



Perceived Barriers to Careers in Sport and Stereotypes toward Women in Sport: Exploring Division I Female College Athletes' Experiences in Athletic and Educational Settings

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While the barriers and challenges women confront in the sport industry have been well-documented, there is a lack of research on how women who aspire to work in sport perceive those barriers. This study explored how female college athletes perceive the barriers to their future careers in sport as well as how they cope with the barriers through the lens of social cognitive career theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine female college athletes participating in NCAA Division I sports and majoring in sport management. Identified themes included exclusive mentorships within the athletic department, gendered experiences in educational settings, gender stereotypes toward women working in sport, and strong willingness to negotiate the barriers. The findings will advance the theoretical knowledge of career development for women in sport and provide beneficial information that practitioners can utilize to mentor and help female college athletes' effective career development during college years.

Keywords: career barrier, coping efficacy, gender stereotypes, social cognitive career theory, women in sport

Women's participation in sport has been gradually increasing since the enactment of Title IX in 1972. The number of female college athletes has increased exponentially, from 16,000 in 1968 before the passage of Title IX to approximately 220,000 in 2018 (NCAA.org, 2018). Recent data indicates a balanced gender profile of college athletes, as there were 278,614 male college athletes and 216,378 female college athletes participating in sports across all the divisions in 2018 (NCAA.org, 2018). Division I showed the highest rate of female college athlete participation in sports, at 46.7 percent of the athlete population of the division (NCAA.org, 2018).

While the number of women working in intercollegiate athletics has also steadily increased since Title IX, the percentage of women working in leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics has significantly decreased over the years (Lapchick, 2020). For example, women comprised less than 25 percent of athletic directors in all divisions of the NCAA, and, at the Division I level, only 14.3 percent of athletic directors were women in 2020 (Lapchick, 2020). The proportion of female head coaches in collegiate sports also mirrors the significant decrease in women in leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics. In 1972, over 90 percent of the head coaches of women's athletic teams were women, but the percentage has fallen since then, and approximately 41 percent of women's athletic teams had female head coaches in 2020 (Lapchick, 2020).

Women have been underrepresented in other sports sectors in the U.S. as well. For example, in the NBA, women were composed of 33 percent of team management positions, 26.6 percent of team VPs, and 39 percent of professional administrators in 2020 (Lapchick, 2020). In the MLB, women consisted of 20 percent of team VPs and 25.3 percent of professional administrators in 2020 (Lapchick, 2020). Moreover, women are underrepresented in the sports media realm, comprising 36.3 percent of upper management positions and 16.7 percent of the sports editors (Lapchick, 2021).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics has drawn substantive scholarly attention from sport management scholars (Burton, 2015; Burton et al., 2011; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). As such, the sport management literature highlights a variety of personal and organizational barriers that women perceive and experience while working within intercollegiate athletics (Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Hindman & Walker, 2020). For example, one of the prominent factors hindering women from obtaining leadership positions are gender role stereotypes (Burton et al., 2009; Burton et al., 2011; Grappendorf et al., 2008). Women's traditional gender roles, which are traditionally shaped and deeply ingrained in society and sport organizations, are not congruent with the characteristics desired for leadership positions (Burton et al., 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002). For example, the desired characteristics of an athletic director in intercollegiate athletics are not associated with the feminine traits, such as gentle, caring, and empathetic (Burton et al., 2009; Burton et al., 2011). Due to gender role expectations, work-family conflict has also been a distinctive challenge for women working in intercollegiate athletics (Dabbs et al., 2016). In a similar sense, hegemonic masculinity has been identified as a significant barrier to women's successful career development and promotion in sport organizations (Burton, 2015; Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Taylor & Wells, 2017; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Hegemonic masculinity is normalized within sport organizations; thus, feminine traits are often considered inferior to masculinity at an institutional level, which contributes to the underrepresentation of

women in leadership positions in intercollegiate athletics (Burton, 2015; Taylor & Wells, 2017; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013).

Homologous reproduction is another source of barriers for women within intercollegiate athletics seeking to advance to leadership positions; this refers to a tendency for personnel in decision-making positions to hire candidates with similar characteristics to them, who are more likely to be male (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018; Taylor & Wells, 2017; Whisenant et al., 2002). A phenomenon of homologous reproduction is often derived from the abovementioned gender role stereotypes that communal traits of women are marginalized and not best suited for leadership roles (Burton, 2015).

A further significant barrier is a lack of female mentors or role models (Bower et al., 2015; Bower et al., 2019; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Taylor & Hardin, 2016; Taylor et al., 2018). Mentoring relationships could play a significant supporting role in successful career progression when available to women; however, this is a vicious circle, with various barriers in place for women aspiring to advance to leadership positions while, at the same time, there is already a limited number of female mentors in leadership positions.

While the existing barriers to women's career development within intercollegiate athletics have been well-documented, previous studies have primarily examined female employees' experiences in various positions (e.g., senior woman administrator, assistant or associate athletic director, conference commissioner). However, there is limited knowledge of how women who aspire to work in sport organizations perceive these identified barriers and challenges that current employees have described. In this regard, exploring female college athletes' experiences and perceptions regarding career barriers would offer invaluable insights for better understanding areas for improvement that could assist their most effective career development during their college years as prospective employees in the sport industry.

While little research has shed light on female sport management students' perceptions of sports careers (Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Sauder et al., 2018), female college athletes' unique experiences in managing the tasks of both academics and athletics would offer new insights into women's careers in sport. Because of abundant opportunities to engage in athletic activities within a team or athletic department, it is essential to capture and unpack female college athletes' experiences relating to both athletics and academics in examining perceived barriers to careers in sport.

The current study therefore aimed to explore female college athletes' perceived barriers to careers in sport and their relevant experiences within the contexts of both athletics and academics based on social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Considering the existing and identified barriers for women who currently work in sport organizations (Bower et al., 2015; Hancock & Hums, 2016; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Wells, 2017), obtaining insights from female college athletes is essential for theoretically bridging the existing research gap and practically assisting their successful career development as they desire to proceed into the sports field.

Social Cognitive Career Theory

SCCT is one of the most widely used career-related theories for examining an individual's career trajectory and the various factors influencing career development (Lent et al., 1994). SCCT stresses both personal and environmental variables and explains how those variables interact with each other and with career interests, goals, and actions. Personal factors

include predispositions, gender, education, race, and career interests, while environmental factors include perceived barriers within a specific context (Lent et al., 1994). Personal and environmental factors help shape an individual's career interests and prompt the individual to develop specific career goals and ultimately engage in learning experiences (actions) related to his or her career interests.

In SCCT, environmental factors are important because choices related to career goals and actions may vary between individuals, since some people are more influenced by environmental factors than by career interests (Lent et al., 1994). Career interests may not serve as the sole factor that influences an individual to establish a career goal, develop a career-related plan, or make choices pertinent to a given career path. In other words, environmental factors may play a mediating role in the relationship between career interests and career choice. SCCT conceptualizes environmental factors—especially career barriers—as a medium that shapes an individual's career interests and perceived opportunity structure within a career plan (Brown & Lent, 1996; Lent et al., 1994). In other words, even though an individual may be greatly interested in a certain career path, he or she may be reluctant to make career-related decisions when perceiving a high level of career barriers (Brown & Lent, 1996). Perceived career barriers are likely to hinder the transformation of career interests into career-related plans and those plans into actions, which are the main focus of the current study. When discussing this, Brown and Lent (1996) stated, “Even persons with well-developed and differentiated interests in a particular career path will be unlikely to pursue that path if they perceived substantial barriers to entering or advancing in that career” (pp. 355–356).

In relation to the concept of perceived career barriers, Lent et al. (2000) presented the concept of coping efficacy as another critical component of SCCT. Coping efficacy is defined as the readiness to negotiate with perceived barriers and the willingness to overcome them (Lent et al., 2000). When an individual with a strong sense of coping self-efficacy confronts difficult contextual situations, he or she tends to overcome barriers and achieve career goals. The concept of coping efficacy is grounded in the idea that active behavior enables one to overcome or address certain conditions or barriers in SCCT. It is a crucial factor affecting one's successful career development in the field because, even though an individual may perceive barriers to achieving certain career goals, with a high degree of coping efficacy, he or she is more likely to overcome those barriers and successfully achieve career goals (Lent et al., 2000).

In the sport management literature, previous studies utilized SCCT to examine career development of sport management students, college athletes, and coaches in intercollegiate athletics. For example, Cunningham et al. (2005) examined that how college students in the sport and leisure major perceived the supporting and hindering factors regarding their career interests and goals. Other studies focused primarily on the aspect of coaching profession, such as male and female athletes' expected barriers to entering the coaching profession (Cunningham & Singer, 2010; Moran-Miller & Flores, 2011) and female assistant coaches' intentions to become a head coach and the existing challenges (Cunningham, Sagas et al., 2003; Cunningham, Doherty et al., 2007). These studies successfully adopted SCCT to understand various aspects of career development in the context of college sport. However, there has been limited use of the concept of coping efficacy in the sport management realm, despite its significance and relevance to career barriers in sport. For the current study, applying both the concepts of perceived barriers and coping efficacy provided a salient theoretical framework for exploring how female college athletes perceive barriers to future careers in sport and how to negotiate those barriers.

Female Students in Sport Management

Previous research on female sport management students' experiences within the major uncovered a "chilly climate" as a main theme (Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Sauder et al., 2018). Initially proposed by Hall and Sandler (1982), the concept of a chilly climate refers to women's experiences in education being different from their male counterparts in mostly negative and discriminatory ways. For example, male students receive more support from professors, are called on more often, and tend to be given more complicated tasks or questions than female students, who receive questions in a more straightforward manner (Hall & Sandler, 1982). A chilly climate may occur in the interactions between male and female students as well. One good example is that, when collaborating on a group project, male students are less willing to give female students equal opportunities to work on the project because of the perception that women are less competent (Sandler, 2005).

Within the sport management literature, Harris et al. (2014) echoed this phenomenon in the study of female sport management students. Harris et al. (2014) affirmed that a chilly climate is more prominent in certain majors in which men outnumber women, such as sport management. More importantly, a chilly climate could negatively affect female students' career development or the continuance in a certain major because of low self-confidence, discouragement, or a lack of credibility (Harris et al., 2014; Sandler, 2005; Sauder et al., 2018). In a recent study, Morris et al. (2019) found that the chilly climate was still prevalent in sport management, and female students were aware of their underrepresented status within sport management programs and the workplace. However, they showed a willingness to overcome gender-specific barriers using several strategies, such as engaging in more networking, going above and beyond in tasks, and interacting more with peers and faculty (Morris et al., 2019).

In addition to a chilly climate, which focuses on discriminatory experiences occurring within the major, previous research has examined female sport management students' perceptions of potential career opportunities and barriers (Forsyth et al., 2019; Hancock et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2015; Sauder et al., 2018; Taylor, Johnson et al., 2018). These studies consistently found that female undergraduate and graduate students within the sport management major acknowledged various sources of career barriers to sports careers. Hancock et al. (2018) contends that female students are aware of the existing barriers women confront in sport organizations, such as homologous reproduction, hegemonic masculinity, and gender role stereotypes, and that their awareness contributes to self-limiting behavior, such that they are less interested in advancement to leadership positions. Similarly, according to Forsyth et al. (2019), female students anticipate gender-related discriminations when working in the sport industry in the future and perceive that being a woman is a critical barrier to be successful in the male-dominated field of sport. The lack of female role models or mentors has also been identified as a critical career-limiting factor for female students pursuing and continuing their careers in sport (Forsyth et al., 2019). In addition to gender-specific barriers for women, female students also acknowledge sport industry-specific barriers when working in sport organizations, such as low salary, frequent travel, and extensive work time (Harris et al., 2015). Despite all the above-mentioned barriers, female students express hope and excitement about the possibility of starting their careers in the sport industry (Harris et al., 2015). They are willing to overcome the identified barriers and still aspire to work in the sport industry because they perceive such careers as unique and dynamic compared to others (Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019; Sauder et al., 2018).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The barriers and challenges women confront and experience in the sport industry have been well-documented and various types of barriers, stereotypes, and discrimination have been identified that women must face to be successful in current positions or to advance (Smith et al., 2019; Taylor & Hardin, 2016). However, there is still minimal scholarly effort expended to understanding how women who pursue future careers in sport perceive the existing barriers or challenges as well as how they cope with the barriers. The purpose of this study was to explore female college athletes' perceived barriers to careers in sport and how they cope with the barriers using SCCT as a theoretical lens.

The findings of this study could contribute to bridging the research gap in the sport management literature by illuminating female college athletes' experiences in both athletics and academics, which extends the primary focus from women already working in professional sports fields to women who are pursuing future careers in sport organizations. In addition, insights gained in this study could be useful for female college athletes pursuing future careers in the sport industry or other male-dominated domains. Practitioners may therefore utilize the information in advising, mentoring, and supporting female college athletes' successful and effective career development. Based on the purpose of the study and SCCT, the following research questions were developed to understand female college athletes' perceptions and experiences regarding barriers to sports careers:

RQ 1: How do female college athletes experience challenges in athletic and educational settings?

RQ 2: How do female college athletes perceive barriers to future careers in sport?

RQ 3: How do female college athletes negotiate these perceived barriers and challenges?

Method

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative approach was used to explore female college athletes' experiences and perceptions regarding career barriers in the sport industry. A qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate as this study sought common themes in unexplored areas—in this case, female college athletes' perceived barriers toward careers in sport (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Furthermore, a qualitative research design enabled not only identification of internal and external barriers related to career development within the sports field, but also development of a deep understanding of how those factors influence each other and the athletes' own career interests and goals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The nature of qualitative research enabled the researchers to explore the complex dynamics of barriers associated with female college athletes' specific career interests and goals within the sport industry—a male-dominated field.

Regarding the philosophical basis of the qualitative research design, epistemological beliefs rooted in social constructivism were adopted as an interpretive framework. Social constructivism served as the primary philosophical assumption due to the nature of the study, which focused on female college athletes' subjective perceptions, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors regarding barriers to future careers in sport rather than the facts or reality of their

career development (Creswell, 2013). In addition, social constructivism served as a primary interpretive framework as knowledge was developed based on contextual factors (Patton, 2002), subjective meanings of contexts, and lived experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Participants and Sampling Rationale

The target population for the current research consisted of female college athletes (a) who were participating in non-revenue generating sports at a Division I institution and (b) majoring in sport management. Previous research consistently discovered that college athletes in revenue generating and non-revenue generating sports showed differences in core career-related behaviors, such as athletic identity, expectation to play professional sports, and career maturity (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Tyrance et al., 2013). Specifically, college athletes in revenue generating sports typically experience the lack of preparation for non-professional athletic careers or diminished engagement in academics due to exclusive commitment to athletics (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010). Given the specific research purpose aimed at facilitating a comprehensive understanding of female college athletes' experiences in both athletics and academics relating to their career barriers, focusing on female college athletes in non-revenue generating sports was deemed most appropriate to achieve the research goal. Furthermore, the researchers elected to explore female college athletes who were majoring in sport management. As briefly reviewed above, the existing literature focused primarily on female sport management students' experience as a marginalized population in educational settings and their perceptions of future careers in sport (Forsyth et al., 2019; Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019). Having a firm understanding of female college athletes majoring in sport management by capturing their experiences within both athletics and academics simultaneously would offer unique insight into the multidimensional aspect of their career development separating from the general college student body.

The participants of this study included nine female college athletes who were full-time enrolled in a mid-western university at the time of data collection. The participants consisted of two freshmen, two sophomores, two juniors, and three seniors. They participated in swimming, water polo, rowing, field hockey, golf, and tennis. The number of participants included in the final sample was primarily determined by the saturation point of the data at which no more new information emerged (Merriam, 2009). The researchers judged when to stop collecting data after seeing common themes and recurring patterns from the participants. Thus, themes emerged and saturated in this study naturally unpacked various perspectives about their perceived barriers in relation to career aspirations in the sport industry. Background information of the participants is available in Table 1.

Data Collection Procedures

Both purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit female college athletes who met the aforementioned criteria. First, after approval from the Institutional Review Board, the email addresses of 10 female college athletes were obtained from a senior assistant athletic director of media and a senior director of marketing in the athletic department at a NCAA Division institution. An official research invitation form was then sent to potential participants via email. Initially, six female college athletes agreed to participate in the study and signed a consent form that indicated they fully understood the information provided, including

the study purpose, potential risks and benefits, procedures of the study, and its voluntary nature. After the completion of the interviews, each participant was asked to suggest peer female college athletes as potential study participants. Upon agreement, the potential female college athletes' email addresses were obtained, and the same contact process as described above was conducted.

In-depth and semi-structured face-to-face interviews served as the primary means of data collection for this research, and each interview lasted for approximately 35 minutes with the shortest of 27 minutes and the longest of 42 minutes. Face-to-face interviews were used as they are the most effective qualitative interview technique and because they allowed the capture of not only verbal meanings, but also non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and tones. Interviews were conducted at the participants' convenience in terms of both time and place, as participants should be comfortable as they share their personal experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2013). Prior to conducting the interviews, the participants were reminded of the general purpose of the study and the expected length of the interviews. The researcher also built rapport with participants by engaging in small talk to make the interview process smoother and more natural, as this was expected to enable more meaningful responses to be drawn out and more detailed information obtained (Glesne, 2011).

After the interviews, the participants were provided with the researcher's contact information so that they could contact him if they had any concerns or questions. They were also informed that they may be contacted again for clarification of data or to collect additional information via follow-up questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and stored in the researcher's encrypted personal electronic device to ensure privacy of the information.

Table 1
Background Information of Participants

Participant (Pseudonym)	Year in School	Sport	Career Aspiration
Brooke	Junior	Swimming	Marketer / Accountant
Katie	Sophomore	Water Polo	Marketer
Victoria	Senior	Swimming	Agent
Alice	Senior	Rowing	Marketer
Heidi	Senior	Tennis	HR Manager
Emma	Junior	Field Hockey	Marketer
Lucy	Freshman	Golf	Marketer
Daisy	Freshman	Golf	(Partnership) Marketer
Amber	Sophomore	Rowing	Marketer / Designer

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol aimed to reflect the purpose of the study and the research questions. The interview questions were rather broad and open-ended to give the participants more opportunities to expand upon their experiences and stories related to their career development and barriers. The questions were modified after review by a panel of experts consisting of three sport management professors and an educational psychology professor (Patton, 2002). The interview questions covered three main areas of interest: background information, perceived barriers to careers in sport, and attitudes toward those barriers. The interview questions were developed theoretically based on SCCT. Questions regarding background information included participants' educational background, major, sport, year in school, sport-related experiences, and career interests and goals. A set of open-ended prompts asked participants about their perceptions of barriers to those aspiring to work in sport after graduation, including "Tell me all the barriers to your career development as someone aspiring to work in the sport industry," "Discuss how these perceived barriers have influenced or will influence you in achieving your career goals," and "What are some of the barriers you have not experienced or thought of before, but believe would be a barrier to achieving your career goals?" The last set of questions regarding participants' coping efficacy included "Describe any of your experience that you have tried to overcome those perceived barriers," and "If any, tell me what strategies you have used to overcome those perceived barriers. If not, what strategy would you use to successfully negotiate the perceived barriers in the future?"

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The audio-recorded data collected from the participants was transcribed verbatim and initially systematically organized according to each research question. Analytical field notes and memos were also utilized to complete the coding process more accurately. Constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to inductively discern common patterns from the data and generate theoretical understandings of the female college athletes' career barriers (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Current themes were compared during the data analysis phase to draw overarching themes from the data, rather than settling on a theme first identified during the data analysis procedure. The use of inductive coding strategies allowed identification of new themes to understand new phenomena related to the female college athletes' career barriers; these strategies also enabled the discovery of patterns that fit into the SCCT framework. Specifically, three steps were adopted for coding: open, axial, and selective (Saldaña, 2016). Open coding allowed the identification of major themes from the data and the creation of main categories, which included two broader themes of perceived barriers and coping mechanism. Sub-categories were then sought based on the main categories using axial coding, and the unfolded stories were finally organized under specific categories during the selective coding phase (Saldaña, 2016).

The researchers ensured the trustworthiness of the current research by adopting four categories suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The researchers utilized peer debriefing and member checks to enhance the credibility and dependability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Peer debriefing was performed with two sport management scholars who had expertise in qualitative research and gender in sport respectively, and for member checking, follow-up emails were sent to each participant, which verified there was congruence between the researcher's analysis and the participants' intended meanings. Thick description was also used to

increase transferability of the study as the researchers recorded detailed description of the voices heard throughout the interviews and theme-related quotes from the transcripts (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, to increase confirmability of the research and minimize the potential bias, the researchers used peer debriefing from two scholars who had expertise in qualitative research and college athletes' psychological behaviors throughout the data analysis phase.

Results

A qualitative analysis of the interviews with nine female college athletes unfolded several notable themes including (a) *exclusive mentorships within the athletic department*, (b) *gendered experiences in educational settings*, (c) *stereotypes toward women working in sport*, and (d) *strong willingness to negotiate the barriers* (See Table 2 for overview).

Table 2
Thematic Findings and Research Questions

Theme	Research Question
Barrier #1 Exclusive mentorships within the athletic department	RQ1: How do female college athletes experience challenges in athletic and educational settings?
Barrier #2 Gendered experiences in educational settings	
Barrier #3 Stereotypes toward women working in sport	RQ2: How do female college athletes perceive barriers to future careers in sport?
Coping Mechanism #1 (Behavioral) Strong work ethic Proving own abilities at work	RQ3: How do female college athletes negotiate these perceived barriers and challenges?
Coping Mechanism #2 (Psychological) Being confident Self-motivated	

Exclusive Mentorships within the Athletic Department

The first research question was to explore female college athletes' experience in either athletics or educational settings. Throughout the interviews, most of the female college athletes talked about their close mentoring relationships within the athletic teams or the athletic department with staffs, coaches, athletic advisors, and academic advisors. However, there was a lack of mentoring relationship with faculty in the major, who could provide proper supports or resources relating to future careers in sport. They indicated that these mentorships helped on

various aspects of college life. For example, Victoria talked about her mentoring relationship with the main team coach and how it helped not only on athletics but also her life aspect:

My main coach is like my go-to person when something you see either it is going super well or something is not going well or if I am super stressed about school, he sits me down and said I will be fine. For sure, we are talking about school too, not only about swimming.

Similarly, Brooke briefly spoke of organic mentorship with the coach, "I would say my assistant coach is my mentor, and he usually helps me if I have any problems with school or whatever or scheduling. It is more casual and informal." Katie also stated, "My assistant coaches always make sure we stay on the top of our academics and they always helped us out on other sport things too."

While the female college athletes' mentoring relationships primarily occurred within the athletic department, Alice reflected on her relationship with professors and its difficulty to build a salient mentoring relationship with faculty or someone in academia:

It has been pretty cool that all my professors have been very understanding of my schedule. They all have been awesome for sure. But I would say no one professor is my mentor. There is no one professor assigned to me. Maybe, having an assigned professor could be cool. That is not something that we had now like I have a connection with sport person or I have a lot of mentors athletically that can help me, but I do not really have a single person that I can go to academically, so probably having that could be good. I know it is impossible to give a professor to every student. For sure I can take more initiative on and I would think that would be really beneficial for me.

While it is beneficial to have mentors in the athletic settings helping on athletics and academics, having a strong mentoring relationship with faculty who could help on future career preparation is also desired, especially for female college athletes who aspire to work in the field (sport industry) aligning with their major.

Gendered Experiences in Educational Settings

The second theme relating to the first research question was female college athletes' gendered experiences in the classroom. Several participants (n = 6) shared their gendered experiences and perceptions as a minority in the sport management major, particularly about the interactions with male classmates on a group project and the stereotype that women are less knowledgeable in sport. For example, Heidi shared her thoughts on being a female in the sport management major and the stereotype and stated,

In my classes, women are by far the minority which can make being in class intimidating at times. Even though I have not experienced this in a career setting yet, I would not be surprised if I did. While I think the culture is getting better, women are still seen as less knowledgeable about sports and are thus not taken as seriously.

Emma echoed on her experience of group work in the class by stating, “I have experienced many times in some group projects at school where the men in the group dominate because they assume that I will not know what I am talking about or that I will not have anything to contribute.” Quite similarly, Alice also touched on the male-dominance in group projects and its relevance to the stereotype by stating, “I experienced men know better than women in terms of sports, so women are not supposed to be knowledgeable, so men tend to lead a group in the group project.” Finally, Lucy shared her struggle in the group project as well, “In one of my sport classes last semester, there were all the guys, just me and five other guys. And I have so many good ideas, but they did not take any of them.”

Overall, the participants in the present study extensively spoke about their marginalized experiences in the academic setting that being mistreated and ignored by male classmates because of the perception that women are not knowledgeable when it comes to sports.

Stereotypes toward Women Working in Sport

The second research question was to ask how female college athletes perceived barriers to future careers in sport. Most of the female college athletes ($n = 7$) in this study revealed their perceptions of barriers to careers in the sport industry reflecting various issues including stereotypes that women are not knowledgeable about sports, homologous reproduction, and sport organizations being male-dominant. Katie pointed out that there are still existing barriers for women working in sport because the sport industry is male dominant:

I think that there are definitely some types of stigmas like women and sports, just because it is predominantly male dominant in sport industry. There is just kind of stigma because of that and that has always kind of been that way. I think that is still definitely a prevalent barrier.

Daisy also illustrated that being a woman is a significant barrier and could be a self-limiting factor inhibiting to advance to higher positions by saying, “I think it definitely does make some women feel like they cannot achieve the goals they want to just because they are women in the sport industry.”

On the other hand, Heidi explained that homologous reproduction and gender stereotypes could be reasons that makes women challenging to start working in the sport industry and believed this situation may not get better any time soon. She stated:

I think people see women as less knowledgeable when it comes to sports. I anticipate this being a barrier for entry level especially because teams will most likely hire men instead of me due to the subconscious belief that he would be more knowledgeable than me.

Katie mentioned the existing barriers for women currently working within intercollegiate athletics:

I think obviously women are definitely less dominant when it comes to sport industry, especially in my sport. I do not think it is about your skill or ability. But somehow, I would also feel pressured to prove my skills if I want to get a job.

Aligning with Katie's point on the pressure to prove women's skills, Alice also mentioned, "There is a perception that women are not knowledgeable about sports especially men's sports like football and basketball, so we feel pressured to study more or to prove about our knowledge. But men do not have to prove anything." After all, the female college athletes appeared to strongly believe that a stereotypical barrier still exists for women aspiring or working in the sport industry, which is a male-dominant field.

Strong Willingness to Negotiate the Barriers

The last research question involves the concept of coping efficacy adopted from SCCT. While most of female college athletes acknowledged the various types of barriers for women working in the sport industry, they were willing to overcome the barriers with their own strategies, which can be behavioral or psychological. One of the behavioral coping mechanisms was strong work ethic. Amber stated she would work harder to achieve her career goals, "I would much rather overcome the glass ceiling and pursue my path. The glass ceiling is more and more apparent as you get higher in an organization, but more and more women are breaking it and that motivates me to work twice as hard to pursue my goals." Another behavioral coping mechanism was proving own abilities. In this sense, Brooke showed her willingness to prove her capabilities at work:

I experienced so many barriers in high school when I played for an all-male ice hockey team, and that has provided me with the skills and confidence necessary to prove myself before and after my employer hires me. It will be still difficult because there will be comparisons to male coworkers but hopefully, I will be able to prove myself in the industry.

In terms of psychological coping mechanism, the participants mentioned that they would cope with the barriers by being confident and self-motivated. Alice reflected on the importance of being confident in overcoming the barriers, "I think confidence and determination are key. Proving you know your facts and not standing down when you are not taken seriously will get you where you need to go." Heidi touched on how she would motivate herself to pursue a career into sport industry while attempting to prove herself in the industry:

I think it will still be difficult (for women) because there will be comparisons to male coworkers, however, hopefully I would be able to prove myself in the industry. I was aware of the glass ceiling in this industry when I picked my major, so it has always been something that I have chosen to let motivate me instead of hindering me.

On the other hand, Daisy spoke about the importance of utilizing support from people around to pursue future career, "I kind of use people around me that I have. I like to ask my family or friends or ask people that I intern with to work for the athletics. I have talked with them a lot how they got into their careers, and that has helped a lot." While this was not identified as a recurring theme, it is worth addressing that having a solid networking or receiving social support could be another coping strategy to negotiate the barriers and continue to pursue a career path.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how female college athletes perceive barriers to their future careers in sport and how they cope with the barriers through the lens of SCCT. Results yielded several significant themes to discuss, including exclusive mentorships within the athletic department, gendered experiences in educational settings, stereotypes toward women working in sport, and strong willingness to negotiate the existing barriers. The findings of this study will add to the body of knowledge on women's career development in the sport industry and provide useful information that help female college athletes and their mentors understand the various sources of barriers to their career development.

Lack of Mentors Outside of the Athletic Department

The mentoring relationship is one of the crucial factors in successful career development for women in intercollegiate athletics (Bower et al., 2015). While the benefits of mentoring relationships are well-documented, lack of female mentors in leadership positions is considered as a critical barrier for women's successful career development (Bower et al., 2015; Bower et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2018). In SCCT, mentoring relationship serves as an environmental factor, specifically as perceived support, influencing an individual's choice related to career goals and actions (Lent et al., 2000). Hence, SCCT theorizes a lack of mentoring relationship as a critical career barrier that can hinder successful career preparations or transitions, which is the case in the present study for female college athletes.

While there is limited information regarding female college athletes' mentoring relationship (Carter & Hart, 2010; Park et al., 2017), the female college athletes in this study appeared to have mentoring relationships primarily with personnel within the athletic department, who helped on both athletics and academics. Considering the close relationship between college athletes and personnel in athletic departments, there are potential benefits personnel could provide to student athletes as mentors, which could be an advantage separating female college athletes' population from female students. However, limited mentoring relationships within athletic departments could be harmful as they are not willing to seek additional mentors outside athletic departments where academic advisors, career counselors, or faculty can provide unique functions of mentorship to female college athletes (Harrison et al., 2006; Kelly & Dixon, 2014). As one of the female college athletes indicated, building a mentoring relationship in an organic or casual manner is often more beneficial than the relationship built from a formal mentorship program (Taylor et al., 2018). However, considering various roles and functions of multiple mentoring relationships (e.g., career-related functions, psychosocial functions), it would be essential to develop and provide a formal mentoring program to female college athletes with faculty (Park et al., 2017).

Given that college athletes can realize many benefits from having a mentoring relationship with faculty advisors, this result warrants that more scholars should investigate how mentoring relationships between female college athletes outside the athletic department can support these students, and practitioners should make an effort to mentor them. Thus, it is argued that while a mentoring relationship within an athletic department provides substantial support, particularly psychosocial support, for female college athletes to pursue a career in the sport industry, the potential benefits of having a mentoring relationship with someone outside of

athletics should not be undervalued due to the identified benefits that can, potentially, give female college athletes an edge in terms of their career success.

Marginalized Experiences of Women in Sport Management

One of the important objectives of this study was to explore female college athletes' experiences or challenges in the educational setting as their major aligns with career aspirations into the sport realm. As a result, the female college athletes shared their gendered and marginalized experiences mostly in the group projects that required them to engage in verbal interactions with male peers. This finding aligns with those previous studies on female students' experiences as a minority within sport management (Harris et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2019; Sauder et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2018). Female sport management students were found to experience discrimination in that the male students were reluctant to work and communicate with them or hesitant to give them the leading role during group work (Leberman & Shaw, 2015; Morris et al., 2019). In a male-dominated major such as sport management, the marginalization of women has been normalized and perpetuated because women are often perceived as less credible or knowledgeable (Harris et al., 2014, 2015; Leberman & Shaw, 2015; Morris et al., 2019).

However, female sport management students showed strong resilience to overcome the gender-specific barriers by utilizing several strategies (Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019). Morris et al. (2019) discovered that female sport management students were willing to make extra efforts in class assignments and group projects to prove their ability and stand out. Harris et al. (2014) found that female sport management students attempted to develop their own strategies to overcome the marginalization of women that has been deeply embedded in sport management such as enhancing their knowledge about sport. The findings of this study are consistent in this regard; the female college athletes in this study expressed that they often took the initiative in situations involving group work so as not to be seen as incompetent, and they were also willing to lead the group. The "chilly climate" for female students, however, will continue to prevail in the sport management major if the low proportion of women remains unchanged (Morris et al., 2019). However, it is more important that women are not discouraged or unmotivated by their underrepresented status in the major and gender stereotypes in sports, especially when they are determined to work and succeed in the male-dominated field of sports (Taylor & Wells, 2017; Waltemeyer, 2018).

Gender Stereotypes toward Women Working in Sport

Consistent with the barriers that women confront while working in intercollegiate athletics, the female college athletes appeared to perceive the barriers and expected to confront them when starting their professional careers in the sport industry. As the female college athletes expect the marginalization to occur within the workplace, they feel pressured to prove their ability and knowledge to fight against the gender stereotypes, namely that women are typically less knowledgeable than men with regard to sports and femininity is undervalued (Burton et al., 2009, 2011; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Walker & Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). In agreement with the previous studies, the finding of this study uncovered that female college athletes would feel that they are being evaluated by their peers or supervisors at work in sport organizations. In addition,

female college athletes feel pressured to prove themselves that they are knowledgeable in sport and skillful at work (Grappendorf & Lough, 2006; Hancock et al., 2018).

However, it is interesting to note that the female college athletes in this study showed their strong willingness to cope with the perceived barriers while preparing for their professional careers in the sport industry. This finding shed light on the unique dynamics between perceived barriers and coping efficacy of SCCT as high levels of perceived barriers could limit one's career-related behaviors, but high coping efficacy is more likely to offset them (Lent et al., 2000). Essentially, the finding of this study adds to the theoretical foundation of women's career development in sport and SCCT in the sport management literature.

In addition, they expressed that they would make extra efforts at work, to either prove their competence in their positions or overcome the prominent gender stereotype prevalent within the sport organizations, namely that women are less knowledgeable about sports and are not the best candidates for leadership positions (Burton, 2015). Previous research has highlighted the fact that women working in various positions in intercollegiate athletics tend to work extra hours, assume additional service roles, and put more emphasis on their careers rather than other responsibilities (Hancock & Hums, 2016; Taylor et al., 2019). Realistically, it is true that women working in intercollegiate athletics may still feel pressured to prove themselves at work even though there is no overt requirement to do so because they perceive themselves as a minority. Women also often feel that they are being evaluated by other employees or supervisors, typically males (Kanter, 1977). While the attitudes and work ethic that the female college athletes presented in this study are consistent with those of female employees in other situations, this theme still reflects and demonstrates the invisible nature of gender stereotypes and discrimination within sports entities (Burton et al., 2012; Hartzell & Dixon, 2019; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Smith & Whiteside, 2021; Taylor & Wells, 2017). It also reaffirms that women still feel pressure to conform to social norms and the gender roles embedded within society and sport organizations in particular (Burton et al., 2015; Hindman & Walker, 2020; Shaw & Hoerber, 2003; Walker & Saltore-Baldwin, 2013).

Coping Strategies to Negotiate the Perceived Barriers

SCCT suggests that perceived career barriers are a crucial (potentially negative) factor influencing the overall career development of an individual with a specific career interest, goal, and action (Lent et al., 1994). As the majority of the participants in this study indicated, the barriers they perceived toward a career in sports were external and institutional in nature. However, when these environmental barriers are perceived as a negotiable obstacle, an individual could still be successful in their career development (Lent et al., 2000). While various barriers and challenges prevailed, the participants in this study showed a strong willingness to cope with and overcome them by resolutely pursuing a career in the sport industry. This finding is consistent with the results of previous research focusing on female sport management students' perceptions; they were persistent in pursuing their careers in the sport industry even while acknowledging the barriers that exist for women working in it (Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019). According to Harris et al. (2015), female sport management students recognize that working in the sport industry involves a heavy workload, frequent travel, low income, and marginalization of women. However, they were still excited about the potential opportunities related to working in the sport industry.

However, this finding is not consistent with the studies of women in the coaching profession. Specifically, previous research indicates that low self-efficacy is a crucial factor limiting women's successful career development in coaching as women are less likely to pursue leadership positions than men (Cunningham et al., 2003, 2007; Sagas et al., 2006). Such a self-limiting behavior, as a micro-level factor, typically prevents women from thriving in a male-dominated workspace where structural barriers exist (Taylor & Wells, 2017). Nevertheless, this was not the case for the female college athletes in this study as they showed high persistence in fighting against the identified, especially the structured, barriers within the sport industry. As per SCCT, when an individual has a high self-efficacy with regard to conducting negotiations and overcoming identified barriers, he or she is more likely to be successful in achieving the intended goal. In this regard, some could argue that female college athletes have not experienced the barriers yet and that the situation may change when they are actually exposed to those barriers at work.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study identified several themes regarding female college athletes' perceptions of barriers to careers in sports, including gender stereotypes and discrimination toward women in sport, lack of mentors outside the athletics, and willingness to negotiate these barriers. The findings of this study make a significant contribution to the literature on women in male-dominant fields. First, the results of this study highlight the existing gender-specific barriers to careers in sports from the perspectives of both athletes and students. Past research has already focused on female sport management students' perceptions (Harris et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2019). The findings of the present work extend this line of research to cover the population of female college athletes by capturing how their experiences as athletes can impact their perceptions of their future careers in sports in a potentially negative manner. Secondly, the findings of this study add to the discussion on the career development of women and the barriers they face from the lens of the SCCT. In particular, existing studies in the sport management adopting SCCT focused extensively on the coaching career development or coaching intention (i.e., coaching self-efficacy) in intercollegiate athletics (Cunningham et al., 2003, 2007; Cunningham & Singer, 2010; Moran-Miller & Flores, 2011). Thus, this study provides a salient groundwork as it examines the multi-dimensional and complicated nature of female college athletes' career trajectories using both tenets of perceived career barriers and coping mechanism of SCCT as the conceptual framework.

From a practical standpoint, the information and insights obtained from this study will be helpful for female college athletes and practitioners who work closely with female college athletes to assist and mentor their career development. The findings of this study also shed light on the strong need to provide educational and institutional support to female college athletes who wish to work in the sport industry, to successfully prepare them for a career transition during their college years (Smith & Hardin, 2018). While the female college athletes did indicate that some of the resources provided by the athletics department were useful for their career development (e.g., career fair), they still perceived that the support and resources available at the institutional level were insufficient. Considering the underrepresented status of women in sport management and their potential to work in the sport industry, a highly male-dominant culture, a more practical effort at an institutional level is warranted to enhance female college athletes' overall experience on campus and help them overcome any gender-specific stereotypes and

barriers. For example, developing initiatives such as female clubs in sport management would be helpful (Morris et al., 2019). Through such an internal social program, female college athletes will be able to gain mutual benefits by sharing essential information and helping each other. In particular, female college athletes majoring in sport management could use more networking opportunities to succeed in their career development as the literature indicates that networking is one of the crucial factors contributing to successful career development. However, networking opportunities are currently lacking for women in sports due to the “old boys’ network” (Forsyth et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2019; Sauder et al., 2018).

In addition, sport management programs need to foster mentorship opportunities for female college athletes via their faculties. One of the unique findings of this study was that the female college athletes reported that the organic mentoring relationships that developed within the athletic department were more beneficial than those outside it. While the female college athletes perceived an organic mentoring relationship as being much more beneficial for their career development and psychosocial well-being, developing and providing formal mentorship programs would be necessary and useful for them to start building such beneficial relationships outside the athletic department and their “comfort zone”. Admittedly, the multi-faceted benefits derived from mentoring relationships within the athletic department are one of the unique advantages available to female college athletes compared to typical college students (Carter & Hart, 2010; Park et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the importance of mentoring relationships in academia should not be unrecognized, given their known benefits to students’ career development and overall experience in college (Harrison et al., 2006). Nor should the availability of resources relate to career development opportunities, such as internships (Cunningham et al., 2005).

Recommendations for Future Research

One of the interesting findings of this study was that the female college athletes mainly engaged in mentoring relationships within the athletic department (e.g., athletic academic advisor, assistant coach, teammate) and struggled to find mentors outside the athletics. Since the main focus of this study lied in exploring perceptions of barriers to careers in sport, this study did not specifically delve into their mentoring relationships or what benefits they expected to gain from mentors outside the athletic department. Future research can further examine female college athletes’ mentoring relationship with faculty or academic advisors in the major and look into the functions of the mentoring relationship, either psychosocial or career-related (Park et al., 2017). Such a study could provide further insight into the different characteristics of each mentorship and assist female college athletes in building an effective mentoring relationship that is most suitable for their needs (e.g., psychosocial, career-related).

Future research should consider exploring how female college athletes perceive their transition experience from athlete to non-athlete. Considering that athletic experience can help ease female college athletes’ transition out of college sport, which is often challenging, it would be essential to understand how athletic experience positively affects their coping with the perceived barriers (Smith & Hardin, 2018; Smith & Whiteside, 2021). In addition, a quantitative study investigating former female college athletes’ athletic identity, athletic experience, and adaptation to male-dominant culture in sport organizations could offer beneficial insight into female athletes’ optimal transition preparation for future careers in the sport industry.

The findings of this study contribute to the broader knowledge of women's career development in sport by focusing on female college athletes' perceptions of barriers to future careers in sport. While it was essential to understand perceptions of female college athletes as a prospective employee in the sport industry, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study on these female college athletes' experience after entering the sport industry and examine how their perceptions of barriers differ than before. Such a study could enrich the sport literature on women in sport and deepen the understanding of women's gendered experiences in sport organizations.

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