (Robidoux, 2012). Willie O'Ree, who broke the NHL's colour barrier, and Hayley Wickenheiser, a female hockey legend, have helped expand the sport's cultural reach, challenging the traditional norms of hockey and making it an inclusive representation of Canadian pride (Holman, 2019). Despite these strides, systemic barriers remain, and critical scholarship continues to address ongoing challenges regarding racial and gender inequalities in Canadian hockey (Szto, 2021).

Today, hockey continues to act as a unifying force, especially during international competitions like the Winter Olympics or the World Junior Ice Hockey Championships. Canadian victories in men's and women's ice hockey at the Winter Olympics, particularly the dramatic gold medal game wins in 2010 in Vancouver and 2014, were moments of intense national pride (Kosnac et al., 2023). The "Golden Goal" by Sidney Crosby in 2010, for

example, became an iconic moment, encapsulating Canadian hockey's emotional importance and its ability to unite the nation in celebration (Kidd, 2017). These moments highlight the centrality of hockey to Canadian identity, yet they also reflect a broader narrative in which national identity is continually reinforced through sporting success (Macintosh & Greenhorn, 1996).

Countries around the world try to emulate the Canadian culture of ice hockey because Canada is widely regarded as the birthplace and spiritual home of the sport. Canadian hockey culture is synonymous with excellence, tradition, and success, and countries seeking to develop their own hockey programs often model their systems on Canadian frameworks (Wieting, 2000). One reason for this imitation is Canada's history of producing world-class talent, its sophisticated hockey infrastructure, and the deep cultural integration of hockey into Canadian life, fostering high levels of participation and community engagement from a young age (Miller & Smart, 2018). Canadian teams and players have long been at the forefront of the sport, winning numerous gold medals at the Winter Olympics, World Championships, and World Junior Championships. From legends like Wayne Gretzky and Bobby Orr to contemporary stars like Sidney Crosby and Connor McDavid, Canada has consistently shaped the global game (Brunt, 2020). By analysing how Canadian players are developed, trained, and coached, other nations attempt to replicate this success to elevate their own hockey programs (Mason & Duquette, 2004).

Another key aspect of Canadian hockey culture that other countries seek to adopt is the infrastructure that supports player development. Canada has a well-established system of youth hockey programs, junior leagues, and professional development pathways that allow players to grow and thrive within a structured environment. From backyard rinks to organised youth leagues and professional clubs, Canada's grassroots hockey system is robust, with deep community involvement and support (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). Other nations,

particularly those where hockey is still developing, often lack this level of infrastructure and community support. By adopting Canadian-style systems, such as youth development programs and training facilities, these countries hope to build similar talent pipelines (Miller & Smart, 2005).

The Canadian model of coaching and mentorship is also a significant reason why other countries try to copy their hockey culture. Canada emphasises a combination of skill development, teamwork, discipline, and a competitive spirit (Glynn, Evans & MacDonald, 2022). Coaches in Canada often place a strong emphasis on fundamentals, such as skating, puck handling, and physical fitness, while also nurturing leadership and resilience among players. As a result, Canadian players tend to be well-rounded and adaptable, qualities that make them successful in the fast-paced and physically demanding environment of modern hockey (Mason & Duquette, 2004). Countries that want to elevate their coaching standards often send their coaches to Canada for training or bring in Canadian coaches to lead their national or club teams, hoping to instil these principles in their own players (Macintosh & Greenhorn, 1993).

Community engagement plays a crucial role in Canadian hockey culture, a model that other countries seek to replicate. In Canada, hockey is a deeply embedded social institution that fosters local engagement, fan culture, and a sense of belonging (Holman, 2009). Entire communities come together to support local teams, build rinks, and celebrate the sport. This grassroots involvement is a defining factor in Canada's sustained hockey success, as it not only fosters love for the game but also provides a robust support system for young athletes (Szto, 2021). Other nations, particularly those where hockey is still growing, recognize that building a passionate fan base and a strong community around the sport is essential for long-term success (Kosnac, Coyle & Mason, 2023). Countries like Finland, Sweden, and the United States have developed strong hockey cultures, largely by emulating Canada's focus

on community involvement, youth programs, and grassroots engagement (Miller & Smart, 2005).

Hockey's status as a national symbol in Canada serves as a model for other countries developing their own hockey traditions. In Canada, hockey is more than a sport, it is a cultural touchstone that represents national resilience, teamwork, and pride (Hall, 2018). The 1972 Summit Series, which saw Canada defeat the Soviet Union in a highly charged Cold War-era matchup, reinforced hockey as an extension of national identity (Wieting, 2000). Inspired by this model, countries such as Russia, Sweden, and Finland have built strong national hockey traditions by cultivating a sense of national pride around their teams (Mason & Duquette, 2004).

Ice Hockey, Masculinity and National Identity in Slovakia

Ice hockey holds a unique place in Slovakia's national consciousness, serving as both a source of pride and a reflection of the country's complex historical trajectory. While the sport played a role in the shared Czechoslovakian identity prior to the peaceful dissolution in 1993, its significance in Slovakia took on new meaning in the post-communist era. The development of Slovak hockey mirrors the nation's broader struggle to forge a distinct identity while grappling with issues of political instability, economic transition, and social cohesion. As Kosnac and Gloss (2023) note, national polarisation remains a pressing issue in Slovakia, dividing society on various levels, including values, governance, and external allegiances. In this context, ice hockey offers a rare moment of unity, temporarily bridging societal rifts and reinforcing national sentiment.

The breakup of Czechoslovakia had profound implications for Slovak ice hockey, as the nation suddenly found itself without the infrastructure, financial backing, and established

systems that had largely been centralised in Prague. Unlike the Czech Republic, which retained much of its sporting legacy, Slovakia had to rebuild its hockey program from the ground up, facing challenges in player development and international competitiveness. This period of transition coincided with broader societal struggles, where weak social cohesion led to the formation of parallel societies, limiting collective progress (Pestansky, 2007). Nevertheless, Slovakia's unexpected victory at the 2002 IIHF World Championship became a defining moment in the country's post-independence identity, symbolising resilience and the ability to succeed despite structural disadvantages. The win was celebrated as a unifying moment in Slovak history, fostering a sense of national pride that transcended political and economic turmoil.

However, the issue of corruption within Slovak sports governance has often hindered further development. Rothstein and Verraich (from Miller, 2016) highlight how Slovakia's low levels of interpersonal trust place it among high-corruption-rated states, an issue that has plagued national institutions, including sports federations. Allegations of mismanagement within the Slovak Ice Hockey Federation, as well as nepotism in player selection, have contributed to scepticism among both players and fans. Furthermore, the infiltration of politics into sports institutions reflects a broader societal pattern, where political actors exploit weakened social cohesion for their own gain (Lukes, 2010). This lack of transparency has fuelled public distrust and, in some cases, stifled the development of young talent, as opportunities often depend on connections rather than merit.

Despite these challenges, ice hockey remains one of the few arenas where Slovak masculinity and national pride are expressed on a global stage. The sport embodies the ideals of toughness, endurance, and perseverance, traits deeply embedded in Slovakia's historical narrative of survival and resistance. As Kosnac and Gloss (2023) suggest, a nation that can reconcile its identity struggles is better equipped to cultivate unity through shared

cultural symbols. Hockey, much like in Canada, has the potential to serve as a unifying force in Slovakia, transcending political and societal divides. However, achieving this requires addressing systemic corruption, fostering stronger institutional trust, and ensuring that the sport remains accessible to future generations.

In Slovakia, masculinity is often closely tied to traditional values, resilience, and national pride, reflecting the country's historical and political landscape. This connection is particularly evident in ice hockey, where toughness, physicality, and endurance are not only admired but expected. Slovak hockey culture emphasises the idea of the "strong, unyielding warrior", a narrative reinforced through sports commentary and media portrayals (Pestansky, 2007). Ice hockey serves as a battleground for national representation, where athletes are celebrated as modern-day warriors defending Slovakia's honour on the international stage.

In Slovakia, ice hockey players hold an elevated status in the public sphere, often being perceived as national heroes and figures of inspiration. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the country's historical and cultural context, where sporting success has been closely tied to national pride and identity. Hockey players, particularly those who achieve international recognition, are frequently idealised not only for their athletic prowess but also for their perceived embodiment of national values such as resilience, strength, and determination. Their success on the ice serves as a source of collective pride, reinforcing the idea that Slovakia, despite its small size, can compete with global superpowers in one of the most physically demanding sports. This notion became especially prominent following Slovakia's victory at 2002 IIHF World Championship, a moment that symbolised the country's emergence on the world stage after its split from Czechoslovakia.

The elevated status of hockey players in Slovakia extends beyond sports into the public and political sectors. Many former players transition into influential roles in politics, media, and

business, leveraging their public image to gain trust and credibility. Their perceived superiority stems from their disciplined, team-oriented background, which is often contrasted with the corruption and inefficiency associated with other sectors of Slovak public life (Kosnac and Gloss, 2023). This perception is further amplified by Slovakia's struggles with low social cohesion and trust in institutions, where successful athletes are seen as figures who have earned their status through merit rather than nepotism or political manoeuvring (Kosnac and Gloss, 2023; Wieting, 2000). However, this near-reverence for hockey players can also lead to an uncritical acceptance of their views, allowing them to wield significant influence in political and social discourse, sometimes reinforcing traditional or nationalistic ideals that may not align with the broader democratic evolution of Slovak society.

Slovakia's post-communist transformation has further shaped its perception of masculinity. The transition from state socialism to market-driven economy resulted in significant socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment and political instability. In this context, the traditional male role as a provider and protector has been both romanticised and threatened (Kosnac and Gloss, 2023). The decline of heavy industry and economic hardships led to the crisis of masculinity, where many men struggled to reconcile expectations of strength and control with realities of financial insecurity and social change (Lukes, 2010).

The rise of far-right political movements in Slovakia has also contributed to a resurgence of aggressive, hyper-masculine identity politics. Party of "LSNS" (People's Party, Our Slovakia) have leveraged nationalist and patriarchal rhetoric to appeal to voters disillusioned with mainstream politics. This often involves vilifying marginalised groups, including immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, and progressive activists, as threats to Slovak tradition and masculinity (Foldes, 2021). Political figures use imagery of "strong leadership" to reject liberal values, positioning themselves as the last defence against societal decay (Miller,

2016). Moreover, corruption and distrust in institutions further complicate Slovakia's engagement with masculinity in the public sphere. As Kosnac and Gloss (2023) point out, Slovakia falls into the category of high-corruption-rated states, where social trust remains critically low. This distrust fuels anxieties around national identity, as people look to strongmen leaders, military symbolism, and nationalist narratives as stabilising forces in an uncertain political climate.

Masculinity in Slovakia remains intertwined with national identity, political discourse, and sport, with ice hockey continuing to serve as a microcosm of broader societal values. However, as progressive movements and social changes challenge traditional gender norms, there is an ongoing tension between historical ideals of masculinity and contemporary efforts toward gender equality and inclusivity.

Ice Hockey, Masculinity and National Identity in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, ice hockey exists on the periphery of the sporting landscape, overshadowed by sports such as football, rugby, and cricket, which have historically played a central role in shaping national identity and perceptions of masculinity (Birrell & Cole, 1994). Unlike in Canada, Slovakia, or even the United States, where ice hockey holds strong cultural and national significance, the sport in the UK remains a niche pursuit with limited mainstream visibility. However, studies suggest that ice hockey in Britain still reflects and reinforces many traditional masculine ideals, albeit within a unique sporting context.

Research on masculinity in British ice hockey highlights the sport's emphasis on physicality, aggression, and resilience, attributes that align with traditional working-class notions of masculinity (Allison, 2018). British hockey culture, much like in North America, values

"toughness" and the ability to withstand pain, reinforcing the idea that real men play through injury and hardship (Gee, 2009). Players are often expected to conform to an unspoken code of stoicism and physical dominance, which mirrors broader themes found in UK contact sports. However, compared to the deeply ingrained hockey cultures of Canada or Slovakia, the sport lacks the same symbolic weight in shaping national identity.

One reason for this is the historical development of sport in the UK. Unlike in Canada, where ice hockey emerged as a national pastime, the UK's sporting identity has been shaped primarily by football, rugby, and cricket, all of which have distinct relationships with masculinity and class (Maguire, 1999). Football, for instance, has long been associated with working-class masculinity, fostering intense loyalty, tribalism, and physical endurance as markers of toughness (Whannel, 2008). Rugby, particularly in England, has often been tied to elite masculinity, with Rugby Union historically linked to public schools and upper-class traditions, while Rugby League has remained a working-class stronghold in the North (Dunning, 1999). The UK's sporting hierarchy explains why ice hockey has struggled to gain mainstream traction. Football dominates media coverage, participation rates, and cultural significance, leaving little room for hockey to develop the kind of national identity status it enjoys in Canada (Moshakis, 2018). Additionally, the lack of accessible ice rinks and grassroots development programs has hindered the sport's growth compared to Canada, where outdoor rinks and winter conditions naturally support widespread participation (Fletcher, 2011).

However, British ice hockey does maintain a dedicated subculture, particularly in cities with historical ties to the sport, such as Nottingham, Sheffield, and Cardiff. The Elite Ice Hockey League (EIHL), established in 2003, has helped stabilise professional ice hockey in the UK, though it remains far behind football and rugby in terms of viewership and cultural impact (Hockey Futures Report, 2021). While British hockey players still embrace the toughness

and warrior mentality of the sport, they do so within a context that lacks the broader societal reinforcement seen in Canada, the US, or Eastern European nations. British ice hockey shares many similarities with rugby and football regarding masculinity but lacks the same symbolic representation of national strength. Rugby, for example, has been a key site for constructing masculine identities in Britain, often emphasising strength, discipline, and camaraderie (Light & Kirk, 2000). The sport has also been used as a symbol of British imperial strength, particularly in the early 20th century when rugby teams were seen as representatives of national power and order (Mangan, 2012). By contrast, football embodies a different but equally powerful form of masculinity, with aggression, tribal loyalty, and endurance playing central roles in fan culture and player identity (Whannel, 2008). Football hooliganism, though diminished in recent years, historically reinforced hyper-masculine behaviours, including violence, dominance, and territorialism (Armstrong, 1998).

Ice hockey, while sharing some of these aggressive traits, lacks the same deep-rooted cultural and class-based associations as football and rugby. Instead, it remains a subcultural sport, where toughness and masculinity are still performed but without the same nationalistic undertones found in Canada or Eastern Europe. In international ice hockey, the United Kingdom competes as Team GB, uniting players from England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland into a single national team. This unified representation contrasts with other sports, such as football and rugby, where each nation fields its own team. The formation of a cohesive team identity under the Team GB banner is essential for fostering team spirit and enhancing performance in international competitions. Research indicates that a strong social identity within a team correlates positively with cohesion and perceived team performance (Fransen et al., 2015). In the context of Team GB, players must navigate and integrate their diverse regional identities to cultivate a unified team ethos.

Effective leadership plays a pivotal role in this process; coaches and team leaders who exemplify identity leadership can significantly influence team identification and cohesion, thereby boosting both individual and collective performance (Steffens et al., 2015). However, the relatively low profile of ice hockey in the UK presents additional challenges. The sport's niche status may impact the development of a robust national identity comparable to that seen in more prominent sports like football or rugby. Despite these challenges, Team GB has achieved notable successes, such as their promotion to the top division of the IIHF World Championships in 2019, demonstrating that a shared sense of purpose and effective team dynamics can overcome structural and cultural hurdles (British Ice Hockey, 2022).

In summary, British ice hockey offers a compelling example of how hegemonic masculinity is both preserved and recontextualised within a niche sporting subculture. While the sport replicates key masculine ideals of toughness, aggression, and stoicism, it does so in a space that lacks the broader national and historical resonance found in sports like football and rugby. As a result, masculinity in British hockey is largely performed in alignment with traditional norms, yet without the same institutional or symbolic reinforcement. This conceptualisation underscores how sporting environments shape gender differently depending on their cultural and national positioning, and highlights the need for further research into how masculinity operates within marginalised or peripheral sport cultures.

Methodology

Introduction

This research adopted a qualitative methodological approach throughout its research process. Qualitative research is particularly essential for this topic because it enables a nuanced exploration of how hegemonic masculinity manifests in the developmental trajectories of ice hockey players. The topic concerns deeply embedded cultural norms, identity construction, and power relations, phenomena that are not easily quantifiable but are instead best understood through interpretive engagement with participants' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As hegemonic masculinity often operates subtly within social institutions like sport, qualitative methods allow researchers to uncover these dynamics by accessing the meanings individuals attach to their actions and interactions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In the context of ice hockey, a sport traditionally associated with toughness, aggression, and heteronormativity, qualitative research provides the tools to critically examine how players internalise, reproduce, or resist such ideals (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Specifically, this study utilised semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and interpretative approaches to examine how masculinity is negotiated alongside athletic performance. These methods are well suited for capturing the complex interplay between personal narratives and broader socio-cultural discourses (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Moreover, qualitative research acknowledges the researcher's position, allowing for reflexive analysis that situates findings within a broader social context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, qualitative methods also present limitations, such as potential researcher bias, challenges in generalisation, and the intensive nature of data collection and interpretation. Nevertheless, for a study examining the social construction of gender within sport, qualitative inquiry is

indispensable for revealing the intricate and often hidden mechanisms that shape athletes' experiences and identities.

Epistemology

Epistemologically, this study aligns with a social constructivist perspective, which holds that knowledge is not discovered as an objective reality, but rather constructed through social interactions, cultural meanings, and historical conditions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). Social constructivism emphasises that understanding is co-produced through language, experience, and context, and that realities are multiple and shaped by power, discourse, and social norms (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). In the sociology of sport, this means that concepts such as masculinity, competition, and athletic success are not fixed or universal, but are continuously negotiated through discourse, institutional practices, and embodied experiences (Andrews, 2008; Markula & Silk, 2011).

From this perspective, the meanings that athletes, coaches, and supporters attach to ice hockey are not merely reflections of a stable sporting reality, but are actively shaped by social processes and power relations. This study therefore seeks to explore how these meanings are constructed and contested in everyday interactions and practices, particularly in relation to hegemonic masculinity. The constructivist epistemology guiding this research supports the use of qualitative methods, as it values subjective experiences and contextual understanding over generalisable, objective truths (Creswell, 2013). By acknowledging that knowledge is situated and shaped by social forces, this study aims to critically examine how norms surrounding gender and performance are reproduced or challenged within the cultural space of ice hockey.

This study embraces an interpretivist approach, which prioritises subjective reasoning and seeks to uncover the implicit rules, rituals, and ideologies governing athletes' behaviours and identities (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2000). Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences within particular contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this framework, qualitative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations, and discourse analysis, are frequently employed because they allow for the construction of knowledge between researcher and participant, and provide rich, contextualised insights into social life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Mason, 2017; Silverman, 2021). These methods are especially valuable in studies of gender and sport, as they enable researchers to explore how individuals internalise, reproduce, or resist dominant gender norms such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Markula & Pringle, 2006). For example, semi-structured interviews encourage participants to reflect on their own narratives and experiences, while discourse analysis helps to identify how language and communication practices sustain or challenge normative masculinities. Previous research has shown the value of these methods in exploring masculinity and gendered power relations in sport, as seen in the work of McGannon and Schinke (2013), and Adams, Anderson and McCormack (2010), who advocate for interpretivist approaches to better understand the lived realities of athletes within gendered sporting cultures.

Ontological Position

This research adopts a constructivist ontological position, which holds that social reality is not a single, objective truth but is instead constructed through social processes, interactions, and contextual influences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). This position aligns with ontological relativism, which posits that multiple realities exist, each

shaped by the perspectives, experiences, and cultural positions of individuals and groups (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hammersley, 2013). Rather than viewing phenomena such as masculinity, athletic identity, and competitiveness as stable or inherent traits, this study approaches them as socially constructed and contextually bound, emerging from discourses, behaviours, and institutional frameworks within the world of sport.

In the context of ice hockey, these constructs are continuously produced, reinforced, and occasionally challenged through everyday practices and the cultural values embedded in sporting environments (Fink, 2015; Pringle & Markula, 2005). Atkinson (2012) underscores that sport should be seen as a socially mediated domain, where meanings are actively negotiated rather than naturally occurring. This ontological stance is therefore well suited to research exploring how gender norms are embedded and experienced within hockey, as it enables the investigation of how different actors make sense of, and navigate, multiple realities related to masculinity and identity. By acknowledging the multiplicity of truths and their dependency on social context, constructivist ontology provides a critical foundation for examining the complex and often contested terrain of gender within sport.

Hegemonic masculinity in ice hockey is not a static or universal concept; rather, it is shaped by both macro level structures (such as governing bodies, media narratives, and national sporting cultures) and micro level interactions (such as team dynamics, player interactions and personal experiences). Smith and Caddick (2012) argue that qualitative research is particularly suited to capturing these fluid, evolving social realities, as it allows for an in depth exploration of how athletes understand and engage with the dominant narratives in their sport. Smith & Sparkes (2016) reinforce that athletic identities are not naturally occurring but are negotiated and performed within specific sporting cultures, emphasising the importance of studying how individuals interpret and reproduce social norms.

Furthermore, as Veal and Darcy (2014) argue, sport functions as a deeply embedded social institution in which norms, traditions, policies, and power dynamics shape participants' understandings of themselves and others. In the context of ice hockey, elements such as coaching philosophies, training regimes, and locker-room cultures act as powerful sites where masculine norms are not only reinforced but also reproduced through routine interactions and embodied practices (Anderson, 2009; Messner, 2002). These institutional forces cultivate specific ideals of toughness, stoicism, and dominance that become integral to athletic identity and performance expectations.

This view aligns with Sparkes and Smith (2016), who emphasise that qualitative research into athletes' lives must account for the construction of reality between researcher and participant, thereby requiring a reflexive stance that recognises both subjectivity and power within the research process. Similarly, Pringle and Hickey (2010) contend that to understand sport as a gendered space, one must interrogate the cultural discourses that shape athletes' perceptions of their own bodies, behaviours, and social roles.

By adopting a constructivist ontological position, this study rejects the notion of hegemonic masculinity in ice hockey as a fixed or biologically determined reality. Instead, it conceptualises gendered expectations in sport as fluid, historically situated, and socially mediated or formed through an interplay of institutional structures, interpersonal dynamics, and lived experiences (Adams, 2011; Smith & Caddick, 2012). This ontological stance justifies the use of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis, which allow for a nuanced examination of how athletes construct, embody, and sometimes contest dominant narratives around masculinity (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Markula & Silk, 2011). In doing so, this study contributes to a richer understanding of sporting subjectivities, revealing how identities are shaped by both structural forces and individual agency within masculinised spaces like hockey.

Reflexivity

Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), positions the researcher as an active agent in meaning-making, acknowledging that data is not simply discovered but is interpreted through the lens of the researcher's own positionality. Within this framework, reflexivity is a central component of methodological rigour, requiring researchers to engage critically with their own assumptions, experiences, and potential biases (Finlay, 2002). My trajectory through diverse hockey cultures, ranging from Slovakia to Canada, affords me valuable insider knowledge that facilitated deeper insight into the often-unspoken norms and practices surrounding masculinity in the sport. At the same time, this familiarity brought with it the risk of normalising certain cultural dynamics, underscoring the need for continuous reflection.

Qualitative scholars such as Berger (2015) and Pillow (2003) argue that reflexivity is not a one-time exercise but an ongoing process of interrogating one's positionality throughout the research. This meant regularly examining how my interpretations might be shaped by personal investments or cultural assumptions, especially concerning what is considered "natural," "dominant," or "acceptable" behaviour in ice hockey. For example, when a Slovak participant described coaches berating players for showing weakness, I initially felt inclined to view this as "normal," because it mirrored my own experiences in that system. Through reflexive journaling (Appendix 6), I was able to record this reaction, recognise my potential bias, and revisit the data with a more critical eye. By actively confronting these influences, I aimed to ensure that my role as researcher did not overshadow the voices of participants but rather created space for their narratives to guide the analytical process.

In this sense, I embraced subjectivity not as a flaw but as an epistemological strength, consistent with interpretivist and constructionist paradigms (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). My insider perspective provided me with a cultural fluency that helped me pick up on subtleties, phrases, tones, and implicit assumptions that might have been missed by an outsider researcher. For instance, when Canadian participants used terms like “grit” or “buying in,” I could interpret these not merely as sporting jargon but as indicators of deeper cultural expectations tied to masculinity and national identity. Similarly, Slovak references to “hard men” or “paying your dues” resonated with my own understanding of hierarchical authority within that culture. By recognising these nuances, I was able to produce richer, more authentic interpretations of how masculinity operates in hockey contexts.

At the same time, insider status carried potential risks. Familiarity can lead to blind spots, where behaviours are accepted without critical examination. Reflexivity therefore required me to remain vigilant about my own reactions. For example, when players spoke about hazing rituals, my instinctive response was to recall them as harmless traditions. Only through revisiting my journal notes and supervisory feedback did I reframe these practices as mechanisms for enforcing conformity to hegemonic masculinity. This iterative process of checking my interpretations against both theory and data helped strengthen the credibility of my analysis.

My own background as a player across three cultural contexts (Slovakia, the UK, and Canada) also meant that I brought varied perspectives into the research. In Slovakia, a nation with a strong hockey tradition, I experienced a system where toughness, discipline, and hierarchical authority were heavily emphasised. Coaches often adopted authoritarian styles and demanding training regimes, replicating the methods that had shaped them as players. In the UK, by contrast, I encountered a more hybrid and emergent hockey culture. Because hockey was less central to national identity, coaching and team dynamics were

more flexible, shaped by influences from other sports and multicultural backgrounds. In Canada, as a global hockey powerhouse, I experienced a highly competitive, performance-oriented environment, where traditional masculine ideals such as stoicism, sacrifice, and emotional control were strongly reinforced, often under the banner of leadership and team cohesion.

Beyond coaching styles, my day-to-day interactions with teammates revealed how masculinity is not only imposed through formal structures but also informally performed and policed. Locker room banter, social rituals, and team hierarchies all contributed to shaping acceptable behaviours. In Slovakia, emotional expression was often stigmatised, while aggression was valorised as toughness. In the UK, particularly in semi-professional or university contexts, more varied interpretations of masculinity emerged, reflecting the diversity of cultural influences. In Canada, the dominant hockey identity rooted in grit, loyalty, and performance created strong pressure to conform to narrow masculine norms, even as community engagement and leadership were framed as central values.

These cross-cultural experiences shaped not only my interest in the research but also the questions I asked and the narratives I prioritised during interviews. Reflexivity meant acknowledging this dual role: my background gave me privileged access to participants' trust and understanding, but it also required constant vigilance to ensure my analysis remained balanced and participant-led. As Berger (2015) and Finlay (2002) suggest, reflexive researchers must remain conscious of how their histories and identities shape both the conduct of the study and the lens through which findings are interpreted.

In practice, reflexivity was embedded through several strategies. Reflexive journals captured my reactions after interviews, helping me identify moments where my assumptions might colour interpretations. Supervisory feedback sessions challenged me to interrogate these

assumptions further—for example, when I initially framed “locker room banter” purely as bonding, my supervisors encouraged me to consider its exclusionary and disciplinary functions. Such processes ensured that participants’ voices remained central while my insider knowledge was critically examined rather than taken for granted.

This reflexive orientation resonates with literature on masculinity in sport, such as the work of Michael Messner (2002) and Richard Pringle (2005), which emphasises how sporting masculinities are shaped by national, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics. Recognising this, my research aimed to explore not only how players internalise dominant norms but also how these norms are negotiated differently across cultural contexts. Ultimately, reflexivity enhanced the transparency, credibility, and ethical integrity of the study, ensuring that its findings reflect both the lived experiences of participants and the researcher’s critical engagement with the processes of interpretation.

Participants and Ethics

This study recruited 18 participants: five ex-junior Slovak players, four ex-junior Canadian players, four ex-junior UK players, and five university players who never participated in structured junior hockey systems. The recruitment strategy aimed to gather a diverse range of experiences by comparing players who developed within formalised hockey structures across different countries with those who played at university level without exposure to elite junior systems. This comparative design enabled an exploration of how hegemonic masculinity manifests in varying hockey environments, contrasting elite pathways with more recreational or academic settings.

Participants were recruited through direct contact with former teammates from Slovakia, the UK, and Canada, as well as via a social media post inviting voluntary participation. All

interested individuals received a participant information sheet (Appendix 2), informed consent form (Appendix 1), and privacy notice (Appendix 3), ensuring they understood the study's purpose, their rights, and how their data would be handled. This process reflects best practices in qualitative research, particularly the emphasis on transparency and consent in ethically sensitive contexts (Smith and Caddick, 2012).

Ethical integrity was prioritised throughout recruitment and data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point and how their data would remain anonymised and securely stored. As Braun and Clarke (2021) note, confidentiality and data protection are critical in qualitative research, especially when participants share personal or vulnerable narratives. Given the close-knit nature of elite and semi-elite ice hockey communities, additional care was taken to prevent deductive disclosure (Tracy, 2010). Reflexivity was central to the ethical process, acknowledging potential power dynamics, particularly with former teammates, and working to minimise coercion (Berger, 2015). Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the study design, reinforcing a participant-centred approach (Sparkes and Smith, 2014; Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

The sample was selected using purposive and convenience sampling, guided by the feasibility of conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews within time constraints. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), the goal was to balance rich data collection with avoiding thematic saturation. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) argue that saturation often occurs within 6–12 interviews in relatively homogeneous groups, though more diverse samples may require larger numbers. This study's sample size is consistent with norms in interview-based qualitative research, which typically range from 6 to 20 participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Mason, 2010).

Including participants from structured junior hockey environments was essential to understanding how masculinity is instilled through coaching, peer interaction, and competitive structures. University players without such backgrounds offered a useful contrast, helping determine whether hegemonic masculine norms exist outside elite sport settings. Gaining access to elite or semi-elite athletes, often constrained by busy schedules, added depth and authenticity to the findings (Roderick and Schumacker, 2017). This design supports the study's aim to explore how masculinity is constructed and experienced across various hockey contexts, aligning with qualitative sport research guidance that values depth and contextual nuance over breadth (Smith and Sparkes, 2016).

Given the study's focus, interviews could evoke emotional responses, particularly from participants who had faced mental health challenges, distress, or trauma in their sporting past. The ethics application addressed these risks by including clear protocols such as the option to pause or withdraw and providing mental health resources. Sparkes and Smith (2014) stress the importance of supporting participants emotionally when discussing distressing experiences in sport.

Qualitative researchers increasingly highlight the importance of creating safe, supportive environments for discussing sensitive topics related to identity, exclusion, or trauma (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Tracy, 2010). Including comprehensive risk management strategies reflects best practice and enhances both the ethical and methodological rigour of the research (Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, 2001). By recognising the emotional labour involved in these conversations, this research affirms its responsibility toward participant well-being.

The study also addressed key ethical concerns around power dynamics and researcher bias. The background of a former player in all three countries introduced the potential for

insider influence. Through reflexivity, acknowledgements were made on dual roles as cultural insider and academic researcher and remained attentive to the relational complexities this entailed (Berger, 2015). Interviews were conducted with empathy and relational sensitivity, encouraging open, co-constructed dialogue rather than positioning participants as mere subjects (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach, 2009).

Importantly, the research does not aim to critique specific coaches, teams, or organisations. Instead, it explores the broader cultural and institutional forces shaping masculinity in ice hockey. This focus reflects Tracy's (2010) emphasis on transparency, credibility, and ethical mindfulness in qualitative work. It also aligns with Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) concept of "ethics in practice," which encourages researchers to remain reflexively engaged with power dynamics and participant relationships throughout the study. By incorporating these principles, the research strives to foster a respectful, trustworthy environment grounded in participant autonomy and ethical care.

Data Collection

As noted above, this study employed qualitative research methods by interviewing players with past experience in junior ice hockey. The number of interviews conducted in person is nine; five of those interviews included Slovak, junior trained players, and the remaining four in-person interviews were taken with four of the five university hockey players. During the in-person interviews, interviewees were given a recording microphone that was put on their shirt and the recordings were saved in an interviewer's phone device. The remaining nine interviews were conducted through Google Meet scheduled meetings as most of these participants were difficult to reach without further financial aid. The Google Meet interviews were also recorded and saved in the research conductor's laptop.

The interviews looked to explore valuable insights and in-depth information about locker room dynamics, team chemistry, sporting cultures, coaches behaviours, interplay of hockey and school commitments and power of hockey mainstream and the impact it has on players' perception of the pressure around performance focused plays (see Appendix 6). Such themes were opened through a thematic question focused upon one of themes mentioned, to conclude the player's perception of experiences, and to what degree these experiences affected them and the team, both in reflection but also in present. The interviews took between an hour and seventeen minutes to an hour and fifty five minutes, in an attempt to foster a free flow of discussions and themes brought up by participants' answers.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using selective transcription, where only the most relevant conversational highlights were transcribed, rather than full verbatim accounts. This approach was particularly suited to the design of the study. The interviews were deliberately broad and semi-structured, encouraging participants to narrate their experiences in ways that often ranged widely across topics. A full verbatim transcription would have generated substantial material unrelated to the research aims, such as off-topic anecdotes, repetitions, or conversational fillers. Instead, the focus of the research was on identifying patterns of assertive behaviour and references to hegemonic masculinity within youth hockey cultures. Selective transcription therefore allowed the analytic process to remain tightly aligned with the research objectives while still capturing the depth and nuance of participants' accounts.

While verbatim transcription is often considered standard in qualitative research, selective transcription is recognised as a valid alternative when researchers are transparent about

their inclusion criteria and consistent in their application (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). In this study, excerpts were selected when they illustrated cultural expressions of masculinity, whether through reflections on physical aggression, locker-room rituals, or coaching expectations, and were compared across participants to identify recurring themes and cross-cultural variations. This ensured that the analytical focus remained on the most relevant and theoretically meaningful aspects of the data, while avoiding unnecessary dilution of the findings.

The transcripts were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021). Reflexive TA provides a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying and interpreting patterns across qualitative data, while explicitly recognising researcher subjectivity as a resource rather than a threat. The six-phase protocol followed included data familiarisation, generating initial codes, developing and reviewing themes, naming themes, and producing the final report. This iterative and reflexive process enabled nuanced interpretation of how athletes negotiate masculine norms across different hockey cultures. In line with Lincoln et al. (2011), this approach allowed for contextual, multi-perspective insights crucial for understanding lived experience within broader institutional forces.

Smith (2009) highlights the importance of methodological flexibility in sport research, particularly when examining concepts as variable as masculinity. In this study, thematic analysis enabled the exploration of both shared and unique participant experiences across national settings. For example, a recurring theme such as bullying in locker rooms could be probed in different cultural contexts (i.e. Slovakia, the UK, and Canada) revealing both commonalities and culturally specific variations in how such dynamics were understood.

The analytic process was supported through theoretical memoing and systematic coding of the transcripts. Themes were organised using colour-coded systems and numerical identifiers (Appendix 6), which facilitated transparency and traceability from data extracts to higher-level thematic interpretations. Tracy's (2010) "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research - worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, and meaningful coherence - were supported through this approach. Transparency and coherence were enhanced by outlining and applying Braun and Clarke's six phases, detailed in Appendix 6, alongside coded extracts and examples of theme development.

Reflexivity was embedded throughout the process. For example, during one interview with a Canadian captain, I noted that a reflexive response such as a nod or gesture of agreement may have unintentionally discouraged elaboration on the emotional aspects of leadership roles. Documenting this moment helped me interrogate how my insider status as a former player shaped the interaction and interpretation. Such reflexive insights (Appendix 6) ensured that potential biases were acknowledged and monitored, consistent with Sparkes and Smith's (2009) emphasis on reflexivity as a marker of rigour.

Thematic analysis also promoted resonance and credibility by ensuring participant voices were central to interpretation. Themes such as 'Conforming to the Code', 'Silencing Vulnerability', and 'Negotiating Masculinity across Cultures' were constructed inductively through repeated immersion in the data and iterative refinement. This process prioritised depth and authenticity while remaining sensitive to cultural variation.

Ultimately, reflexive thematic analysis proved a robust tool for capturing both individual and collective experiences. Combined with a selective transcription approach tailored to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, it enabled the study to focus on the most relevant, culturally situated narratives of masculinity. This made it particularly valuable in examining

socially constructed, context-dependent phenomena such as hegemonic masculinity in youth sport.

Results and Discussion

The table below presents the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data. These themes reflect recurring patterns in participants' narratives and were developed through an iterative coding process that foregrounded the complexity and nuance of their experiences. Each theme captures a distinct aspect of how hegemonic masculinity is constructed, performed, and negotiated within junior ice hockey environments.

These findings have been used to structure the remainder of this chapter, with each theme and its related sub-themes explored in detail. Throughout the discussion, cross-cultural comparisons between participants from Canada, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom are integrated to highlight how national contexts shape and differentiate these gendered dynamics. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between sporting culture, identity formation, and masculinity across differing hockey traditions.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Toughness, Aggression, and Risk: Core Masculine Ideals in Junior Ice Hockey	<p>Body Checking and Normalisation of Physical Aggression</p> <p>The Role of Sanctioned Violence in Identity Formation and Group Belonging</p> <p>The Fighting Tradition and the Role of the “Enforcer”</p> <p>Equipment, Risk, and Masculine Identity in Junior Ice Hockey</p> <p>Concussions and CTE: Injury, Risk, and Cultural Resistance</p> <p>Perceptions of Mental Health Struggles and the Availability/Acceptability of Seeking Help Within Hyper-Masculine Environment</p>
Coaches as Enforcers and Gatekeepers of Masculinity	<p>Positioning of Coaches Within the Club Hierarchy</p> <p>Examination of Formal and Informal Roles Coaches Occupy and How these Influence Authority and Behavioural Norms</p> <p>Coach-Athlete Relationship, Individual Development and an Impact of Personal Connection on Identity Development</p> <p>Coaching Philosophies and Behavioral Conditioning</p> <p>Analysis of Preferred Coaching Methods and their Alignment with Values Associated with Hegemonic Masculinity</p> <p>Problem Solving Approaches and Consideration of how Conflict Resolution and Performance Feedback Reinforce Gendered Expectations</p>
The Locker Room as a Crucible of Masculinity	<p>Team Hierarchies and their Influence on Individual Behaviour</p> <p>How Informal Ranking Systems Shape Conformity, Authority, and Social Capital</p> <p>Traditions, Rituals, and Rights of Passage, Rookie Treatment, and Veteran Status in Reinforcing Masculine Ideals</p>
Wider Cultural Forces: Media, National Identity, and Shifting Norms	<p>Influence of Professional Players, Social Media Trends, and the Visibility of Elite-Level Behaviours</p> <p>Reactions, Resistance, or Acceptance of Shifting Norms</p> <p>Analysis of Players’ Attitudes and Assumptions in Response to Broader Societal Changes</p>

Toughness, Aggression, and Risk: Core Masculine Ideals in Junior Ice Hockey

This theme explores how toughness, physical aggression, and risk-taking are normalised as essential markers of masculinity within junior hockey. Through players' reflections on body checking, fighting traditions, and injury culture, it becomes clear that physical dominance is positioned as central to belonging and success. This theme directly addresses the research question by showing how hegemonic masculinity is reproduced through the embodied practices of the game itself.

Body Checking and the Normalisation of Physical Aggression

This theme explores how body checking in junior ice hockey functions not only as a tactical skill but also as a performative mechanism for reinforcing dominant masculine norms, particularly those associated with toughness, physical dominance, and emotional control (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). British players expressed an ambiguous relationship with body checking and aggression. While physical drills were used, they appeared more symbolic than strategic, often framed as behavioural correction rather than core performance criteria:

“We would do many silly drills, I am not sure if it was due to our bad plays. However, the coach would let us know they were unhappy by making us hit each other at this one drill. He'd say it was making us tougher.” (BJ1)

In both Canadian and Slovak contexts, physicality was described as an expected, even mandatory, element of team participation, with players experiencing pressure to embody aggression as a route to legitimacy within the sport. As one Slovak player put it:

“I thought hitting was the gateway to the lineup. The coaches always said hits we’ve made were never enough. So I thought hitting people will get more ice time. We were hitting each other instead of having pucks at practice, ‘cause that’s how hockey players are made.” (SJ2)

Here, the act of hitting becomes a symbol of worth, not only in terms of gameplay but as a marker of adherence to the sport’s masculine culture. The quote also underscores how development was sometimes deprioritised in favour of physical assertion, with training practices replacing skill-based activities with drills focused on bodily confrontation. This message was further reinforced in Canada, where one player recalled the implicit coaching instructions to escalate physical engagement:

“Not me personally but I have heard others being instructed to ‘go through the players’ by coaches during the game.” (CJ1)

Such directives demonstrate how aggression is institutionalised through coaching ideologies and informal team norms, shaping not just what it means to play hockey, but how to be a "proper" hockey player, one who is fearless, punishing, and emotionally restrained.

Body-checking in junior ice hockey functions as a tool of behavioural conditioning, reinforcing emotional restraint and resilience as coachable attributes. These findings suggest that even in less physically oriented systems, masculinity is subtly shaped through contact, discomfort, and the ritualised use of the body to enforce discipline.

The Role of Sanctioned Violence in Identity Formation and Group Belonging

This theme examines how sanctioned violence in junior ice hockey, manifested through body checking, fighting, and retaliatory hits, functions not only as an accepted tactical element but as a performative act through which young athletes construct social identities and earn respect within their teams. These acts of aggression are tightly bound to hegemonic masculine ideals, especially emotional stoicism, physical toughness, and loyalty to the group (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In the Canadian setting, sanctioned violence was framed as a strategic response to adversity. One player recalled:

“The coaches would have the tactics of making hits to get back into the game. There are games when your team is losing 3:0 and you need a mood shift. If it was not coming from goals it had to be to make sacrifices, take a hit and give one.” (CJ3)

This quote underscores the symbolic role of aggression, not merely to disrupt gameplay but to energise team morale and signal dedication. Another Canadian player added:

“Hitting was not a big deal, it’s tied to the sport. No one would praise you or demean you for that.” (CJ2)

Here, physical aggression is normalised to the point of invisibility; it becomes an unremarkable part of a larger masculine code that is expected, routine, and emotionally neutral. This framing reveals how deeply embedded violence is in the sport’s cultural DNA, rendering it a standard feature of what it means to be a legitimate player.

In contrast, British players were more likely to express ambivalence or discomfort with violence, though they still encountered institutional encouragement to participate in it. As one recalled:

“I remember coaches that were instructing us to go out and hit someone. It got to a point when players asked if they could pick fights with opponents, to get a coach’s permission. But I didn’t like hitting.” (BJ2)

This illustrates how aggression was not simply tolerated but actively instrumentalised, regardless of individual players’ preferences or emotional responses. The need to conform to aggressive norms, even when they contradicted personal values, points to the broader social function of violence as a currency for belonging and validation in junior hockey cultures.

Slovak players expressed similarly conflicted experiences, suggesting a tension between traditional expectations and personal playing styles. One shared:

“Coaches wanted me to body-check as a defender. Finish hits, make an open ice hit to protect other players. But I didn’t like that aspect of the game, I was a player who liked to figure out how to get around players without hits and through skill.” (SJ1)

This quote reveals a nuanced resistance to dominant norms, where skill and strategy are positioned as alternative, but less culturally reinforced, means of demonstrating value. Yet even in resistance, players remain aware of the normative pressures to be physically imposing and sacrificial for the team.

This theme underscores how junior hockey environments use violence as a cultural mechanism to produce and maintain a particular vision of masculinity, one rooted in fearlessness, loyalty, and emotional suppression. For players, the cost of deviating from this norm is not just tactical but social. The institutionalisation of aggression limits the space for alternative identities and values within the sport, thereby constraining emotional expression, individual autonomy, and inclusive development. In this way, sanctioned violence not only shapes gameplay but also profoundly influences how young men learn to perform gender in high-stakes sporting contexts.

The Fighting Tradition and the Role of the “Enforcer”

The figure of the “enforcer” has historically symbolised a particular form of hegemonic masculinity in ice hockey, embodied through physical dominance, emotional control, and sacrificial loyalty to the team (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Robidoux, 2001). Although formal rule changes and heightened awareness of player safety have diminished the official prominence of this role, its cultural legacy remains deeply embedded, particularly within junior systems where masculine norms are internalised through socialisation. Across interviews, players described the enforcer role as either an enduring tradition, a contested practice, or a pragmatic team function, revealing distinct national and cultural attitudes toward fighting and its symbolic function.

Among Canadian participants, the enforcer was most consistently upheld as a meaningful figure within team hierarchies. One player explained:

“It was part of hockey, there are different roles for each player. Some play more during powerplays, others play during penalty kills, some people are devoted to just shutting down the opposing team. That’s part of being a team. I saw fights as a traditional part of hockey too. I didn’t fight, but I understood that others were

protective, or emotional. There were players who knew that it is their domain to engage in a fight to pump us up or to let the other team know that we are not going to let them bully us.” (CJ3)

Here, fighting is framed as a team-serving ritual, a role-based sacrifice undertaken to protect teammates and boost morale. Even when not personally involved, players legitimised the act as a meaningful contribution to group cohesion and emotional regulation, reinforcing the enforcer as a respected identity within the masculine logic of the sport.

In contrast, British players were more likely to reject both the necessity and emotional maturity of fighting. Their accounts suggest a disconnect between aggression and team cohesion, and a questioning of whether fighting serves any real functional or moral purpose:

“I wasn’t taking part in fights. Fighting in our team was a way of getting your anger out. I found it embarrassing to not be able to control emotions, but players were looking for conflicts and for someone to hurt them.” (BJ2)

“It was part of the game but I was left alone in conflicts. The team was not cohesive enough to stand up for our players and at the end it felt disjointed.”
(BJ4)

These comments reflect a breakdown in the symbolic logic that normally surrounds the enforcer role. Where Canadian players associated fighting with loyalty and unity, British players experienced it as a chaotic or isolating act, one that lacked both collective meaning and emotional legitimacy. This suggests that the enforcer role is not universally admired or socially reinforced, but is instead shaped by contextual team cultures and institutional values.

Slovak participants tended to express more neutral or pragmatic views. Some acknowledged the role of fighting, but positioned it as a specialised responsibility rather than a marker of masculine status or group identity. One player explained:

“I enjoyed fights, I was part of a few but otherwise I focused on the game and skills I could improve. There are players who are designated for these jobs like hitting and fighting.” (SJ3)

This more transactional framing of the enforcer aligns with Elias’s (1982) notion of “civilising processes”, where aggression is socially regulated and compartmentalised within broader norms of skill development and self-control. The answers reveal how the cultural meaning of the enforcer role varies significantly across hockey contexts, shaped by national ideologies, coaching practices, and team dynamics. While Canadian players often upheld fighting as a badge of honour and symbolic masculine duty, British players tended to challenge its purpose and emotional maturity, and Slovak participants generally adopted a more pragmatic view. These contrasting perspectives highlight the contested legacy of hegemonic masculinity in junior hockey, showing how some players internalise violent roles as forms of belonging and respect, while others view them as outdated, performative, or emotionally hollow. Understanding these divergences is critical in interrogating how masculine norms persist, shift, or dissolve in contemporary sport settings, and how young athletes negotiate identity, aggression, and group cohesion within these frameworks.

Equipment, Risk, and Masculine Identity in Junior Ice Hockey

Attitudes towards protective equipment, such as neck guards, full-face cages, and visors, offer insight into how masculinity is constructed and policed in junior ice hockey. Although mentioned by only a few participants, both their reflections and the broader silences around

the topic reveal key tensions between safety, identity, and gender norms. Across all three national contexts, the removal of protective gear upon reaching certain age thresholds was described not merely as a practical change, but as a symbolic transition into mature, masculine hockey.

As one British player recalled:

“Looking back when I turned eighteen and we could lose cages and neckguards, it was only the hypermasculine guys who did it to, again, prove how tough they were.” (BJ1)

Here, rejecting safety equipment becomes a performative act, signalling toughness, maturity, and alignment with traditional masculine ideals. A Canadian player echoed this view:

“Players will try to look like what they want to embrace. Their symbols of masculinity are to portray that they are the tough guys, hence why many don't wear the non-mandatory protective equipment.” (CJ3)

These comments reflect a peer-driven culture where risk-taking is valued, and voluntary exposure to injury becomes a badge of credibility. This aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) notion of hegemonic masculinity, where emotional control and physical fearlessness are idealised traits. Refusing equipment is less about comfort and more about demonstrating belonging within a masculine hierarchy.

By contrast, Slovak players appeared more compliant and less concerned with the symbolic implications of equipment:

“It came to me as mandatory. At the point I was eighteen, I was already training with men and there you’d occasionally get chirped for wearing a cage... so I’ve been influenced to switch to a plexi glass after a few practices.” (SJ4)

Here, equipment changes were framed as routine, with peer influence playing a minor but present role. The absence of deeper reflection or resistance may suggest that masculinity is expressed through other means in Slovak hockey culture or that regulation is more effectively normalised.

The fact that most of the players conformed to the equipment rules may point to how ingrained and unexamined these gendered behaviours have become, or how reflection on vulnerability remains culturally discouraged. As such, even peripheral practices like equipment use reveal how gender norms are communicated not only through speech, but through silence, habit, and conformity.

This theme highlights how decisions around protective equipment, often seen as trivial, carry deeper symbolic meaning in the performance of masculinity within junior ice hockey. Where rejecting safety is equated with toughness and maturity, players are incentivised to risk injury as a means of securing peer respect and asserting legitimacy. These dynamics reinforce a gendered culture where vulnerability is denied, and masculinity is performed through ritualised risk, even at the cost of personal safety.

Concussions and CTE: Injury, Risk, and Cultural Resistance

Despite mounting medical evidence about the dangers of concussions and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), junior ice hockey continues to treat injury, especially head trauma, as a masculine proving ground. Across all national contexts, players’ reflections

revealed a cultural framing of pain as something to be endured, even valorised, reinforcing hegemonic ideals of stoicism, sacrifice, and physical dominance (Messner, 1992; Young, 2012).

In the British context, some players described how visible injuries functioned as symbols of legitimacy:

“I got concussed after hits, I didn’t want to make more after that. There were players who were looking for hits. After games, showing people battle scars was considered manly, masculine.” (BJ2)

This “battle scar” mentality echoes Young’s (2012) masculine warrior narrative, where pain becomes social capital. While one player noted a gradual shift in attitudes, this appeared more like softening around the edges of tradition, rather than a fundamental disruption of gendered expectations.

Canadian participants showed more familiarity with concussion risks, likely due to the visibility of CTE in North American sports discourse:

“It was more of a personal courtesy or knowledge. Coaches would only reiterate to keep your head up... But nothing official. I got concussed, so I had to quit entirely at the end.” (CJ3)

Despite growing awareness, formal systems of protection or education were lacking. This reflects a paradox identified by Eisen and Danylchuk (2020): knowing the risks does not necessarily change behaviours when cultural scripts of toughness remain intact.

In Slovakia, concussion discourse was marked more by absence than resistance. One player stated:

“Seeing players lay on ice with injury didn’t feel out of place, it was common. We were taught that the strongest wins at practices.” (SJ2)

Injuries were not medicalised or moralised, they were simply part of the game. This reflects what Robidoux (2001) describes as the naturalisation* of masculine norms, where toughness is neither questioned nor overtly celebrated, it is simply assumed.

This theme reveals how cultural attachments to toughness and risk continue to undermine injury prevention in junior ice hockey, even in the face of medical consensus. Whether through active glorification (UK), contradictory awareness (Canada), or passive acceptance (Slovakia), the masculine ethic of resilience persists as a central organising principle. As a result, the body becomes a site where gender performance and institutional inaction intersect, exposing young athletes to long-term harm in the name of tradition.

Perceptions of Mental Health Struggles and the Availability/Acceptability of Seeking Help Within a Hyper-Masculine Environment

Mental health in junior ice hockey exists within a cultural framework that equates emotional vulnerability with weakness and incompatibility with the sporting ideal. In line with Courtenay’s (2000) and Connell & Messerschmidt’s (2005) theories of hegemonic masculinity, expressions of psychological struggle are often interpreted as threats to a player’s legitimacy and group standing.

British participants described structural inequities and emotional burdens, but often without connecting these to mental health explicitly:

“On one hand there wasn’t any pressure. We were playing ice hockey in a country where you can only make it as a pro with almost an impossible chance. Even with the national team, scouting only happens in top towns... But it did bother me.” (BJ4)

This comment reflects internalised frustration and exclusion, shaped by class and geography, but also a reluctance to frame such experiences in psychological terms. The absence of mental health language underscores how cultural codes discourage help-seeking, aligning with Courtenay’s (2000) argument that masculine environments reward emotional suppression.

Canadian respondents showed slightly more awareness of mental wellbeing and institutional responsibility, though they too expressed ambivalence about the efficacy and authenticity of support:

“There should be a professional agenda to help young players grow as hockey players but also as people. (CJ3)

Yet this awareness was often paired with disillusionment:

“It’s a fortune to be a hockey player in Canada but some players took advantage of their position.” (CJ2)

Such statements highlight structural contradictions, where support systems exist but may be undermined by uneven implementation or competitive mistrust. These observations echo

Bauman (2016) and Breslin et al. (2017), who note that without cultural legitimacy, mental health initiatives risk being seen as superficial.

Slovak players, by contrast, offered fewer explicit reflections on mental health, instead describing high-pressure environments with limited guidance:

“Looking back now, I wish I had enjoyed it rather than stress about whether I will make it as a professional, but that is what the environment makes you think you want.” (SJ3)

Across all national contexts, psychological struggle is often internalised, and help-seeking remains socially fraught. Despite some institutional gestures toward holistic development, cultural scripts of toughness and emotional control persist, silencing vulnerability and framing distress as personal failure. The hyper-masculine environment of junior ice hockey thus continues to regulate which emotional expressions are legitimate, and which must remain hidden.

Coaches as Enforcers and Gatekeepers of Masculinity

This theme highlights the significant role of coaches and mentors in shaping young players' attitudes, behaviours, and identities. Coaches occupy both formal and informal positions of authority, reinforcing discipline, stoicism, and conformity while rewarding aggression and emotional restraint. These dynamics illustrate how institutional figures act as custodians of hegemonic masculine values, demonstrating the broader influence of adult authority in youth socialisation.

Positioning of Coaches Within the Club Hierarchy

In junior ice hockey, coaches occupy a complex and often contradictory position. As central figures in players' development, they are tasked with both guiding young athletes and meeting institutional demands that prioritise performance over holistic well-being. Positioned at the intersection of mentorship and management, coaches are both cultural architects and enforcers of organisational norms (Potrac et al., 2002). Their influence often extends beyond technical instruction, shaping the emotional and interpersonal tone of the team environment.

In the British context, players frequently encountered informal or underqualified coaching structures, often relying on parent volunteers:

“Most of my coaches were parents of other players because there wasn't much interest from the outside or from the inside to hire a professional coach.” (BJ4)

This lack of professionalisation was associated with inconsistency, favouritism, and emotional detachment, which hindered trust and personalised development. The fragmented coaching culture appeared to reinforce exclusionary hierarchies, leaving limited room for meaningful mentorship or emotional dialogue.

Canadian players described a more structured, performance-driven coaching culture, characterised by clearer boundaries and meritocratic expectations:

“We've had a good coach, it was intense but they were serious about wanting us to play well and develop. Players respected them and their decisions.” (CJ1)

While this formalism contributed to credibility and respect, it also reflected what Potrac et al. (2002) term; “instrumental empathy” a relational style that centres care and attention on players’ ability to deliver results, rather than their personal or emotional needs.

In Slovakia, players recalled rigid, top-down coaching models, often defined by emotional distance and disciplinarian logic:

“There was a clear division between players and coaches. Players had their collective views of the coach as a result of the way they addressed us. We wouldn’t know what we are doing wrong or well during games.” (SJ1)

Here, coaching was framed as authoritative and opaque, reinforcing a cultural logic where toughness was shaped through ambiguity and withheld feedback, rather than relational development. Emotional engagement was rare, and communication largely limited to performance critique or disciplinary control.

Across contexts, the coach’s role is revealed not only through what they do, but what they are unable, or unwilling, to provide. Whether due to informal structures, institutional pressures, or cultural norms, many coaches struggle to reconcile performance expectations with relational support. This tension underscores the importance of examining coaches not just as individuals, but as actors embedded in broader systems that reward output over emotional labour, thus shaping the everyday reproduction of masculine and competitive hierarchies.

Examination of Formal and Informal Roles Coaches Occupy and How these Influence Authority and Behavioural Norms

Coaches in junior ice hockey operate within a dual role structure, formally sanctioned leaders and informally embedded social actors. The interplay between these positions significantly shapes authority, behavioural expectations, and the emotional tone of team culture. As Potrac et al. (2002) argue, coaching effectiveness cannot be separated from the broader cultural scripts and relational practices that govern sporting environments.

In the UK, blurred boundaries between formal and informal coaching roles often undermined authority and consistency. Many coaches were parent volunteers with limited training, leading to a fragmented and emotionally ambiguous coaching culture:

“Parents who coached had good methods like safeguarding but it lacked professionalism. You’d often be benched in favour of their kids or favourite players. They wouldn’t approach players for one-to-one conversations and would address us all as a team.” (BJ1)

“My first coach gave up the position because he didn’t know what to do or how to change the mentality of players.” (BJ4)

These examples highlight how the absence of professional oversight enabled favouritism and emotional distance, reinforcing inconsistent behavioural norms. Coaches held symbolic authority, but their ability to manage team dynamics or foster developmental relationships was often compromised by informal loyalties and inadequate preparation.

In Canada, coaching structures were more formalised and respected, with clear hierarchies around playtime and role expectations:

“Coaches had their units for certain plays, like penalty kill or power play... I knew there would be players ahead of me who got the crucial ice time.” (CJ2)

However, emotional engagement remained minimal:

“I don’t remember any one-to-one conversations; they would address us as a whole unit.” (CJ4)

While authority was largely uncontested, it was also instrumental and impersonal, aligning with a performance-oriented model that prized competence over connection. The coach’s role functioned more as an executive decision-maker than a mentor, reproducing a masculine culture of detachment and self-reliance.

In Slovakia, coaching roles were highly formal and authoritarian, rooted in traditional, top-down models of discipline:

“My coach was a retired, old player... he’d scream at us throughout the whole practice. The team was against him because of his communist way of teaching and ruling.” (SJ2)

This account reflects a coaching style based on fear and compliance rather than dialogue or guidance, where behavioural norms were enforced through volume and command. Informal mentorship was largely absent, replaced by a rigid hierarchy that discouraged questioning and emotional expression.

Across all three contexts, the entanglement of formal authority and informal influence produced environments in which behavioural norms were shaped less by intentional

pedagogy and more by the cultural reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Coach-Athlete Relationships, Individual Development and an Impact of Personal Connection on Identity Development

Coach-athlete relationships are crucial in shaping identity, motivation, and emotional well-being in youth sport (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In junior ice hockey, the presence, or absence, of personal connection influences players' sense of belonging and ability to navigate the pressures of competitive, masculine environments (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008).

In the UK, players commonly described a lack of individualised engagement, often linked to the volunteer status of coaches:

“In England, there is a big attention drawn on safeguarding from parents mainly as there were incidents from youth team sports. Parents want to make sure their kids are in a safe environment. So the coaches would never enter the changing room. Safeguarding was the main concern, not player growth. They would never come to the changing room and talk to us, They only addressed us on the ice as a team.” (BJ2).

“The coach would never have one to one conversations with players. They addressed us at practice as a team. Even if the matter was serious, they would bring it up either before or after practice on ice, in front of the whole team.” (BJ1)

Such emotionally distant coaching limited opportunities for personal development and left players feeling overlooked. The structure prioritised group management over relational depth, which weakened athletes' motivation and self-perception (Lorimer & Jowett, 2009).

In Canada, while coaching was more professionalised, the relational dynamic remained primarily team-focused:

“The coach would speak to the whole team, that was normal. I remember I had one important meeting with the coach when my studies became more intense, so he talked to me about what my position within the team would look like. Otherwise no one-to-one” (CJ2).

“The coaches addressed the team through me, as I was the captain. They would sometimes call me into their room to ask about the chemistry in the changing room or related things. I was their extended hand if they had something important they needed to tell the players.” (CJ3)

This highlights a structured but impersonal approach—authority was respected, but relational mentorship was scarce. While occasional personal support occurred, it was often situational rather than systemic, reflecting a tension between institutional care and cultural norms of emotional restraint (Bruner et al., 2017).

Slovak players reported the most distant relationships, shaped by strict hierarchies and fear-based authority:

“The coaches wouldn’t speak to us, We wouldn’t know what we are doing well or not during the games when they sat us. To them it was only points and wins that mattered” (SJ3).

“They were unapproachable, I didn’t understand what I was being punished for when I didn’t get an ice time. Coaches came into the changing room after some practices, said what they wanted, and left.” (SJ1)

“I was scared to ask for the coach's time, he was almost detached from any questions and he was solving everything with punishment.” (SJ2).

Here, coaching reinforced hypermasculine ideals through control and emotional inaccessibility (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), leaving players uncertain of their progress and often demoralised.

Across all contexts, the quality of coach-athlete relationships significantly shaped players’ identity formation, emotional resilience, and developmental outcomes. Where trust and connection were lacking, athletes experienced reduced motivation, confusion, and vulnerability, outcomes intensified in environments that discouraged open dialogue and prioritised performance over personhood.

Coaching Philosophies and Behavioral Conditioning

Coaching philosophies serve as powerful instruments in shaping behavioural expectations, emotional expression, and team culture in junior ice hockey (Lyle, 2002; Cushion, 2010). Through both explicit instruction and implicit routines, coaches condition athletes to align with specific norms around discipline, effort, resilience, and masculinity. This conditioning often reproduces dominant masculine ideals, emphasising toughness, stoicism, and

hierarchy, particularly when coaches adopt authoritarian approaches (Light & Evans, 2010). This theme explores how such philosophies manifest across national contexts and how they affect athlete development, self-concept, and internalised behavioural norms.

In the British context, coaching often lacked formal consistency and pedagogical grounding, leading to a reliance on punitive, emotionally charged methods. One player described a drill intended to humiliate rather than develop:

“Some practices after lost games, we would skate as a punishment, the coach would let us know they were unhappy by making us hit each other. It was this one drill where players line up next to the boards, ready to hit and you are to go by them and take a hit by each player. The coach called it ‘death row’.” (BJ1)

This method, devoid of technical feedback, used physical punishment as a behavioural corrective tool. Another player added:

“When I missed practice it felt like you murdered someone, nobody would talk to you, I’d feel horrible.” (BJ4)

Such responses suggest that British players were conditioned through fear of exclusion rather than developmental guidance. Instead of fostering motivation or accountability, this punitive environment encouraged compliance through shame and social isolation (Gould et al., 2007).

In Canada, coaching was more structured and embedded within a performance-driven system. Players described clear roles and expectations, which shaped their understanding of accountability:

“Coaches had their designated players for certain ways they wanted to play. I was mostly the third line defender, so I understood my ice time in games was limited compared to others. I didn’t see it as a bad thing. I felt good being part of the team. There were a couple of instances when we skated instead of normal practice. But it didn’t feel like punishment. We thought we were skating to improve stamina as that’s what coaches made us believe.” (CJ1)

This illustrates a more psychologically palatable form of conditioning, where physical exertion was reframed as preparation rather than punishment. The approach reinforced behavioural discipline within a competitive but controlled context, tied to development and achievement (Smith & Smoll, 2007).

In Slovakia, players reported highly authoritarian coaching philosophies rooted in fear and emotional distance. Behavioural correction was abrupt, physically demanding, and rarely explained:

“When the coach was not happy during the game, and we were losing, he’d already scream at us at the bench that we will have no pucks at Monday’s practice. So we were skating and hitting each other instead of having pucks.”
(SJ2)

This strategy focused on physical hardship as a means of regaining control and asserting dominance. Coaches rarely clarified expectations or outcomes, instead relying on repetition and intimidation. Such methods discouraged critical thinking, emotional expression, or self-initiated learning, reinforcing a rigid hierarchy where players felt replaceable and voiceless (Erickson et al., 2007).

Across all three settings, coaching philosophies shaped not only athletic performance but also players' internalised behavioural scripts, what it means to work hard, to fail, to obey, and to be a "man" in sport. Where coaching was punitive and authoritarian, it promoted emotional suppression, fear-based compliance, and dependence on external validation. Conversely, structured but supportive philosophies (as in the Canadian context) showed greater potential to align performance with personal growth. The findings suggest that without conscious reflection on the values underpinning coaching methods, behavioural conditioning in junior hockey may perpetuate unhealthy masculine norms and inhibit the development of emotionally intelligent, self-directed athletes.

Analysis of Preferred Coaching Methods and their Alignment with Values Associated with Hegemonic Masculinity

Coaching methods in junior ice hockey are not value-neutral; rather, they often reflect and reinforce dominant cultural ideals, particularly those associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as physical toughness, emotional stoicism, hierarchy, and authority (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Potrac et al., 2002). This theme examines how players internalise these values through exposure to coaching methods that privilege discipline, obedience, and performance over empathy, collaboration, or personal reflection. By analysing how authoritarian or performance-centric approaches align with masculine sporting culture, it becomes clear how coaching can either reproduce or challenge rigid gender norms (Smoll & Smith, 2006). This dynamic plays a crucial role in shaping athlete behaviour, identity, and emotional development.

In the British context, players commonly encountered coaching that emphasised discipline over development, aligning with traditional masculine expectations of compliance and resilience. Praise was rare, and emotional support was minimal:

“I wasn’t praised as a player when I did things well. I would have preferred to have a personal conversation with coaches every now and then to find out what to improve on individually, so I can help the team better.” (BJ2)

This statement reflects a desire for developmental dialogue, something absent in environments where obedience and toughness were valued more than communication or reflection. The lack of individual feedback also highlights how authority was exercised impersonally, consistent with masculine ideals that discourage vulnerability and emotional expression (Messner, 1992).

In Canada, coaching was somewhat more structured and included occasional praise, but this praise remained largely performance-based. Coaches maintained an emotionally reserved persona, reinforcing a form of mentorship that recognised achievement without addressing emotional needs:

“Coaches mostly praised us as a team. You’d hear occasional positivity during practice like ‘good pass, nice touch’ or so. We’ve had good coaches who rather helped us out by saying good things.” (CJ1)

“I wish they’d given me more guidelines on how to handle certain situations as a captain. I didn’t know what was expected of me, it wasn’t clear to me how to act on the responsibility they’d given me.” (CJ3)

These quotes suggest that even within more systematised environments, emotional detachment and indirect guidance were the norm. Authority was framed around leadership roles, but the lack of clarity and mentorship reveals a model where players were expected to

“figure it out” independently, aligning with the masculine ideal of autonomous problem-solving and emotional control (Potrac et al., 2002).

In Slovakia, coaching methods appeared the most rigid and hierarchical, often characterised by distance, mockery, and a clear division between players and coaches:

“There was a division between coaches and players, we talked behind their backs, we didn't like them. Some of them were professional players who came to our practice to help out. They mocked us and took fun of us with their skills and didn't take us seriously. I remember having only one coach in my life who had a chat with me personally and asked me personal questions. He was from another team in the league higher than ours and he wanted me to sign for them. I've had my priorities elsewhere but I noticed he cared about my development. Other than that my coaches didn't care who their players were.” (SJ3)

This environment reinforced a narrow vision of masculinity built on dominance, mockery, and emotional detachment. The impersonality of the coaching dynamic left players feeling alienated, with relationships grounded more in control than care. Opportunities for emotional or developmental engagement were rare, and players were expected to endure rather than grow.

Across these national contexts, preferred coaching methods often reinforced the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, where emotional toughness, hierarchy, and control were prioritised over empathy, communication, and individual growth. This alignment normalised the suppression of vulnerability and perpetuated rigid gender roles, especially in environments where coaches wielded authority without offering mentorship or support. The rare instances where players encountered emotionally engaged or autonomy-supportive coaching were

remembered vividly, suggesting a significant developmental impact when alternative models were offered. The findings point to the need for critical reflection on coaching pedagogy, not just for performance outcomes, but for the long-term emotional and identity development of athletes navigating masculine sporting cultures.

Problem-Solving Approaches and Consideration of how Conflict Resolution and Performance Feedback Reinforce Gendered Expectations

In junior ice hockey, the ways in which coaches and team leaders address conflict and deliver performance feedback are deeply embedded in the sport's gendered culture. This theme explores how feedback mechanisms and conflict resolution strategies often reflect and reproduce hegemonic masculine norms, such as emotional restraint, competitiveness, dominance, and unquestioned authority (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pringle, 2005). Coaches may favour direct, confrontational, or punitive forms of communication that prioritise toughness and accountability over empathy or emotional intelligence. Such approaches can disempower players who do not conform to these ideals and reinforce rigid standards of masculinity, where seeking help, expressing vulnerability, or engaging in dialogue may be perceived as weakness (Cushion & Jones, 2006). By examining how feedback is given and how conflict is managed, this theme sheds light on the gendered power dynamics within developmental hockey and their impact on player identity, inclusion, and emotional well-being.

In the UK, players described coaching environments that discouraged open dialogue or emotional expression, reinforcing a gendered culture of passivity and obedience in the face of conflict. Coaches were positioned as unquestionable authorities, and players internalised the need to suppress dissent to avoid being seen as difficult or weak.

“I didn’t agree with the coach's decisions but I wouldn’t raise that. He is in charge, what he says we execute, or try but there would be no discussion about it. Besides, they don’t like being contradicted. If something goes wrong, you just put your head down and keep going.” (BJ3)

This response reflects an implicit endorsement of emotional control and silence in conflict resolution, hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity (Courtenay, 2000). Even when coaches’ decisions were seen as unfair, the emphasis remained on submission and endurance, not advocacy or negotiation.

In Canada, feedback mechanisms were somewhat more formalised but still embedded within structures that prioritised competitive performance over holistic development. Players learned that mistakes were penalised through lost opportunities, with little space for emotional support or contextual discussion.

“The ice time was crucial to your development and success in the sport. If I made a mistake and the coach benched me, I couldn’t argue. I would sit and wait for another player to mess up so I can get another go. You had to be ready to perform every time the coaches called upon you.” (CJ4)

Here, conflict resolution is not a process of dialogue but a zero-sum game. Emotional expression is substituted with silent perseverance. The system incentivised hyper-competition and self-regulation over collaboration, closely aligning with hegemonic masculine ideals of individual toughness, stoicism, and internalised responsibility (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Slovak participants described feedback and conflict resolution through lenses of hierarchy, favouritism, and exclusion. Feedback was often minimal, impersonal, or politically charged, reinforcing a deeply authoritarian structure that left players feeling powerless and alienated.

“There was a player whose parents had an influence over the coach for some reason. The player would have the majority of ice time during games and he would pick his favourite team mates who wanted that luxury too. You couldn’t do anything about it, the coach knew he had better players he could use to perform better. In the end I left that team because they wanted me to move to the B-team and I refused. Not every ex-player who had a good career should become coach, they feed on the past lives success without knowledge or wanting to help young players grow.” (SJ1)

This reflection illustrates a culture where power is not earned but inherited or manipulated, and where conflict is resolved through silent withdrawal or exit, not negotiation or reform. The quote highlights a culture of resignation and disillusionment, where coaching decisions are seen as both emotionally distant and strategically unjust.

Across contexts, these systems taught players emotional stoicism, obedience to hierarchy, individualised self-reliance and suppression of vulnerability. These practices serve not only to shape behaviour on the ice but also to socialise young athletes into narrow, rigid conceptions of masculinity, where success is tied to dominance, deference, and emotional control. Such environments risk marginalising those who value collaboration, empathy, or emotional expression, and limit the sport’s capacity to nurture holistic development and mental well-being. Recognising these patterns is essential if coaching cultures aim to become more inclusive, player-centred, and emotionally intelligent.

The Locker Room as a Crucible of Masculinity

This theme focuses on the informal peer culture of the locker room, where hierarchies, rituals, and peer interactions reinforce masculine ideals. Rites of passage, hazing, and the use of homophobic or sexist language highlight how group belonging is contingent on conformity to dominant norms. By examining these dynamics, this theme demonstrates how youth sport extends beyond the ice, becoming a social institution where masculinity is actively performed, policed, and contested.

Team Hierarchies and their Influence on Individual Behaviour

This theme explores how formal and informal hierarchies based on age, skill, experience, or social capital shape behaviour, identity, and relationships in junior ice hockey environments (Allain, 2008; Pape, 2020). These hierarchies often operate as mechanisms of both structure and control, reinforcing hegemonic masculine ideals such as toughness, loyalty, and conformity, while limiting space for emotional expression or alternative forms of value.

In British locker rooms, hierarchy was reinforced through rituals of toughness and social conformity. One player described,

“Team mates would put me in headlocks if I missed a training session, or hide my gear. I didn’t really address the bullying and just got on with it” (BJ1).

Here, aggression functioned not only as a physical skill but also as a form of social currency. The same player recalled,

“I was afraid to share that I have good grades... When I shared at the end of my time there that I aim to get to a university, my teammates would still make fun of me that I am a ‘smart ass’” (BJ1),

revealing how intellectual ambition was marginalised and framed as incompatible with dominant team identity.

In Canada, hierarchies were more formalised and embedded within team leadership structures. As one player noted,

“We had our leaders and captain who would approach at matters” (CJ2),

indicating a clearer delegation of authority. This organisation facilitated communication between players and coaches but also centralised influence in the hands of senior figures, shaping behavioural expectations around silence, discipline, and loyalty.

In Slovakia, hierarchical rituals were seen as routine and inherited. One player reflected,

“We always perked the younger players. They had to collect pucks at the end of practice, could always only use the showers as last ones and stuff like that. But we didn't take it seriously, at the end, we all had to do it too if we played for years above us” (SJ1).

While framed as harmless tradition, these actions acted as symbolic markers of status and subordination, socialising younger players into accepting unequal treatment as a rite of passage. The cyclical nature of such norms reveals how hierarchy is not only enforced but also normalised across generations of players.

How Informal Ranking Systems Shape Conformity, Authority, and Social Capital

This theme explores how informal ranking systems, unspoken yet widely understood, structure social authority, peer recognition, and behavioural norms within junior ice hockey environments (Thorpe, 2012; Pape, 2020). These hierarchies, often based on perceived toughness, skill, or charisma, operate parallel to formal leadership, shaping who gets heard, who is marginalised, and how players navigate their social standing. Conformity to dominant masculine ideals such as stoicism and competitiveness often secures status, while deviation can lead to exclusion or ridicule.

In British locker rooms, informal power dynamics were policed through aggressive forms of social regulation. One player recalled,

“We had an instance in the showers after a practice, when a player would accuse the other player of being an f-word for staring at him. This would happen more when the initial incident occurred” (BJ1).

Such incidents illustrate how hypermasculine norms were reinforced through fear and public humiliation, establishing boundaries around acceptable behaviour and identity.

In Canada, the informal ranking system was shaped by performance and racialised dynamics. A Canadian player of Asian ethnicity observed,

“I realised that the only time I’ve had any voice (in the changing room) would be when I played well” (CJ4).

This quote reveals how social capital was contingent on athletic output, with racial or cultural differences further complicating access to authority and acceptance.

In Slovakia, informal hierarchies were normalised through humour and tradition, but often blurred the line between banter and bullying.

“I would say it would be considered bullying in a different setup. In the (hockey) changing room, everyone was bullied from time to time. We’ve had hockey banter, we made fun of rookies, even I was made fun of as a rookie” (SJ2).

Here, initiation rituals and mockery functioned as social levellers, but also reinforced players’ positions within the team hierarchy, where respect had to be earned through resilience and conformity.

Together, these examples demonstrate how informal status systems regulate behaviour in ways that mirror, and sometimes intensify, the formal structures of team sport, rewarding alignment with dominant norms while marginalising those who fall outside them.

Traditions, Rituals, and Rights of Passage, Rookie Treatment, and Veteran Status in Reinforcing Masculine Ideals

Initiation practices and the treatment of rookies in junior ice hockey act as informal yet deeply embedded mechanisms for establishing hierarchy and reinforcing hegemonic masculinity (Allain, 2008; Atkinson & Young, 2008). These rites of passage, often framed as tradition or team bonding, compel newcomers to prove their toughness, obedience, and

conformity to dominant group norms. A British player described the impact of such dynamics:

“Bullying happened many times, few of my teammates even left the club because it was a toxic environment. I even found myself in a headlock as part of a joke. People were fatshaming, bullying others for grades at school” (BJ1).

What is cast as ‘banter’ or harmless initiation masks a system of social control where emotional suppression and degradation are used to maintain status hierarchies.

Canadian players expressed similar experiences of enforced silence and marginalisation:

“I’ve had a hard time trying to have a voice in a changing room because of my ethnicity. It was hard for me to speak up. I have a place in the squad but not a voice” (CJ4).

This quote highlights how the cultural expectation for rookies to remain passive silences alternative perspectives and reinforces the authority of more established players. Such silencing functions not only to preserve tradition but to uphold ideals of emotional stoicism and group conformity.

In Slovakia, physical aggression emerged as a key marker of belonging:

“It was viewed by us as players as a competition. If a player had a fight with an opponent, it meant that the guy is not afraid of getting hit. Consequently, the teammates would then organise fights to prove status and gain respect. So fights were on regular bases in the changing room as that’s how respect was gained.” (SJ3).

Here, the deliberate provocation of violence is portrayed as a way to earn credibility and status within the group, embedding physical resilience and confrontation as measures of worth. These practices contribute to a culture where masculinity is defined through dominance, submission, and emotional control - values that shape players' self-perceptions and interpersonal dynamics well beyond the rink.

Ultimately, the treatment of rookies reflects a broader ideological framework that legitimises hierarchy and discourages vulnerability. While initiation rituals may build a sense of inclusion for some, they often do so by excluding or marginalising others, reinforcing a narrow model of masculinity that privileges aggression, conformity, and silence over emotional diversity or individuality.

Wider Cultural Forces: Media, National Identity, and Shifting Norms

This theme examines how wider societal and cultural forces shape the construction of masculinity in hockey. Players reflected on the influence of professional role models, national traditions, and shifting social attitudes toward gender and sexuality. While traditional masculine ideals remain strong, some participants acknowledged growing discomfort with exclusionary behaviours. This theme connects the local practices of junior hockey to broader cultural narratives, underscoring the interplay between sport, identity, and society.

Influence of Professional Players, Social Media Trends, and the Visibility of Elite-Level Behaviours

In the digital era, the behaviours and appearances of professional ice hockey players have become central reference points for junior athletes, shaping how young players understand

legitimacy, success, and masculinity within the sport. Through constant exposure to elite-level figures via televised games and digital platforms like Instagram or YouTube, junior players internalise a curated ideal of what it means to be a "real" hockey player, aligning with hegemonic masculine traits such as stoicism, aggression, and physical toughness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Daniels, 2009). This emulation has direct behavioural consequences. For instance, a Canadian player recalled how teammates mimicked professional enforcers:

“They also wanted to fight because they've seen them in the NHL. One guy even came with a patch over his nose the next day like Chara had.” (CJ4)

Such imitation reflects the influence of professional athletes as informal educators of sporting identity, where violence and bravado are valorised as performative tools of belonging.

Similarly, the symbolic power of elite aesthetics can influence safety decisions among youth players. One Slovak participant noted,

“We all did it (switched from helmet cages to visors and lost neck guards) because none of the pros in the NHL wear it.” (SJ4)

Here, imitation becomes a form of social alignment, even when it entails heightened physical risk, suggesting that visibility and status in hockey culture can outweigh rational concerns for safety. In the British context, the professional game's peripheral cultural status creates a different tension. As one player explained,

“You do know about the big league and you follow it but have nobody to talk to about it here,” (BJ3)

reflecting both a desire for connection with the elite level and the social isolation that can occur when sporting aspirations are culturally unsupported.

Reactions, Resistance, or Acceptance of Shifting Norms

This theme reveals the conflicting responses of junior ice hockey players to changing norms around gender inclusivity, LGBTQ+ rights, and emotional openness, exposing the deep-rooted tensions between progressive social discourse and traditional masculine ideals within hockey culture. Hockey has long been characterised by values such as emotional stoicism, physical dominance, and conformity; traits aligned with hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As broader cultural movements challenge these norms, players face the dual challenge of reconciling personal beliefs with team dynamics and institutional messaging.

In the British context, one player’s reflection starkly illustrates the emotional cost of nonconformity:

“I was disgusted, didn’t want to engage and it made me even more disengaged from the team after hearing that (homophobic slurs). Usually I’d just change after practice and leave without a word.” (BJ2).

This account captures a form of silent resistance, where discomfort with toxic language and exclusion leads to emotional withdrawal rather than confrontation. It reflects how fear of marginalisation within a hypermasculine space often suppresses open dissent, despite underlying disapproval.

Conversely, the Canadian perspective suggests an evolving landscape. One participant observes

“The culture now is much better and more accepting than the 80s and 90s, so I think very soon there will be the first NHL player to come out.” (CJ3).

This quote conveys cautious optimism and reflects generational shifts influenced by public discourse, institutional efforts, and changing social attitudes. Yet, the phrasing “very soon” also implies the persistence of barriers, highlighting how change is anticipated but not yet realised at the elite level.

In Slovakia, resistance to inclusivity remains more explicitly articulated. One Slovak player claims,

“In our changing room, it was an offence if you got told the f word. Today, the NHL has rainbow jerseys, pride flags to push their agenda and narratives, and it distracts from the game. It’s completely unrelated and hockey has nothing to do with it.” (SJ3).

This comment reflects a defence of traditional masculinity by framing inclusivity efforts as external intrusions, threatening the perceived purity of the sport. It suggests that in some contexts, players see social advocacy not as progress, but as ideological interference, underscoring a disconnect between institutional messaging and cultural reception.

These varied responses demonstrate the contested terrain of identity formation in junior ice hockey. While some players internalise and support evolving norms, others resist or

disengage, illustrating how masculinity in sport is not monolithic but negotiated in relation to cultural, generational, and institutional influences. The enduring tension between tradition and transformation reflects not only the fragility of hegemonic masculinity under pressure but also the slow, uneven path of cultural change within male-dominated sports.

Analysis of Players' Attitudes and Assumptions in Response to Broader Societal Changes

This theme reveals how junior ice hockey players interpret shifting societal discourses around gender norms, inclusivity, mental health, and emotional expression, particularly as these intersect with entrenched masculine values historically dominant in hockey. While contemporary cultural movements promote acceptance, vulnerability, and emotional openness, hockey remains largely governed by traditional expectations of toughness, stoicism, and social conformity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Anderson, 2009). The players' reflections across national contexts illustrate a spectrum of responses, ranging from discomfort and alienation to cautious acceptance and reflective uncertainty.

In the British context, one player recounts feeling culturally out of place within the locker room:

“Hockey changing room is a pigsty... it was hard for me to find common themes with others in the changing room, I couldn't relate to clubbing or things you do when you are high” (BJ2).

This quote reflects both social disconnection and an implicit critique of the hypermasculine norms shaping team culture. The metaphor of the “pigsty” not only highlights behavioural excess but also suggests a space resistant to inclusivity or emotional nuance. It illustrates how conformity to dominant values becomes a prerequisite for belonging, marginalising those who deviate from the norm.

From the Canadian perspective, the response is more ambivalent, yet notably optimistic.

One player reflects:

“It’s a problem that we hear negative news about the Canadian junior hockey team, how players take advantage of their position. It certainly doesn’t represent the environment that Canadian, junior hockey clubs are trying to develop. I grew up in a very positive hockey culture, that taught me a lot and I would definitely want my kids to grow up within the sport too.” (CJ3).

Here, the player acknowledges misconduct within the sport while distancing themselves from it, reinforcing an idealised image of hockey as a moral and developmental framework. The comment illustrates a protective stance towards the institution, suggesting that individual misbehaviour is an aberration rather than a structural issue, thereby preserving the sport’s legitimacy while avoiding deeper systemic critique.

In Slovakia, one participant captures the generational dissonance between traditional team culture and the evolving social discourse in professional hockey:

“I don’t know what I would think if I was a kid now watching the headlines of the NHL. Ten or fifteen years ago it wasn’t a thing. Now I am an adult and I see for example how much controversy it creates if a player refuses to wear a rainbow jersey for warm up. I am able to make a clear judgement but back then, in an environment where if you had more fat on you than normal, you’d get bullied to oblivion. I don’t know how we’d react to this as kids.” (SJ4).

This account reflects a layered awareness of cultural transition: while the speaker can now appreciate debates around inclusivity, they acknowledge the difficulty of internalising such values in a youth environment steeped in ridicule and conformity. The reflection implies that while attitudes may evolve with maturity and broader exposure, early hockey socialisation often delays or suppresses such growth.

These accounts illustrate how hegemonic masculinity is both contested and reproduced within junior hockey environments. While some players question the culture or express ambivalence toward progressive change, others reframe or resist it, reflecting how dominant ideologies adapt to maintain relevance. The locker room remains a crucible of gender socialisation, where belonging often depends on aligning with narrow definitions of masculinity, limiting the potential for inclusivity, emotional well-being, and cultural transformation within the sport.

Comparison of Junior Ice Hockey Setups with University Structure of Hockey Development

Role of Coaches/Mentors on Player's Development

This theme compares the experiences of ex-junior ice hockey players from Slovakia, Canada, and the UK with those of players from University Ice Hockey Club (UIHC), examining how coaching and mentorship styles influence athlete development. The comparison draws a clear distinction between coach-led, performance-oriented junior systems and player-led, inclusive university environments. Through this contrast, the theme explores how leadership style, communication dynamics, and power relations shape athletes' identities, motivations, and emotional well-being.

Junior coaching systems, shaped by elite sport structures and normative masculine values, often emphasized obedience, toughness, and authority, hallmarks of hegemonic masculinity

(Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Robidoux, 2001). These environments cultivated a top-down style where feedback was limited, relationships impersonal, and player autonomy constrained. In contrast, the UIHC environment, though less professionalized, encouraged collaborative leadership, collective responsibility, and inclusive mentorship, a model more aligned with athlete-centred and humanistic approaches (Kidman, 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

Across all junior environments, players described a coach-driven model in which authority figures shaped not only sport development but also personal confidence and emotional regulation. Coaches functioned as disciplinarians and gatekeepers to progression. Their support, if present, was typically limited to athletic achievement, sidelining holistic mentorship.

In Slovakia, players recounted rigid hierarchies, limited communication, and punitive leadership:

“I’ve had my priorities elsewhere but I noticed he cared about my development.

Other than that my coaches didn’t care who their players were.” (SJ3)

Similarly, British participants noted emotionally detached coaching that undermined personal development:

“I would have preferred to have a personal conversation with coaches every now and then to find out what to improve on individually, so I can help the team better.” (BJ2)

In Canada, though the system was more structured, the relational dynamic remained formal and performative. Praise and feedback were limited to performance outputs rather than personal growth:

“Coaches mostly praised us as a team... I wish they’d given me more guidelines on how to handle certain situations as a captain.” (CJ1, CJ3)

These testimonies collectively show how junior coaches, though central to players’ progression, frequently failed to offer emotionally intelligent or developmentally supportive mentorship. This neglect reinforced the internalisation of hegemonic masculine traits such as emotional suppression, hierarchical compliance, and competitive individualism (Pringle, 2005; Cushion & Jones, 2006).

By contrast, the UIHC environment presented a leadership structure rooted in shared responsibility and peer support. Without institutionalised coaches, players assumed collective accountability for training, tactics, and team cohesion. The emphasis shifted from obedience to participation, from discipline to collaboration.

“In a university club the coaching is a responsibility of players. The greatest authority amongst team-mates relies on captains. There is more of a togetherness among the team when the person in charge is one of the players.” (UP1)

This form of horizontal leadership diffused power, encouraged open communication, and fostered emotional trust among peers. It also offered space for individual voice and agency, promoting a model of mentorship based less on dominance and more on cooperation.

Another player described the diverse cultural backgrounds and player contributions that enriched team development:

“With the experiences the players bring into this club from different parts of the world, it is a rich environment of hockey knowledge. Here it’s just the question of cohesiveness and cooperation.” (UP2)

The absence of formal coaching structures, though arguably a limitation in technical development, appeared to empower players to co-create learning environments grounded in mutual respect, inclusivity, and reflective practice. This aligns with research supporting the benefits of athlete-led development models for autonomy, motivation, and identity growth (Kidman, 2005; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

The comparison between junior and university environments reveals that coaching and mentorship are not merely tools for performance development, but cultural mechanisms that shape the gendered experiences and identities of players. In junior settings, the dominance of coach-led, hierarchical authority upheld hegemonic masculine norms, emphasising control, discipline, and emotional distance. These environments reinforced narrow definitions of masculinity where silence, compliance, and toughness were rewarded, while vulnerability or relational development was overlooked.

In contrast, the UIHC environment represents a break from traditional coaching orthodoxy. Though less formalised, its player-led structure facilitated greater emotional expression, collaboration, and identity agency. By flattening hierarchies and prioritising cohesion over domination, it offered a more inclusive model of mentorship that challenged the gendered expectations players internalised in their youth.

This thematic contrast underscores the transformative potential of peer-led, relationally supportive environments in dismantling rigid masculine norms and promoting player well-being. As such, the university model offers valuable insight for reimagining developmental sport structures that nurture both performance and personhood.

Role of Peer Dynamics and Locker Room Culture

Locker room culture serves as a powerful site of socialisation in ice hockey, shaping players' values, behaviours, and identities. This theme compares junior-level environments, often embedded in hegemonic masculinity, with the more fluid and self-reflective culture found at the university level, specifically within UIHC. Through this comparison, it becomes evident how peer hierarchies, bonding rituals, and team norms reflect and reproduce, or challenge, gendered ideologies.

In junior hockey, peer dynamics were strongly influenced by informal hierarchies based on seniority, performance, and conformity to masculine norms such as emotional toughness, dominance, and silence (Allain, 2008; Kidd, 2013). Players frequently recalled hazing and exclusion as part of the locker room culture:

“The culture is of hierarchical nature. There are seniors, ‘vets’ and new players, ‘rookies’... it’s a circle and it turns the same way every year... Bullying was part of it... but to build a thick skin.” (CJ3)

Here, hierarchy is naturalised as part of a cyclical tradition, rationalising harmful behaviours such as bullying as rites of passage. This reinforces hegemonic masculinity by equating resilience with one’s capacity to endure emotional and verbal abuse (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Similarly, the Slovak player’s experience points to exclusionary practices tied to group loyalty and silence:

“There is a massive inclusivity problem. Within a group of players you would hardly find an open way to get in from the outside.” (SJ2)

In these settings, locker rooms acted as social gatekeepers, where access to belonging required alignment with dominant behaviours—often at the cost of emotional safety and personal identity. Leadership was also framed through charisma or aggression rather than moral or inclusive leadership:

“Our team-leaders were chosen for the wrong reasons such as toughness, likeability or humor.” (BJ2)

In contrast, the UIHC presents a more dynamic and evolving locker room culture. While the club is not free from masculine norms, its player-led governance structure allows for critical engagement and cultural reformation. One participant reflected:

“We have had a number of years where the teams within the club were disjointed because of performance preferences. The captains of the top, men’s team didn’t want their team to engage with other, lower, teams. In the year when I became club’s president, we aimed to change the culture around that. It was mostly successful but the main difference was in the captain's approach, captains change every year and they each bring a new culture with them into their team. That way, it is easier to change a toxic culture, but also might be harder to maintain a positive one.” (UP3)

The annual rotation of leadership at UIHC is both a challenge and an opportunity—it allows for cultural shifts and fresh perspectives, but also poses difficulty in sustaining inclusive practices. Still, participants expressed a willingness to confront toxic behaviour:

“There is currently a team now within the club that falls under the toxic masculine bracket with the behaviours and culture they pursue. There were players reporting they don’t want to be part of such a space because of that. There will be new leaders of that team next season, so we will hope that it will change and the whole club will, again, be open for everyone and that they will feel good in the environment.” (UP2)

These examples highlight how university players, empowered by peer governance and academic environments, are more likely to question and intervene in harmful traditions. Leadership is viewed not only as positional authority but as an ethical responsibility to foster inclusion and emotional safety.

This comparison reveals that locker rooms are not neutral spaces, they are culturally charged arenas where gender norms are learned, enforced, or contested. Junior settings, with their rigid hierarchies and ritualised toughness, reinforce hegemonic masculinity and emotional suppression under the guise of team bonding. In contrast, the university environment, though imperfect, offers a space for more fluid and reflective peer dynamics, where leadership can be redefined and harmful norms openly challenged. This shift from conformity to consciousness is crucial for fostering healthier sporting cultures that value both performance and personalities.

Accepting Societal Differences in Public Space and a Collective Environment

This theme explores how junior hockey and university sport environments shape athletes' engagement with diversity, inclusivity, and evolving social norms. While junior-level systems tend to reinforce conformity through hegemonic masculine norms, university clubs like UIHC offer greater ideological fluidity and openness to difference (Messner, 2002; Anderson, 2009).

In junior hockey, particularly in Canada, Slovakia, and the UK, collective environments often reinforced dominant gender norms and nationalistic ideals that left little room for difference. Canadian players reflected on the class-based identity of hockey, and its cultural mythology:

“Hockey is and always will be a ‘blue collar’ sport, it was mostly working class kids who played.” (CJ1)

“It’s a fortune to be a hockey player in Canada. Yet, there are fundamental issues with common people’s perception and interpretation.” (CJ2)

These reflections expose hockey’s position as both a class marker and a cultural ideal. The tension between public adoration and private marginalisation illustrates how social norms are tightly policed within the sport. Players are expected to uphold not only athletic standards but also symbolic ideals of toughness, loyalty, and masculinity, making expressions of mental health struggles, non-normative gender identities, or cultural differences difficult to surface or validate (Adams, 2011).

Slovak players similarly framed hockey as a source of national identity and cohesion, but also one that carries the weight of historical nostalgia and limited change:

“I was at the town square in our capital when Slovakia won the championship in 2002. I’ve never felt more pride to be a Slovakian... Ice hockey is our pride, it’s what we see ourselves like.” (SJ3)

This reinforces the notion of sport as national myth-making, consolidating cultural unity at the cost of individual diversity. In such environments, deviation from the norm, whether in terms of gender, race, or sexuality, is often viewed as a threat to collective identity.

By contrast, players at UIHC reported a more inclusive, critically aware, and flexible environment. The university club’s structural openness, diverse international membership, and academic context enabled greater acceptance of societal differences:

“At UIHC you get within the club’s structures relatively easily. There are all kinds of playing experience accepted and at trials, captains figure out what team and the level of play will suit you best. It might be tougher for some to accept that their level is not of the highest team’s suiting, but there are very few people who look to compete seriously besides their studies. Club values results, but mainly it values an inclusion of all and making sure that people are getting a positive outcome from taking part.” (UP1)

While not free of toxic masculinity, the club displayed the capacity for cultural self-correction:

“I recently made a switch from UIHC to a different university and joined their hockey team. I was near a point of quitting because the atmosphere in the room was of a toxic, masculine nature full of machos who led indecent conversations and shared terrible views of gender ideals.” (UP3)

This contrast reveals how institutional culture matters: the ability to accept diversity is not intrinsic to athletes but shaped by the norms, expectations, and leadership within each environment.

This comparison highlights that acceptance of societal differences in team environments is contextually and structurally produced. Junior hockey often upholds traditional, exclusionary ideals aligned with hegemonic masculinity and national pride, leaving little room for alternative identities or vulnerabilities. In contrast, university sport, especially in ideologically diverse and academically grounded settings like UIHC, can offer a space for challenging these norms and fostering inclusion. This underscores the importance of critically reflective leadership, institutional support, and peer accountability in shaping environments where difference is not just tolerated, but valued.

Dealing with Toxic Masculinity and Limiting its Influence on Development in Sporting Environment

This theme contrasts how former junior hockey players and current UIHC athletes experience, internalise, and respond to the presence of toxic masculinity within their sporting environments. By comparison, university-level hockey, particularly within UIHC, appears to provide more robust institutional mechanisms and discursive space to resist, question, and reform such behaviours (Anderson, 2009; Mennesson, 2012).

“It’s a problem that we hear negative news about the Canadian junior hockey team, how players take advantage of their position. It certainly doesn’t represent the environment that Canadian, junior hockey clubs are trying to develop...”

(CJ3)

This response demonstrates how toxic behaviours are often reframed as isolated incidents, allowing athletes to maintain a positive association with the sport while distancing themselves from broader systemic issues.

“We’ve had a girl playing on our youth team and she was one of the best players. She had her own changing room which excluded her from the silly talks we’d have as young boys. ...It got to a point where she got scared of talking to pretty much everyone to not become a centre of sexualised chatter.” (SJ4)

Despite nominal inclusion, the peer culture perpetuated her marginalisation through objectification and symbolic segregation. This mirrors critiques that institutional inclusion without cultural transformation risks reproducing hegemonic masculinity under a more acceptable veneer (Adams, 2011).

“I was disgusted, didn’t want to engage and it made me even more disengaged from the team after hearing that (homophobic slurs). Usually I’d just change after practice and leave without a word.” (BJ2)

His reaction illustrates passive resistance, revealing how oppressive cultures often neutralise dissent by isolating players rather than empowering them to challenge the status quo. The psychological cost of dissent reinforces conformity and deters open critique.

UIHC players described active systems of accountability and institutional response that fostered a safer and more inclusive team culture:

“If there is a theme players aren’t happy about, they can choose different ways of approaching the problem. There is a welfare officer whose job it is to attend and

pass on any concerns, there are captains who must act on reports as well. There were instances where players were seen using disrespectful language or acts outside the hockey club and they were asked to leave in consequence. University cares about how players portray themselves and the club in public.” (UP1)

This demonstrates how university structures not only enable but encourage ethical behaviour, with consequences for misconduct extending beyond performance metrics. The club’s commitment to moral leadership and public representation reflects an institutional culture where inclusion is both a value and a practice (Anderson, 2009).

“There was an instance when I had to act as a president of the club and ask higher authorities to approach the matter. It’s a chain of authority and not only students are responsible for the well being of the club. Setting the culture and making the space inclusive is the priority but when a large issue occurs, you want to act quickly so it doesn’t spread amongst other players and teams. The values we set define people’s approach towards taking part, carrying on in the club’s name.” (UP3)

This reflects a proactive stance toward cultural leadership and a recognition that inclusivity must be actively cultivated and protected. It also highlights how institutional responsibility within university sport empowers players to address toxic behaviours with systemic support.

While junior hockey environments often tolerate or excuse toxic masculine behaviours as tradition or individual misconduct, university clubs like UIHC demonstrate the potential for meaningful reform when ethical leadership and institutional accountability intersect. Where junior players often navigate toxicity through silence or withdrawal, UIHC players benefit from mechanisms that enable active resistance and community protection. This comparison

affirms that cultural change is most possible where structures, values, and leadership are aligned, not just to tolerate difference, but to transform the norms that once constrained it.

Conclusion

Recap of Key Findings

This thesis set out to explore how hegemonic masculinity is constructed and maintained within youth ice hockey programmes and to investigate the impact these dynamics have on male players' conduct both on and off the ice. Drawing on a combination of in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and critical engagement with existing literature, this research provides new insights into the ways in which masculine norms are internalised, performed, and policed among adolescent male athletes. While the influence of hegemonic masculinity in sport has been widely documented, this study makes an important contribution by focusing specifically on youth contexts, where identities are still forming and institutional pressures play a formative role in socialisation.

The findings reveal that youth ice hockey programmes are key sites for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Within these programmes, players are frequently exposed to cultural expectations that value physical toughness, emotional restraint, dominance, and heterosexuality (Messner, 1992; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Robidoux, 2001). These norms are reinforced not only through the structure of the game, its physical demands, competitive ethos, and hierarchical team dynamics, but also through the informal cultural practices embedded within locker room spaces, coaching relationships, and peer interactions (Allain, 2008; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Szto, 2020). These peer interactions often include shared language, music preferences, banter, and other everyday

rituals that reflect and uphold dominant masculine values (e.g., language/music choices, teasing, or shared media).

Players consistently reported feeling pressure to conform to narrow definitions of masculinity. Emotional vulnerability was often stigmatised, and acts of aggression or dominance were rewarded, explicitly through coaching praise and implicitly through peer approval. Rookie treatment, rites of passage, and ritualised hazing practices further reinforced hierarchies that positioned more aggressive, assertive behaviour as a marker of authentic manhood. Such dynamics contributed to the marginalisation of alternative masculinities, including those associated with empathy, emotional openness, or non-heteronormative identities. These findings suggest that youth sport is not an isolated sphere but a social institution with wide-reaching influence on young men's development and social conduct.

Cross-cultural comparisons revealed consistent pressures to conform to dominant masculine ideals, though their intensity and framing varied. In Slovakia, strict hierarchies and authoritarian coaching reinforced Connell's (1995) model of hegemonic masculinity, where discipline, emotional control, and physical dominance structured everyday practice. In Canada, the institutional prestige of hockey further embedded these norms within national identity, aligning with Robidoux's (2001) analysis of masculinity as central to Canadian hockey culture. In contrast, the UK setting allowed for slightly greater fluidity, echoing Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, which acknowledges the emergence of less rigid gender performances in certain social spaces.

Yet, even in traditionally hypermasculine environments, the data revealed moments of resistance. Discomfort with homophobic language, exclusionary behaviours, and violence illustrates that hegemonic masculinity, while dominant, is not uncontested. These findings support Demetriou's (2001) notion of hybrid masculinities and highlight the co-existence of

dominant and subordinate forms within a single institutional space. Moreover, the presence of ambivalence and contradiction in players' reflections aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that hegemonic masculinity is relational, dynamic, and continuously reconstructed through practice.

These insights carry important implications for future development of the game. As conversations around inclusion, mental health, and gender diversity gain traction in wider society, youth sport (particularly in male-dominated, contact-heavy environments) must adapt. Coaches, organisations, and policymakers should reflect critically on how current practices reinforce outdated norms, and instead foster spaces that support emotional wellbeing, inclusivity, and diverse masculinities. Doing so is not only vital for the welfare of individual players but also for the long-term cultural sustainability of the sport.

Methodological and Theoretical Reflections

This study employed a qualitative methodology to explore how masculinity operates in youth ice hockey. In-depth interviews enabled access to players' lived experiences, while reflexive thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and tensions. Preserving participants' voices ensured that their narratives shaped, rather than were abstracted from, the research's meaning-making. The study was limited by a relatively small and geographically specific sample. While efforts were made to include players from different national backgrounds, the findings are not intended to be generalisable. Social desirability bias may also have influenced participants' willingness to discuss sensitive topics around masculinity and identity.

The analysis drew primarily on Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which provided an initial conceptual frame during coding by sensitising attention to expressions of

toughness, authority, and dominance. The related concepts of complicit and subordinate masculinities were particularly useful at the theme development stage, helping to differentiate between participants who reinforced dominant ideals and those who navigated them more critically. Connell's framework, however, has been critiqued for underplaying agency and fluidity (Demetriou, 2001). To address this, Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory was incorporated in the later stages of theme refinement and interpretation, where it helped make sense of data pointing to subtle resistances, such as participants rejecting homophobic language or showing support for teammates' emotional openness. In this way, theory was not imposed deductively but engaged reflexively, shaping how patterns already evident in the data were contextualised and explained.

While Connell and Anderson's frameworks appear theoretically opposed, one emphasising structural dominance and the other cultural change, they proved complementary in practice. Connell highlighted the persistence of norms around aggression and emotional suppression, while Anderson enabled recognition of small but significant challenges to those norms. Rather than collapsing one into the other, both frameworks were mobilised at different stages of the analytic process to capture the coexistence of enduring and emerging masculinities in hockey.

The positionality of a former player in Slovakia, the UK, and Canada brought advantages and challenges. Insider familiarity with hockey culture enhanced trust and enriched data collection (Sparkes & Smith, 2014; Hodkinson, 2005), but it also raised concerns around bias and power dynamics, particularly with former teammates. To mitigate this, reflexive strategies were employed throughout, including journaling and cautious probing during interviews (Berger, 2015). Emphasis was placed on co-construction of meaning, positioning participants as collaborators in knowledge production (Karnieli-Miller, Strier & Pessach, 2009).

By combining inductively developed themes with theoretical interpretation and insider insight, this research captured both the enduring and evolving dimensions of masculinity in youth ice hockey. The tension and overlap between Connell and Anderson's frameworks mirrored the lived experiences of participants, who simultaneously conformed to and resisted the complex expectations of hockey masculinities.

Future Research Directions

This study raises several important directions for future research. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how young male athletes' understandings of masculinity evolve over time within sporting contexts. Such research could clarify whether early exposure to hegemonic norms in sport has a lasting influence on adult identity and behaviour, or whether athletes later develop more inclusive or critical masculinities. Scholars like Michael Messner (1992) and Eric Anderson (2009) have called for deeper analysis of this trajectory, particularly in relation to social change and generational shifts in gender norms.

Future research should also explore the intersectional dimensions of masculinity in youth sport. While this study focused primarily on gender, factors such as race, class, and sexuality undoubtedly shape how masculinities are constructed and experienced. Michael Robidoux (2001) and Stéphanie Allain (2008) have noted the racialised and heteronormative assumptions embedded in hockey culture, yet few studies have examined how these dimensions interact in youth settings. Intersectional approaches could offer richer insight into whose masculinities are legitimised or marginalised within team dynamics.

Comparative ethnographies across junior, amateur, and professional levels, and across national contexts, would further illuminate how masculinity in hockey functions within and

beyond the rink. While this thesis focused on junior environments, there remains a gap in understanding how masculine norms translate into everyday behaviour, relationships, and identity beyond sport. Andrew Roderick (2006) and Heather MacDonald (2016) suggest that sporting masculinities often extend into broader life contexts, shaping emotional expression, leadership styles, and interpersonal dynamics in adulthood.

Greater attention must also be given to the roles of coaches, parents, and organisational structures in challenging dominant gender norms. Coaches in particular play a central role in shaping behavioural expectations, often acting as gatekeepers of acceptable masculine performance. Brackenridge et al. (2005) and Kerr and Stirling (2012) have shown how coaching cultures can perpetuate silence around emotional wellbeing and exclude alternative forms of masculinity. Understanding how adult role models contribute to or resist hegemonic socialisation could inform targeted interventions and coach education programmes.

From these findings, interventions can be considered at multiple levels:

- 1) Micro (individual/peer level): programmes that foster emotional literacy, peer-to-peer support, and resilience-building could help players resist harmful masculine scripts. Workshops encouraging reflection on locker room language, music, or rituals could challenge subtle everyday reinforcements of exclusion.
- 2) Meso (club/team/organisational level): coach education and parent awareness programmes should prioritise mental health, inclusivity, and safe team cultures. For example, mandatory safeguarding training could help coaches challenge hazing practices or address homophobic/sexist language directly.

- 3) Macro (structural/policy level): governing bodies and federations could embed inclusivity metrics within funding and development policies, ensuring clubs prioritise wellbeing alongside performance. Broader campaigns, similar to anti-racism or concussion-awareness drives, could spotlight gender inclusivity as a core value of hockey development.

There is a growing need for applied, intervention-based research that evaluates the effectiveness of these measures in transforming culture. Anderson and McCormack (2014) and Adams et al. (2010) advocate for proactive strategies within sport organisations to disrupt homophobia and expand the emotional repertoires available to male athletes. Embedding such practices into youth development systems could move sport toward becoming a more inclusive, reflective, and socially responsible institution.

In sum, this thesis underscores the powerful role youth ice hockey programmes play in shaping male identities through the reinforcement of hegemonic masculine norms. While these environments continue to privilege aggression, dominance, and emotional restraint, emerging expressions of resistance and changing cultural attitudes offer signs of potential transformation. By critically examining the mechanisms through which masculinity is constructed and performed in youth sport, this research contributes to broader efforts to understand and challenge gender inequality, promote inclusivity, and reimagine what it means to be a man in the sporting world and beyond.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Identifying Hegemonic Masculinity (HM) in youth ice hockey programmes and investigating its effects on male players conduct on and off the ice

Michal Drobny
 (MA) Research Student
 Room SNC 3.17, Sinclair Building, Headington Campus
 Department of Sport
 Faculty of Health and Life Sciences
 Oxford Brookes University
 Oxford
 OX3 0BP
 Phone: [REDACTED]
 Email: [REDACTED]
 Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/drobers64>



Please tick initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without a giving reason.	
3. I understand that I may withdraw my data from this study up until 1st September 2024.	

Please tick initial box

	Yes	No
4. I agree to the interview consultation being audio recorded.		
5. I agree to the interview consultation being video recorded.		
6. I agree with the use of anonymised quotes in publicly accessible publications.		

I agree to take part in the above study	Yes	No
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Name of Participant		Date		Signature	
Name of Researcher		Date		Signature	

Appendix 2: Participants Information Sheet



Study title

Identifying hegemonic masculinity in youth ice hockey programmes and investigating its effects on male players conduct on and off the ice.

Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a postgraduate research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to identify the presence of hegemonic masculinity and its impact on ice hockey players who grew up playing for junior ice hockey teams and structures. Hegemonic masculinity is a term that looks at how certain behaviours and roles that are often seen as ideal for men actually help them hold power over others. This concept also explains why some men are pressured to act tough or suppress their emotions to fit into these roles.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to take part within this study because you, either, possess experiences from youth ice hockey programmes, or you have experiences from university ice hockey structures.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research study. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet alongside a Privacy Notice that will explain how your data will be collected and used. You will be asked to give your consent to participate. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Any data collected from you can be withdrawn up until the point of analysis in November 2024, up to the point of submission.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to a 50-60 minute long interview about your experiences from ice hockey teams you have played for.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Within interviews there is the potential for some of the questions may lead to distress and anxiety. You do not have to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable discussing. There is a small risk of mild distress being caused by recollection of past injuries, violence, illegal activity, gender identity, and asexuality. The topics mentioned will not be directly included in the interview questions. However, because the interview is semi-structured, they might come up during the conversation.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

You will have an opportunity to help find out if past and current ice hockey culture affects young players and if teams prepare them for the adult world outside of ice hockey. You are invited to comment and discuss the extent to which ice hockey affected you and your environment growing up.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

The data collected from this study will be kept confidential. Your data can only be accessed by the research supervisors and the researcher. The data collected will be stored on encrypted files, and it will also be stored anonymously. Your data will be stored on the Brookes Google Drive in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you still want to participate in this study, please tick all boxes required and sign the consent form on page 3. Send the completed filled and signed consent form to me at [REDACTED] no later than 48 hours after receiving this invitation.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of this study will be used for a Master's dissertation and will not be published elsewhere.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The lead researcher is a MA by Research in Sport and Coaching sciences student at Oxford Brookes University, Michal Drobny. The project is self-funded.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research has been reviewed by the Departmental Research Ethics Officer for the Department of Sport, Health Sciences and Social Work, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Oxford Brookes University.

Contact for Further Information

Please reach out at the following addresses for further information.

Michal Drobny
(MA) Research Student
Room SNC 3.17, Sinclair Building, Headington Campus
Department of Sport
Faculty of Health and Life Sciences
Oxford Brookes University
Oxford
OX3 0BP
Email: [REDACTED]

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk .

Thank you

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet.

Privacy Notice for Research Participants



This Privacy Notice provides information on how Oxford Brookes University (Oxford Brookes) collects and uses participant's personal information when you take part in one of our research projects. Please refer to the research Participant Information Sheet for further details about the study and what information will be collected about you and how it will be used.

Oxford Brookes is the Data Controller of any data that you supply for this research. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it lawfully. We will make the decisions on how your data is used and for what reasons.

Why do we need your data?

You are being invited to take part in a postgraduate research study on masculinity in ice hockey. Hegemonic masculinity is a growing theme that promotes men's dominant position within hierarchy and justifies marginalised behaviours of being a man. This study aims to identify the presence of HM and its impact on ice hockey players who grew up playing for junior ice hockey teams and structures. You have been invited to take part within this study because you, either, possess experiences from youth ice hockey programmes, or you have experiences from university ice hockey structures

Oxford Brookes' legal basis for collecting this data is:

Your Personal Data will be used in academic research. Oxford Brookes University is a public body and staff and students carry out research in line with the University's legal powers and constitution.

Your consent is an ethical requirement.

Oxford Brookes University's legal basis for processing your Personal Data (or information) is as set out in Art 6 UK GDPR.

What type of personal data will Oxford Brookes use?

Transcribed answers from the interview recordings which will be anonymous.

Who will Oxford Brookes share your data with?

Oxford Brookes will not be sharing your data with anyone.

Will Oxford Brookes transfer my data outside of the UK?

Data will be stored on Google Drive, which Oxford Brookes has a contract with. Please note, Google stores data outside the UK.

What rights do I have regarding my data that Oxford Brookes holds?

- You have the right to be informed about what data will be collected and how this will be used
- You have the right of access to your data
- You have the right to correct data if it is wrong
- You have the right to ask for your data to be deleted
- You have the right to restrict use of the data we hold about you
- You have the right to data portability
- You have the right to object to Oxford Brookes using your data
- You have rights in relation to using your data in automated decision making and profiling.

Your rights will depend on the legal ground used to process your data

Where did Oxford Brookes source my data from?

Data will be produced solely from the voluntary scheduled interviews.

Are there any consequences of not providing the requested data?

There are no consequences of not providing data for this research. It is purely voluntary. If you like to withdraw part way through the research, the Participant Information Sheet includes this information. It may be that some of the data that you have provided has already been used in the research. If you would like more information about this, you should feel free to contact the research team.

Will there be any automated decision making using my data?

There will be no use of automated decision making in scope of UK Data Protection and Privacy legislation.

How long will Oxford Brookes keep your data?

Research data will be transferred to Oxford Brookes University once the study is finished. Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity; in this instance, the data will be kept until the point of graduation.

Who can I contact if I have concerns?

In the event of any questions about the research study, please contact the research team in the first instance. Their contact details are listed on the Participant Information Sheet. If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, please contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee at ethics@brookes.ac.uk. For further details about information use contact the Information Security Management team on info.sec@brookes.ac.uk or the Data Protection Officer at brookesdpo@brookes.ac.uk. You can also contact the Information Commissioner's Office via their website ico.org.uk. Appropriate support services and organisations of signposting purposes contact information:

Brookes Wellbeing Team 01865 484650 wellbeing-recpt@brookes.ac.uk
 Samaritans 116 123 www.samaritans.org
 Mind 020 8215 2243 www.mind.org
 Citizens Advice 0800 144 8848

Appendix 4: Ethics Approval (shssw ethics email)



Michal Drobny
Department of Sport, Health Sciences, and Social Work
Oxford Brookes University

16th May 2024

Dear Michal

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences Ethical Approval

Thank you for your recent HLS Ethics Application submitted to the Sport, Health Sciences, and Social Work Department Research Ethics Officer for approval. I am pleased to inform you that your study has been granted full approval.

FHLS Ethics Number: HLS/2024/JS/013
Study title: Identifying hegemonic masculinity in youth ice hockey programmes and investigating its effects on male players conduct on and off the ice.

The approval period for the data collection phase of the study is one years from the date of this letter. If you need the approval to be extended, please do contact us nearer the time of expiry.

Should the recruitment, methodology or data storage change from your original plans, or should any study participants experience adverse physical, psychological, social, legal, or economic effects from the research, please inform us with full details as soon as possible. Likewise, please refer any other issues or complaints to us at the earliest opportunity.

We wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Jamie Sims
Deputy Research Ethics Officer

CC: Dr Stuart Whigham

Appendix 5: Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Schedule

1. Can you describe any instances where you or your teammates were on the team's lineup but were not allowed to play during the games? What was the reason behind this decision?
1. How did it feel to be included in the team's lineup but remain on the sidelines during games?
2. Can you share examples of times when coaches praised or rewarded you for good performance or behaviour?
3. What actions did your coaches take if you or your teammates made mistakes or behaved poorly during practice?
4. How often did your coach have one-on-one conversations with you?
5. Did you feel the need to have more discussions with your coaches? Why or why not?
6. If you ever missed a practice, how did it affect your relationship with your coaches and teammates?
7. Was there a specific coach responsible for the players' well-being? If not, can you explain why?
8. Have you experienced or witnessed verbal or physical bullying in the changing rooms? Can you describe what happened?
9. How were conflicts between players handled by the coaches?
10. How did you react to fights within your team or against another team?
11. Did a coach ever instruct you to make a hit or body check on someone in the next shift?
12. How did you feel after performing a body check?
13. What were common themes or topics of conversation in the changing room?
14. What are some of the most derogatory words you've heard on the ice, in practice, or during games, and why do you think they were said?
15. Were there instances of team members bringing unusual substances into the changing room? How was this viewed by others?
16. How were players' physical plays in games and practices received and discussed among the team?
17. Can you share any experiences or observations regarding homophobic or transphobic behaviours within your ice hockey team?
18. How do you think homophobic and transphobic behaviours affect team dynamics and individual players' experiences in ice hockey?
19. Have you thought about a backup plan in case a career in ice hockey doesn't work out? Can you elaborate on your thoughts?
20. How did your coaches view the importance of education? Did they inquire about your grades? Was your school in any way involved with your hockey activities?
21. Was there much discussion about different career paths within your team? How did your teammates react to these discussions?
22. What behaviours are typically expected of ice hockey players to demonstrate their masculinity or manliness?
23. Do you see any problems with the masculine culture within ice hockey? Can you describe them?
24. Are there any other comments you'd like to add or topics we haven't covered that could help understand masculinity in ice hockey better?

Appendix 6: Exemplar Analysis of Interviews

culture of Canada 17 mid-level hockey
 coaches - leadership culture of toughness / talked hard work (several of coaches)
 back skating after hard game / vomiting after a practice lessons for future
 culture of hard work
 puberty effects in male contact sport
 Bullying (kind of the / the) like atmosphere, leaders who were bullies
 Examples of how much they can take + give out. Social Status is based on performance.
 Hierarchy of Hockey Players / "was a captain - meant to push on realists."
 Competition for spots - Coaches gave rewards to better players
 Main Rivalries were w/ other teams. INTERNAL COHESION
 Coaches weren't aware, prep talk at most. Stuff going on without adults knowing
 Punishment were collective. → Better cohesion. Individual feelings were on w/ me as captain.
 Putting people in awkward position. High school. Notable in hockey - Stereotype / Realities
 20-30 yrs it was worse / societal changes
 Mob mentality, trying harder can annoy people w/ them. Fitting problem.
 Media training, learning to contain themselves. Scandal, rebel of play is too big. Hockey fans
 hate. Enforces it's different. Mental Health. Fighting is electric, it's part of
 identity. Masculinity issue, mandating issues - as long as it's not mandatory (make war)
 Lack of equipment is a tough guy problem. (Players push back against realty)
 - real players have a great status to represent sport
 Mandatory cages + realty, emulate what role models. Kids look to NHL
 players.
 Themes at ch. room - girls, hockey has positive influence on academics.
 Classic dumb joke - hockey
 Tough to be gay in hockey culture. Homophobic culture
 sticking out of group's pattern took
 conformity - fear stigma of worse men despite changes

Not much in time - Methods C. →
 4.3 →
 PRAISE, COMPLIMENT E. ATTACK. →
 LEADERSHIP →
 roles, responsibility, hierarchy
 RETROSPECT →
 THEN? Responsibility (stress)
 TEAM RULES (CULTURE) →
 ... teammates vs coach
 3.5. TRADITIONS →
 taking on roles - divisions
 Realities vs. later? (in) → BULLYING
 COACHING APPROACH →

Interview Annex Subject CJS

Q1. I know these were players who weren't getting on much level on ice so either
 I would annoy them, I was usually the captain or an assistant captain.

Q2. It was part of hockey, there are different roles for each player. I would play more
 during practices, other players during games. There were people who started to push
 and shove the opening them. That's part of being in hockey. I was not that of an officer
 possible w/ in them.

Q3. Yes, usually it would not be only one or only one player but they'd pressure or
 pressure w/ in them.

Q4. Most of the time, at the end practice, the practice, about their own and down.

Q5. They'd communicate with me after they'd call me into their locker and
 usually they'd be with about 10-15 other players or about 10-15 other players
 down as their assistant coach, so as a captain.

Q6. Looking back now, I wish they'd give me more of questions on how to handle
 certain situations or what is expected of me. It would have been for me how
 to act on the responsibility they'd give me.

Q7. I felt like I missed out on something when I wasn't there. It wasn't that
 good to miss out on a practice. Others would usually just ask where was I,
 but more would care beyond that.

Q8. Not exactly for that, I think they were all higher levels. They're had coaches for
 defense games and they were meant to have a stronger level with players.

Q9. For the culture in of a traditional nature. There are seniors, jocks and new players
 "seniors" and the job of seniors is to make seniors the whole team but that's
 when they were seniors. This is a circle and it leaves the same way every year,
 with every group. Bullying was part of it, it didn't happen because of an
 inclusion to that someone, but he should be that when it then uninvolved
 most of players can't handle that. This is how a team worked
 internally, the seniors that they would call it bullying but pushing on.

Q10. Coaches didn't care, they're had their coaches, like me in the locker
 room to work out conflicts. That's also how I played as a leader.

Q11. During practices, fights were forbidden. During games, if they happened,
 I was there in that part of the game. I didn't fight, I was of a small
 club, but I understood that others were predators, so how involved.

CJS