Wrestling with Femininity:  
Female Wrestlers’ Gender Performances  
and the Meaning of Femininity On and Off the Mat

by

Theresa Vladicka  
B.A., University of Alberta, 2001

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  

MASTERS OF ARTS  

In the Department of Sociology

© Theresa Vladicka, 2006  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy  
or by other means, without the prior permission of the author.
Wrestling with Femininity:
Female Wrestlers’ Gender Performance
and the Meaning of Femininity On and Off the Mat

by

Theresa Vladicka
B.A., University of Alberta, 2001

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Aaron H. Devor, (Department of Sociology)
Supervisor

Dr. William Carroll, (Department of Sociology)
Department Member

Dr. Lara Lauzon, (School of Physical Education)
Outside Member

Dr. Christine St. Peter, (Department of Women’s Studies)
External Examiner
Supervisory Committee

Dr. Aaron H. Devor, (Department of Sociology)
Supervisor

Dr. William Carroll, (Department of Sociology)
Department Member

Dr. Lara Lauzon, (School of Physical Education)
Outside Member

Dr. Christine St. Peter, (Department of Women's Studies)
External Examiner

ABSTRACT

Female wrestlers live in paradoxical worlds on and off the mat. Wrestling is a traditionally masculine activity, demanding specific gender performances, while the social world has different gendered expectations for women. Using grounded theory analysis of qualitative interviews with ten Canadian female wrestlers, this research explores and examines wrestlers' experiences across contexts in order to understand the potential effects of wrestling on wrestlers' gender performances and the social definition of femininity. On the mat, wrestlers' performances incorporate masculine qualities, including assertiveness, competitiveness, confidence, and independence. Off the mat, wrestlers display normatively feminine qualities, including attentiveness to appearance, displays of heterosexuality, sociability, and emotionality. They also retain several of their on-the-mat masculine characteristics, resulting in less traditionally feminine displays in contrast to the hegemonic norm. Wrestlers' performances may affect the social definition of femininity by displaying an alternative performance of femininity, and by expanding the limitations of what is considered feminine.
Table of Contents

Title Page .................................................................................................................. i
Supervisory Committee .......................................................................................... ii
Abstract .................................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ..................................................................................................... iv
List of Figures .......................................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................. viii

Chapter 1
Introduction: Female Wrestlers and Femininity ......................................................... 1

Chapter 2
Literature Review & Theoretical Framework: Putting the Research in Context ..6
  Social Contexts: Stages and Fields of Performance ................................................. 6
  Gender ...................................................................................................................... 15
  Sport ......................................................................................................................... 28

Chapter 3
Research Question: Examining Female Wrestlers ..................................................... 39

Chapter 4
Method & Analysis: Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory ................. 43
  Sampling and Recruitment ....................................................................................... 45
Data Collection........................................................................................................53
Data Analysis........................................................................................................64

Chapter 5

Results and Analysis: Wrestlers’ Performances and Conceptions of Femininity 69

Femininity..............................................................................................................72
  Traditional Femininity: The Girly Girl ...............................................................76
  A Wrestler and a Woman......................................................................................82
  We’re Pretty Too: Wrestlers’ Feminine Appearance ........................................83
  Hear Me Roar!: Confident, Assertive, and Outgoing........................................87
  I’m my own Woman: Being Independent ........................................................92
  Summary: Femininity from a Wrestler’s Perspective .........................................94

On the Mat.............................................................................................................98
  Winning over the Men: Male Wrestlers’ and Coaches’ Responses to
  Female Wrestlers................................................................................................102
  Keep your Women as Women: Institutionalization of Femininity .................107
  Be a Man: On the Mat, Femininity is a Bad Word ........................................113
  In Control: The “Masculine” Side .....................................................................119
  On the Mat, in the Room, and in the Showers: Variability within
  Wrestling Contexts..............................................................................................124

Off the Mat..........................................................................................................131
  Looking Like a Girl..............................................................................................134
  “Get Pissed and Get Laid”: Wrestlers’ Sexuality.............................................140
Acting like a Girl.................................................................149
Head Held High: Always Confident and Strong.........................152
I Like My Body........................................................................156
In Front of a Crowd: Variations in Off-the-Mat Performances for
Different Audiences ..............................................................162
R-E-S-P-E-C-T, Find out What it Means to Me................................167

Chapter 6

Discussion: The Effects of Wrestling on Wrestlers’ Performances and the Social
Definition of Femininity ..........................................................181

More of a Woman.................................................................189
Seeing the Other Side of Femininity ..........................................199
Expanding the Box of Femininity.............................................207
Back to Bourdieu .....................................................................211

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Significance and Contributions of Research...............221

Bibliography..............................................................................228
Appendix A..............................................................................236
Appendix B..............................................................................248
List of Figures

Figure 1: Hegemonic conceptions of Sex, Gender, and Gender Performance.....19

Figure 2: The Spectrum of Femininity.......................................................76
Acknowledgements

There are countless people who offered and provided me with assistance and support during my Master of Arts degree and I would like to thank them all. Firstly, thank you to the wrestlers who participated in this study. Without your involvement and help, my research would not have been possible, and I sincerely appreciate the candour and openness of our conversations. I would also like to thank deeply Dr. Aaron Devor, my supervisor and mentor. Thank you, Aaron, for providing such valuable counsel and encouragement during my course work and the entire thesis process. I am incredibly grateful that you have been a supportive guide and sounding-board for my ideas as I traversed the field of gender. I appreciate how you allowed me to make this project my own, trusting in my judgement and abilities to find the right path. Finally, I’m very thankful that you made me a priority in your busy schedule during the writing of my thesis. I would also like to extend my thanks to my committee members for their support and assistance with my thesis: you have each helped to make this an enjoyable process, rather than a fearful and daunting one. In addition, I would like to thank the other faculty members who helped to expand my knowledge of sociology and to develop my research project. I would especially like to thank Dr. Alan Hedley who taught me the important lesson that "it depends on your research question." In the Department of Sociology office, I would like to thank Carole Rains and Zoe Chan for their friendship and help, especially during the hardest and most stressful moments of my time at the University of Victoria. You have been good friends and my "mothers" in Victoria. Thank you to my family and friends who have always loved and supported me, especially during these past two and a half years when I left home to embark on this journey. Specifically, I want to thank my mother and father, Betty and Alan, for their countless phone calls, words of support and encouragement, and a lifetime of love. Thanks to Kathy, my sister, who has constantly believed in me and has supported my dreams. Also, thanks to Marilyn Roth, my roommate and friend. Marilyn, your friendship made this past year one of the best of my life. Lastly, I want to thank my partner, Brian Gue, who has seen me through the hard times, put up with my bad days, listened to my ideas, and encouraged and loved me. I cannot list all of the people who have helped me with my degree but I know that I am very lucky to have such a rich group of supporters, and I would like to thank each and every person who has helped me in this process - thank you!
Chapter 1

Introduction: Female Wrestlers and Femininity

When compared to the ancient history of men's wrestling, women's wrestling is a relatively new sport. Evidence of men's wrestling dates back over 15,000 years (*Origin of wrestling*, n.d.), whereas women's wrestling began as an organized sport for adolescent girls in the late 1970s, and the first women's world championships were not held until 1986 (*Wrestling database*, n.d.). Wrestling's extensive male history and its combative nature of euphemized violence, which in a patriarchal, phallocentric society is expected to be an exclusively male purview, contribute to the maintenance of a sporting field that is masculine, if not hyper-masculine. Given the traditional male domination and masculine ethos of the sport, women's foray into wrestling appears to foster a situation that is rife with contradictions and is potentially antithetical to traditional femininity.

Other sport researchers have attempted to determine how female athleticism affects athletes' conceptions of femininity and their gender performance. However, there is a paucity of research that evaluates the experiences of female wrestlers. In order to address this gap in the literature, this thesis presents a qualitative, empirical study of female wrestlers that evaluates the ideological meaning of women's wrestling and the effects of wrestling on individual performances and the social definition of femininity. Framed by both Goffman's (1959) and Bourdieu's (1990) theories of social action, using a bimodal, multi-factorial model of gender (Deaux, 1987), and recognizing that gender performances are fluid and situationally specific (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Zvonkovic, Greaves, Schmiege & Hall, 1996), this research develops a grounded theory that
explicates how wrestlers’ gender performances are both contextual, and yet universally influenced by their experiences in wrestling.\(^1\) In addition, by examining wrestlers’ gendered experiences and performances of femininity, the purpose of this research is also to re-examine how women’s participation in sport contributes to the changing meanings of femininity within contemporary society.

There are numerous perspectives on female athletes’ gender performances and the meanings ascribed to their gender displays. On the one hand, theories such as the female and heterosexual apologetics (Felshin, 1974; H. Sykes, personal communication, October 29, 2005), performances that Dworkin and Messner (2000) refer to as reproductive agency, maintain traditional notions of femininity while allowing for athletic “masculine” displays in particular fields of action. Alternatively, other explanations of the effects of female athleticism, such as un-apologetics and conceptions of empowerment or resistive agency (Broad, 2001; Dworkin & Messner, 2000), suggest that the social definition of femininity may be challenged and altered to include qualities previously considered to be masculine. Drawing on these contradictory and sometimes conflicting perspectives, this research re-examine whether sport, specifically wrestling, is an empowering experience for women. Alternatively, or perhaps in conjunction with empowerment and resistance, this work also explores whether and in what ways female athleticism re-entrenches general hegemonic definitions of femininity while allowing for limited and contextually specific, roles, traits, and gender performances that are less or even unfeminine.

\(^1\) For the duration of this paper, the terms wrestling and wrestlers will refer to women and women’s wrestling unless otherwise stated. This terminology turns on its head the traditional assumption that men and men’s sports are the neutral category from which women and women’s sports must be distinguished.
To address this research problem, I interviewed ten Canadian wrestlers. The interviews were qualitative, unstructured, face-to-face interviews. The participants were recruited based on five selection criteria: (1) the athletes identified as female; (2) they were adults, 18 years of age or older; (3) they had wrestled for at least four years; (4) they wrestled during the 2005-2006 season; (5) and they were not athletes against whom I had competed or with whom I had wrestled. Direct personal appeals at team practices, snowball sampling, and a recruitment email about the study, sent by wrestlers’ coaches, were the three methods used to recruit participants. Each recruited participant was interviewed by the research in depth for one to two hours. During the interview with each wrestler, we discussed and explored seven main topics of interest, including: (1) details of their involvement in wrestling; (2) wrestlers’ perceptions of femininity and their own gender; (3) their performances of femininity both on and off the mat; (4) how the wrestlers perform their gender for a variety of social audiences in various social contexts; (5) stereotypes associated with wrestling; (6) perceived limitations and advantages that other women and wrestlers face within contemporary society; and (7) the perceived effects of wrestling on their own lives and other’s opinions of women.

I transcribed the interviews and coded the transcripts and fieldnotes using grounded theory techniques and the constant comparative method. The aim was to deconstruct the individual interviews and reassemble the data into a cohesive whole that explained how wrestlers performed their gender on and off the mat, demonstrating if and how wrestling had influenced the athletes own ideas and performances of femininity, and indicated the potential effects that these performances might have on the social meaning
of femininity. In my analysis, based on my research question, four main themes emerged: Femininity, On the Mat, Off the Mat, and Effects of Wrestling.

Understanding gender and wrestlers' gender performances is a complex task. In order to discuss logically this challenging problem, the thesis has been organized into seven chapters. In Chapter 2, the main theoretical perspectives on social context, gender, and sport that frame this research are outlined. Chapter 3 is a detailed statement of the research problem, contrasted with two other research studies about female wrestlers. The method and analysis techniques, including sampling and recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, are discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 is an examination and exploration of three of the four main themes of this work: wrestlers' perceptions and definitions of femininity, and wrestlers' gendered performances on and off the mat. In Chapter 6, drawing on the wrestlers' professed ideas about femininity and the theories that frame the research, the final theme, Effects of Wrestling, is investigated. In this chapter, I speculate on the potential effects of wrestling on the wrestlers' own gender performances, others peoples' perceptions of women, and the social definition of femininity. I also re-examine the results of the study using Bourdieu's theory as a framework. My thesis concludes with Chapter 7 in which the limitations of the research are briefly outlined and future research projects to which this work points are indicated.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to help contribute to a larger body of work that attempts to explicate how gender is organized and enforced, and highlights some of the ways in which people are challenging the hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity – a challenge which begs us to notice that biology and a socially constructed, fetishized, model of gender are not destiny. I hope that my work adds to a larger
discussion of how we can create a world in which all people are free to enact their own
gender as they wish, instead of feeling boxed into limited social categories.
Chapter 2

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework: Putting the Research in Context

Three bodies of literature are important for framing this research: broad issues of social setting and context, gender, and sport.

**Social Contexts: Stages and Fields of Performance**

Female wrestlers live in paradoxical worlds (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kaurer, 2004): the world of sports, which, despite female participation, is still a male-dominated domain (Broad, 2001; Cahn, 1994; Kimmel, 1996 as cited in Malcom, 2003; Dworkin & Messner, 2000; Theberge, 1987), and general social life, which, while patriarchal, in comparison, is less masculine than the world of sport, and is based on different gendered expectations for men and women. Within both of these social spheres, wrestlers, like all individuals, are expected to conform to certain social expectations or to play particular roles. We can consider social life to be coordinated actions that are based on normative categories that prescribe acceptable behaviour by which individuals orientate their own performances. While in the sporting arena, wrestlers are expected to adopt and perform sporting characteristics that are typically considered masculine: competitiveness, aggression, and independence (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Wohlers, 1986; Bem, 1974). Off the court, pitch, field, rink, or mat, female athletes are still subject to normative social demands of a more passive and weak femininity. Given the contrast between these worlds and the roles expected of wrestlers, the notion of contextually
specific behaviour becomes apparent between wrestlers' paradoxical worlds, and is pertinent to their lived social realities and gender performances.

Irving Goffman (1959) in his dramaturgical approach theorized that all social interactions are individual or collective performances by actors attempting to project particular definitions of social reality: people perform for an audience in order to stage a display that will be favourable and considered "real." According to Goffman, individuals play specific roles in specific contexts for specific audiences. People have specific and directed self-presentations intended for the purpose of impression management that directs others' responses to them.

Individuals' and teams' presentations of themselves are based on front-stage acts for an audience. These acts are a created, idealized presentation of the actors that are essential for establishing a shared created reality. In other words, because people, for the purposes of impression management, act out a performance that creates an image of themselves that may accentuate their real character or be a fabrication, they are creating and defining reality. Furthermore, front-stage performances for audiences are distinct from the back-stage which are performances for a member's team — their in-group — based more on familiarity, although that is not to say it is any more their "real" self than their front-stage performances. Back-stage performances may be more relaxed than the front-stage, but they are still acts, and, thus, are not necessarily a reflection of an individual's own personal identity and conception of self.

The difference between on and off-stage acts highlight how performances are carried out for particular audiences. In addition to the significance of audiences, Goffman also indicated how performances are specific to a particular setting based on the
props available. Therefore, although Goffman did not discuss it in detail, he suggested that performances change from setting to setting, and from audience to audience: performances are contextually specific.

Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir’s germinal work, *The Second Sex* (1964), Goffman discussed gendered examples of his ontological theory, describing how women’s performances change based on the gender of an audience. By using this example, Goffman suggested that gender, like other personal qualities, is a performance that is articulated to particular audiences within specific social settings. Gender is thus a flexible quality that varies to “fit” situations (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although gender is a performance that is intended for a specific audience for the purposes of impression management, neither Goffman nor de Beauvoir claimed that this results in radical presentations that deviate from an individual’s gender identity: individuals modify their gender performance as the situation demands, but they are still a reflection of their own gendered self-identity. Generally, Goffman’s work emphasizes how gendered performances are a socially constructed and contextually specific doing of gender: gender is done, acted out, performed, and put on.

Unfortunately, within his canonical piece of work, Goffman’s discussion of performance, particularly gender performance, is limited. He appears to imply that individuals can choose from an unlimited number of performances, bound only by available props, in order to achieve a desired impression. Clearly, this does not give adequate recognition to the limitations and constraints explicitly and implicitly imposed by patriarchal social structures and the “dominant gender schema” (Devor, 1989, p. 32). In order to be identified as a particular gender, an individual’s performance and
impression must dovetail with social gendered expectations. Constraints on behaviours and performances are enforced through various mechanisms, most powerfully through a process of internalization that Foucault addresses within his various works on social institutions, specifically those related to gender and sexuality (Foucault, 1978; Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Individuals’ gendered performances must be strictly limited if they are to be successful in displaying their gender.

Similar to Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu also made an argument for contextually situated action. Throughout his expansive body of work, Bourdieu addressed issues of action and power, and formulated a theory of historically and socially grounded embodied action (Shilling, 2004; Webb, Schirato, & Danahar, 2002). Recognizing the relation between agency and structure, Bourdieu postulated a circular dialectic pattern of reinforcement between the two, in which action is constructed within a social structure that limits it, and, in turn, structure is shaped and modified by collective social agency. Hence, Bourdieu is explicitly acknowledging what Goffman and de Beauvoir suggested: performances are limited by social structures.

Bourdieu’s constructivist and relativist sociology is briefly summarized in his generative statement: (habitus*capital) + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101 as cited in Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990, p. 7). Briefly, the habitus is an individual’s disposition, personality, temperament, or their thoughts and beliefs (Krais, 2000; Webb et al., 2002). Using Bourdieu’s running sports metaphor, the habitus can be described as an instinctual “feel for the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Reflecting Bourdieu’s beliefs about structure and agency, the habitus, which is both conscious and unconscious, is shaped through an individual’s reflective thoughts, experiences, social institutions, and
societal beliefs (Bourdieu, 1979 as cited in Mahar et al., 1990). Although the habitus is a personal disposition, it is partially modeled and formed by the social world: the habitus is thus both personal and "the storage of the social within the body" (Krais, 2000, p. 56). Furthermore, although Bourdieu's theory is one of field or context-specific action, the habitus is transposable between contexts, thereby creating some cohesion between fields within a specific society.

Capital for Bourdieu, who dismisses Marxist economic reductionism, refers to various resources and assets that an individual possesses which influence their standing and power within a particular field. Bourdieu discussed numerous types of capital including economic, symbolic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). Expanding on Bourdieu, other theorists have also considered how bodily or physical capital (Shilling, 2004), and gender as capital (Adkins, 2003) are related to power and position within a hierarchy. Habitus and capital taken in conjunction in a specific field—a demarcated space in which practices and struggles for power occur (Bourdieu &

2 Although Bourdieu claimed that the habitus is reflexive and is subject to change through conscious manipulation, he also emphasized how, for the most part, it is actually doxic, or unquestioned or undisputed (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Furthermore, other theorists have challenged Bourdieu's claim of a reflexive habitus. Instead, they have stressed the pre-reflexive qualities of the habitus as an internalization of socially hegemonic discourses, making the argument that discursive ideologies are internalized and naturalized in the habitus (McNay, 1999).
Wacquant, 1992), and discourses, institutions and social categories (Webb et al, 2002)\(^3\) – produce specific practices or behaviours. Thus, a person’s disposition and power in a specific social context determines how they will act, or as Goffman would say, how they perform.

Indicating the relationships between structure and agency, Bourdieu (1984), who adamantly argued that his corporeal sociology was not reductionist or structuralist, outlined the inter-relationship between the elements of his generative statement. While the statement reads as a fixed, linear model of social action, Bourdieu also described the flexibility of the statement and the circular connection between habitus, capital, field, and action. The habitus is shaped by reflective thought and objective structures in the field, yet peoples’ habitus, influenced reflectively by their own actions, also shape the social field through individual and collective actions and struggles for power. Capital is determined in relation to a specific field and establishes a person’s standing within that field; yet, the struggle for capital and power can also change the value of capital as well as the field of action. Thus, Bourdieu’s statement can be read in reverse to indicate that action shapes and defines the component parts, rather than simply claiming that habitus, capital, and field determine social action. The power of Bourdieu’s theory rests on the constant relationship and feedback between the various elements, particularly between structure and agency.

\(^3\) Bourdieu’s work is concerned with power relations in social reality. His work, as described by Wacquant, was an exploration of capital, particularly social capital, and how this form of capital creates hierarchies of dominance that are instrumental in dictating social fields and practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).
Bourdieu explicitly addressed gender issues late in his career when he published his last book, *Masculine Domination* (2001). In this book, Bourdieu attempted to explain how patriarchy is maintained through the naturalization of socially created gender differences that are internalized and embodied in the habitus and incorporated into objective social reality. Bourdieu’s work examined and theorized how male domination is perpetuated through gender socialization, which establishes the habitus, the gendering of fields, and, primarily, symbolic violence. Furthermore, although Bourdieu did not address it in his own theory, others have considered how capital is gendered, or how gender itself is a form of capital, increasing or decreasing one’s social standing and power in a field (Adkins, 2003). Integrating gender as capital into Bourdieu’s generative statement can be used to explain and understand social domination and patriarchy in that gender affects one’s position in a social hierarchy within fields. The gendering of Bourdieu’s generative statement also provides a paradigm for understanding gender performances in specific contexts.

Unfortunately, Bourdieu’s perspective on gender is limiting. Bourdieu discussed gender as a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity and, therefore, re-established this dualism, despite his assertion that his work was specifically an attack on falsely

---

4 Some feminist scholars, such as Canadian Suzanne Laberge, have charged that Bourdieu’s work is essentially gender-blind, asserting that he did not consider gender differences in meaningful ways throughout his discussion on the construction of social space. At best, these scholars argue, gender was treated by Bourdieu as a secondary characteristic rather than a master status that significantly influences the social order (Laberge, 1995). In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu attempted to incorporate gender into his generative statement but this late and incomplete foray into gender is seen by some, including Laberge, as simply tacking gender on to his body of work.
created dualisms or “epistemological couples” (MacAloon, 1988). Within this false
gender dichotomy, masculinity is presented as exemplifying strength, violence, duty and
“sexual or social reproductive capacity” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 59), while femininity, which
is defined negatively in relation to neutral masculinity, is “smiling, friendly, attentive,
submissive, demure, restrained, self-effacing” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 66). Although the
gendered perspective that Bourdieu stated in his work, which was based upon those
cultures he studied, is unsatisfactory, his broader social theory is valuable for examining
how gender performances are contextually specific.

Bourdieuian conceptions of field-specific practice and gendered behaviour, either
as a socialized part of the habitus or as capital, are important concepts when considering
gender performance. Taken in conjunction with Goffman, it is possible to think of
gender as a performance within specific social contexts that are dominated by power.
The performance of gender is based on naturalized and internalized socially defined
conceptions of what constitutes gender, and is directed towards specific audiences in
specific settings. These performances, in turn, shape social structures and reinforce

---

5 Bourdieu’s gendered binary in which women are negatively defined – “defined only by default”
(Bourdieu, 2001, p. 27) – to male neutrality is not necessarily an assertion of his own academic or personal
beliefs regarding gender but may be a reflection of the gendered beliefs of the individuals and societies that
he empirically studied. Bourdieu, who was staunchly against the separation of theory from empirical
research, may simply have adopted the model presented by those whose lives he was studying. Even if this
was the case, his failure to deconstruct this limited notion of gender is problematic, especially given that
this ideology is part of the patriarchal system of dominance that he was scrutinizing. Although his
evaluation of patriarchy and male domination is valuable, his limited presentation of gender categories
restricts the usefulness and applicability of his gender work.
individual's dispositions, naturalizing and fetishizing the socially constructed gender
categories that originally shape a person's performance. As with other performances,
masculinity and femininity are enacted in relation to specific settings and audiences, and,
in part, also reflect an individual's own sense of identity that is both reflexive and pre-
reflexive. What is critical to a gendered analysis of performance is the recognition that
while there are relatively constant elements of these performances, based on ingrained
conceptions of gender that are socially constructed, gender performances are contextually
specific: "the making or doing gender must be finely fitted to a situation and modified or
transformed as the occasion demands" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 135).

The notion that there are naturalized, socially constructed elements of gender
performances does not imply that there are not subversions or resistance to these
prescriptions. Rather, hegemonic notions of gender that form the dominant gender
schema and script are powerful ideologies that shape individual and collective
perceptions about what are appropriate gender performances. There may be
performances that do not fit the dominant model, however, these are the exceptions, and
they are conceptualized and interpreted within this schema. Furthermore, while these
hegemonic notions and performances are apparent in a variety of social contexts, this
does not mean that the performance of gender is static. Instead, gender performances are
fluid and fluctuate between and within different situations and settings.

The issue of social contexts and gender performance is particularly pertinent to
the experience of female wrestlers because they live and act in social worlds that
prescribe and demand different, if not conflicting, gender performances. Hence, it is
necessary that we examine how their performances and perceptions of gender are
contextual, and, furthermore, how their experiences within contradictory contexts influence their performances across and between these settings.

**Gender**

This research is concerned with female wrestlers' perceptions and performances of their gender within specific contextual situations, and how these performances are influenced by their experiences in a "masculine" sport. Furthermore, this research investigates how female wrestlers' gender performances and experiences affect their understanding of gender and contribute to reinforcing and challenging the social hegemonic definitions of femininity. Understanding athletes' individual notions of gender in relation to the social definitions requires a clear framework of the differences between numerous gender-related terms: a distinction between sex, gender, gender identity, and gender performance is paramount to determining how athletes' experiences and gender performances affect the social meaning of femininity. Despite a continued conflation of terms within most of lay culture, especially regarding sex and gender, a rubric exists within academia, specifically within the sociology of gender, to differentiate between these related categories.

Sex and gender are distinct but related concepts and terms. Simply stated, sex is a biologically based distinction between male and female (Nelson & Robinson, 2002), although this limited sex dimorphism blindly discounts intersexed peoples. More accurately, sex is a distinction between male, female, and intersexed persons, based primarily on biological markers or primary sex characteristics such as genitals or chromosomes (Devor, 1989). On the other hand, gender is a historically specific social construction that differentiates between men and women, girls and boys (Connell, 1987;
Lorber, 1994; Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Despite this distinction, a dominant conception of sex and gender is that they are the same; thus, all females are girls or women, and all males are men or boys.

As a social construction, gender distinguishes between men and women based on socially sanctioned roles, behaviours, and performances that are considered gender appropriate. Gender is both ascribed and attributed to people by others, and is assumed or taken on by an individual (Devor, 1989). The assumption of gender is done both on the part of individuals themselves, in which they take on a gender, and by others when they encounter another person. Therefore, sex and gender are different: sex is a distinction based primarily on biology, although there is a social element to sex and sex is defined by social markers, while gender, which in the dominant gender schema is tied to biology, is social, socially constructed, and based on the performance of gendered characteristics. Although there is a meaningful difference between sex and gender, the two terms are often conflated and links between them are falsely created: sex and gender are incorrectly assumed to be congruent despite meaningful differences between the two. Due to this congruence, based on the performance of behaviours and roles considered gender specific, an individual’s sex is often assumed (Devor, 1989; Maccoby, 1987; Thompson, 1993).

Gender refers to an abstract social definition of what constitutes appropriate qualities and behaviours for men and women. Relatedly, gender identity is an individual quality that is a personal embodiment and self-perception of socially abstracted gender. Gender identity is the acceptance of a gender to one’s self; it is a personal definition of one’s own gender that is defined in relation to social conceptions. According to Spence
and Buckner (1987), gender identity is an individual's sense of self as a man or woman, although more recently, abandoning limiting dichotomies, gender and gender identity are conceptualized as a combination of both masculine and feminine qualities (Deaux, 1987). This embodiment or self-attribution of gender, while personal, is based on the social categories of gender. Hence, while gender identity is an individual's own self-identification as a specific gender, it is based on the dominant ideologies of what constitutes each gender category. In order to personally accept or to ascribe a gender identity to others, an individual does not necessarily need to embody or perform all of the qualities of a man or woman (Deaux, 1987); rather, they simply need to have either a number of defining gender traits, or what can be considered overriding and pertinent qualities (Devor, 1989; Kessler & McKenna, 1978).

Attribution of a gender to others is based on an individual's gender performance—the ways in which a specific person acts out or displays their gender. Gender is

---

6 The common confusion about the difference between sex and gender may be perpetuated by the academic terminology applied to these terms in relation to gender identity and performance. The terms used to for biological sex are male and female, while man and woman refer to gender, and masculine and feminine are gender performance terms. Since gender performance is considered to be a reflection of gender and not sex, the relation of the terms masculine and feminine to the sex terms of male and female can become confusing. At the surface level, the etymology and meaning of the specific words used for sex and gender performance appear more related than those for gender and gender performance. Based on the words themselves, if you are a biological male it would appear that you should also be masculine, given the apparent relationship between these terms. The insertion of gender as social differences between men and woman seems less related to gender performance based on the terms, perhaps lending to the confusion over, and conflation between sex, gender, and gender performance. Perhaps it would be more appropriate
attributed based on how a person enacts femininity and masculinity. Given common binary conceptions of gender, people are assumed to be men if they act out primarily masculine qualities, or they are assumed to be women if they enact primarily feminine qualities. Thus, as Goffman (1959) implied, gender is a front-stage performance of a set of characteristics enacted in order to present a particular impression of the "self" and to define social reality.  

An individual’s gender performance can be based on an acceptance of social definitions of gender as well as other qualities that the performer wishes to incorporate into their personal gender performance. Typically, the ideological control of the dominant, hegemonic conception of gender is internalized in a person’s own gender identity, and, due to issues of social acceptability, is likely the foundation for front-stage gender performances. However, people are not merely a homogenous presentation of dominant gender ideologies: individuals may have gender performances and gender identities that deviate from the norm, such as women enacting what are considered to be masculine qualities. Alternative gender performances, those that are not based on hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and femininity, may affect social conceptions of gender. For example, if many women consistently enact what are currently considered to refer to gender performance as manliness/boyulinity and womanliness/girlulinity. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will use the conventional terms for sex, gender, and gender performance.

7 In contrast to the front-stage performance of gender, a back-stage performance may include more elements of an individual's gender identity, due to the familiarity between performers in this setting. However, as noted earlier, the back-stage still includes elements of performance; thus, an individual may not completely display their gender identity, even when they are off the front-stage.
be masculine qualities, these traits and characteristics may eventually shift the definition of what constitutes femininity to include these qualities. Using Bourdieu's model, we could argue that performances may help to reshape objective reality and subjective self-conceptions: performances may change the rules of the game.

There are critical differences between hegemonic social definitions of, and the relationship between, gender and sex, and more nuanced positions, typically advocated by academics. Hegemonic notions of sex, gender, and gender performance are based on dichotomies. There are only two oppositional categories in each classification in this dominant model of sex, gender, and gender performance: male and female, man and woman, feminine and masculine, respectively. Furthermore, the conflation between sex and gender establishes links between these dichotomous categories, such that if we were to conceptualize each as an end point on a singular continuum, the ends would all be equal to one another and, essentially, they would by synonymous.

**Figure 1: Hegemonic Conceptions of Sex, Gender, and Gender Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex:</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>or</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>or</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Performance: Feminine</td>
<td>or</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This perspective on sex, gender, and gender performance sees each dichotomy as mutually exclusive. Thus, what is female is not male; what is woman is not man; and what is feminine is not masculine. These limited conceptualizations also indicate how the dichotomies are linked: they are seen as natural groups in which the terms essentially become synonymous – all females are women who are feminine.
In contrast, a more sophisticated understanding and representation of the differences between sex, gender, and gender performance incorporates a break between the categories and recognizes that each is not a simplistic dichotomy. As previously noted, the dichotomy of sex as simply male and female is shattered by the inclusion of transsexuals and intersexed persons. With gender, the dichotomy of man and woman is broken and replaced with a bi-modal, multi-factorial model of gender and gender identity (Deaux, 1987; Maccoby, 1987). This model of gender proposes that an individual’s gender identity and performances are a blend of both masculine and feminine characteristics. Although there are multiple elements associated with masculinity and femininity, these characteristics are not necessarily correlated. Therefore, in order to be considered a man or woman, an individual does not have to express or embody every masculine or feminine characteristic (Deaux, 1987). Consequently, an individual’s gender identity and performances are a unique combination of elements associated with both genders. In turn, recognizing that any individual can possess and perform characteristics that are considered masculine or feminine, the assumed link between sex and gender is weakened since individuals who identify as any gender and sex can enact a

\[\text{8} \text{ There may be some individuals who believe that transsexuals and intersexed individuals have a problem that needs to be rectified. These people may argue that the presence of these types of sex identities does not challenge the conception that there are only two sexes; instead, they may view transsexualism and intersexuality as anomalies that need to be “solved.” This is one perspective – one with which I disagree. I would assert that the very fact that intersexed and transsexual individuals are “real” – they are biological realities – indicates that the sex dualism of male and female is false. Regardless of one’s perspective, the existence of these sexes, especially intersexed persons since they cannot be dismissed as a psychological “problem,” demonstrates that there are more than two sexes.} \]
single quality; thus, performances of behaviours cannot rest entirely on biology as the dominant gender schema suggests. Although a particular quality may be classified as appropriate for a specific gender — for example, aggression is still classified as masculine quality — individuals who identity as men or women can both perform this characteristic and, therefore, it is not based on whether they are male or female.\(^9\)

As stated, gender refers to abstracted socially constructed categories, while gender performance is, in part, an individual enactment of these social constructions. Referring to an individual’s own gender behaviour as a performance reveals the socially constructed “put on” element of gender. A person’s gender is not something that is innate but rather something that is acted out. Mirroring Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, West and Zimmerman (1987) explicitly proposed that gender is something that is done; gender is a social accomplishment in which people in particular settings routinely perform particular roles and attributes based on their perception of what is socially prescribed. Hence, gender is performed individually, but this enactment is done for

---

\(^9\) Extensive research conducted by various scholars and compiled by Ashmore et al. (1986) categorizes particular qualities and characteristics as either masculine or feminine. Although their research is relatively dated, to my knowledge, no comparative research has been conducted recently. Furthermore, it may be argued that despite certain changes to the role of woman, associated with the feminist movement, the stereotypes of hegemonic gender are still relatively the same today as they were in 1986 and, thus, are reflected in the gendered list that Ashmore et al. produced. Ultimately, a study needs to be conducted that reassesses people’s conceptions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity. In addition, given changing notions of what constitutes gender and the expansion of the continuum, or rather the creation of two continua, a study of gender should include an examination of what people consider gender to be, and how many categories they perceive as operating within everyday social life.
others and is based on social rules: "In one sense, of course, it is individuals who ‘do’
gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who
are presumed to be orientated to its production" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126).
These authors claimed that both the individual performing their gender and the audience
they are performing it for are all orientated towards a certain production of gender based
on normative conceptions that are considered appropriate. While a person “does” their
own gender, most do so within the confines of what is considered socially appropriate for
them, based on their own gender identification and the gender attributed to them by their
audience. Thus, women, who are assumed to be female, act out femininity, and men,
assumed to be males, act out masculinity: the socially abstract constructions become
concrete through the individuals’ performances.

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity extends West and Zimmerman’s claim
that gender is something we do or perform. Butler’s (1999) theory of the heterosexuality
matrix highlights how gender and gender performances are socially created and
fabricated, although society attempts to maintain that these performances are based on
natural distinctions. According to Butler, gender performances are based on social
beliefs of what is appropriate for the genders; gender performances are not based on a
real or “original” model that individuals are emulating but on an ideal that is created.
Gender is performed according to socially prescribed rules of what is appropriate for men
and women, based on sex and linked to sexuality, creating hegemonic, normative
genders. Thus, the doing of gender based on hegemonic categories re-entrenches the
dominant discourses that link sex, gender, sexuality, and gender performance.
Using Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the notion of hegemonic gender in Butler's theory is important for understanding the power of socially constructed gender prescriptions. Gramsci (1971), specifically reflecting on the continued success of capitalism, suggested that the system maintains itself not through coercion but through ideological dominance in which specific beliefs, those that support capitalism, become "common sense" or part of a cultural ethos, what Bourdieu referred to as orthodoxy (1990). Butler has taken up the concept of hegemony and applied it to gender: hegemonic gender is a socially constructed image of the ideal, if not required, man and woman. These ideas of gender are decrees that individuals unquestionably perform in order to be recognized as legitimate members of a gender group. Given continued performances, gendered prescriptions become ideologically dominant, or hegemonic, and individuals "naturally" assume these doctrines as their own gender identity. Thus, as dominant discourses that become taken-for-granted, hegemonic masculinity and femininity are normalized. The performance of gender-specific traits is required in order to be recognized as that gender, and, as a result, individuals enact similar gender performances, thereby creating normalized and normative gender performances.

To relate these ideas of gender specifically to this research, explicating how some normative gender edicts are problematic for women engaged in masculine activities, such as wrestling, demonstrates the power of hegemonic categories. In our society, there is a perception that to engage in activities that are considered masculine will masculinize an individual. The adage "it will make a man out of you" reflects the opinion that masculine activities will produce masculine individuals. Hence, sport, a masculine activity, is considered to be a masculinizing enterprise. For this reason, sport is encouraged in
young boys while it is often discouraged for girls, especially for certain sports considered to be men’s or boy’s sports.

Many of the qualities associated with sport, and especially a combative sport such as wrestling, are contradictory of hegemonic femininity. In the wrestling community “masculine” behaviours, as identified by Ashmore et al. (1986), are encouraged for all athletes, including aggressiveness, competitiveness, confidence, determination, domination, forcefulness, independence, strength, toughness, and lack of emotion (p. 70-71). Clearly, these qualities contradict hegemonic perceptions and prescriptions of normative femininity. In contrast to men, given that gender is commonly conceptualized as oppositional, women are deferent, gentle, helpless, meek, mild, and weak (Ashmore et al., 1986, p. 70-71). Therefore, women’s participation in wrestling results in a situation in which they are subject to contradictory expectations of gendered behaviours. As women, they are expected to perform femininity, but as athletes, they are expected to demonstrate characteristics that are more masculine.

One salient and significant contrast between hegemonic femininity and the masculinity of sport that female athletes must negotiate is the issue of bodily appearance and performance. Despite the post-feminist turn to discourse, gender theorists have strenuously argued that the body matters (for example, see Butler, 1993; Smith, 1987). Feminist perspectives discuss how women’s corporality is subjugated. As a dominated class, the work of women’s bodies is for others: women serve others in the private sphere, and many of women’s positions within the public sphere are in tertiary industries where they also serve others. Furthermore, women’s very bodies are for others: women’s bodies are used by and displayed for others. For example, as models, women’s bodies
are clearly on display for others, and as cheap labour for manufacturing, women's bodies are used by corporations to produce low-priced products. This is not to imply that men's bodies are not used for and by others. However, as a group, women are consistently dominated in their everyday bodily actions, which is not true of the subjugation of men whose domination is significantly influenced by social class and status.

Body for others also means that women limit and control their bodies in ways that are consistent with hegemonic ideals of femininity. For example, hegemonic femininity stipulates that women should be small, should take up little space, and that they should be attractive.\(^{10}\) Small bodies not only mean that women should be slight and, ideally, fine boned, but that they should not be muscular. Clearly, restrictions on musculature contrast with sport, and especially contact sports in which a large, muscular body is an asset. Although wrestling is organized into weight categories, strength is a requirement for each successful competitor. The purpose of wrestling is to control your opponent's body and in order to do so, wrestlers must be muscular; therefore, most high-level wrestlers, both men and women, lift weights. Muscles and other qualities related to corporality reveal how female wrestlers are subject to competing normative demands within gendered paradoxical fields.

In addition to having a feminine-looking body, the display of sexuality is also an important element of a woman's femininity. The female body as body for others means

---

\(^{10}\) What is considered attractive and appropriate for women differs slightly based on ethnicity, race, class, and other subjectivities. Thus, there are many subject position-specific prescriptions about the ideal presentation of femininity. Primarily, the remarks in this paper refer to white, middle-class femininity in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies.
that women are encouraged to put their bodies on display for an audience; within
patriarchal society, women are objectified sexually and, furthermore, they are socialized
to objectify themselves. Sexual objectification for women is primarily for the benefit of
the male gaze: women’s bodies are sexualized and put on display for men. Therefore,
an important element of hegemonic femininity is the display of a heterosexual identity.
Displays of women’s heterosexuality include fashions that sexualize the female figure by
drawing attention to secondary sex characteristics such as the breasts and hips, and
sexual activities such as flirtation with men. By engaging in these types of performances,
women are able to assert and display their gender for a social audience. The display of
women’s bodies and heterosexuality is an important, if not defining, feature of femininity
(Devor, 1989).

11 Women also objectify each other, which also includes sexual objectification. In patriarchal society,
however, which is underpinned by men’s power, women are primarily sexually objectified for and by men.

12 In her song, “When I was a Boy,” crooning about women’s fashion, Dar Williams (1993) proclaims:
“More that’s tight means more to see/ More for them not more for me,” reflecting a sentiment that women’s
clothing is intended for an audience rather than for the women wearing the garment. High heeled shoes are
an excellent example of how women’s fashion is intended for an audience, especially a male audience.
High heeled shoes are not only uncomfortable but they can damage women’s feet (Lee, Jeong & Freivalds,
2001; Linder & Saltzman, 1998). Yet, since they stretch the calf muscle, women’s legs look slimmer and
shapelier in high heeled shoes. High healed shoes are worn, in part, for the advantage of a male audience,
and not the female wearer. Women also wear particular fashions for the benefit of a female audience that
will appreciate the work of the created image. This production is clearly related to normative and
hegemonic demands about what constitutes femininity.
The significance of heterosexuality for defining femininity cannot be overstated: heterosexuality is a fundamental component of hegemonic femininity. Adrienne Rich (1980) outlined how heterosexuality is compulsory for women, with alternative sexualities such as lesbianism being denigrated and considered deviant. More significantly, Rich described how compulsory heterosexuality, rather than being a natural predisposition, is actually a socially constructed institution used to reproduce male domination and patriarchy. Drawing on Rich's conception of compulsory heterosexuality and Monique Wittig's (1992) concept of the heterosexual contract, Judith Butler's (1999) heterosexuality matrix, which outlines the socially constructed relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality, also posits heterosexuality as a cornerstone of femininity and male dominance.

Women who deviate from compulsory heterosexuality, such as butch and lesbian women, are sometimes dismissed as deviants and they can be marginalized. In addition, women, who may or may not be lesbians, can be accused of homosexuality in an attempt to de-legitimate them. Thus, not only is heterosexuality a central component of hegemonic femininity and patriarchy, but the display of this heterosexual identity must be readily apparent in order to easily avoid claims or accusations that would call into question one's sexuality and, therefore, gender. Obviously, given the dominant gender schema, normative hegemonic gender prescriptions require limited and limiting performances of gender and sexuality in order to be considered a bona fide and legitimate woman.
Sport

Sport is an institution that has been, and continues to be, used to bolster and support masculinity and patriarchy (Dworkin & Messner, 2000). Although sport is considered a bastion of masculinity (Cahn, 1994; Lenskyj, 1994), in which men either compete against one another to prove their dominance or reaffirm their masculinity by watching sports with their friends, women are increasingly participating in various athletic pursuits. In different theoretical and empirical assessments of women’s participation in sport, the meaning attached to women’s athleticism is mixed and its effects on gender and patriarchy are considered to varying degrees. As Messner claims (1988), the meaning of female athleticism is still “contested ideological terrain” (p. 197).

The gendered cultural ideal that males are physically superior, which serves as part of the basis for the claim of general male superiority, remains relatively unchallenged within contemporary sporting culture. In the ring or pool, or on the field, pitch, ice, court, or mat, the euphemized violence of sport is used to continually demonstrate men’s strength and superiority. In comparison, females, when they are allowed to compete in sports, are encouraged to participate in less strenuous physical activities such as gymnastics or swimming (Kane, 1995). This system of dichotomized participation creates “men’s” sports and “women’s” sports, in which men’s sports are more highly valued, are considered more physically demanding, and are more prestigious. The idea of the “muscle gap” – men have larger muscles than women, are stronger, and therefore, more suited to play particular sports – is used to reinforce the notion of gender-specific sports and male sporting privilege (Kane, 1995). Although sports in which women traditionally participate are very demanding physical activities,
the physical element of these sports is not as apparent as football or boxing, two “male” sports. Instead, women’s sports are typically seen as more aesthetic and artistic. Furthermore, if women do compete in the same sports as men, the rules are modified so that the idea and image of female inferiority is demonstrated. For instance, early in women’s wrestling, women’s matches lasted four minutes whereas men’s matches were six minutes. Females’ athletic pursuits are minimized in comparison to men’s in order to preserve sport as a male activity and, more importantly, to affirm masculinity and men’s apparent social superiority.

Women’s efforts within sport are minimized in terms of the gendered implications of female athleticism as challenging perceived male superiority and the conception that women are weak. In order to maintain the established gendered social structure, the meaning of the female athlete is sometimes attacked and debased. For this reason, female athletes have been labelled and dismissed as deviants (Cahn, 1994; Felshin, 1974; Kane, 1995). Kane identifies three different forms of deviance used to minimize the ideological meaning and contestation of normative genders presented by female athletes: physical mutant, masquerading male, and lesbian. As a physical mutant, the female athlete is considered to be not a “real” woman. After all, normative gender prescriptions, which individual performances are used to justify and naturalize constructed versions of femininity, stipulate that women are frail, weak, and passive. Therefore, because female athletes do not display these characteristics, they are deviants and, obviously, unfeminine.

The second form of deviance, which follows on the logic of the first, is that female athletes are not really biologically female (Kane, 1995). Based on the dominant gender schema, since it is assumed that women are inferior and weak, women who
demonstrate masculine qualities must be partly male, according to this perspective. Within sport, it is assumed that males might want to masquerade as females in order to compete in what are considered easier female competitions. These assumptions underlie female sex verification testing which, until the 2000 Olympics, was conducted on all female athletes at the Olympic Games (Kane, 1995).¹³ The Barr body test, which replaced other tests based on genital inspection, confirmed athletes’ sex chromosomes and was used to verify an athlete’s sex. “Confirmed” female athletes were required to carry their official gender verification card with them at all times during the Games. This type of testing insinuates that athletes are questionable females because of their very participation in sport, and therefore, a test is required to confirm that they are indeed biologically female, and, therefore, women.

Finally, female athletes are also dismissed as deviants, challenging their ability and status as “real” women, by labelling them as lesbians (Kane, 1995; Lenskyj, 1992). If, as stated previously, a central component of femininity is heterosexuality, to claim that a woman is a lesbian is to de-legitimate her as a woman. Lesbians are considered deviants because they do not conform to compulsory heterosexuality, which is a defining feature of femininity. By labelling athletes as lesbians, their femininity is questioned. It is easy to dismiss the abilities and accomplishments of female athletes because they are

¹³ In 1999, after formal protest by a number of international sport bodies, including the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), the International Olympic Committee, supported by the International Olympic Committee’s Athletes Commission, abolished gender verification testing at the Olympics. (Simpson et al., 2000). This policy was implemented at the next Games – the summer Olympics held in Sydney Australia.
not “normal” and, therefore, they do not represent what it means to be a woman.

Labelling athletes as deviants dismisses the challenge of female athleticism and maintains the standards of hegemonic femininity.

Various sport researchers have brought a feminist perspective to the examination of the ideological meaning of the female athlete, femininity and the effects of sport participation on feminine gender performances. One perspective that has emerged is that sport is a potentially empowering experience for athletes; sport encourages a broader perspective of what constitutes femininity and helps to foster resistance to limiting hegemonic conceptions of appropriate female behaviour (Blinde, Taub & Han, 1994; Krane et al., 2004; Neverson & White, 2002). Within this framework, sport is discussed as a source of empowerment both for individual athletes and at the group or social level.

Blinde, Taub and Han (1993) claimed that sport is empowering at the individual level because it enables women to reclaim their bodies as physically capable, resulting in a self-image of competence and a proactive approach to life. The abilities and qualities fostered within sport promote a new ideal of femininity for these women, allowing them to be more empowered and resistive of the canon of hegemonic femininity. Unlike other research that claims that women may not be able to flourish within the patriarchal and misogynist culture of male sporting organizations (Lenskyj, 1994), these authors have asserted that female athletes can reclaim their bodies and the meaning of their physical participation in athletics. Furthermore, through interviews with athletes, Blinde et al. demonstrated that the feelings of competence, uniqueness, and empowerment that athletes gain through athletics can transfer to non-sporting contexts, demonstrating the
potential athletics has outside of the sporting sphere for women to challenge their subordinate position within society.

Throughout her numerous treatises on female ice hockey players, Nancy Theberge has also examined sport as a potential site of individual empowerment and resistance against traditional gender ideologies and relations. Specifically, Theberge (2003) noted that through sport, athletes learn how to develop skills and their bodies in ways that challenge traditional limitations of femininity. In hockey and other combative sports, women develop muscular and strong bodies, and they learn how to be aggressive and powerful, thus rejecting inhibited hegemonic femininity. Rather than learning to be small, demure, and passive, sport teaches women to use their whole bodies and to have a physical presence.

Although Theberge acknowledges that sport has the potential to empower women, she recognized contradictions within the sporting structure that limit its effectiveness. While sport encourages the development of physical prowess and a re-definition of embodied femininity, this may be limited to sport arenas. Research has revealed that women do not view sport as a means to reaffirm their femininity. Unlike men who use sport as a means to establish and proclaim their masculinity, sport is not an important venue in which women develop their identity (Coakley and White as cited in Theberge, 2003). The qualities developed in sport may not be those that women think of as central to their identity and performances and they may not transfer to other social, non-sport contexts. This again reveals the contradictions and limitations of the paradoxical worlds between which female athletes must negotiate, and the limitations of female empowerment through sport.
While researchers have examined how sport may foster individual empowerment, building on their previous research, Blinde, Taub and Han (1994) determined that sport does not foster group or societal empowerment, despite the rapport developed between like-minded athletes. Through ethnographic interviews with female athletes, these researchers determined that athletes viewed their participation in sport as “enhancing the status of women in society by...improve[ing] societal perceptions of women’s capabilities and physical skills” (p. 55). However, while some athletes were aware of the social issues facing women, few were involved with feminist causes or broader gender issues. Instead, their concerns about gender (in)equality were limited to sporting experiences such as sport funding. Despite the personal empowerment female athletes develop and demonstrate in sport, Blinde et al. questioned the effectiveness of sport to offer counter-resistance to hegemonic femininity and patriarchal gender relations.

The results of Blinde et al.’s studies of the potential of sport to empower women at the personal, group, and societal levels reveals the limitations of sport as resistance to dominant and pervasive perceptions of what constitutes femininity. While sport may empower women in the context of sport and may clearly challenge and contradict certain elements of hegemonic femininity, it may also function to maintain normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Typically, researchers have examined how sport may be empowering to women, since the premise of sport seems to be antithetical to hegemonic femininity. However, as Judith DiLorio (1989) states in her plea for humanist, ethnographic, non-positivist sport research, we need to examine the meaning that athletes attribute to their athletic participation in order to determine if female athleticism is subversive, or whether the meanings they ascribe uphold patriarchal gender
relations and normative demands for femininity. Female athletic participation itself cannot blindly be interpreted as a challenge to hegemonic femininity, especially since institutional mechanisms and the organization of sport often function in ways that attempt to reinforce gender differences and gender inequality (DiLorio, 1989; Lenskyj, 1994).\textsuperscript{14} If sport is indeed a challenge, we need to ascertain which elements of hegemonic femininity athletes are resisting and rejecting, how they are doing so, and in what contexts they are offering this resistance.

Early work that examined women in sport and more recent research on women in non-traditional sports, such as women’s body building, have examined the ways in which women reinforce hegemonic genders by performing normative elements of femininity. For example, female athletes may emphasize their feminine appearance or feminine qualities, such as their nurturing personality in their roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers. Media re-representations of female athletes have also emphasized athletes’ traditional displays of femininity\textsuperscript{15}, for example, by commenting on their appearance and

\textsuperscript{14} In their respective articles, both DiLorio and Lenskyj comment on how sport researchers, through the language they use in their research, reinforce the gender binary and the notion that sport is a masculine, and masculinizing, and, furthermore, that sport is contradictory or antithetical to femininity. Both authors assert that as researchers, we must be more sensitive to the ways in which we express our interpretations. In addition, I think the claim can also be made that we need to assess the ways in which sport is both empowering and a means for entrenching gender differences and inequality. While branches of sociological research, particularly feminist studies, are built upon social justice principles and goals, this does not mean that we can only look for evidence that supports our own perspectives and desires.

\textsuperscript{15} Media images and commentary on athletes are referred to as re-representations because they are the presentation of athletes own representations – performances – to a mass audience. In other words, the
feminine performances (Duncan & Messner, 1998; Knight & Giluliano, 2001; Messner, Duncan & Jensen, 1993). Institutional mechanisms in sport have been used to encourage, if not enforce, traditional images and presentations of femininity. Women’s bodybuilding is a perfect example: the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) adopted rules that limited the amount of musculature considered appropriate for female bodybuilders. In addition, female competitors are now marked on their make-up and hair, which is typically worn long and is bleached blonde, epitomizing traditional notions of a feminine appearance (Lowe, 1998). The significant number of female bodybuilders who have breast implants also seems to indicate competitors’ recognition of what is considered a desirable and, thus, winning image. In contrast to men’s bodybuilding where the largest and most muscular body wins, women bodybuilders must limit their size in line with hegemonic expectations of femininity and perform traditionally feminine characteristics, thereby reproducing this ideology.

One theory developed to explain female athletes’ feminine performances is the female apologetic (Felshin, 1974; Griffin, 1998; Lowe, 1998; Malcom, 2003). The female apologetic suggests that athletes will display and perform normative femininity, if not hyper-femininity, as a means to compensate or apologize for their transgressions against gender norms through their participation in sport. In other words, athletes

media have observed and interpreted athletes’ own dramaturgical performances of self and are presenting their own representation of the athlete to an audience.

Malcom (2003) claimed that the original apologetic was not only an overemphasis of feminine qualities, but also a de-emphasis of the perceived masculine qualities associated with sports participation. She
perform traditional femininity both in and out of the social context of sport in order to reaffirm their own femininity, and, at the same time, re-establish normative gender prescriptions and the dominant gender schema. Examples of the apologetic include wearing feminine-style athletic clothing, such as the outfits worn by many contemporary female tennis players, or emphasizing more feminine qualities, such as their social "natures", and their roles as mothers and caregivers. Through the display of characteristically feminine qualities, female athletes are able to atone and apologize for their "masculine" performances in sport, thereby reaffirming their own femininity to a social audience that considers athletic participation and prowess to be a masculine characteristic. I believe that the apologetic can be summarized with the phrase, "you can be that strong and athletic as long as you look that pretty." Dworkin and Messner (2000) refer to performances such as those enacted in the feminine apologetic as reproductive agency: reproductive agency is performances that reproduce and reaffirm hegemonic femininity.

As previously discussed, heterosexuality is an essential element of hegemonic and normative femininity; therefore, athletes' apologetics might include clear demonstrations that they are not lesbians, which most, if not all, female athletes are automatically assumed to be.¹⁷ As Griffin (1998) and Broad (2001) claim, the fear of being labelled a

---

¹⁷ Certainly, these assumptions vary to some degree based on the sport in which a female athlete participates. For instance, a female athlete who participates in "women's" sport is less likely to be
lesbian, rather than a fear of being regarded as too masculine or unfeminine, is a central
element of athletes’ apologetic performances. The display of heterosexual femininity
may be considered a special element of the female apologetic – the heterosexual
apologetic (H. Sykes, personal communication, October 29, 2005). In fact, given the
assumed link between butch and lesbianism, it may be that athletes are not attempting to
affirm their femininity (fighting the label of butch), but their heterosexuality. If, as the
dominant gender schema asserts, biological females are assumed to be women, and thus
feminine, and if a central component of being feminine and a woman is being
heterosexual, then athletes who demonstrate their heterosexuality can “prove” that they
are not lesbians, and are also not butch – they can prove that they are women and females
through displays of heterosexuality. Alternatively, if female athletes do not assert their
sexuality, their femininity may still be suspect.

In contrast, there may be elements of hegemonic femininity that athletes will not
perform, indicating, as discussed, the potentially empowering aspect of sport.
Contradictory to the female and heterosexual apologetic, refusal of hegemonic feminine
performances can be considered the female un-apologetic in which female athletes

considered a lesbian than a woman who competes in a “man’s” sport, such as wrestling. Given this, it is
important to keep in mind that this perspective, in which athletes’ sexuality is suspect simply because of the
sport in which they participate, is historically specific. Initially, all female athletes were suspected of
deviance, including lesbianism. As women’s participation in sport has become more common, often
limited to gender “appropriate” sports, it is only those athletes who compete and participate in non-
traditional sports that are commonly, if not automatically, questioned. As Adams (2005) has asserted, it is
important to consider the socio-historical context of sport, rather than applying contemporary
interpretations and ideologies.
directly reject aspects of hegemonic femininity (Broad, 2001). Dworkin and Messner (2000) refer to behaviours that do not reflect and even reject normative gender prescriptions as resistive agency. Individual and collective demonstrations of resistive agency and alternative performances of femininity have the potential to shift the normative conception of what constitutes gender appropriate performances.
Chapter 3

Research Question: Examining Female Wrestlers

Despite increased research on women in sport, there is a dearth of research on wrestlers. Most works that address issues of women in sport typically do not include female wrestlers, and if they do, it is a brief reference, or, more likely, it is simply included in a list of combative sports (for example, see Cahn, 1994; Felshin, 1974). I have found only two scholarly studies that directly address women’s wrestling in any depth: *Female Gladiators: Gender, Law, and Contact Sport in American*, and “Wrestling with Gender: A Study of Young Female and Male Wrestlers’ Experiences of Physicality”.

In *Female Gladiators*, Sarah Fields (2005) discusses American legal battles involving women’s struggles to participate in amateur wrestling in various states. While this is an informative piece of work that includes a recorded history of women’s wrestling, unfortunately limited only to the United States, it does not address the gendered experiences of the athletes.\(^{18}\)

Mari-Kristin Sisjord (1997) in “Wrestling with Gender” briefly and superficially talks about girls’ and boys’ experiences as wrestlers in Norway. The purpose of this

---

\(^{18}\) Field’s book is one of the few histories of women’s wrestling that I have found. Given the lack of printed material about the sport, this is not surprising; yet, even websites that are dedicated to the sport do not include historical information. In Canada, it has been very difficult to find any information about the history of women’s wrestling. Thus far, I have had to rely on oral information from authoritative sources including university-level coaches.
research, which focuses on youth in sport, was to study the relationship between social interaction and culture, with respect to gender and class, explored through non-participant observation and qualitative interviews. The author concludes that there are gender differences in wrestlers’ experiences and perceptions, especially in regards to physicality, and that wrestling includes a “hidden gender curriculum” (p. 434).

To my knowledge, Sisjord is the first social science researcher to investigate the gendered experiences of female wrestlers, although this was not the primary intent of her study. In her short article, she draws women’s wrestling into the academic discourse and notes several important aspects of wrestlers’ experiences, including discrimination against women’s wrestling from within the wrestling community. Although Sisjord’s work is groundbreaking in that it examines female wrestlers and her conclusions are interesting, unfortunately, there are a number of important and significant limitations to her work.

Firstly, Sisjord clearly lacks an understanding of the sport and, due to this ignorance, she falsely cites problems that women experience in wrestling. Sisjord’s misunderstanding of wrestling is evident when she imposes a false distinction between men and women by claiming that they compete in different styles of wrestling (p. 434). While this may have been the case in this particular city in Norway where men wrestled in the Greco-Roman style and women wrestled freestyle, this distinction is not true throughout the wrestling community in general. Freestyle and Greco-Roman wrestling are equally common styles for men, with slightly more competitors in freestyle, and women do not compete in Greco-Roman (The rules of wrestling, n.d.). Thus, more men compete in the same style of wrestling as women than men that compete in another style.
Her claim that “being a female wrestler may be experienced as being outside the norm” (p. 434) because women compete in a different style is problematic and representative of her lack of knowledge about the sport.

There are also a number of problematic or unexplored assumptions in Sisjord’s discussion of women’s experiences in the sport, particularly their experience of physicality. Sisjord claims that the male competitors were “more concerned with their muscles and bodily appearance than the girls in the study” (p. 436). She does not explore the women’s concerns with their muscles, given that masculinity is contradictory with femininity, nor does she discuss other bodily appearances that might be important to the female wrestlers. She does note that the wrestlers discussed enjoying physical activity and that they felt that they were able to defend themselves, but she does not discuss how this relates to “wrestling with femininity.” Finally, Sisjord also briefly discusses the relationship between physicality and sexuality, asserting that the wrestlers’ sexuality was considered suspicious. However, she neither explores nor justifies this claim.

Regarding these specific points, and more generally throughout the article, Sisjord does not adequately discuss how bodily experiences and wrestling relate to gender, and she fails to discuss the meanings that athletes ascribe to their own experiences. Ultimately, while Sisjord has exposed wrestling as an interesting and overlooked arena for women’s experiences of gender, the issues raised in her article were not well explored. The limitations to Sisjord’s work highlights the need for further investigation of women’s wrestling in order to understand the experiences and implications of female athletes’ participation in the sport.
It appears that there is a general lack of research on female wrestlers, and the research that has been conducted either lacks a theoretical grounding or is empirically unsubstantiated. This demonstrates a gap in gender and sports research and literature. This gap is surprising given that wrestlers are an ideal example of women athletes living in paradoxical worlds: wrestlers epitomize a group of women who are subject to seemingly contradictory gendered expectations across social contexts. Clearly, female wrestlers are a fitting population to study in order to examine and assess how sport affects athletes' gender performances in different social contexts, and the meaning that athletes ascribe to these experiences.

Drawing on the theories and perspectives pertaining to female athletes' gender performances outlined above — apologetics, un-apologetics, empowerment, resistive and reproductive agency — this thesis is an exploratory qualitative study of female wrestlers' gendered performances and experiences across sport and non-sporting social contexts. The research examines how female wrestlers experience and perform their gender within different social contexts, how their participation in wrestling influences their performances, and how women's wrestling relates to female athleticism as potential resistance to, and reproduction of, entrenched societal notions and definitions of gender and femininity. Specifically, I have attempted to determine whether and how female wrestling serves to challenge and extend the definition of femininity, expanding the continuum, or, alternatively, whether it re-entrenches hegemonic femininity in specific spheres while allowing for a temporary deviation in others.
Chapter 4

Method & Analysis: Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory

In order to explore female wrestlers’ gendered experiences in and outside of sporting contexts and the potential that these experiences have to shift the definition of femininity, I conducted a qualitative study using qualitative, unstructured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews and grounded theory analysis. A qualitative method of inquiry based on interviews was the most appropriate methodology for this type of study. Qualitative methods are appropriate for topics that deal with ill-defined, deeply rooted, complex, and sensitive issues and phenomena, such as gender (Ritchie, 2003). Qualitative methods allow researchers to collect and analyze data describing individuals’ lived experiences, motivations, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and the contexts in which these phenomena occur (Ritchie, 2003). Grounded theory analysis is particularly well suited to this project because it is an exploratory study that critically examines wrestlers’ experiences and the wider social implications of these experiences. Grounded theory is based on inductive analysis rather than the deductive application of theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); hence, it is well suited for exploratory studies.

In contrast to these qualitative methods of inquiry, quantitative methods or scales that assess masculinity and femininity, of which there are several including the Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Strapp, 1974), are not suitable for this work. Firstly, I do not believe that these assessment tools adequately capture the subtleties, nuances, and contextually specific elements of gender. Inevitably, these types of instruments include a finite list of
attributes that may not describe individuals’ various experiences and gender performances. Furthermore, given that one of the purposes of this research was to assess whether the ideological meaning of femininity is shifting, it would be inappropriate to appraise these potential shifts using inflexible, dated instruments. For these reasons, qualitative methods were the most appropriate for this study: qualitative methods yield rich in-depth data that is pertinent to the examination of female wrestlers’ lived experiences.

Although this research project is not explicitly based on feminist methods and it is only partially based on feminist theory, I still feel, as a feminist, that it imperative that I state my own position in relation to my subject area. I wrestled for approximately 12 years, since I was 13 years old. I wrestled with school, community, and university teams, and I was also a member of the Canadian Women’s Junior World Team in 1999. I was a high-performance athlete in Canada: I won numerous local and provincial championships, four age-group national championships, placed 7th at the World Junior Championships in 1999, and, overall, competed and medaled in over 50 tournaments throughout my wrestling career. In addition, I also coached junior high school wrestlers, served as the female athletes’ representative for the Alberta Amateur Wrestling Association (AAWA), was a clinician and office staff member for AAWA, and was a camp counsellor at a premier Western Canadian wrestling camp run by AAWA. In 2004, after the Olympic Trials, I retired from wrestling, although I have continued to train and coach sporadically since.

It is important to note that the Canadian wrestling community is relatively small. Given my involvement in the wrestling community, I still know many of the active
competitors across Canada, particularly throughout Western Canada. My familiarity with
the athletes was important for the research design of this study, both as an asset in terms
of access to participants and familiarity with the sport, but also as an on-going concern
for reflexivity, maintaining objectivity, and minimizing bias during data collection and
analysis. Familiarity with the sport was beneficial for recruiting athletes: since I was
in-group member, athletes were very willing to participate in the research and they spoke
with me candidly, given that they perceived that I understood their experiences and
beliefs. Furthermore, my understanding of the sport helped to ensure that I did not insert
or overlay unjustified and unsubstantiated claims on athletes’ experiences. On the other
hand, my status as a wrestler was somewhat detrimental during the interview process.
My familiarity with the sport sometimes caused participants to believe that we had
similar experiences and that I shared their opinions. This was dealt with by reassuring
participants of the validity of their perspectives and beliefs, but asking them to explain in
detail their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, etcetera, rather than assume my
complete knowledge or empathy.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

In Canada, wrestling is divided into both age categories and school versus non-
school competitions. School competitions are specific to junior high and high school

---

19 The issue of objectivity in research is relative to the epistemological stance of the researcher. Feminists,
such as Reinharz (1992), have drawn attention to how it is impossible to be completely objective in social
science research – this is a general criticism of positivism. Given that objectivity is impossible, it is
important to acknowledge how one’s own subjectivity may affect the research, such as my relationship to
the wrestling community.
athletes and include city-specific and provincial championships, but there are no national championships at these levels. At the university level, there are an increasing number of nation-wide school competitions, annual regional and national championships, as well as international tournaments, such as the International University Sports Federation Championships. Separate from school-based events, there are also numerous age-based competitions, such as various national championships. The age categories are Schoolboy (14 thru 15 years of age internationally),\textsuperscript{20} Cadet (15 thru 16 years of age in Canada, and 16 thru 17 internationally), Juvenile (17 thru 18 years of age), Junior (18 thru 20 years of age), and Senior (20 years old and over). Athletes in younger age categories may compete in older age categories, although, clearly, older athletes cannot compete in younger age categories. In addition, there are open tournaments in which any athlete can compete, although these typically include only junior and senior athletes.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} The term Schoolboy is also used for girls who are 14-15 years old.

\textsuperscript{21} In Canada, there is not a national championship at the Schoolboy division.

\textsuperscript{22} For safety reasons, in order to compete at an older age level, athletes must have a medical note verifying that they are physically capable of competing at these levels of competition. FILA specifies that only athletes who are one year younger than the lowest cut-off for an age category can compete with parental and medical permission; athletes younger than this may not compete in older age categories. Despite the rules, I say that open tournaments typically include only junior and senior athletes because I personally have wrestled up two age-group divisions.
Wrestling is a relatively small sport in Canada.\textsuperscript{23} At the junior and senior high-performance level, athletes wrestle for university or community based programs. Most universities programs have community clubs for older aged athletes associated with them, such that junior and senior aged athletes who are not enrolled in university also train with varsity programs. One example is my former university and club program, the University of Alberta Golden Bears and Pandas and the Bears Wrestling teams.\textsuperscript{24} The University offers a varsity program for registered students, the Pandas and Bears teams, while the

\textsuperscript{23} It is difficult to determine the number of wrestlers in Canada. Provincial associations have membership lists, although these may not include all athletes, or, because membership list are compiled primarily for insurances purposes, they may be over inflated in order to insure athletes who may or may not come to a few practices or tournaments. The national organizing body, the Canadian Amateur Wrestling Association (CAWA), does not have a membership list, to my knowledge. It would also be impossible to determine the number of wrestlers by reviewing publicly available results about wrestling tournaments. Counting the number of competitors at tournaments may not necessarily reveal a more accurate determination of the number of wrestlers since athletes may not compete at tournaments for various reasons. More importantly, tournament results typically only list the top six placed individuals, and they do not include total counts of the number of participants.

\textsuperscript{24} The University of Alberta (U of A) is one of the few schools in Canada that still distinguishes men’s and women’s teams by different names. At the U of A, the men’s teams are referred to as the Golden Bears and the women’s teams are called the Pandas. In the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Pandas mascot, Patches, was updated from a teddy-bear figure to a fiercer version of the animal. Other university programs, such as the University of Victoria (UVic), no longer have different names for their men’s and women’s teams: all UVic varsity athletes are now referred to as the Vikes.
club team, Bears Wrestling, is a community-based program for wrestlers who are not students at the university. The teams seamlessly train together and they share a coaching staff and other resources. Universities programs may also be associated with community clubs for younger athletes. In Calgary, the Junior Dinos is a program for Cadet, Juvenile, and young Junior aged athletes. These types of community programs for younger athletes may use the university training space, and the university coaches may assist with the program. In addition to teams associated with universities, there are a small number of independent community programs. Funding for the various wrestling programs is provided through universities, provincial associations, fundraising, and sponsorships.

For this research project, I interviewed wrestlers from both university and university-affiliated senior and junior club teams in Canada. Given the relatively small number of wrestling programs in the country, as compared to hockey teams, for example, further elaboration and specification of the teams, even by province or region, would make it difficult to protect participants’ confidentiality. Within the limits of this deliberate obscurity, it is still important to note that participation of athletes from across the country was not sought. National representation was not required because the sampling method was a purposive, convenience sample. However, the non-national sample of participants selected from this relatively small population did yield a wide selection of athletes, based on age and level of experience, outlined in detail in chapter 5. More importantly, national representation and demographic variability was not necessary,

\[25\] The University of Alberta is offered as a specific example because participants were expressly not recruited from this team, given my past association with their varsity and club programs.
given that statistical representation is not a critical element of qualitative research (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003); instead, rich data can be garnered from fewer interviews, as compared to the large samples required for quantitative studies.

The sample of participants interviewed is a non-probability, or purposive, convenience sample of ten Canadian wrestlers, a sample size sufficiently large for exploratory qualitative research.\textsuperscript{26} As a purposive sample, athletes were selected on the basis of satisfying the following selection criteria: the athletes identified as female; they were adults, 18 years of age or older; they had wrestled for at least four years; they had wrestled during the 2005-2006 season; and they were not athletes against whom I had competed or with whom I had wrestled on a team. The specification that athletes must have wrestled for at least four years was to guarantee that they had participated in the sport for a reasonably lengthy period of time, ensuring that they would have had many experiences on and off the mat as a wrestler. Only athletes against or with whom I had not wrestled were selected to participate in order to further protect and ensure athletes’ confidentiality, and to minimize my own bias.

Given this selection criteria, it is important to note that this research did not consider the intersectionality of multiple subjectivities. Specifically, the effects of race, ethnicity, and class on wrestlers’ performances were not investigated. Although intersectionality is important, it was not considered in this work due to the small population of Canadian female wrestlers, and the small sample used in this study which

\textsuperscript{26} I opted to use a purposive sample rather than the grounded theory technique of theoretical sampling. Although I use grounded theory to analyze the data, I did not use grounded theory as the sampling method, primarily because theoretical sampling is difficult to achieve for a study of this size and resources.
would inevitably yield insufficient variation in race, ethnicity, and class. Multiple subjectivities were also not considered in order to narrow the scope of this study, given the constraints of time and resources.

The sample was also a convenience sample because the participants were athletes who were relatively easy to contact, recruit, and interview. A convenience sample was used given my budgetary and time constraints as a Master's student; however, given the nature of the research question, regional differences within Canada are not likely. While the experience of gender does vary according to social and historical context, these variations within the Canadian wrestling community are not likely sufficiently significant to warrant recruiting participants from every region, which would have required great expenditures of time and resources. Furthermore, as a qualitative study, my interest is in general experiences rather than a focus on variability according to particular variables such as national region. Therefore, the use of a convenience sample to examine female wrestlers' on and off the mat gender performances and the potential effects of these on conceptions of femininity is sufficient.

Participants for the study were recruited using three interrelated methods.\textsuperscript{27} To recruit participants to the study, I attended team practices to speak directly with athletes, asking them to participate; I used a snowball sample where I used initial participants to recruit additional female wrestlers; and I had team coaches email information about the study to their female athletes. These various methods were employed separately and consecutively in order to recruit ten wrestlers to participate in the research.

\textsuperscript{27} Prior to recruiting participants and starting data collection, ethical approval was sought and granted from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board.
The first method of requirement was a direct, in-person appeal to wrestlers. For those teams to which it was convenient for me to travel, I attended team practices in order to speak with wrestlers about the study and recruit participants. Prior to attending team practices, I sent a letter to coaches informing them of the details of the study and asking if I could meet with their team. Together, the coach and I determined when would be an appropriate time to come to a practice in order to meet with the athletes. At the practices, I spoke with the athletes about the research purposes, objectives, importance, and the selection criteria. For those athletes who were interested in talking to me further about the study, and who met the selection criteria, I obtained their contact information and then called or emailed them shortly after our initial meeting to ask if they would like to participate. I did not ask athletes to participate in the project while I was at their team practice in order to ensure their confidentiality. Therefore, when I was at their team practices, athletes were told that providing their contact information did not mean that they had to participate in the study. By this means, participants’ identities were kept confidential since other athletes and coaches on their teams did not know who participated. Of the ten participants in the study, three wrestlers were recruited using this method. Recruiting athletes through team meetings proved difficult because I was recruiting participants during the summer months, after the completion of the main wrestling season for both university and club-based athletes. Due to the pragmatic difficulty of recruiting participants by attending practices, I used additional methods to recruit more participants.

The second means used to recruit wrestlers to participate in the study was snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, additional participants are recruited through
the network of current participants: initial interviewees are asked to refer additional participants who also met the selection criteria (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003). Based on this sampling method, I asked those wrestlers whom I had recruited at team meetings to call or email their teammates about the study, asking interested wrestlers to contact me. I provided each initial interviewee with copies of my letter of information to give to their teammates, the same letter I had distributed at practice, which included information about the study and my contact information. Two additional participants were recruited using this method.

While snowball sampling is a recognized procedure used with purposive research designs, it can be a problematic method of recruitment. The most significant limitation associated with snowballing is the potential for sampling bias (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003), in which the variability of types of participants is reduced because they are recruited through social networks in which people are likely to share similar characteristics. The issue of bias was not significant in this study because of the small population being studied and the selection criteria that participants were required to satisfy. Furthermore, those wrestlers who were recruited through snowballing were athletes who otherwise would have been contacted either directly at a team practice or through the third method of recruitment, a direct appeal for participants sent by email to all interested wrestlers by their team coach.

Potential participants were also recruited to participate in the study by email. Since my ethical approval did not allow me to contact potential participants directly, unless I had their permission, I asked team coaches to email my letter of information to their female wrestlers. The letter of information distributed was the same letter that I had
provided to athletes at the team practices and was distributed by initial participants to their teammates for snowball sampling. In the letter of information, interested wrestlers were asked to contact me directly. This method of sampling is potentially biased in that respondents may have particular characteristics as compared to non-respondents. While this is a concern, pragmatically, this remained the only feasible means by which I could recruit participants. Although requests to have participants directly contact the researcher often yield lower response rates, five wrestlers, or half of the sample, were recruited as a result of this email request. Through the three different methods of recruitment, ten female wrestlers who met the selection criteria were recruited to participate in the project.

After each interested wrestler confirmed that she would participate in the research, I arranged to meet and interview her at a time and location that was convenient for her. Interviews were conducted over four months, from May through August 2006, in four different cities.

**Data Collection**

For the athletes who consented to participate in the study, data were collected using face-to-face, unstructured, qualitative interviews with open-ended questions that were audio recorded. The amount of time spent with each participant varied based on the amount of time that she agreed to spend in the interview or the amount of information about her experiences and perceptions that she was willing to share with me. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length.

Qualitative interviews were the most appropriate method of data collection for this project because they allowed for the collection information directly from athletes about their experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, interviews, which allow for an in-
depth focus on individuals, were more suitable than focus groups because potentially sensitive issues relating to gender, such as sexuality, are better discussed in private rather than in groups, especially groups where participants have social relationships. Yet, because of the importance of shared or similar experiences, for which focus groups are an excellent method of data collection (Madriz, 2000; Ritchie, 2003), participants were asked questions relating to experiences reported by other individuals in order to confirm or disconfirm if they had similar experiences or shared perspectives. Permission was obtained from each participant to share their experiences and responses to the interview questions with other interviewees. Given assurances of confidentiality, these feedback questions were carefully tailored and shared in a fashion that maintained each participant’s privacy: their name was not used, and information that could be used to identify them was either removed or altered. These types of questions were phrased neutrally with preamble such as “I’ve heard from other people...” or, “in my experience and in discussion with others, some of the things that have come up are...” These types of questions were necessary to check and confirm responses in order to reveal meaningful differences and similarities between individuals. Since these questions may have been interviewer, rather than interviewee, initiated, which can stymie conversation, they were used in later stages of the interview after rapport had already been developed so that they were not interpreted by the participants as prying or intrusive questions.

The interviews were unstructured and loosely based on focused interview techniques (Merton, Fiske, & Kendell, 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946). The focused interview, which is a very positivistic form of qualitative inquiry, was initially formulated for the purposes of determining a subject’s response to a particular experience or stimuli,
specifically stimuli within controlled experiments or reactions to media presentations. Although the concern of this study is not a response to particular, isolated stimuli, and the qualitative approach used is not positivistic, focused interview techniques are useful for determining the effects of a person’s involvement in an experience and their subjective interpretations of these events. The procedures of the focused interview were used to illicit responses with range, specificity, depth, and personal context. Specifically, unstructured questions, transitional questions, continued focus on experience and expressive responses, and establishing a personal context within these experiences were focused interview techniques employed in the interview to elicit meaningful data regarding participants’ involvement in wrestling (Merton et al., 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946).

The interviews for this research were also organized and conducted as unstructured interviews. As unstructured, in-depth interviews, prior to data collection, an interview guide was developed which included an outline of topics to be discussed with each athlete during our conversations. Although the interview guide did contain specific questions (see Appendix A), these detailed questions served only as a guide to the content of topics and the type of questions that were used in the interviews. Rather than following the interview guide verbatim, as with more structured or even semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Teevan, 2005, p. 71), the interviews with the wrestlers were informal, and the wording and ordering of questions varied between interviews. As unstructured interviews, my discussions with the wrestlers were collaborative conversations based on respect, openness, and reciprocity in which we explored each area of inquiry, following paths of discussion that developed throughout the conversation
(DeVault & McCoy, 2002; Heyl, 2001; Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). The flexibility of unstructured interviewing allowed me remain open to unanticipated responses and emergent issues and concepts that developed during the interviews. Further flexibility in interviews was achieved with the use of unstructured, open-ended questions that allowed the wrestlers to express their opinions without limiting their responses (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003; Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946). The flexibility of open-ended, unstructured interviews and questions are critical components of qualitative research generally, and more specifically of grounded theory and exploratory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Unstructured collaborative interviews treat the interviewee as expert. Treating the interviewee as an expert means that a large portion of the interviews were focused on collecting information about participants’ knowledge of their own experiences. This type of data collection is what Kvale (1996) refers to as mining for data. As a miner, the researcher unearths nuggets of “truth” that lay hidden within the research participant. For example, I mined for data when I asked participants about their own gender and in what ways they thought of themselves as feminine. I specifically told them that I wanted to know how they defined femininity; I would not impose an external definition on them. In addition, especially given my stance as a feminist, collaborative interviews based on discussions helped to ensure that the participants were not objectified during the research process. Thus, the interviews with the participating wrestlers also included questions and discussions based on what Kvale refers to as the traveler metaphor, where knowledge is created and negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee. Like a traveler, the interviewer attempts to understand the lay-of-the-land of a phenomenon and gathers tales
to tell a story about the topic of interest. Interview questions such as those covering the meaning of wrestlers’ experiences on and off the mat were based on Kvale’s traveler-style. Combining both miner and traveler-style questions enabled for the gathering of information about athletes’ own perspectives and, because gender can also entail qualities and performances that are un-thought, also allowed for the explication of information that otherwise may not have emerged by simply taking for granted, or at face-value, participants’ own perspectives. Qualitative interviewing requires participants to be reflexive, knowledgeable, and communicative about their experiences and knowledge of self (Black & Champion, 1976). Thus, my challenge as a researcher was to help draw out these experiences, beliefs, and perspectives with neutral, non-leading questions as we explored together their lives as wrestlers.

Although the interviews were unstructured, there was a logical development from the introduction to the conclusion of the interviews. Firstly, an attempt was made to start the interviews by developing rapport with the participants, easing them into the role of an interviewee by asking introductory questions related to their participation in wrestling. Each wrestler was asked to tell the story of how she got involved in wrestling, including when and why she started participating in the sport. These introductory questions were unthreatening and straightforward (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003); more importantly, they provided a personal context to participant’s experiences, framing their responses. Progressing slightly beyond the details of their involvement in wrestling, wrestlers were asked what they enjoyed about the sport and the sporting community. These questions, which were also relatively unthreatening, were intended to focus the participants on
answering questions about their opinions, feelings, motivations, and beliefs about the subject matter, thus focusing on their own subjective experiences.

After the introductory questions about wrestling, the wrestlers were asked about a variety of topics including their ideas about femininity; their experiences both on and off the mat, in different contexts and for different audiences; stereotypes about female wrestlers; perceptions about the limitations and advantages faced by other women and wrestlers; and the potential effects of wrestling on their own lives and on society’s perception of women. Each of these topic areas are outlined in more detail below. For the purposes of describing the data collection procedures, the interview topics have been laid out in a logical progression. However, the interviews were unstructured and did not necessarily follow this specific order; instead, topics were discussed with athletes as they emerged during the interview. During our conversations, lines of discussion were followed as a free-flow of thought, ensuring that each topic area was covered and that the discussion was not artificially structured which often limits or inhibits participants’ responses. While a prescribed ordering of topics was not followed, I did ensure that each topic area was thoroughly explored with every participant, and attempts were made to discuss other emergent issues and unanticipated responses as they arose. Glaser and Strauss (1967), specifically discussing their method of grounded theory, refer to this type of openness in interviews, allowing for the discussion of emergent topics, as theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is particularly relevant to this exploratory research because grounded theory was used to analyze the data.

One of the topic areas explored with participants was their perceptions and ideas about femininity. In order to understand the meanings that athletes ascribed to their own
gender and gender performances, it was necessary to determine how they perceived and understood gender. Participants were asked questions relating to gender and femininity in general, and to their own gender and gender-performances more specifically. For instance, I asked the wrestlers to define femininity, to describe themselves and their own gender, to discuss if they thought of themselves as feminine, and to talk about how wrestlers were both similar and different from other women they knew who were not athletes and from other athletes who were not wrestlers. Since gender can be an unthought-of category and concept, if wrestlers had difficulty answering these question, they were provided an abridged list of adjectives from Ashmore et al.'s 1986 meta-analysis of gender (included in the interview guide: see Appendix A). Using both miner and traveler style questions, we explored together the differences, similarities, and contradictions between how the wrestlers defined femininity, their self-descriptions and self-definition, and how they perceived other women.

Regarding the comparison between wrestlers and other women, I loosely speculated that the wrestlers would hold fairly traditional beliefs about what constitutes femininity in order to propose themselves as different from this model. Due to the elite nature of high-performance sport, which is competitive and based on being the best, I believed that the participants would think of themselves as unique and special, possessing qualities and abilities that many other people do not. I hypothesized that the wrestlers might think of themselves as unique in terms of their gender, in addition to their specialness as elite athletes. Wrestlers might hold a traditional view of femininity, perhaps posing typical women as hyper-feminine, in order to show how they are different and special in comparison.
Another topic area that was discussed with participants was their gendered experiences and performances on and off the mat, and the meanings they ascribed to their experiences. On-the-mat contexts included wrestling practices, tournaments, related training activities, and the locker room. More specifically, I asked the wrestlers questions about how they felt, behaved, dressed, and were treated in different sporting contexts by various groups, including other athletes, coaches, officials, and spectators. The athletes were also asked to discuss their experiences, and the meanings associated with them, in non-sporting contexts, including work, school, home, and social settings such as restaurants and bars. I specifically discussed with them the ways in which their behaviours, physical appearance, and self-perceptions were similar and different on and off the mat in order to examine how their gendered performances varied and remained the same between sporting and non-sporting contexts.

Furthermore, in addition to asking about the variations between social contexts, I also spoke with the wrestlers about how they acted and behaved on and off the mat for different social audiences. Goffman (1959) claimed that performances are based on and orientated to audiences. Therefore, it was important to have the athletes discuss their gendered experiences and performances in relation to different types of audiences. We conversed about how the participants behaved for various audiences, including family, friends associated with wrestling, non-wrestling friends, lovers, employers, coaches, and the general public. A specific examination of the variation of wrestlers’ performances in social situations that included other wrestlers and those in which members of the wrestling community were not involved was important for discerning whether wrestlers engaged in apologetic behaviours. Based on previous research of athletes’ apologetic
behaviour (Felshin, 1974; Griffin, 1998; Lowe, 1998; Malcom, 2003), I speculated that if athletes engaged in apologetic behaviour, it would be more prominent in non-sporting contexts that included an audience of sporting actors. If, as the theory of the apologetic proclaims, athletes compensate for unfeminine sporting qualities by demonstrating their femininity, this may be more likely to occur with greater intensity for an audience that experienced their unfeminine performances in sport.

Athletes were also engaged in conversations about the constraints and advantages to their gender performances that they perceived across and between audiences and social fields. In this line of questioning, I specifically explored wrestlers’ beliefs, actions, and reactions to their perceived stereotypes about women in sport, especially women in male-dominated sports. In a related course-based study that I conducted, athletes indicated that there were a number of “negative” stereotypes associated with female wrestlers, including being butch, lesbian, un-ladylike, as well as stereotypes against amateur wrestling because of professional wrestling (Vladicka, 2005). The participants in this current study were specially questioned about these particular stereotypes and I discussed with them related issues such as their sexuality. These discussions with individual wrestlers were attempts to determine if these were stereotypes that they had encountered, and, if so, how they reacted and acted in relation to these perceptions of wrestlers. I wanted to discover if and how their gendered performances within different sport and non-sporting contexts were influenced by perceptions and stereotypes of female athletes. In addition to constraints and limitations, participants were encouraged to discuss advantages that women and wrestlers may have because of their subjectivity. This line of
questioning related to the theories of the apologetic, un-apologetic, and reproductive and resistive agency.

The participants were also encouraged to talk about whether or not, and in what ways, the constraints and advantages to which they felt subject were the same or different from other women. This line of questioning was an attempt to determine whether sport was empowering for these women. I proposed that if they felt empowered, which I explored in relation to their sporting experience, the wrestlers would feel fewer constraints and greater advantages than other women who were not wrestlers or athletes. Attempts were made to determine whether any empowerment that the wrestlers felt as a result of wrestling translated into contexts outside of the sporting sphere, thereby addressing the potential loosening of the boundaries between athletes’ paradoxical worlds. In our interviews, if the wrestlers indicated that they did not find sport to be empowering, the details of this were discussed with them, and attempts were made to discover how their beliefs were related to their experiences in sport, their perceptions of femininity, and their own gender performances.

In addition to exploring whether or not the wrestlers felt empowered because of their experiences in sport, they were also asked to directly talk about the effects that wrestling had on their lives: how wrestling had influenced their behaviour, opinions, and beliefs about themselves. We discussed how they felt about their participation in wrestling and how wrestling had shaped them as individuals. Given our previous discussions of femininity, I explored with them how they conceived of the relationship between sport and femininity, and how sport had influenced their own gender identities and performances. Relatedly, the wrestlers were also asked whether and in what ways
they thought women’s wrestling might also change how others thought of women, and how their participation in a “masculine” activity may influence the social conception of femininity and ideas about women’s abilities. These summary questions about the relationship between wrestling and femininity were asked as a conclusion to the interviews. Arthur and Nazroo (2003) suggest that overall summaries of interviewees’ experiences and attitudes are a good way to conclude interviews.

To facilitate a deeper discussion of the various topics outlined above, probes and follow-up questions were used throughout the interviews. Probes are essential for generating the depth of information required by qualitative research (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003; Legard et al., 2003). Follow-up questions encouraged the interviewees to think and respond more critically about their experiences and phenomena that they may otherwise have left unquestioned: these questions encouraged more in-depth and specified responses (Merton, Fiske, & Kendell, 1956; Merton & Kendall, 1946). Deeper probing and specification is particularly pertinent to gender issues which may be unconscious, especially where individuals may assume, based on the dominant gender schema, that gender and gender performances lead purely from one’s sex. Probes, like all questions in the interviews, were open-ended, non-leading questions.

In addition to audio recording the interviews, I also took limited fieldnotes during and after the interviews. In the fieldnotes, information was recorded about athletes’ appearances and behaviours during the interviews, as well as important replies they had offered which would possibly be useful for other topics in our discussion. These notes were occasionally referred back to during the interviews in order to ask questions that were tailored to participants’ previous responses. I took fieldnotes sparingly during the
interviews so as not to distract from the conversation itself. While fieldnotes that capture
the reflections of the researcher during the interview can be important (Arthur & Nazroo,
2003), these types of notes were not recorded until after the interview was completed
because copious note-taking during interviews can be disruptive (Legard et al., 2003).
Ideally, I would have liked to include observations in different contexts as part of the data
collection, however, that was beyond the scope and resources of this study. Instead, the
fieldnotes served as a rudimentary substitution for more extensive observation. The
limited fieldnotes were useful for supplementing the oral data collected during the
interview.

Data Analysis

In order to code the data, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim.
Transcription itself is often an overlooked element of research design; many researchers
simply state that interviews will be transcribed without addressing the theoretical
assumptions inherent in their choice of transcription style (Bavelas, Kenwood & Phillips,
2002). Ochs asserted that transcription itself is theory and involves theoretical decisions
(in Bavelas et al., 2002). Bavelas, Kenwood, and Phillips were concerned with issues of
transcription in relation to discourse analysis; however, their comments that particular
methods of transcription focus and make salient some elements of discourse, while other
aspects, such as tone, intonation, and non-verbal communication, are not considered is
relevant to grounded theory analysis. Given that this research is concerned with gender
performances which include more than the mere words that individuals use to describe
their experiences, in the transcripts, notes were included on other elements of discourse
including tone and emphasis. These verbal characteristics of speech are indicated in
participants’ quotations with curly braces.

The transcribed interviews and fieldnotes were coded and analyzed using
grounded theory techniques. Grounded theory is based on the principle of inductively
discovering and developing theoretical explanations from data obtained through rigorous
empirical research, rather than testing hypotheses developed from theories (Creswell,
2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While other theories helped to
organize and guide this work, the purpose of drawing on these theories was to shape and
inform the research, not as the basis for an empirical test of these perspectives. The
theories of social context (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Goffman,
1959), empowerment (Blinde, Taub, & Han, 1993, 1994; Theberge, 2003), apologetics
(Felshin, 1974), un-apologetics (Broad, 2001), and resistive and reproductive agency
(Dworkin & Messner, 2000) helped to frame the research but they were not superimposed
on the data during analysis. Instead, by critically examining wrestlers’ gendered
experiences and using comparative analysis, explanations and interpretations were built
up from the data and are grounded in the views of the participants.

Qualitative data analysis generally, and grounded theory specifically, are based on
questioning data, searching for patterns, themes, and similarities across cases, and teasing
out and explaining meaningful differences. Concepts that emerge from the data are
constantly compared to other cases in order to verify the ideas and categories. Starting
from the data, ideas are built up, questioned, analyzed, and then abstracted to a theoretical
level. In grounded theory, this type of comparison is referred to as the constant
comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant comparative analysis was used to
assess and analyze the interview data gathered from the ten female wrestlers who participated in the study.

The constant comparative method includes three levels of coding: open, axial, and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Overall, through constant comparison, based on these different levels of coding, conceptual categories are developed which inductively form a theory of explanation of the phenomena from the data, illustrated in the analysis through examples (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Connections or thematic similarities are sought at the different levels of coding in order to develop an explanation of the phenomena of study.

In grounded theory, the first level of analysis and data coding is open coding. Open coding is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Open coding entails combing through the data and searching for themes within and across cases. Categories are conceptualized by examining and comparing interviewees’ experiences, attitudes, behaviours, motivations, beliefs, and perceptions. The interviews are broken apart into the various categories that emerge, and each case must fit a specific category. Categories must have attributes or scales that incorporate enough breadth to include each case, but enough specificity to differentiate them for other categories. The primary level of coding in this project was rudimentary and broke down the data into broad categories that related to the major topics of this research including definitions of femininity, gender performances and experiences on and off the mat, sexuality, stereotypes about wrestlers, and the effects of wrestling on the social definition of femininity.
During axial coding, the second level of grounded theory coding, connections are made between the categories developed in open coding, whereby the data are reassembled by categories. Grounded theory coding has a specific coding paradigm that involves looking for conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This implies a linear relationship between conditions through to actions and consequences. The ontological and theoretical foundations that underpin this research were concerned with social interactions and experiences, and not progressions and structuralist functions; therefore, Strauss and Corbin’s paradigm was not used, but a greater specificity of coding was developed to determine how the various categories that emerged in open coding were related to and affected one another. Categories that emerged during this level of coding include, among numerous others, Femininity from a Wrestlers Perspective, Winning over the Men, and Looking Like a Girl.

Moving toward a synthesis of categories and a more abstracted level of coding, selective coding, the third level of coding in grounded theory, seeks to select out core categories which serve as the foundation for the emergent theory, to which all other categories are related. Selective coding moves away from mere description of the data and seeks to develop a theory of explanation. Based on continual comparison of the categories developed during axial coding, relationships between categories and themes were drawn and four main categories were developed as the basis for a conceptual framework that explains female wrestlers’ gender performances and the broader implications for femininity towards which activities such as female wrestling may contribute. The four main categories are (1) Femininity, (2) On the Mat, (3) Off the Mat,
and (4) The Effects of Wrestling. (See the coding scheme in Appendix B.) Each theme that emerged from the data during axial and selective coding is outlined and discussed as a category or sub-category in the following chapters.
Chapter 5

Results and Analysis: Wrestlers’ Performances and Conceptions of Femininity

Ten wrestlers participated in this research study. Each participant met the study selection criteria: participants identified as female; they were 18 years of age or older; they had wrestled for at least 4 years; they had wrestled during the 2005-2006 season; and they were not wrestlers with whom I had wrestled on a team or against whom I had wrestled in competition. The wrestlers who participated ranged in age from 18 to 28 years old; hence, both junior and senior athletes were included in the study. Several of the participants began their wrestling careers in early secondary school, grades 6, 7, and 8, while two participants started wrestling at a very early age – they were approximately 8 years old and in grade 3 – and one wrestler began her career later than the other participants, starting the sport in grade 12. Relatedly, the participants’ levels of experience varied widely: one participant had been wrestling for 4 years, whereas the most experienced wrestler had been participating and competing in the sport for 14 years. Most of the participants had been competing for at least 8 years and the average length of involvement for these wrestlers was ten and a half years. In addition to wrestling, three of the participants still participated in other sports at a competitive level, and six others had quit other sports to concentrate on wrestling. Other sports in which the wrestlers currently or previously had participated included soccer, basketball, figure skating, volleyball, softball, rugby, and field hockey. At the time of her interview, one participant had recently retired from wrestling, hanging up her boots at the end of her final year of
university; three were contemplating retirement for various reasons including age and injury; and the remaining six wrestlers planned on continuing with wrestling with no foreseeable end to their active participation. For those wrestlers who were retired or were contemplating retirement, all planned on staying involved in the wrestling community as a coach, official, or volunteer.

Given their levels of experience and the ages when they started wrestling, as would be expected, all of the study participants had wrestled within a secondary school league. In fact, one of the participants was the first female to compete in her province’s high school championships. In addition, all of the participants had competed or were currently competing in the Canadian inter-university varsity league. Hence, all of the participants were either currently enrolled in university or had completed a university degree. Interestingly, seven of the participants were enrolled in more traditionally “feminine” disciplines such as education and nursing, although two of the wrestlers were enrolled in the sciences and one participant was in engineering.

The participating wrestlers varied in weight and levels of success. Firstly, as would be expected, the wrestlers varied in size and weight. Participants included women at the lowest weight category, where competitors weigh a maximum of 48 kilograms or 105.6 pounds, up to the “heavy” weight category, which tops out at 72 kilograms or 158.4 pounds. The participants’ successes in wrestling, assessed here only as the number and level of tournaments in which they placed, also varied widely. Two wrestlers were

---

28 Top six placement at tournaments is used here as a benchmark for success because this is the standard within wrestling. There are other measures of success, such as “personal bests,” but, given that this is the
relatively less successful: they did not win, medal, or place in the top six at most or any recent tournaments. On the other hand, many of the participants were very successful wrestlers: six of the participants were former or current national team members, either at the junior or senior level. National team members are those wrestlers who have won the national championships at their respective weight and age class, and they represent Canada at international tournaments, including the World Championships. Of those participants who had competed at a world championship, three had won medals. In addition, one of the participants was an Olympian; she had competed in the 2004 Atlanta Olympics where women’s wrestling was included in the Games for the first time.

“objective” standard of the sport, it has been used here as one benchmark for the wrestlers participating in this study.

The participants in this sample are a relatively successful group of wrestlers. Their high levels of success should be kept in mind when considering the results. Less successful wrestlers may have different gendered experiences on and off the mat.

Given the sampling methods used, there may have been a self-section bias in terms of which wrestlers chose to participate in the research. In part, this bias may be due to the time of year in which I recruited most of the participants. Due to time constraints, most of the recruitment was conducted in the summer months when typically only national-level wrestlers were still training. Additionally, this group of more confident athletes may have been more willing to share their experiences with me, also, potentially, resulting in a sampling bias.

This participant agreed that I could identify her as an Olympian, even though this identification means that her confidentiality cannot be completely protected. However, she did stipulate that she did not want
order to protect participants’ confidentiality, the wrestlers will only be referred to by randomly selected pseudonyms.

Noting the wrestlers’ diverse qualities and characteristics is important for putting their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs in context. Their varying weights, ages, levels of experience, and levels of success are important for understanding their responses. Important qualities and characteristics may be noted in relation to their responses in the categories and themes discussed below.

**Femininity**

In order to comprehend how each participant understood her own gender and gender performances, I spoke with the wrestlers at length about femininity. In addition to direct discussions, comments throughout the duration of the interviews provided further information about their beliefs about gender and femininity. Rather than simply taking for granted what constitutes femininity, or applying an external, and perhaps inappropriate, notion of femininity to the athletes, their own ideas about gender were determined. Understanding participants’ perspectives on femininity was critical for framing and interpreting their performances, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about their identities and experiences. Their ideas serve as the basis for the explanation of their performances and the implications that such displays have for the social meaning of femininity.

her comments to be identified. To protect the confidentiality of her comments, she will not be identified as an Olympian in relation to her comments or direct quotations. Instead, given the number of national team members who participated in the study, including the Olympian, she will be identified only as a national team athlete or by her pseudonym.
When directly asked, each participant found it very difficult to describe what she thought of as feminine. Each participant initially responded with silence, or phrases such as “I don’t know,” “that’s a tough question,” “I’ve never thought about this before,” or even “I can’t define femininity for you,” which seems to indicate that their gender is often unthought-of, pre-reflexive, or in Bourdieu’s terminology, doxic. These responses may be indicative of general social prescriptions that naturalize gender and encourage the adoption of relatively un-criticized, normative gender performances. I found the wrestlers’ initial inarticulate responses to questions about gender and their own femininity as slightly surprising, given that they are regularly exposed to competing gender expectations that might be experienced as thrusting the socially constructed nature of gender on to them, and, more pertinently, the critical analysis and formulation of gender that they proposed later throughout our conversations. For women who live in paradoxical worlds that expose the hegemonic norms of gender as fabrications to not see these constructions as such reveals how deeply engrained and powerful gender ideologies are within society.

It may be that part of the wrestlers’ resistance to, and difficulty in, describing femininity was their rejection of essentializing or limited definitions of femininity. In response to both directed questions about femininity and comparisons between wrestlers, other athletes, and non-athletes, the participants indicated that although there are differences between women, and between women and men, it was difficult for them to label or categorize these as meaningful because of their belief in individualism and subjective interpretation. As one participant, Kirstin, stated, “I can’t really compare them, [women], because everyone is [an] individual... everyone is pretty unique.” The
wrestlers appeared to subscribe to the belief that women’s presentations of femininity are varied and that each person’s performance is representative of her own sense of what it means to be a woman. Thus, the wrestlers’ opinions about femininity were encompassing and, in contrast to normative conceptions of gender, liberal. Jane, one of the youngest participants, even suggested that any quality that a woman possessed or performed was feminine by virtue of the fact that she was female: femininity was “every female’s way of going through life and society . . . . I would say that every woman would have some type of feminine because every woman is female.” Although Jane’s comments indicate a conflation between sex and gender, her formulation about what constitutes femininity was expansive and inclusive.

Rather than delimiting a rigid definition of femininity, the wrestlers described and utilized a wide-ranging conception. On the one hand, they described a very traditional woman who was concerned with her appearance, talkative, and somewhat ditzy. They also talked about a feminine woman as someone who has “sort of strength on the inside, strength on the outside, and sort of mental strength,” as described by Kate. These two types of women appear to be very different in terms of their personality characteristics, but the wrestlers considered them both to be feminine. Wrestlers’ broad formulations of femininity are similar to claims made by feminists who assert that we cannot state what constitutes femininity because the very act of drawing boundaries excludes some women and legitimizes a particular type of femininity while ostracizing others (Butler, 1999). The opinions expressed by the wrestlers do not profess a proper way of being a woman and doing femininity, allowing for and supporting a myriad of enactments and performances.
The encompassing view of femininity that the wrestlers expressed was aptly summarized by one participant, Laura, as a range of types of femininity. When talking about other women she knew who enacted a very traditional femininity in comparison to her own less normative behaviours Laura said:

That’s an extreme that I’m at though, and it’s not like they’re, [the other very traditionally feminine girls], just your average girl either that doesn’t wrestle. They’re to the end where . . . they’re the ones to take care of babies and stuff.

Her comments seem to indicate extreme types of femininity with a range of options in-between. Within this range, the wrestlers’ perspectives on femininity appear to distinguish between different kinds of women; however, these distinctions are not strict and reflect subtle changes rather than large breaks. According to the wrestlers’ comments, women have many things in common, such as being more emotional than men, but there are also many differences between women. Thus, the wrestlers suggested that there are a variety of women – as Rebecca stated, “there’s such a wide variety [of women] now-a-days” – some more traditionally feminine, and some that deviate from the normative version of femininity.

The range of femininity that was described by the wrestlers can be laid out as a continuum or spectrum of femininity. The spectrum ranges on the one end from a very traditional, and more easily identifiable, version of femininity, which the wrestlers referred to as “girly girl.” Close to the other end of the spectrum, claimed Laura, are female wrestlers, as well as female boxers, hockey players, ultimate fighters, and other athletes engaged in physical, combative sports.
While Laura commented that wrestlers are at the far end of the spectrum, as opposed to "girly girls," I would suggest that the continuum may expand beyond female wrestlers to a further extreme. There are other women who also consider themselves to be feminine who are more masculine than these female wrestlers; for example, gender blenders whose performances of their own gender are regularly mistaken as the performances of men (Devor, 1989). According to the wrestlers, the differences between more "girly girls" and other women are based on both appearance and personality characteristics. Regardless of where they fall on the continuum, all of the participants said that women share some characteristics, and, more importantly, they believed that they are all feminine.

**Traditional Femininity: The Girly Girl**

As proposed by the wrestlers, on one of the far extremes of the spectrum of femininity is the "girly girl." Based on the descriptions offered by the participants, the "girly girl" is a very traditional model of femininity. "Girly girl" was specifically defined as traditional when the wrestlers stated that it was the femininity that women displayed in the 1950s. While this was a timeframe that two of the participants used to identify this type of femininity, specifying it as the femininity of the 1950s does not mean that the wrestlers considered this type of femininity to be obsolete. Rather, the participants indicated that many women in contemporary society still exhibit the same qualities that
they associated with what they consider to be an outdated fashion of femininity—a femininity that is "gentle, and helpless, and meek," according to Kirstin.

Based on physical attributes, as distinguished from personality characteristics, both of which were elements associated with differing types of femininity, as outlined by the participants, this 1950s model of femininity includes a focus on appearance. A "girly girl" is "the girl that always has her hair done, her make-up done, and they have the outfit and everything, and they look put together all of the time," said Laura. This phrasing, which is representative of several of the wrestlers' responses, suggests that the "girly girl" focuses on and is concerned with her appearance, and she also expends effort to look nice. Amber said these women "dress up more, maybe they wear make-up, maybe they do their hair more," while Jill suggested that they are the type of women "who just does her hair for an hour in the morning; like, is just trying to be just beautiful."

The regular use of make-up was a particular characteristic that was associated with traditional femininity: every participant commented about traditionally feminine women's use of make-up. When I asked about femininity, Kirstin asked, "like wearing dresses, and make-up, and going out and that kind of stuff?," indicating that these types of performances were what she immediately thought of when asked about femininity. Although many of the wrestlers themselves wore make-up regularly, in contrast to "girly girls," they did not feel that make-up was a necessity. Jill commented that putting on make-up was something that she did for fun, which was infrequent. Jill told me that she would sometimes say to her girlfriends, "hey, do my make-up. I don't know how to do it so you guys do it for me." The fact that Jill did not know how to apply make-up indicates how infrequently she wore it.
The use of make-up by athletes when participating in athletics was particularly belittled by the wrestlers. Susan snidely commented that some athletes who were not wrestlers “come out of practice looking like they did when they were at school. They still have their make-up all perfect, but they put on make-up before they went to [practice]!” The shocked and disapproving tone Susan used when making this comment is representative of how she and other wrestlers disapproved of these female athletes. Although the wrestlers accepted that “girly girls” wore make-up routinely, for other women, particularly athletes, they suggested that make-up should only be worn in specific contexts. Commenting specially on wrestlers wearing make-up during sport, Jane said, “you see them putting on make-up and you’re just like ‘what are you doing wrestling?’,” seemingly suggesting that these women do not belong in the world of sport because they are paying attention to their appearance. When I probed further into her comment, Jane said that she would not consider these women as worthy opponents. The use of make-up in the sporting field is considered inappropriate, and athletes who wear make-up during sporting activities are considered by the wrestlers to be less athletic and they may be ridiculed for being “girly girls.”

Despite the work that traditional women were assumed to put into their physical appearance in terms of attractiveness, such as wearing make-up, the participants suggested that these women did not put effort into developing their bodies and muscles. “Girly girls” were scorned by the wrestlers for being weak, lacking muscles, and for their inability to use their bodies physically, even for the mildest forms of exertion. Jacqueline, who wrestles in one of the lower weight divisions, described “girly girls” as “your typical girls, like, dainty and I guess delicate, not very strong, just weak little
ones.” The “girly girls” bodies were described by Kate as being “sticks” that were not functional.

One wrestler discussed in detail the “stick” “girly girls” that she worked with in her summer job. Although she did not ridicule their bodies, instead suggesting that they have been taught to be dainty and delicate, and to avoid physical labour, this participant said she hated how her co-workers would not use their bodies. Imitating their voices, by speaking softly and in a higher pitch, she claimed they would say things such as, “oh, we can’t do that; we can’t lift anything. We can’t, like, do hard work or anything. That’s not what a girl should do.” These “girly girls,” according to this wrestler, could not complete even basic, and in her opinion, easy physical tasks, such as lifting and carrying small boxes. Instead, her comments indicated that these women deliberately inhibited their own bodies and motions, as proscribed by normative femininity. She also described how these women were critical of other women, such as the wrestlers, for using their bodies, especially in non-traditional ways such as in sport and in more manual labour jobs. Imitating these women again, the participant described how they would say things such as “you shouldn’t be a dirty tomboy girl. You shouldn’t go play in the mud. You have to look the part and you have to look pretty.”

32 I have deliberately not referred to a particular wrestler in some quotations throughout the thesis. The wrestling community is very small and an informed reader may be able to cross-reference quotes to determine the identity of the participants. Hence, at times, I have deliberately not included a reference to the participant’s pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. This technique is particularly applied to quotes that are very personal or are about unique experiences.
While these imitations are likely parodies and extreme representations of comments the wrestlers have heard, they do provide examples of how the wrestlers perceived “girly girls” mentality about work and the use of their bodies. Although the wrestlers recognized these types of physical restrictions as extreme, they seemed to have harsh criticism for women who engaged, or rather disengaged, their bodies in these types of ways. Instead, the wrestlers thought that a feminine body was one that allowed you to “do whatever you want to do,” as Laura, claimed.

Personality traits of the “girly girl” were also outlined by the wrestlers as very traditional. As noted, gentle, helpless, meek, and passive were words that Kirstin used to describe this type of femininity, while other wrestlers called these women “gossipy,” “catty,” and “fake,” terms that are representative of traditional femininity. The “girly girls” were also described as women who accepted, took on, or even embraced very customary gender roles, again reflecting a very traditional notion of femininity. Wrestlers labelled these type of women as home-makers, mothers, and wives: “girly girls” were described by Jill as “the traditional type of woman, how she will get ready for her husband, and look beautiful for him, and, you know, do everything for the family type of thing.” This stay-at-home wife-and-mother style of femininity was not looked

---

33 Some of these adjectives were included in an abridged version of the Ashmore et al. (1986) list that was provided to the participants if they were unable, or finding it difficult, to describe and define femininity. While this method may have influenced their responses, there were other less traditionally feminine words included in the list (see Appendix A). Some of these other adjectives were used to describe other, less “girly girl,” women.
upon very favourably by the athletes. As Rebecca suggested, they thought that these women were “push-overs.”

Clearly, the wrestlers offered some strong criticisms about traditional femininity; however, they also asserted that while these “girly girls” were making the choice to accept and perform traditional femininity, they had been taught to behave as such by society:

A lot of people set limitations on themselves that aren’t athletes. A lot of girls think they shouldn’t do things or they don’t think they can be capable of it . . . but, like, a lot of girls were taught that [they] don’t do that: “you don’t lift things, you don’t work hard, [and] you can’t do physical labour” (Laura).

Thus, while the “girly girls” were still seen as enacting a traditional model of femininity, as Laura’s comment indicates, the wrestlers claimed that they did so because of socialization. Since the wrestlers seemed to think that “girly girls” behaved very traditionally because of socialization, I sensed that they seemed to be slightly forgiving of the “girly girls” behaviour: “I really disapprove of judging people. Everybody has their reasons for doing things, and stuff, so I just take people’s actions as they come,” said Laura. While they might forgive “girly girls” for their performances of traditional femininity, the wrestlers certainly did not want to be like these women.

Reflecting their liberal and open perspective of femininity, as represented and described in the spectrum of femininity, the wrestlers’ comments seemed to indicate that not all women exhibit these traditional characteristics. The wrestlers recognized that there are many women who do not display or possess this extreme traditional version of femininity, including the wrestlers themselves. Rather, other women fall elsewhere along
the spectrum of femininity, although the wrestlers’ discussions tended to focus on both extremes.

**A Wrestler and a Woman**

According to the wrestlers’ descriptions, as opposed to the “girly girl,” on the other end of the spectrum of femininity are female wrestlers, and other individuals involved in combative sports and other traditionally unfeminine activities. Although the wrestlers saw themselves as at the other end of the spectrum and, therefore, as different from the “girly girls,” they recognized that they possessed and exhibited some similar qualities. The wrestlers made comments such as “I have feminine qualities,” as Laura said. Some of the wrestlers described more similarities between themselves and other women, including Kirstin who said, “I have the same woman tendencies: I’m really good at bitching,” while others described a greater amount of deviation. Laura, when discussing female wrestlers in relation to other women she knew claimed, “I think we have more differences, to be honest . . . . Like, I’ll look at a lot of us and what we do disgusts {emphasized} other girls.”

The qualities and tendencies which the wrestlers suggested they possessed that were similar to their descriptions of more traditional women included being social, emotional, talkative, gossipy, nurturing, caring, and even passive. Importantly, however, the wrestlers suggested that these qualities were not dominant or dominating portions of their personalities or gender performances. Instead, these types of hegemonic feminine qualities were situational: the wrestlers exhibited these types of emotions and qualities in particular situations. One participant, Kirstin, who has been involved in wrestling since her early teens, said, “I have the same female tendencies that every other woman has, but
there is a time and a place for them . . . . [I] turn them on and turn them off,” a statement about how wrestlers situationally modify their gender performances. In addition to their more traditional feminine qualities, the wrestlers also turned on and off a number of other qualities and characteristics that were different from those of “girly girls,” but which they also considered part of their own femininity. These qualities include being confident, assertive, outgoing, and independent.

*We’re Pretty Too: Wrestlers’ Feminine Appearance*

One of the specific ways that wrestlers seemed to view themselves as similar to other women is that, for the most part, they wanted to look feminine and be considered attractive women by societal heterosexual standards. In order to look attractive, the wrestlers would don the trappings of femininity, including make-up, jewellery, and feminine “good” clothes. During my interviews with the wrestlers, they each displayed a cultivated feminine appearance: several had long hair, many had dyed their hair, they wore jewellery and make-up, and they wore feminine clothing, including fitted shirts and one participant was wearing a skirt.

While they were and wanted to look attractive, in comparison to other women, the wrestlers did not appear to spend a considerable amount of time on their appearances. In fact, they commented that because they were always busy and tired, due to their involvement in wrestling, they did not expend effort on their appearance daily. Kate said:

> We just don’t do it, [dress up], as much. Like, we’re so frickin’ tired by the end of the day that we’re not worried about that . . . so the only times that you worry about it [are] when you have that extra time to do something special.
Amber commented, “I like dressing up once in a while, and putting on make-up and looking good and wearing good clothes . . . but it’s not to the same extent as non-athletic girls.” When asked, she said that “not to the same extent” meant that she did not pay attention to her appearance as often and to the same degree as “girly girls.”

The wrestlers wanted to look good but, in their opinion, they did not focus on their appearance as much as many other women, especially women who were not athletes. In contrast to more traditionally feminine women, the wrestlers claimed that they were not as concerned about their appearance in relation to an audience. Regarding her appearance, Jill asserted that “sometimes I’ll get all gussied up for fun, but, like, I’m just not really worried about the world around me because it doesn’t really matter to me what people think,” and Kelly claimed, “I think a lot of people care a lot more what other people think of them . . . in the sense of more in appearance ways.” Instead of significantly worrying about others’ opinions of them, the wrestlers expressed self-confidence regarding their appearance: “I don’t care about what people think of what I look like; I don’t spend a lot of time in the morning . . . . I just feel like wrestlers don’t have the same concerns as the ordinary girl,” said Jill. In fact, rather than focusing on their appearances, the participants’ comments seemed to indicate that they would rather be thought of and valued for other qualities, possibly their strength and abilities, which they talked about in relation to their own femininity. Yet, while they possessed other qualities, like other women, the wrestlers also stressed that they were pretty too.

In addition to being attractive like other women, the wrestlers were redefining for themselves what it meant to be an attractive woman. In this sense, being pretty too was adding qualities to and modifying what is considered to be attractive, expanding both the
conception of feminine attractiveness and the continuum of femininity more generally. The wrestlers’ standard for attractiveness included a larger body with more muscles: “you can be athletic and you can have muscles and stuff [and] you can still look pretty,” said Susan, one of the younger wrestlers who said she dyed her hair and wore make-up. In contrast to “girly girls” who are “skin and bones,” as Rebecca suggested, wrestlers were proud of their athletic, muscular, powerful bodies. Yet, the wrestlers were also aware that because of their muscles, they attracted attention about which they were sensitive. Although they felt attractive and generally confident about their own appearance, they understood that some in society were still shocked or surprised by their contradictory feminine image of traditional prettiness and muscles. These mixed sentiments expressed by the wrestlers about their appearance and attractiveness are captured in stories told by two of the participants.

Kate, a former national team member, told a story about one of her teammates, another national team member, who was accepting an award at a ceremony:

I know Kim is really sensitive about her back: her shoulders are really broad and her back is really built. I think it looks really good but a lot of people are like, “your shoulders are way too big, and your neck is way too big.” . . . I remember once she went up in this backless dress for an awards ceremony and . . . so many people commented on how built her back was. Well, girls don’t really want to hear that {laugh} . . . . And there was probably admiration . . . . I think sometimes she’s a bit, you know, sensitive about it but proud of it at the same time.
Amber, one of the smaller women, who is also very muscular and strong, talked about wrestlers’ bodies in comparison to other more traditionally feminine bodies and social expectations of femininity.

It’s kind of like you go out, say out to a club or out with a bunch of the wrestlers or something because you’re away, and you get a lot of attention. You get a lot of looks because a lot of times you’re wearing tank tops and you see, like, these big back muscles and shoulder muscles and stuff. And then you sort of notice that people are intrigued or they like that and stuff. But then other times you kind of like it because you get attention, or whatever. But then there’s the times too when you just look at these super skinny girls with no muscles, like all the magazine covers or what you see on TV, and it’s so hard sometimes to just be happy with your athletic body. And you think that way because that’s just what society likes. It’s hard. Like, it’s pound, pound, pound into you: “this is what a girl should look like; this is the ideal girl.” But then... I see other female wrestlers and they look great with their muscles! And you’re just like, “oh my god, that’s awesome!” Or you look at your muscles and... you just realize what you can do because you are so strong. And then you’re like, “well hey, I’m proud of this, and I like this!”

These comments demonstrate how the wrestlers are similar to other more feminine women in their attempts to be attractive, in part due to their gender socialization, while recognizing that their bodies do not fit with the normative model of femininity. Kate and Amber’s comments juxtapose their attempts to be traditionally attractive with their non-
traditional muscles. Ultimately, although the wrestlers sometimes felt that they “look[ed] like a linebacker,” as Rebecca commented, they liked their muscles and were proud and confident of their non-traditional bodies and appearances. The wrestlers’ physical appearances were different from “girly girls” but they appreciated these differences and thought that they were just as attractive as other more traditionally feminine women, thus expanding their definitions of what constitutes a feminine appearance to include an athletic body and a less cultivated appearance.

In addition to looking pretty too, as they define attractiveness, the wrestlers also proudly claimed that they processed other attributes which distinguished them from “girly-girl” women, attributes that may be considered less traditionally feminine or even masculine within the dominant gender schema of dichotomies. Reflecting the sentiments of all of the participants, Laura succinctly claimed, “I still think I’m feminine but I definitely think I have masculine qualities too.” While “girly girls” are “not confident, they don’t really know what they want, they’re not independent,” as Amber claimed, speaking specifically about wrestlers, the participants seemed to suggest that women who are further towards the other end of the femininity spectrum are more confident, strong, assertive, and independent.

**Hear Me Roar!**: Confident, Assertive, and Outgoing

Confidence was the quality about which the wrestlers spoke most frequently as a characteristic that they felt distinguished them from women who fit a more traditional model of femininity. All of the participating wrestlers asserted, and even demonstrated, that they were confident. Sentiments Jill expressed were representative of the general response that the wrestlers offered about confidence: “I feel a lot more confident about
myself, but that’s because I know myself more,” and “I’m confident in who I am as a person.”

Wrestlers’ confidence and self-assurance was apparent in that they stood up for themselves and in what they believed. Kate asserted:

I have a very strong sense of who I am, and what I want to do, and what’s wrong and what’s right, and what to stand up for and what not to. . . . I think you’re just willing to take a stand on a lot of issues . . . you’re going to take a stand . . . you’re going to have a voice, you’re going to have an opinion, you’re going to be able to speak up for it and say “no, this is good, this is what I want. No, you’re wrong."

Not only did the wrestlers feel able to express their opinions and be the people who they wanted to be, they also felt that they “didn’t have to prove anything to anybody . . . . I’ve always had my own agenda . . . [and] it doesn’t bother me what people think,” as Kirstin claimed. As Kirstin’s comment indicates, the wrestlers’ senses of confidence caused them to claim that they did not care about other people’s opinions of them, although this contradicts with their desire to prove themselves, which will be discussed later in the results. In contrast to others, the wrestlers said that they were confident in themselves and that they did not require external validation. For example, Jill stated, “okay, this is me. Take it and like it, but if you don’t, that’s your problem,” and she also said, “I guess it goes back to my theory where if you look – if you know me, or if you want to get to know me, and if you have problems with what I do then I don’t really care.” Susan stressed, “I’m one of those people like, ‘oh, if you don’t like me for who I
am then you’re not worth being around!” Their comments indicate that they felt assured in who they were as people, in what they believed in, and what they wanted.

In their individual interviews, both Kate and Jill demonstrated confidence in who they were as individuals and their beliefs. Both wrestlers were interviewed, by their own choice, in public coffee houses. During my interview with Kate, a man approached us to give us advertisements and Kate would not accept them, telling the individual that she thought these types of handbills were a waste. Jill demonstrated confidence and a sense of self when our interview was interrupted by a man who was eavesdropping on our conversation. The middle-aged man who interrupted us expressed that he thought we were wrong in our assessment of wrestlers. After patiently listening to his initial points, Jill shot back that he “didn’t know what we were talking about,” and, after further assertions by the man, told him “he was wrong” and reasserted her own opinion. These are clear examples of the wrestlers’ self-confidence.

Due to their self-confidence, the wrestlers seemed to be assertive, open, and outgoing. Both Jane and Susan specifically said that wrestlers were outgoing people: “I’m thinking most people in sports are more out there so they’re more outgoing. And more outgoing means they feel more confident,” said Susan. Wrestlers commented that because they were confident, they could do what they wanted. Kelly made the following claim that represents her own confidence and is indicative of the confidence expressed by the participants generally:

I’m not afraid to try something new, even if I’m going to fail at it . . . . And I might be bad at it, but I’m not afraid to make myself look bad and I think, like I think typical women are afraid to try things because they feel like they are going
to fail... I think that I'm less afraid to try things, and I'm less afraid to fail at things that I may not be good at right away. Typical women I think won't do that.

Jane asserted that because they were outgoing, wrestlers were “able to express themselves,” which she said meant that wrestlers were confident enough to “not [be] afraid to show even [their] weaknesses.” As confident women, the wrestlers seemed willing to take risks.

The wrestlers claimed that, for the most part, they were not “push-overs,” although, in contrast, one of the participants, Rebecca, said she sometimes could be a patsy. Rebecca appears to be a minority case because at least seven of the wrestlers said they were outgoing. Overall, I sensed that the wrestlers felt that they could do what they wanted, such as participate in wrestling, even if there were social limitations and restrictions on their behaviour. Reflecting these types of sentiments, Amber said, “I’ve always kind of been a person where it’s like if somebody tells me I can’t do it like, ‘whatever, I can do it!’,” while Jill said:

I think that everyone can do what they want. If you want to be something, or you want to do something, there shouldn’t be anything that’s stopping you. You should be able to do it, even if you have to be able to work at it then do it!

For the wrestlers, doing what they wanted included using space and their bodies in ways that they wanted. Their comments seemed to indicate that they felt they could walk with confidence and act and speak as they chose. Regarding the use of space and their bodies, in contrast to normative femininity, the wrestlers said they felt they were less inhibited:
We’re rowdier, you know: more willing to let loose. I would say that a lot of my other [non-wrestling] girlfriends are less inclined to do that. They’re much more worried about how people are thinking of them, how people are perceiving them, maintaining this girly image, nice girl, pretty girl, this is the way that I’m supposed to act (Kate).

Compared to the “girly image” that Kate paints, the wrestlers indicated that they were more willing to take up space, and exhibit strength and confidence. In addition to acting how they wanted, which may include being rude and assertive, the wrestlers also spoke without feeling restricted. They claimed that they were loud, as opposed to quiet, demure women — “I’m loud!”, Susan proudly proclaimed, and many of the wrestlers spoke loudly during our interviews. The wrestlers also spoke about topics that they thought other women might find repulsive, such as blood, injuries, and skin conditions, which are common in wrestling. They also said they could occasionally be “crude,” “crass,” “rude,” and “raunchy,” which they thought could be intimidating for people, but, because they were confident, this did not concern them greatly. Kate claimed:

We have a tendency to act more masculine... We have some nice raunchy team members who bring up everything. So we tend to do things that a lot of people find weird. We act in ways that a lot of people are put off by; they come and join our group and a lot of them are intimidated by us.

The fact that the wrestlers understood that they were “raunchy,” “weird,” and “intimidating,” and yet they continued their behaviours indicates that the wrestlers were confident to act and speak how they wanted. Overall, the wrestlers seemed to exhibit confidence as individuals, and they claimed and appeared willing to be
assertive, out-spoken, and outgoing, more so than other traditionally feminine
women: “female wrestlers are more willing to stick up for themselves in a lot more
situations . . . . Female wrestlers actually stick up for themselves a lot more,” stated
Kelly.

Wrestlers’ confidence is in sharp contrast to traditional femininity, as defined by
Ashmore, Del Boca, and Wohlers (1986), which is cautious and passive. Women are
typically thought to be insecure and uncertain, as compared to masculine self-confidence
and assurance. As the wrestlers’ comments indicate, they did not conform to the
normative image of femininity in this sense; instead, they were more confident. In
contrast to their own performance and sense-of-self, confidence was a quality that the
wrestlers thought not all other women possessed. When Kate spoke of her own
confidence, I asked her if she thought that was a trait she shared with other women and
she replied with an adamantly “no!” Therefore, at the other end of the spectrum of
femininity from “girly girls,” the wrestlers were embracing and appropriating what are
generally considered to be more masculine qualities of confidence and self-assurance.

*I'm my own Woman: Being Independent*

In addition to being confident and assertive, the wrestlers also claimed that they
were independent, which is unlike traditional images of feminine dependence and
reliance. Independence to the wrestlers meant that they were comfortable being alone,
and they were able to do and accomplish things on their own without relying on others
for assistance: “we’re independent enough to do it on our own,” said Laura. Kirstin, who
talked about being independent at four separate times during our interview, stated, “we
are independent enough to be able to pursue our goals and our achievements by
ourselves.” She also said, “I mean for my whole life I have been independent, and everything I have, I have gotten for myself.”

More specifically, the wrestlers asserted that they were more independent than some other women, which especially meant that they did not rely on men to help them. Jane described these differences when she said:

With female wrestlers, I think most of us think we can take care of ourselves, whereas the other side of it, the femininity side, the man is supposed to be the protector, or whatever . . . . I personally don’t feel like I need a man at all.

Laura also made a similar claim when she said, “a lot of girls need somebody, a man, there to help them through things and stuff, but I don’t find a lot of us [wrestlers] do.” Even for those wrestlers who talked about having a prominent man in their lives, such as a romantic partner, they asserted that they did not always need them close by and they could do things by themselves. Amber, when someone asked her what she did when her boyfriend was away, responded by saying, “I don’t need him. I do my own thing! . . . I’m definitely independent.” Rather than relying on men, the wrestlers saw themselves on equal footing with them, capable of completing the same tasks.

Despite their assertions that they were independent and could do things on their own, the wrestlers also talked about the value of having a support system. The participants referred to the support that they received from a variety of sources. Jane said her family and boyfriend were “really supportive of me,” and Jacqueline and Jill both said that their families were proud of them. Rebecca said her mom was her biggest fan, and Amber indicated that her family and boyfriend supported her wrestling. For the wrestlers, their teammates were an important source of support on and off the mat, as
were their families, friends, and romantic partners. While the wrestlers had many social
supports, ironically, their independence was demonstrated so profoundly that they
sometimes felt that they did not receive the support that they occasionally needed from
their friends and family:

I think maybe sometimes I might come across as too independent . . . . When
you’re having a difficult time and then no one thinks that you need help . . . I
guess I come on as too independent, strong, like, very strong willed (Amber).

The wrestlers contrasted their ardent independence to the reliance and desperation that
they claimed they have seen some other women exhibit. Being independent was
something that the wrestlers valued, and this independence appeared to be a characteristic
that they thought distinguished them from “girly girls” and put them on the other end of
the spectrum of femininity.

**Summary: Femininity from a Wrestler’s Perspective**

These wrestlers held an expansive and flexible view of femininity. Their
encompassing view included traditional women who they saw as passive, weak,
dependent, and focused on appearance. They also stipulated that there are “totally
different types of femininity,” as Jill claimed, in addition to this more traditional image of
women. In contrast to the extreme “girly girl” of traditional femininity, they proposed
female wrestlers as another model of femininity that is a combination of traditionally
feminine qualities, such as being social and emotional, with other qualities such as
confidence and independence. Their vision of their own femininity is how they came to
define the term generally. For example, Amber said:
I think being a confident, strong, independent person makes you a feminine woman. I can be any woman I want, and I think that, I guess, would be a definition: to be a feminine woman is to choose how you want to be.

Therefore, my prediction that wrestlers would have a very traditional image of femininity in order to hold themselves out as unique and different from such a model is partially incorrect. Their depiction of “girly girls” was very limited and traditional, and they did suggest that they were distinct from these women, giving partial support to the hypothesis that the wrestlers would think of themselves as different from other women. On the other hand, the wrestlers seemed to simultaneously hold an inclusive opinion about what constitutes femininity: their definition of femininity was broad enough to include their own performances of femininity as well as other women who are more traditionally feminine. Rather than proposing their own femininity as different from or an alternative to a narrowly defined normative femininity, the wrestlers defined the term more widely in order to include themselves within this definition, given that they all considered themselves to be feminine, although not traditionally so. Hence, the wrestlers were redefining and broadening the definition of femininity to include themselves, while also still postulating some women as very traditional in order to highlight how they are different from these other women.

The conception of gender that the wrestlers posited represents a more critical understanding than that of the dominant gender schema. In addition to conceptualizing femininity as a varying category of identity, the wrestlers also talked about the relationship between masculinity and femininity in a way that does not provide complete
support for gender binaries, in terms of the performances of gender.\[^{34}\] The wrestlers’ self-descriptions included qualities that are traditionally considered by some to be masculine, such as being confident, strong, and independent, and, as previously indicated. In addition, as Laura’s quote about her own femininity exemplified, they explicitly expressed the belief that they possessed and performed both masculine and feminine qualities. Thus, since the wrestlers said that they considered themselves feminine and they exhibited masculine qualities, it would appear that they believe that women can have masculine and feminine characteristics. While they did not state this opinion blatantly, their comments are indicative of a nuanced and intricate perception of gender that is not based on gender binaries. This more complex conception of gender is akin to the bi-modal, multi-factorial model proposed by gender researchers and theorists such as Deaux (1987) and Maccoby (1987). Also consistent with Deaux’s and Maccoby’s more nuanced approaches to gender, in contrast to hegemonic conceptions of sex, gender, and gender performance, the wrestlers seemed to partially recognize that gender was a social construction. Their suggestions that “girly girls” are taught to believe particular things and behave in particular ways implies the social creation and fabrication of these qualities, rather than supporting a biological deterministic argument.

In conjunction, however, the wrestlers also expressed opinions that were consistent with the dominant gender schema which links sex, gender, and gender

\[^{34}\] The wrestlers’ discussions of gender do seem to support gender binaries in terms of a belief in only two genders: man and women. The claim that their comments do not completely support gender binaries is to draw attention to their professed beliefs that women can perform “masculine” traits, thereby challenging the gendered category of femininity.
performance, and defines these as dichotomous variables that are relationally defined. For example, the wrestlers compared and contrasted men and women: "I think of feminine as opposite of masculine," said Jacqueline. As compared to men, women were described by Jacqueline as more delicate. Other wrestlers said that women were more serious and in tune with their emotions: "I think as women, we're better at expressing our feelings, whereas men just bottle it up inside," said Jill, and Laura stated that women are "more talkative, more open, willing to share things, [and] more of a serious tone too. [With] guys, you can't tell if something's the matter with them; they usually just joke around with their friends." Women were also described as more sensitive to others, and as having smaller egos than men. In contrast to men, Susan said, "a girl would be {pause} more sensitive," and Kirstin claimed, "women have egos, but not to the same extent as men do."

While the wrestlers discussed masculinity and femininity in relation to one other, in contrast to the numerous binary opposites that Ashmore et al. (1986) highlighted in their study, the wrestlers did not cite many differences between men and women and their comments about their own femininity suggest similarities between men and women. Some wrestlers even stated that men and women are not very different. For example, Kirstin said, "I don't really see a difference between having a conversation with a man or a woman." The few differences between women and men that the wrestlers discussed may be a result of the non-dualistic view about gender that they professed. The sentiment expressed by the wrestlers seems to be that there are differences between women, and these differences appear to be greater or equal to the differences they noted between men
and women; thus, the wrestlers seem to think of gender relationally but also more expansively than simplistic, exclusive differences between men and women.

Also consistent with more complex models of gender, as discussed in the literature review, wrestlers’ descriptions of gender were situationally specific. The wrestlers stated that their gender performances were something that they controlled by displaying some qualities in particular situations and hiding them in others. Kirstin commented, cited in the subsection “A Wrestler and a Woman,” that wrestlers turned on and off qualities of their performance for particular times and places. In other words, their gender was, as described by West and Zimmerman (1987) and implied by Goffman (1959), a field or stage-specific doing or putting on. However, the wrestlers also felt that their gender identity was something that was stable in some respects, and while they could make salient particular qualities at particular times, they always possessed these qualities and instead only chose to show them in certain circumstances. Thus, as Bourdieu might argue, their gender appears to be a relatively stable disposition or habitus. The variations in wrestlers’ gender performances and habitus are most apparent in their paradoxical worlds on and off the mat.

**On the Mat**

One of the worlds in which the wrestlers lived was the world of wrestling. The worlds of wrestling and sport are traditionally masculine worlds that demand the performance of traditionally masculine qualities, such as competitiveness, from all participants, although women are treated differently than men in sport (Lenskyj, 1994). In the every-day social world, sharper divisions and differentiations are drawn between men and women, and the normative model of femininity is more traditional than the
wrestlers' performances in sport. The participants are wrestlers and women, and due to the varying expectations of these two different identifiers, they seem to change their gender performances to fit with a variety of contexts.

Each of the participants has been involved in wrestling for at least four years; all of the participants started wrestling in high school, if not earlier. Several of the participants started wrestling because of a family connection to the wrestling community. Five of the participating wrestlers started wrestling because their fathers were coaches of school or club programs within their home communities. Due to their fathers' involvement, and sometimes the involvement of other family members including siblings and their mothers, these wrestlers started participating in wrestling. As one of the wrestlers said, "it was like a big family thing: my dad coached, and me and my [siblings] all trained, and then my Mom ran all the draws at the tournaments and stuff . . . . It was a family affair." While many of these wrestlers decided to tag along with older siblings or their parents to wrestling, thus voluntarily foraying into the sport, one of the participants was required to join by her father. This wrestler told me that she trained with her siblings from an early age and her father was their coach but she did not join voluntarily. She said, "I was forced into it . . . . There was no ands, ifs, or buts [about starting wrestling]." While she did not join voluntarily, she did enjoy the sport and chose to continue wrestling, even after her other siblings stopped participating in the sport. Two of the other participants joined wrestling because of a sibling or friend's involvement, and another two wrestlers joined at the suggestion of a either their school principle or wrestling coach. All of the participants in the study got involved with wrestling due to a male in their lives, either a father, brother, friend, or school figure. This is not surprising,
given that wrestling is still predominantly a male-dominated sport and women’s wrestling
was still in its infancy when many of these women started wrestling.

All of the participants enjoyed wrestling and expressed a number of things that
they liked about the sport. One of the elements that the participants liked about wrestling
was that they perceived it to be one of the hardest and most challenging sports,
demanding physical, mental, and emotional toughness. Since the sport is difficult and
challenging, the wrestlers said that it requires serious commitment and dedication, and,
therefore, a person could not participate in wrestling recreationally: “it’s not even
something that you can really do recreationally in my books,” said Kate. The wrestlers
took pride in and liked wrestling because it is a difficult sport: “I like that it [is] so
physical . . . it’s just such a challenge,” stated Amber.

The participants also expressed that they liked wrestling because it is an individual
sport: rather than relying on a team, the wrestlers seemed to see themselves as
independent athletes who earned their own successes by themselves and suffered defeat
alone. Kate commented that “there is no one covering your back in wrestling; it’s all
you. If you suck, you suck and everyone is going to know. If not, then, you know, that’s
great.” The wrestlers recognized that they had support and assistance from their coaches,
fellow athletes, and others, but unlike other sports, such as soccer or hockey where
athletes have to rely on others to help achieve a win, winning a wrestling match is
accomplished solely by the wrestler on the mat.

[In wrestling], you have your own individual sport . . . . Most of the time your
team doesn’t really depend on you, whereas, in soccer, your whole team loses.
[In wrestling], when you end, it’s you either win or you don’t win, you have
individual champions (Kirstin). 35

While the wrestlers indicated that they appreciated their teammates, they liked not having
to rely on them. Laura said, “completely how you perform and how you do is based on
the effort that you put in. It doesn’t depend on the other team members or anything.”
Despite enjoying the individual element of the sport, the wrestlers also said that the
camaraderie with teammates was something that they loved about wrestling: nine of the
wrestlers commented on the close relationships they had with other friends in wrestling.
Rebecca asserted, “I like the team . . . . We’re very close, and you know what? I think
that’s what’s kept me going more than anything.”

Finally, reflecting their athletic and competitive qualities, six of the athletes
specifically said that they continued to participate in wrestling because of their success.
Winning and success, however they personally defined these, were reasons for their
continued involvement: “you have some success and, you know, you start liking the
success and then you start kind of getting hooked in to it . . . and when you’re good at
something you want to stick with it,” said Kate. The reasons that the wrestlers said that
they liked the sport reflect some of the personality characteristics that they exhibited
while on the mat.

Prior to considering the themes that emerged from the data about the wrestlers’
own gendered characteristics and performances on the mat, two themes that emerged

35 There are a few tournaments, including the Canada West Championships and Thunder Bay Duels, which
are organized as duel meets. In duel meets, individual wrestlers earn points for their team and there is a
team champion. However, although they represent their teams, wrestlers are still competing as individuals.
about the context of the world of wrestling will be discussed. The participants spoke about the need to prove their abilities to male wrestlers and coaches in order to earn their respect, and the institutional mechanisms employed by the wrestling community to promote traditional femininity within the sport. These two themes are important because they frame the wrestlers’ comments about their own gender performances on the mat.

**Winning over the Men: Male Wrestlers’ and Coaches’ Responses to Female Wrestlers**

The female wrestlers participating in this study were physically and mentally tough; they were aggressive and competitive; and they also experienced vulnerability, close social ties, and openness within the wrestling context. In the dominant gender schema, many of these qualities are associated with masculinity, and the wrestlers themselves said they had to be more masculine on the mat. Part of their performance of “masculinity” is based on the expectations of the sporting world; expectations that are both verbally expressed by coaches and other athletes, and those that are simply the unspoken ethos of sport. Some of the qualities that the athletes performed on the mat were acted out in order to prove their abilities as athletes and to justify and legitimize the sport of female wrestling. Amber claimed:

> It’s like you have to show that you’re tough and that we have to prove [we] can do it just as well as the guys! [We] can do it better than them . . . . Since I started, it’s been, like, constantly trying to prove yourself.

Those wrestlers that had been involved in wrestling for a number of years and had started participating in the sport when it was first starting in Canada talked about the discrimination that they had faced in the sport and how they tried to over come it and win
the respect of the other male wrestlers and coaches. Reflecting back on her early days in wrestling, Kate said:

We come into the room full of guys, they’re working hard, [the coach] doesn’t want us there, we’ve got something to prove, you know. We want to be there; we want to overcome all of these obstacles that are sent in front of us. “Oh, you can’t climb this rope.” Well, not at first we didn’t {laughing}, but we sure learned. And we came; we were always on time; we always came early; we worked harder than anyone; we did extra cardio; we did extra weights.

Particularly when they started, because of the resistance or complete apathy towards women’s wrestling, the women wanted to prove themselves and their abilities and earn the respect of the other male wrestlers. The need to prove themselves was particularly expressed by the more senior athletes, and some of the younger athletes talked about the struggles of early pioneering women wrestlers. Although the wrestlers particularly expressed the need to prove themselves during the infancy of women’s wrestling, they indicated that, in their current experiences, they still needed to prove themselves to other male wrestlers and coaches, and they wanted the respect of these other members of the wrestling community.

Seven of the participants in the study talked about battles they were currently facing on the mat and within the wrestling community. The women said that they had sometimes felt personally disrespected by other male athletes, and that the sport of women’s wrestling was still slighted:

We still get that [disrespect]. There are still a couple of guys who are like, “get off our mat. This is our mat.” . . . They think they can just run us over every day
... I don't think a lot of guys really do have a lot of respect for women's wrestling because they think they work so much harder .... A lot of guys, even though we are friends with some of them, you know how they feel about it. Not all the guys, [but] a few (Kelly).

Some of the comments the wrestlers told of hearing from their male teammates included remarks that women's practices were easier, their matches were not difficult, that women's wrestling was a joke, and even that wrestling was a man's sport and "you guys don't belong here," a comment that Jane had said she had heard from her male teammates, with the word guys actually referring to women. Although the participants expressed differing opinions about the difficulty of separate women's and men's practices, they still asserted that women wrestlers work hard, were tough, competitive, and strong. 36 Interestingly, four of the wrestlers claimed that when men and women train together, women's wrestling receives more respect and support from the men because they can see that the women work just as hard as the men. Kate stated:

So many girls have their own practices [now], and I find that it takes something away from the experience almost though. [It takes away] equality — to be seen as equals. [When we trained together], we trained as hard as those guys; we trained with the guys; we trained above and beyond the guys because we had something

---

36 At the varsity level, men and women are technically on different teams because universities segregate teams by gender. Despite this formal separation, the men's and women's wrestling programs often train together, they typically share a coaching staff, although some coaches may dedicate more of their time to the men or women, and they travel together. Hence, they essentially function as one team. Community programs do not distinguish by gender: men and women are on the same team.
to prove. And now it's kind of gone and taken a back step because the guys
might see us at a certain time and say "oh well, we didn't do that. You guys are
slacking off. You guys get it easy."
Kate asserted that the women still worked hard in practice when they practiced
separately from the men's team, but she indicated that because the men do not see the
women training, some of them assume that women's practices are easier and,
therefore, women do not receive the same respect as when they train with the men.

Demonstrating their work ethic and proving their abilities may help address
the complaints of male wrestlers regarding women's practices and matches; however,
comments that the women heard such as "girl's wrestling is not wrestling," recounted
by Laura, and "oh, girl's wrestling: what a joke. Oh, you guys are just a waste of
space," which Jill had heard, reflect more ingrained notions of what constitutes
femininity and appropriate behaviour for women, sentiments that may be more
difficult to change. Suggesting that women should not wrestle because it is a man's
sport draws upon hegemonic notions of male physical superiority and female
weakness. Earning the respect of some of their male teammates may be difficult for
the women to achieve because of how these men perceive femininity.

Although there the participants said that there was resistance to women's
wrestling, some of the more successful wrestlers claimed that they had "proven
[themselves] again, and again, and again, and again, and then now {emphasized} . . .
you have the respect of your teammates. They know that you can do it, [wrestling],
yeck know you can do it better than them," as one of the national team members
stated. However, from my discussions with these ten wrestlers, it appears that there
was a difference in respect afforded to female wrestlers by level of success. Those wrestlers who were more successful relayed fewer stories about feeling disrespected than did less successful athletes. Hence, respect seemed to be offered to a select group of athletes who regularly won tournaments and was not necessarily granted to the sport in general.

Despite the criticisms that the female wrestlers expressed about the lack of respect they sometimes received from some of their male teammates, the participants said that a number of men in wrestling were supportive and helpful. Rebecca said that several of her male teammates were supportive, had taught her techniques, and encouraged the sport of women’s wrestling: “there’s also some guys who are really supportive . . . . Like, the older guys will teach you something, or . . . say ‘yeah, that was a good job, but you’ve got to do this’, or coach you or something like that,” she said. Other wrestlers, including Amber, Laura, Kelly, Kirstin, Kate, and Jacqueline, talked about the support they had received from their coaches, although three of athletes said that some of the coaches they currently or previously have trained with were dismissive, unsupportive, and “wished [they] weren’t in the [practice] room,” as Kate commented. While the wrestlers still faced resistance to their participation in the sport from members of the wrestling community, they also expressed that others were helpful. Overall, the sentiments that the participants expressed about the support of male athletes and the work accomplished by female athletes was mixed. Within this context, each athlete talked about wanting the respect of their male coaches and wrestlers, and they were willing to prove that they too were competent, dedicated athletes in the hopes of earning the respect they sought. The
wrestlers tried to prove themselves, attempting to become “in-group” members, through their wrestling techniques and by adopting the standards of behaviour in the sport.

*Keep your Women as Women: Institutionalization of Femininity*

On the mat, the wrestlers stated that they were women but they changed their performance to be less feminine; they enacted qualities that are considered more masculine and they disregard traditional trappings and qualities of femininity, details of which will be discussed in the sections below. Despite the wrestlers’ less feminine performances, context specific identifications, and assertions about femininity, they indicated and decried that there were many practices used by wrestling organizations, especially the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (FILA),\(^{37}\) to institutionalize traditional femininity in wrestling, including weight categories that discriminate against heavier women, sex verification testing, awarding tiaras instead of medals, and the Ms. Lutte Award, otherwise known as the Most Beautiful Wrestler Award.

The image and idea of women’s wrestling promoted by FILA is contradictory to how the wrestlers viewed themselves, and may be interpreted as insulting to these women who were attempting to expand beyond traditional gendered expectations. Exemplifying their objectifying and very traditional view of women, FILA, in a recent online publication, made the following claim about women’s wrestling:

---

\(^{37}\) The International Federation of Associated Wrestling styles is the English name for this international body where English is the second language. The Association’s primary language is French, and the acronym, FILA, stands for the French title – Fédération Internationale des Luttes Associées.
After clearly establishing the basis for equality between the sexes, Ladies Wrestling was accepted by the Olympic Games committee and will be held in Athens 2004. In this way, FILA signals the intention to develop Ladies Wrestling, a sport of striking beauty and beauties (*Welcome in New World of Wrestling*, n.d.).

Reference to women’s wrestling – interestingly referred to as Ladies Wrestling\(^{38}\) – as a sport of beauty and beauties is demeaning to the participants. Rather than concentrating on their capabilities as athletes and the sheer physicality of the sport, which is what the participants enjoyed about wrestling, FILA focuses attention on the aesthetics of the sport.\(^{39}\) Furthermore, and perhaps even more dismissively, they refer to the athletes as beautiful women rather than talented athletes. On the mat, the wrestlers were not concerned with their appearance and instead were focused on wrestling and winning; they did not think of themselves as, nor were they trying to be, beauties. The wrestlers I interviewed who heard this quote or were aware of FILA’s position were outraged. As a former wrestler myself, I also found this claim to be demeaning, dismissive, and belittling of women’s wrestling, a sport that requires strength, endurance, flexibility, technique, quick thinking, and fortitude, and is not a sport which intends to be aesthetically pleasing.

\(^{38}\) This is one of the few, if only, places that I have seen women’s wrestling referred to as ladies wrestling. Referring to the sport as ladies wrestling seems to exemplify FILA’s gendered expectations for the female athletes, suggesting that they want female wrestlers to be women and ladies.

\(^{39}\) As noted in the Chapter 2, “women’s sports” are typically seen as aesthetic sports, rather than demanding physical activities (*Kane*, 1995).
like some other “women’s” sports, including gymnastics, synchronized swimming, or figure skating.\(^{40}\)

One of the most blatant examples of FILA’s attitude towards women wrestlers as “beauties” is the Ms. Lutte award,\(^{41}\) given to the “most beautiful wrestler” at world championships and other international meets. The award recipient is selected by male coaches and officials at the tournaments and the winner is awarded pearls, or other feminine gifts; for example, one year the winner was given a poodle (Kotarski, 2001). While many countries and athletes have refused to accept the award as a protest, Ms. Lutte is still a part of some international events, such as the Warsaw Cup. Many female wrestlers I know think the award is ridiculous and insulting. As stated by one of the participants who was a national team member:

> We’re not here for a beauty pageant! If we wanted to be in a beauty contest or a beauty pageant we’d go to a beauty pageant. We’re here for wrestling. This is ridiculous! Why are [they] bringing looks into it? What are my skills?

The awarding of the Ms. Lutte title continues to be felt by many wrestlers to be demeaning and has nothing to do with sport, which, unlike a beauty contest, is actually the purview of FILA. The sexist attitude of FILA is readily evident, especially since there is no Mr. Lutte.

\(^{40}\) While these sports try to present an aesthetically pleasing image, they are also challenging physical activities. My comments about the aesthetic qualities of these sports are not intended to take away from the capabilities of the athletes participating in these sports but are to show some of the differences between these types of sports and wrestling.

\(^{41}\) Lutte is French for wrestle.
Currently, at the World Championships, the winner of each male weight class is awarded a belt and the winner of each female weight class is awarded a tiara. Awarding tiaras seems to parallel the analogy of the beauty pageant. Rather than awarding medals or trophies, FILA has different awards for men and women and the women’s award is one that is traditionally feminine. Two of the participants said they would not mind winning a crown but they were more interested in winning the world championships rather than the crown per se. Instead of a tiara, the wrestlers said they would rather win a belt or a medal: “just give me a medal, that’s all I want,” said Amber. Both awards given by FILA, the tiaras and Ms. Lutte, clearly signal their commitment to promoting and maintaining traditional femininity within wrestling, despite their claims about gender equality.

FILA also has a policy of sex testing at the world championships. Although this policy was eliminated at the Olympic Games in the 2000 Olympics in Sydney (Simpson et al., 2000), FILA still requires women to prove that they are females. Unlike the less intrusive Barr Body test previously used at the Olympics, although all sex tests are intrusive, FILA requires a physical, manual inspection to verify an athletes’ sex. As Kelly bluntly stated, “they stick their fingers in you and make sure you have female parts

---

42 The standard nomenclature is gender verification testing, although it is the sex of the athlete that is confirmed.” Rather than use this erroneous term, I will refer to this as sex testing which is a more accurate label for these types of tests.

43 I confirmed FILA’s sex testing policy with Canada’s Junior Women’s World team coach, and my former coach at the University of Alberta, Vang Ioannides (Personal communication, July 14, 2006).
... They have to make sure that you have ovaries."44 A minor consolation to such an
intrusion of their bodies was that these "confirmatory" tests could be conducted at home
by their own physician, which raises further questions about the need for such
verification testing at all. Sex testing can be interpreted as degrading to women who are
required to have their sex confirmed in order to prove that they are females, as if it is
questionable that females would want to compete in sports. As Kane (1995) notes, the
very fact that women participate in sport makes their sex and gender suspect since sport
is still considered an unfeminine activity. Sex testing seems to exemplify this sentiment
and demands that women prove that they are indeed females.

Women’s weight categories are the means of institutionalization of femininity that
the wrestlers spoke about most frequently. Seventy-two kilograms (158.4lbs) is the
"heavy" weight category for women,45 which is a relatively low weight in contemporary
Western societies given that a general weight increase is occurring in industrialized
nations (Silventoinen et al., 2004). Given this low "heavy" weight class, many women
cannot participate in wrestling, even though one of the advantages of the sport is that it

44 Kelly’s description of sex verification testing raises the interesting question of what is required for a
person to be considered a woman. In her comment, she seems to state that a woman who does not have
ovaries in not really a woman, excluding, for example, women who have had oophorectomies.

45 In wrestling, the listed weight is the top end of the category, or the maximum allowed weight for a
competitor. Thus, at the "heavy" weight category, 72kg is the maximum weight that any wrestler can
weigh. On the other end of the scale, at the lowest category, the maximum weight is 48kg. The remaining
categories beyond 48kg, including the "heavy" weight category, represent a range. For example, at 51kg,
the weight class ranges from over 48kg up to 51kg.
does not require a specific body type because of the weight categories. Six of the participating wrestlers talked about how the low cut off for the “heavy” weight category prevented women, many of whom were not over-weight but are simply taller, muscular women, from wrestling altogether or wrestling in international tournaments. Heavier women can compete nationally in the interuniversity league in Canada in an 82kg (180lbs) weight category, but the highest non-varsity national and international weight is 72kg.\textsuperscript{46} The participants, two of whom were “heavy” weight wrestlers themselves, stated that the weight categories discriminate against larger women, which they thought was fuelled by the sentiment of “oh, you know, we don’t want to watch fat girls wrestle,” as Rebecca bluntly stated. The fact that the men’s weight categories go up to 120kgs (264lbs) while the women’s do not exceed 72kg is telling. Although the average man’s weight is greater than that of women, the disparity between the men’s and women’s heavy weight categories is quite large, and was viewed by these participants as discrimination against bigger women. The weight categories do seem to suggest that FILA is supportive of a traditionally small female figure, despite the sport’s requirement of a muscular, and thus heavier, body.

These various methods and practices – Ms. Lutte, tiaras, sex verification testing, and low weight categories – are a means for institutionalizing, or entrenching, femininity into the sport of wrestling. Despite the wrestlers’ assertions that they were less feminine on the mat, and contradictory to the requirements and the ethos of the sport, the

\textsuperscript{46} Interestingly, the gap between 72kg and 82kg is the largest between any of the women’s weight categories: three to five kilograms, or 6.6 to 11 pounds, separate the other categories, while this is a 10 kilogram or 22 pound difference.
international ruling body of wrestling appears to be promoting a traditional image of femininity. Amber suggested that these types of practices reflected a fear of a femininity that includes stronger women. She asked the theoretical question “a woman can’t be really aggressive in an aggressive sport without still being a woman?” Demonstrating a clear belief that the FILA practices firmly supported, promoted, and contributed to hegemonic images of femininity, Amber also said that FILA is engaged in these types of activities to “make [their] women [into] women.” The dominant image of femininity still does not include the qualities that female wrestlers are performing on the mat, and female athletes are still considered deviant and are a challenge to the dominant gender schema, the power of which is reasserted and upheld by numerous FILA practices.

The participants commented on their gendered experiences and performances within this world of wrestling, a world in which they have tried to earn the respect of the male coaches and wrestlers, and in which they had to contend with institutional mechanisms that attempted to enforce and promote traditional femininity. On the mat, the wrestlers believed that their performances were more masculine and less feminine, despite the efforts of FILA to make or keep their women as women.

*Be a Man: On the Mat, Femininity is a Bad Word*

The wrestlers were very committed to their sport. When they were in their season, which runs from September through March for the varsity league, until May for the Senior National Championships, and into the summer for international competitions, they trained for at least two to four fours a day, five to six days a week, plus additional cardiovascular and weight lifting workouts; therefore, the wrestlers spent a large portion of their waking hours in the wrestling world. Wrestling, at least from a historical
perspective, as Rebecca noted, is a masculine sport and, thus, the participants believed they were expected to be masculine. Rebecca made these gender expectations very explicit when she asserted, “I think that on the mat you’re expected to be a guy and off the mat you’re expected to be a girl.” This distinction indicates a dichotomous gender perspective that differentiates between masculinity and femininity and epitomizes the gender distinctions between wrestlers’ on-and-off-the-mat worlds and performances. Although it seemed difficult for the participants to articulate these differences, the gendered expectations they felt on the mat and their resulting gender performances, about which they spoke, are crucial for understanding wrestlers’ lived experiences and the meaning of femininity in their world of sport.

Within wrestling, traditional femininity is belittled and disrespected. On the mat, all of the wrestlers were expected to behave like athletes, which meant being competitive, aggressive, tough, strong, and unemotional – qualities which are typically associated with masculinity rather than femininity (Ashmore et al., 1986). These qualities are highly regarded in wrestling, as in sport in general, and, it appears from these wrestlers comments that behaviours which contradict these ideals are derided by those within their wrestling community. On the mat, femininity, especially traditional femininity, was a performance that was not often done or tolerated; according to Kate, femininity is “one of those kinds of things that you try to avoid lots when you’re a wrestler.” Many of the participants expressed similar sentiments to those expressed by Susan when she said, “when you’re in the wrestling room, you don’t really want to be viewed as super feminine.” In wrestling, the female wrestlers played down their feminine qualities and instead amplified their more masculine traits. Within this environment, they considered it
a compliment to be treated like men. When she heard comments that female wrestlers are “just like one of the guys,” Kate said she responded by saying, “all right, I’ll take it as a compliment,” even though she did not think of herself as masculine. In fact, Kate suggested that on the mat, wrestlers were made into and behaved like “pseudo-guys” because that was the expectation and requirement within the wrestling room:

Guy wrestlers, especially, want to rationalize our existence in the sport: “you’re just like a guy” because they are just trying to bring us and make us like pseudo-guys. You know, “they’re not really girls: they have more guy in them so they want to be like us” (Kate).

On the mat, more traditionally feminine characteristics that the wrestlers tried not to perform, did not want to perform, and did not think were appropriate in wrestling included attention to their appearance and being emotional. All of the wrestlers strongly stated that on the mat they did not care about how they looked; they said that their appearances did not matter to them as they were more focused on actually wrestling. Commenting on her appearance in wrestling, Jane said, “you don’t even care when you’re wrestling.” As noted in the section “We’re Pretty Too,” those athletes who did concentrate on their appearance and put effort into looking attractive in sport were criticized and dismissed by other athletes and coaches. Even when they did not put much effort into their appearance but still looked more feminine on the mat, wrestlers were chided for their appearance. Kate told a story about wearing a tank top to practice and was told by her coach that she could absolutely not wear it in wrestling. At first, he stated that it was dangerous because others might get their fingers caught in it, which it clearly was not, given that the uniform for wrestling is a tight, spandex singlet similar to a
tank top. He then told her that a tank top was inappropriate because it “might distract the male wrestlers.” This response demonstrates that a feminine looking appearance on the mat is not tolerated, and it leads to concerns about sexuality in wrestling. While the wrestlers themselves strongly stated that wrestling is not sexual – “there is nothing sexual about wrestling at all!,” Kristin explained – concerns about sexuality have previously been used as a justification to bar women from wrestling (Fields, 2005).

Rather than looking pretty or attractive on the mat, the wrestlers said that they were “sweaty,” “gross,” “battered,” “bruised,” and “broken,” and they were proud of their sweat and hard work. As Jill proudly proclaimed, “I just like getting sweaty {laugh}. I like feeling like I’m accomplishing something after a work out. I like coming out of wrestling and my shirt is just completely sweat drenched.” The wrestlers described their appearances on the mat as them looking their worst – Kelly commented that “at wrestling, they’ve seen you at your worst; you can’t get much worse” – and in this context that was a good thing.

In addition to being unconcerned about their appearances, being more masculine on the mat also meant that the wrestlers were less emotional. Behaving less emotionally specifically applied to crying, showing weakness, and reacting to injury. Rather than being very emotional, especially by showing fear or pain, the wrestlers said that within this context they controlled their emotions and behaved more stoically. One of the younger wrestlers, Susan, stated that in wrestling she has learned to “control [her] emotions . . . You can learn how to control your breathing and things that, which is also a good thing about wrestling.” Borrowing a line from the movie A League of Their Own (1992) and applying it to wrestling, it would be fair to say the general sentiment from the
immediate community is that “there’s no crying in wrestling.” Even when they were injured (and many of the participants have had serious injuries including chronic and acute problems with their backs, necks, shoulders, elbows, ankles, and knees, and a few had undergone surgery), the expectation was that they would not and should not cry in the wrestling room, and even more extremely, in front of other wrestlers. Amber, a senior wrestler, said that she would not ever cry in wrestling – “I will not do that here!” – given that, as Rebecca stressed, “[crying] is not accepted in wrestling . . . . It’s viewed as weakness.” The wrestlers said that they controlled their emotions in wrestling and were generally less emotional in the wrestling world.

Despite the stigma against crying in wrestling, three of the women said they had cried on the mat, particularly when they were injured. When they did cry, the wrestlers said that they found it extremely embarrassing, given the context-specific condemnation against emotion, and particularly against showing weakness. Rebecca said, “I’m a crier . . . . I have [cried in the wrestling room] . . . . It’s embarrassing.” However, the wrestlers also expressed that when other team members cried, rather than harshly condemning them, they expressed concern for their injuries and feelings: “whenever a woman gets hurt, a chick apologizes . . . . Those are your friends so you’re very amicable,” claimed Kirstin. Both the expression of hurt through crying and the care expressed by female wrestlers for injured teammates are considered feminine responses, as compared to masculinity.

The very fact that the female wrestlers sometimes cried is used as a point of distinction between themselves and the male wrestlers. Kirstin, commenting on injury and emotion, stated:
Women, we focus a lot more on injury whereas men don’t. Men are very capable of pushing through and just turning that off. In terms of when you’ve got the adrenalin running and the testosterone is there and maybe you don’t feel, I don’t know, the physical aspects of it.

Kirstin’s comments indicate that she believed there were biological differences between men and women and their reaction to injury. Jill commented that “there is definitely a difference in women’s wrestling than men’s: boys don’t cry, they don’t cry, but in the wrestling practice we’ll have people crying: the girls crying because they’re hurt, or they’re pissed off, or something like that.” Interestingly, therefore, although they recognized that they were expected to be more masculine, the wrestlers also demonstrated more characteristically feminine qualities in wrestling and implied that these were natural differences. Yet they discussed gender as a social construct and had offered a less dichotomous perspective of gender. Hence, the wrestlers’ assertions that they were expected to be less feminine while on the mat is not as emphatically or rigidly expressed in their descriptions of their actual experiences.

The other more feminine quality that the wrestlers stressed should be left off the mat was sociability. The wrestling practice room and competition mat were seen as places to be focused and directed; the wrestlers’ concentrations were centered on wrestling and they asserted that they were not and should not be distracted by being talkative or social with their teammates or coaches. Kelly said that on the mat, she did not think it was acceptable for girls to “laugh, and joke around, and giggle, and talk.” Rebecca described wrestling as a business and Amber said it was like a job. The participants had work to do and they could not be social on the mat; rather, the business
of wrestling was serious and they expected that they and all other wrestlers would take it seriously, which meant no chitchatting and no gossiping. As Kelly asserted, “you take it pretty seriously when you’re on the mat.” Despite their dedication and focus on the mat, the wrestlers reported that they did talk and have fun with one another during wrestling; yet, they considered themselves to be less social while in wrestling as compared to off the mat when they were more talkative, sociable, and characteristically feminine.

Wrestlers’ strong claims about their masculine behaviour in wrestling may be attempts to verbally simulate a more rigid character than they have actually enacted, a character that fits more with the expectations of the sport than with their actual performances. Wrestlers understood that they were expected to be less feminine in wrestling, and their descriptions appear to be attempts to conform to this model rather than accurately reflecting their performances. Their speech acts may be a means to convince themselves of their own performances conforming to the expectations of the sport, despite the richer and more nuanced reality of their on-the-mat experiences in which they performed both masculine and feminine qualities.

In Control: The “Masculine” Side

In contrast to the femininity that they said they performed off the mat, the wrestlers said they felt that they needed to be more masculine while on the mat. Not only did that mean toning down some of their more feminine qualities, such as being more emotional and sociable, it also required that they made salient some of their more characteristically masculine qualities. On-the-mat masculine qualities included physical and mental toughness, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and confidence.
Wrestling is a sport of control: the purpose is to control physically your opponent’s body, which is done through the execution of technique and is accomplished through the control of one’s own body. Clearly, physical control is essential in wrestling. Physical control is not simply the execution of wrestling techniques but is also the physical controlling of one’s own body in terms of restricting food and water intake for weight cutting, and controlling the development of the body, including developing and maintaining muscles. Wrestlers have formed, honed, and controlled bodies for the purpose of achieving the physical control required in their sport.

One specific element of physically controlling their bodies encompasses the very act of the continued use of their bodies to wrestle and workout. Physical dedication was a central element of the participating wrestlers’ on-the-mat experiences. The wrestlers talked about the sheer amount of physical work they accomplished within wrestling and the dedication that this required: “physically I don’t think there is another athlete in the country that could keep up with our training schedule, but then our regiment is so demanding, so whole-body demanding,” said Kirstin, while Kelly commented, “I don’t

47 Weight cutting is an interesting practice, one that I did not have the opportunity to discuss in detail with wrestlers. The only comments that wrestlers expressed about weight cutting were that this was their least favourite element of the sport. To cut weight, in order to make a desired weight category, wrestlers will decrease the amount of food that they eat for several days and may even go for a couple of days without eating. Wrestlers may also completely stop drinking fluids twenty-four hours prior to weighing-in for a competition. At the same time, athletes will increase the amount of exercise that they do and they may exercise in warm clothes and multiple layers in order to help them lose water weight. Wrestlers may also “bag it,” in which they wear plastic suits underneath their warm clothes to assist with sweating out more water. A final weight cutting technique includes sitting in or even exercising in a sauna while “bagging it.”
think there are lots of sports that get harder than wrestling.” Continuing to push
themselves physically was a quality that the wrestlers talked about as an important
component of their on-the-mat experience; their physical toughness and strength were
qualities that they said they turned up and performed to a greater degree within wrestling.

Control and toughness were also demonstrated more abstractly by the athletes
through exhibitions of mental fortitude. The wrestlers explained that the mental strength
required for the sport was another quality that they appreciated about their participation
in wrestling, and was a characteristic that they suggested was central to their on-the-mat
performances. Mental toughness includes a number of elements such as forcing oneself
to complete gruelling physical tasks, including weight cutting, controlling one’s
emotions, and remaining focused under pressure. The wrestlers’ abilities to remain
mentally focused, serious, and directed are characteristics that are important for being a
wrestler, and, from their perspective, more importantly, for being a successful wrestler.
“When you get up to the higher levels,” claimed Jacqueline, “it comes down to your
mental toughness.” Jacqueline’s comment implies that mental toughness may be the
difference between winning and losing. Wrestlers’ mental fortitude allows them to keep
going under physical pressure – “you’ve got to learn to get through that and you’ve got to
be mentally tough,” Laura stressed. Given the wrestlers’ discussions of both the mental
toughness and the individualistic nature of wrestling, it seems that these two qualities are
related. Mental toughness is critical because wrestling is an individual sport, and
circularly, the fact that it is an individual sport, which means wrestlers cannot rely on
their teammates for help, also contributed to making these women mentally tough.
Overall the wrestlers said that “it’s a tough sport physically; it’s a tough sport mentally.
You know, not many people are made to wrestle. It’s just a tough sport,” claimed Kate. Due to the demanding nature of the sport and their continued involvement and success in the sport, these women, as they suggested, were tough and strong, especially on the mat.

These wrestlers wanted to win and they were committed to doing what was required to be successful: “I like being competitive. I like to win,” said Kirstin, an experienced and successful athlete. Although winning was the ultimate success, the wrestlers defined success and their competitive abilities in other terms as well. Being competitive and successful also meant wrestling to the best of their abilities, regardless of whether or not they won the match. “I love when you go out there and you just wrestle your hardest and stuff, and even if you do lose it’s hard, but you know you’ve done all you can do,” said Laura. To these participants, required performances and characteristics for being successful meant being aggressive, sometimes ruthlessly. The wrestlers talked about being aggressive in terms of assertiveness, such as demanding access to training equipment, and being physically aggressive. For example, Kirstin commented that if she was at the gym and someone was on her equipment, as a wrestler she would be more forceful about asserting her rights. She claimed that she would say, “‘we’re signed up for this equipment, could you please get off?’” Whereas, if it was everyday life, I would probably just be like, ‘okay, I’ll find something else, you know. It’s not a big deal.”

Although her “please” does not sound forceful, Kirstin’s tone was very demanding when she made this comment, and saying please is certainly more forceful than not asserting her right to the work out equipment at all.

Physical aggression was viewed by the wrestlers as a requirement of the sport and a necessity for winning. Their sense of themselves as physically aggressive was most
apparent in their discussions about injuring athletes. In illustration of being less emotional and more aggressive, the wrestlers talked about causing injury to others, although not deliberately, and being relatively unconcerned if they did injure another athlete. Laura stated that in tournaments, “you’re going to wrestle your best, regardless of whether it’s going to hurt [your opponent].” The wrestlers indicated that being aggressive and forceful on the mat was considered to be a release of some of their emotions: “wrestling [is] your place to get all that out,” claimed Laura, and Susan said, “I also find it a stress reliever sometimes. Sometimes you just want to, like, hit someone or something {laugh}, right. If you can’t punch them, you can do something else: like, get rid of your tensions.” These comments seem to suggest that while in wrestling the wrestlers acted aggressively and they recognized that this was an acceptable and encouraged quality on the mat – sport is a stage for euphemized violence. When they stepped off the mat, however, it appears that the wrestlers seemed to recognize that there were different expectations and they should behave less aggressively. The wrestlers’ implied understanding of aggressiveness as a context-specific performance is a demonstration of how they “did” gender within paradoxical and contradictory worlds with differing gendered expectations, and the social constructedness of their performances.

On the mat, one of the qualities that the wrestlers talked about most frequently, which they cited as an outcome of their toughness and aggressiveness, was confidence. All of the wrestlers said that they felt confident within and because of wrestling. “I think that’s one thing I notice with wrestlers. Like, just in general, they’ll work to get what they want . . . they go out there with the idea of ‘you know I’m good; I’ll win’,” said
Laura, a comment which indicates wrestlers' confidence. Interestingly, the wrestlers talked about feeling more confident in wrestling because they were in front of an audience who knew them, because they had “made their mark” in the sport and this was recognized by their community. Kelly, another international wrestler, said, “I do feel a little bit more confident when I’m wrestling because I’m with people that know what I’m doing.” Since the wrestlers felt they were surrounded by a relatively like-minded community, they indicated that they felt less of a need to prove themselves and they felt generally more confident with this audience. These comments contradict other remarks the wrestlers made, as previously discussed, about feeling the need to prove their abilities as athletes. Hence, while wrestling itself is about demonstrating their abilities and wrestlers felt the need to prove themselves as athletes, their comments about confidence seem to apply to their personalities and other performances. Confidence was something that the participants indicated that they felt in wrestling, that they believed they learned through wrestling, and something that they took off the mat from wrestling, although they were the most confident when they are on the mat.

On the Mat, in the Room, and in the Showers: Variability within Wrestling Contexts

The wrestlers’ gender performances on the mat were characteristically more masculine than feminine, and certainly more masculine than their performances off the mat, although the wrestlers did display qualities associated with both genders in both contexts. In the world of wrestling, the wrestlers also identified differences between their experiences and performances in competitions, in practices, and in the locker room.
Their feelings of strength, toughness, and aggressiveness varied markedly among these wrestling contexts.

In competition, the wrestlers described extreme focus, determination, competitive spirit, and willingness to be aggressive. Their desire to win and to be successful brought out their on-the-mat “masculine” qualities more strongly than other on-the-mat contexts. In the moment of competition, when they stepped out on to the mat to “do battle,” as Kelly said, they would enter into what they refer to as a “zone.” In this zone, they were, in their opinion, simply athletes and their gender, their femininity, no longer mattered. Amber said:

As soon as you get out there, it’s like voom! It’s like I’m you the wrestler and then you just try and wrestle . . . . In a sense, you’re just the one aspect: you are a wrestler at this point and that’s all you are.

However, as noted, the wrestlers did consciously perform their gender on the mat, minimizing their more characteristically feminine displays, such as their attention to their appearance. While they may claimed that they did not think of their production of femininity while wrestling, they clearly did attempt to manage their gender performances, restricting their femininity in order to legitimate themselves as wrestlers. Furthermore, despite thinking of themselves as simply athletes and claiming that they did not focus on or pay attention to their femininity, inevitably, the wrestlers’ gender performances have gender implications. Their strong identification as wrestlers and their suggested beliefs that their gender was not important on the mat indicates the importance of wrestling for their self-conceptions and identifications: they seemed to suggest that they were wrestlers first and women second.
In contrast to their toughness, aggression, and confidence, the athletes also expressed other elements of their emotional experiences in their on-the-mat experiences: they expressed feelings of doubt, fear, and worry. While the wrestlers considered and talked about themselves as exemplifying the qualities that they identified as masculine, there were variations in their performances, which seemed to be particularly influenced by their immediate success and performances as athletes. In a competition, if they were winning, the wrestlers indicated that they felt strong and powerful; however, if they were losing they felt more self-doubt and they might sometimes lapse in confidence. Kirstin’s pithy statement exemplifies this sentiment: “well, if I’m losing I probably feel like shit, and if I’m winning I probably feel great.” Although they retained their fortitude, feelings of desperation and vulnerability were more readily expressed when the wrestlers spoke about their experiences of being in a losing situation in a competition.

The athletes also discussed how they were emotional, and could feel vulnerable, stressed, and strained when they were in a competition, just prior to the start of their matches. They said they felt focused and determined once they stepped on to the mat, yet during warm-up and the time between matches, which are a required minimum of 15 minutes but can be much longer, up to a couple of hours, the wrestlers indicated that they could sometimes be worried and stressed. Expressions of these vulnerable emotions are those which the wrestlers had said that they tried to avoid within the wrestling world because they are considered very feminine. One wrestler said that the strain of competition and the general stress associated with diligence to physical and mental toughness resulted in her losing some of her hair. While this is an extreme example, all of the participants said that they had “nerves” prior to wrestling: a common sentiment,
which Jill and Rebecca both stated, was “I get really nervous.” Interestingly, Laura claimed that these types of unsettling feelings were why she enjoyed competition. “You have so many doubts, and questions, and worries, but as long as I keep enjoying it and have that want, [have] got that emotion about it, I want to keep doing it,” she claimed. Rather than interpreting these feelings of worry negatively, Laura thought of them as a further challenge that was an enjoyable element of the sport. Nervousness and worry in competitive sport are not surprising, and there is a large body of sport psychology literature devoted to this topic. Rather than focusing on these psychological elements, it is important to note that these emotions do contrast with the toughness and strength that the wrestlers described as typifying their on-the-mat experiences and performances. Simultaneous expressions of toughness and vulnerability on the mat reveal a more nuanced perspective of the wrestlers’ gender performances rather than simply displaying the strength that is a requirement of the sport.

In the practice room, as compared to tournaments, the wrestlers were still focused, serious, and determined but they expressed that there was less emotional intensity associated with this on-the-mat context. Discussing this on-the-mat context, the wrestlers expressed a greater sense of freedom to take risks that might result in losing a point. Kate stated that she would try out new technique at practice: “that’s where I go to do weird things and try weird things, and it’s more relaxed,” she claimed, while Laura, Sarah, and Jane talked about feeling less concerned with losing in practices. Reflecting on her experiences of being in a losing situation, Jane said, “at practice, it doesn’t matter as much because it’s practice,” and Laura commented that in practice “if you do something really bad, I’ll laugh it off.” The wrestlers also indicated that they were less individually
focused in practice and they helped their teammates rather than simply fighting to be the best and to score each point, as they would in competition. One of the least experienced wrestlers, Susan, reflecting on the support she received from her teammates, said, “I have my friends, like Marilyn, my training partner. She’ll help me out in practice.” For the wrestlers, practices seemed to be a more relaxed environment than tournaments, but the wrestlers still expressed feelings of determination, aggression, competitiveness, and confidence, and they still worked very hard at their job of wrestling. Despite the more relaxed atmosphere of practices, Amber and Kelly, both national team members, discussed how they took practices very seriously: Amber said that at practice you have to “push [your]self... and work hard.”

While they did not express the same zeal about the performance of their more “masculine” qualities in practices, they still asserted that it was not acceptable to display more typically feminine qualities in this context. For example, it was still unacceptable to be overly talkative and social. Despite the unspoken code about socializing in wrestling, Amber and Kelly, both of whom spoke about the intensity with which they trained in practices, stated that they had seen some of their teammates talking regularly during practices. Both of these more experienced athletes talked about their responses to talkative and “giggly” training partners in the room. They said they would yell at them: “you can’t do that here!... If you’re in this room, you can’t be doing that. You have to be wrestling!” Part of their ardent stress on remaining focused and diligent in the practice room related to proving their abilities to the men, in addition to suppressing some of their more feminine qualities while on the mat.
A further difference between tournaments and practices was the wrestlers' approaches to injuring their opponents. As noted, while none of the participants in the study suggested that they wanted to injure or maim their competitors in tournaments, they did express that they would concentrate more on executing their technique rather than preventing the injury of their opponents. In the practice room, however, the wrestlers were not as physically aggressive and they said they took greater care of each other. Kirstin made several quotable comments about the differences between wrestling teammates in practices and tournaments. "You should wrestle to win everyday, fight for that extra point, but not at the expense of somebody getting hurt down there [in their practice room]," she stated. Kirstin also said:

You know, those are your friends so you're very amiable, or amicable; you're very friendly in that sense of "oh, are you okay? Sorry, sorry," you know. "How's your foot? Or how's your shoulder? ... What's hurting today? Just tell me what's up." ... You have to remember that all of those girls [in practice], we're all really good friends as well as teammates, so you don't want to hurt or alienate your teammates.

The wrestlers appeared to be more aggressive in tournaments and with competitors as compared to at practices and with their teammates. Despite the wrestlers' greater attention to the safety of their training partners while in practice, occasionally and unfortunately, teammates injured each other. If they hurt a teammate, the participants seemed to express greater concern for these injuries in the practice room as opposed to in competition where their sentiment was more akin to "it's all fair game. If you feel well enough to go to a tournament, then I'm going to try and avoid hurting you if you're my
teammate. If you're not my teammate, I'm going to do my moves," as Kirstin stated. In practice, the wrestlers were still less traditionally feminine and more characteristically masculine, yet these extremes in behaviour appeared to be less evident in practice, demonstrating the fluidity of their gender performances even within the context of wrestling.

The wrestlers' gender performances were also different in the locker room as compared to in the practice room or in competition. Wrestlers' descriptions of the locker room emphasized friendship, sharing, and fun. In the showers and change rooms, the wrestlers would chat about wrestling, their bodies, lives, and sex lives. Within the locker room, the wrestlers commented that they were more open than they were in other spaces, especially within wrestling: "you see a lot of things come out in the locker room that you don't see come out in the [practice] room”, said Jill. Talking and being open and relaxed were certainly on-the-mat qualities that were unique to the locker room. Tucked away from their coaches and male teammates, the wrestlers did not appear to feel the same expectations for their performances as they did when they were in the practice room or in tournaments. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, in the locker room their relationship with one another was simply as teammates and not as competitors. In the locker room they did not feel the same need to be as tough or competitive. Amber said, "when you go in there, [the practice room], you kind of put up a wall . . . always you have to be tougher. And people are definitely more light-hearted [in the locker room].” The idea that they took down their walls in the locker room implies that their performances in this contexts were back-stage performances. Drawing on Goffman (1959), I would suggest that these performances were demonstrations that were less of an
enactment; they were performances that were not as highly staged or “put on” because the audience members were their in-group. While practices and tournaments also include other in-group members, male wrestlers and coaches are an audience for which female wrestlers appeared to feel they must perform, living up to the expectations of these audience members in order to prove their abilities. In the locker room, the wrestlers did not seem to feel the same need to live up to the expectations of an audience, and instead they relaxed their performances.

In addition to being a more relaxed and social wrestling context, the locker room appears to serve as a point of transition between the wrestlers’ sporting and social worlds. In the safety of the locker room, they seemed to both prepare to put on their game faces and get ready for the business of wrestling, and, alternatively, they also let down their guard and they took down their walls and relaxed. As a transition space to the social world, in the locker room these women prepared for their more feminine performances off the mat. The wrestlers literally put on the face of femininity in the locker room by dressing in feminine clothing, putting on make-up, and doing their hair, signifying a move into the off the mat social world which has different gender expectations.

**Off the Mat**

When the wrestlers stepped off the mat and into the general social world, they were subject to different gender expectations and demands. While wrestling demands the performance of characteristics that are typically considered masculine in the dominant gender schema, off-the-mat social expectations for these women are markedly different. A model of a more passive and weak femininity is still the norm in society, in contrast to masculinity and female wrestlers’ performances on the mat. Thus, societal notions of
femininity are relatively more traditional than the gender demands placed on wrestlers in the world of sport.

In comparison to their on-the-mat performances, the wrestlers said that they were more feminine off the mat. Outside of wrestling, the participants defined themselves as feminine, whereas on the mat, femininity was a thing to be avoided. Specifically, their more feminine performances off the mat appeared to be the exhibition of those feminine qualities that they deliberately did not enact while in wrestling, for example suppressing their emotions and disregarding their own appearances. When asked about her own femininity, Kate said, “I think if you’re talking about femininity we all really feel it when we go out and it kind of turns on for us and stuff. I think that it’s something that is ignored a lot when you’re wrestling.” Hence, drawing on Kirstin’s previous statements and terminology, off the mat, the wrestlers “turned on” qualities that they “turned off” while on the mat. Kate, referring to the differences in her own on and off the mat behaviours said, “there is some super bipolar action happening with wrestling.” Not all of the wrestlers claimed that the differences between their paradoxical worlds were “bipolar”; however, they did suggest that they behaved differently in wrestling as compared to other social contexts. Off the mat, the wrestlers reasserted their femininity, as they defined it. Their femininity and feminine displays were based on traditionally feminine qualities of appearance, emotionality, sociability, as well as less characteristically feminine qualities, including competitiveness, assertiveness and independence, as discussed in detail in the sub-sections below.

On the mat, the participants said they needed to prove themselves as competent wrestlers. In comparison, off the mat, the wrestlers said that they sometimes felt that they
needed to prove their femininity. Talking about the changes in the wrestlers’ on and off the mat performances, Laura said some of the wrestlers might modify their behaviour to “prove that they’re still women.” Kate, speaking at greater lengths said, “I think that you just want to prove to everyone and yourself, you know, if you couldn’t wrestle, if you’re doing something else, if you wanted to, you could be this girl.” “This girl” seems to refer to a more feminine performance than the wrestlers typically enacted, especially while in wrestling. Not all of the participants used strong language about proving their behaviour as Laura and Kate did, however, they each talked about how they were more feminine off the mat than they were in wrestling.

It is important to mention that both on and off the mat the wrestlers felt that they had to prove themselves to others. Firstly, this suggests that they were implicitly aware of the context-specific expectations of their performances: on the mat, they had to prove themselves as athletes by being more characteristically masculine, and off the mat, they had to prove themselves as women by displaying more traditionally feminine qualities. Secondly, the issue of proving also indicates that the wrestlers’ behaviours were performances intended for an audience who evaluates them. In order to prove something, a display, object, or idea, is compared to a “true” model of the same thing in order to verify that the former is a bona fide version of the later: proving is done in relation to an established and legitimated original. Using Goffman’s theory of social behaviour (1959), in the case of gender performances, it can be argued that the wrestlers performed their gender for an audience based on what they understood to be a legitimate performance of what was expected by that audience. Hence, their displays were an enactment for an audience that was orientated to the production of a specific performance, and, as Butler
would claim (1999), regarding their off the mat performances, these enactments were based on an assumed, internalized, naturalized and fabricated “original” model. The wrestlers’ performances on and off the mat indicate how gender is a performance geared towards social ideals that define and prescribe productions of masculinity and femininity, and in order to be viewed as a man or a woman, individuals must base their own performance on these rules.

**Looking Like a Girl**

One feminine characteristic that the wrestlers said they performed when they were off the mat, and a type of performance that they said demonstrated their femininity, was a greater attention to their appearance. Off the mat, the wrestlers stated that they wanted to look like women and not like athletes, implying that the two are somehow incongruous. When we were speaking about wrestlers’ appearances, Kelly suggested, “you just want to ... feel normal sometimes and not always feel like you’re a wrestler.” Rebecca also made several remarks about wrestlers’ feminine appearance off the mat, differentiating this from how they looked while in wrestling. Speaking specifically about how wrestlers appearances changed once off the mat she said, “you want people to know, ‘yeah, I don’t always look like a boy,’” and she said that other wrestlers would make comments such as, “‘I don’t want to look . . . like a wrestler’, so they’ll go the opposite way and be really concerned with their appearance.” Stating this case more emphatically, and linking appearance not just with femininity but with general humanness, Kelly, speaking about her off-the-mat attention to attractiveness, said, “you don’t always want to be looking like a rag-a-muffin – whatever – with sweat dripping everywhere and stuff . . . . You want to look good . . . . You want to look like a human {emphasized}.” Although the wrestlers
certainly did not look inhuman on the mat, and I think Kelly’s comment are more hyperbole than a direct reflection of her beliefs, they did describe their appearance in wrestling as looking their worst; therefore, off the mat, the wrestlers wanted others to sometimes see them at their best. Jill commented:

You do not look pretty when you’re wrestling, and if you do, I don’t know what you’re doing . . . . You’re hair is dishevelled . . . . It’s not something you look pretty doing. So when you get the chance to look exactly opposite than you do when you’re wrestling, it’s fun, and it’s neat.

In contrast to their on-the-mat appearances, which, in their opinion, were not particularly attractive, the wrestlers wanted to look more attractive and more feminine off the mat.

Intra-contextual differences in the wrestlers’ off-the-mat performances are apparent in their discussions about appearance and attractiveness. While appearance was certainly important to wrestlers off the mat and they sometimes wanted to be seen as looking at their best, other times they were relatively less concerned with their appearance. Post-banquet tournaments and outings to local bars are off-the-mat contexts where wrestlers appeared to spend more time on their appearance. Jacqueline stated that appearance was important “at the banquet because you want to show everyone else there that you’re not just [a wrestler], because they get to see the ultimate brute side of you so you’re showing them the other side.” For these events, the other side that they wanted to show was their more feminine side: at banquets, the wrestlers commented that they wore make-up, styled their hair, and wore feminine clothing such as skirts, fitted shirts, dresses – “something that you normally wouldn’t wear that shows off your body,” said
Jacqueline – high heels, and jewellery. Their appearances for the banquets and bars were, as Laura described, “a 360 from what you’ve seen in wrestling.”

As one of the places that wrestlers were proving their femininity, Kate suggested that at the post-tournament banquets the wrestlers’ feminine appearances could be hyperfeminine. She claimed that their appearances were sometimes “over the top” as they tried to demonstrate that they could be attractive. Wrestlers’ performances of femininity at post-tournament banquets were extreme, they claimed: “it’s like a prom or something close to that,” suggested Jacqueline. Not all of the athletes wore very feminine clothing and not all put as much effort into their appearance, yet the post-tournament banquets seem to be the off-the-mat forum in which wrestlers spent the most effort on their feminine appearance and they focused on proving that they were feminine through their appearance.

So all of a sudden we’re going from girls on the mat [and] I think they honestly have something to prove to themselves too. We look gross on the mats: no make-up; we’re ugly; we’re beat up; some of us have black eyes and bloody noses, and broken noses . . . . I think that you just want to prove to everyone . . . you know, I’m better. It’s kind of like I’m better than them. I can do this: I can be just as hot as any girl out there (Kate).

These hyper-feminine displays are an example of apologetic behaviour, as described by Felshin (1974) and Griffin (1988), in which the wrestlers displayed more traditional femininity in order to compensate for their less feminine qualities on the mat. Post-tournament banquets are a context immediately juxtaposed to wrestling, a context in which wrestlers looked their worst and were unfeminine; therefore, the banquets serve a
forum in which wrestlers can immediately display, prove, and apologize for their less feminine appearance and gender performances on the mat.

Regarding their feminine appearances, especially at the banquets, eight of the participants commented on people’s reactions to how they looked. Given that their appearance can be a “360” in contrast to their on-the-mat appearance, the wrestlers indicated that many people, even others within the wrestling community, sometimes reacted with shock and surprise that they could be attractive women by normative social standards. Kirstin said:

We have the year-end banquet where we get to get all gussied up and everyone is so surprised that we actually look nice. Or, you know, we’re at the end of the nationals and everyone is all dressed up to go out, and the people, especially the people that don’t live in [our hometown], that see us during our tournaments . . . people are just like “holy!,” you know. “Is that you [Kirstin]?” . . . [Our appearance] is so black and white.

Astonished responses to the wrestlers’ appearances seem to indicate that the expectation is that wrestlers would not or could not be attractive simply because they were wrestlers. The women said they have heard comments from other people such as “that’s the same person?,” “{sound of catching their breath} weird! You look so nice,” “wow, I never knew you could look like [that],” and compliments such as “whoa, you clean up well.” Interestingly, rather than being insulted by the insinuation that many people thought that they could not be attractive, the participants were pleased by peoples’ positive responses. Laura said “you get a little sense of feeling when someone comes up to me and they’re like, ‘oh, you look so
good’, you know, and they’ve never seen you that way.” Speaking frankly, Amber said:

It makes you feel good; that’s the bottom line . . . . When people give you attention, it makes you feel good so of course you want people to see you look good because they’ve seen you at this other extreme.

The wrestlers took pride in their appearances off the mat, which they modeled and performed according to traditional and normative standards of femininity, and they enjoyed people’s positive reactions to their displays.

At post-tournaments banquets and when they went out to bars, the wrestlers put effort into their appearance and they looked more traditionally feminine, yet, they also said that these levels of attention to their appearance, these hyper-feminine displays, were not typical. “During the season, I would say that I’m pretty tomboyish in that I run around in drab clothes [and] flat shoes. [I] don’t really put a lot of effort into appearance,” claimed Jill. In their day-to-day lives, the wrestlers did not appear to be as focused on their appearances in terms of attractiveness and instead were focused on being comfortable. “I’m comfy but not really attractive,” said Kirstin. She also commented, “I like dresses and like skirts: I love to get dressed up. I like all of that stuff. I wear heels when I can but I can’t really traipse around in high heels all day.” Hence, Kirstin implied that the discomfort of putting considerable effort into her appearance was not worthwhile or necessary each day; rather, her daily appearance was more comfortable than attractive.

In contrast to Kirstin’s responses in which she suggested that although she is comfortable she does not look attractive, other wrestlers said they felt more attractive
when and because they were comfortable, as compared to when they were “all gussied up.”

I feel that I look nicer when I’m comfortable. When I’m not comfortable in what I’m wearing, I don’t feel like [I’m] going to have a good time. And then I think I feel I look nicer when I’m comfortable. Just, like, putting effort into yourself and, you know, maybe doing your hair and make-up and that kind of stuff . . . sometimes it’s fun to do that every once in a while, but no, I definitely don’t do that that often.

This participant, Kelly, clearly stated that while she could look traditionally feminine by doing her hair and make-up, she felt more attractive when she was comfortable. Her preference for comfort was apparent when I met with her. During our interview, even though Kelly was on her way to work, she was not wearing make-up, her hair was in a ponytail, and she was casually dressed in a pair of baggy pants and a t-shirt.

Echoing sentiments similar to Kelly, Laura asserted that she did not feel comfortable being “all done up.” Instead, she preferred a more relaxed appearance that she considered more comfortable. When she did have to dress up, such as for work, she was not as cozy, and more importantly, she did not enjoy being dressed up because she could not use her body. At work, she said:

You wear a skirt, like this big skirt, and you go to lift things and move things and can’t because you try to get up and you’re stepping on your skirts and stuff and it’s awkward . . . . I feel like I’m kind of—not that I’m playing a part or anything but like you can’t just be yourself.
The participants said that although there were times when they put on the traditional trappings of femininity in order to look attractive, more often, they preferred to put less effort into their appearance and wanted to be comfortable, which they in turn considered to be more attractive.

Just as the wrestlers were attempting to re-define what constitutes feminine attractiveness to include muscles, their opinions about feminine attractiveness also seem to imply that they were re-conceptualizing what this personally meant in other ways as well, rather than simply accepting the dominant gender script. The wrestlers said that they did not have to spend considered amounts of time and energy to be attractive women. They did not have to wear make-up, jewellery, skirts, dresses, and high heels to be feminine, but they stated that they could do this if they chose and they occasionally enjoyed this type of feminine appearance. The wrestlers wanted to look good, and wanted to have an attractive appearance, but they did not feel that they needed to “look a part” to do so. Rather, they suggested that they could incorporate other elements into their physical appearance, such as muscles and dressing comfortably, and still be feminine women. “I don’t feel like you have to look a certain way just to be feminine,” suggested Laura. Hence, the wrestlers seem to have re-conceptualized for themselves what constitutes an attractive feminine appearance.

"Get Pissed and Get Laid": Wrestlers’ Sexuality

In addition to looking attractive, one of the other ways that wrestlers implied that they were able to prove their femininity off the mat was by displaying their heterosexuality. Displaying their heterosexuality included being flirtatious with men, being publicly affectionate and sexual with men, and talking about their heterosexual
desires and experiences with others. The wrestlers’ emphasis of their heterosexuality off the mat implicitly suggests that they considered heterosexuality to be a central component to femininity, akin to some feminist researchers who claim that heterosexuality is a cornerstone of femininity in our society (Butler, 1999; Rich, 1980; Wittig, 1992). In contrast to their on-the-mat experiences and performances where they were not sexual, the wrestlers displayed and enacted performances that were more sexual when they were off the mat as part as of their heightened displays of femininity. Kate said, “your sexual side or whatever . . . that’s turned on, and versus on the mat that’s not turned on at all.”

Reflecting on wrestlers’ off-the-mat sexuality, Kate commented:

I think it has everything to do with being stuck in this routine where you’re not allowed to be sexual, or feminine, or anything for such a long time that finally [when] you get a chance to let loose, and you’re going to do it, and you’re darn well going to go over the top and do it right because it’s going to be the only thing that gets you through the next few months {laughing}.

Off the mat, the wrestlers reported that they “turned on” their sexuality, which they kept suppressed during wrestling.

As Kate’s comment indicates, once the wrestlers unleashed their suppressed sexuality, many of them occasionally did this to an extreme. Generally, some of the wrestlers stated or suggest that their off-that-mat behaviour was an extreme, in concert with their extreme dedication on the mat. Laura said that wrestlers were:

Extreme in every part of life, though. You know what I mean? Like, they train hard; they go hard in everything . . . . They party hard . . . when they can, they
do go hard in partying, and they train hard. They do, like, everything to an extreme.

While wrestlers may be excessive in other ways, examples of wrestlers’ intense behaviours were discussed primarily in relation to their sexuality. Their extreme sexuality off the mat was both the lengths to which some wrestlers would go in order to demonstrate their sexuality, and their incredible openness and willingness to talk to other people about their sexuality.

Firstly, regarding performances of heterosexuality, several of the wrestlers talked about the sheer number of people with whom some wrestlers have had sexual relationships. One of the participants shared that in her early years as a wrestler with one of her teams she “had a little crazy times.” “Crazy times” meant that she had previously had sexual relationships with several men, particularly other wrestlers. While this participant was the only one to talk about her own intense heterosexuality, in terms of the number of sexual relationships she had, other participants talked about wrestlers whom they knew who were very sexual. Rebecca spoke about some of her teammates “who went nuts”: “we have a couple of girls on our team that just – one of the girl’s goals was to sleep with as many guys on our team as she could, that was her goal!” Discussing the sexuality of wrestlers, Kate, talking about her teammates, said, “I’m thinking of a couple of girls that are kind of the younger girls and they go out and party and they’re just out to get attention and reaffirm their sexuality.” Speaking specifically about the post-tournament banquets and bar trips, where the wrestlers were also actively trying to look attractive, Kate asserted:
I’ve seen people get absolutely trashed; I’ve seen people get, you know, really
crazy sexual things; and {laugh}, you know, wear really provocative clothes, be
really provocative, maybe; and in the end have a really good time . . . get pissed
and get laid. Get pissed and get laid seems to be the main theme.

Wrestlers’ demonstrations of their heterosexuality appear to be commonly
displayed within the wrestling community. The participants indicated that many
wrestlers had sexual relationships with other members of their own team, or with other
teams. Six of the wrestlers participating in the study were currently, or previously had
been, in relationship with male wrestlers. When I wrestled, relationships between
wrestlers on the same team were very common and we referred to this as “teamcest,”
since these were sexual relations between team members. The fact that we created
terminology for these relationships indicates how common these romances were in the
community. Reflecting on the number of people in wrestling who had relationships, Kate
said, “if I drew a chart and inter-connected all of the, like, who has dated who and who’s
slept with who – yuck! I don’t even want to think about it.”

Wrestlers suggested that they dated other wrestlers because “well, it’s easy; it’s
convenient {laughing} because you know you have to be at the same place at the same
time, you have to do the same training,” as Amber claimed. They also said relationships
within wrestling were common because the partners had things in common and would
understand each other’s lives: “[people] date other wrestlers because they understand
your life. They understand what you are going through because they are going through
the same thing,” said Jill. Certainly, these claims have merit; however, I would also
suggest that wrestlers’ performances of heterosexuality in front of their teammates might
also be enacted in part to "prove" their femininity for an audience who routinely
witnesses their "unfeminine" performances on the mat. Kate commented that some
wrestlers "have swore that they're never ever going to date women wrestlers," and
Kirstin said, "I don't date wrestlers," yet despite these claims, many men and women
within wrestling do date and have sexual relationships. For both genders, this allows
them to show each other that they are heterosexual: "here we have these girls that are
horny and these guys that are horny and they both want to prove that they're hot stuff so
of course they're going to hook up," Kate laughed. For the women, their heterosexual
displays reaffirm and show their femininity, and for men, because wrestling is sometimes
charged with being homoerotic (Mazar, 1998), they assert their heterosexuality and
masculinity.

Both Kate and Susan explicitly spoke about how wrestlers' displays of their
heterosexuality were attempts to prove their femininity. As noted above, Kate suggested
that both men and women wrestlers may want to prove their heterosexuality. Susan
spoke about how the female wrestlers' displays of their heterosexuality related to their
desires to demonstrate their femininity while off the mat. Susan stated:

I think that some of them, [other wrestlers], think that they have to do that stuff,
like have sex all of the time, or with one night stands or stuff. I think they think
they have to do that to make themselves feel more girly.

The talk of proving their sexuality, especially by numerous sexual displays, supports the
theory of the heterosexual apologetic (H. Sykes, personal communication, October 29,
2005). The heterosexual apologetic is a specific type of the female apologetic. Since
female athletes are often dismissed as deviants and their abilities diminished by labelling
them as lesbians (Kane, 1995), wrestlers reasserted and performed their heterosexuality in order to affirm their femininity, given that heterosexuality is a critical component of femininity in the dominant gender schema. Thus, their sexual behaviours can be seen as a compensation for their “unfeminine” qualities and their roles as wrestlers, and as displays that help to prove their femininity.

Another element of wrestlers’ sexuality, interestingly, is that although they were attempting to prove their femininity through these performances, their sexual displays were not necessarily based on a more traditional passive femininity. Six of the participants suggested that because wrestlers were more confident, they were more willing to display their bodies and their sexuality: “I think they’re more comfortable with their sexuality,” claimed Susan. One of the participants, Jacqueline, told me a story about her own sexuality that demonstrated confidence. At a tournament, Jacqueline approached a man in whom she was interested and invited him to join her at a bar. Pondering the meaning of this experience, Jacqueline suggested:

Maybe wrestlers, female wrestlers, are more pursuers towards guys. I don’t know . . . because when you think about normal woman, well maybe the majority they like to be pursued . . . . Yeah, I think [female wrestlers are more willing to pursue].

Well, I am and I think I’ve witnessed a number of times where that’s been the case.

---

48 These bracketed remarks are the wording of my question to Jacqueline to clarify the comment she had made. She responded simply with “yeah, I think so,” and, therefore, I have made this insertion to clarify her response.
Thus, it would seem that at the same time as the wrestlers were attempting to display and reaffirm their femininity through demonstrations of their heterosexuality, they were also exhibiting less traditionally feminine qualities by being sexually assertive.

Female wrestlers, perhaps, in part, because of a need to prove and reassert their femininity, were very sexual off the mat; however, they recognized that their sexuality was sometimes viewed quite negatively by others. When they spoke of the wrestlers whom they knew were very sexual, they suggested that this was slightly unacceptable behaviour of which they were disapproving; yet, they also said that these women were free to behave as they chose, again indicating their liberal views and support for individuality. Laura spoke about a number of women on her team who were very sexual and commented that “we were so looked in disgusted upon for some of them . . . . People thought that they shouldn’t be [that sexual] . . . . And that’s what I didn’t get either.” Laura suggested that she thought these women could engage in as many sexual relationships as they chose.

Certainly some of the comments that the wrestlers had heard from other people about female wrestlers’ sexuality were very negative. For those girls who had teammates who were very sexual with other male wrestlers on their team, they reported that their coaches told them they need to get their teammates to “rein it in,” as Rebecca was told. Laura was told by her coach that she and her teammates needed to “get that under control,” encouraging their teammates to be less sexuality explicit. Speaking candidly about women’s sexuality and social restrictions and opinions, Laura said “you have your man-whore type guy and it’s not frowned upon, but you have a girl that’s really open and doesn’t care and she’ll sleep with a lot of people and it’s still frowned upon.” While
women's heterosexuality is important for femininity, the wrestlers appeared to believe that social rules hold that it should be a controlled sexuality, although they themselves expressed views that were more liberal.

In addition to openly displaying their sexuality, many of the wrestlers expressed that they were quite open in discussing their sex lives with one another. Particularly in the locker rooms, wrestlers said that they would tell each other about their romantic and sexual relationships. Amber claimed, "I think we talk about sex way more," while Jill said, "the wrestling girls are so much more open, and you know what their sexual orientation is, and what they like, and what they don't like, and talking about certain areas of the body, and stuff like that." Wrestlers' discussions about their sex lives also serve as affirmations and demonstrations of their heterosexuality and femininity. Kelly said that the wrestlers could be very graphic about the details of their sex lives and in asking for details about other people's experiences, again indicating the wrestlers' heightened performances of heterosexuality and femininity off the mat. Kelly said, "they'll talk about it straight up: like 'yeah, when me and my boyfriend. . . ', or 'oh yeah, I hooked up with this guy.'" Susan suggested that their behaviour was "kiss-and-tell," as a means to indicate and show their femininity and heterosexuality. The wrestlers engaged in and even flaunted their heterosexual relationships, and they also shared the details of these experiences, demonstrating their femininity, especially to other wrestlers.

One other forum in which the wrestlers shared and talked about their sex lives was at sex toy parties. One of the national team members told me:
I think I pretty much knew everyone’s sexual activity . . . I think it’s pretty open. We’ve gone to, like, well at a few [international tournaments] we’ve gone to a number of sex toy parties and people are pretty open: “I got this and this.”

Talking about their heterosexuality was another means of affirming their femininity, which was less intimately interactive or graphic than openly engaging in sexual relationships with men. By talking about and sharing stories of their sex lives, wrestlers were able to assert their heterosexual identity without having to engage physically with others.

All of the participants claimed that they were fairly open about their heterosexuality within wrestling; all of the wrestlers knew one another’s sexual orientation. None of the participants identified themselves as lesbian or bisexual; however, many stated that they had teammates with alternative sexualities. The sexual openness and acceptance of various types of femininity that the wrestlers expressed also seems to extend to various types of sexual identities. Participants in this study seemed to be very accepting of their teammates who were not heterosexual, or they indicated they were not concerned with or interested in people’s sexuality generally. Kelly commented, “no one made a big deal about these girls being lesbians on our team,” and, when talking about a teammate who was a lesbian, Jill said, “just her being a lesbian didn’t make a difference to me.” The wrestlers’ approach to “alternative” sexualities appears to be the same as their perspective on various types of femininity: they seem to be accepting of various displays and performances.

49 There may be differences in lesbian and bisexual wrestlers’ performances of sexuality; however, within this study I cannot adequately speak to these experiences since all of the participants were heterosexual.
My predication that wrestlers’ sexual orientation would be more important to wrestlers than it would be to other individuals appears to be only partially correct, at least for the female wrestlers participating in this study.\textsuperscript{50} The wrestlers were accepting of non-heterosexual orientations and they even indicated that they were not concerned about other athletes’ sexual orientations. However, for these heterosexual athletes, it still seemed to be important that people knew their heterosexual orientations and their heterosexual activity as a method of reaffirming their femininity. Although they accepted “alternative” sexualities, they wanted to be very clear that they were heterosexual and were not “suspect” women (Kane, 1995): they wanted to be recognized as feminine, heterosexual women.

\textit{Acting like a Girl}

Being emotional and sociable appear to be central elements of how the wrestlers defined femininity, and they enacted these qualities to a greater degree once they were off the mat. Outside of wrestling, the participants described themselves as more talkative and friendly, and less competitive and aggressive: their “softer” feminine side was more readily displayed and apparent off the mat. Laura said that off that mat she was “definitely more open, more willing to share, [and] willing to share things,” and that as a feminine person she was “understanding [of] emotion” and was “nurturing and stuff.” Another participant, Amber, commented that “most people, they just seem more light-

\textsuperscript{50} The participants did suggest that sexual orientation was very important to their male teammates. Many male wrestlers, they commented, could be quite homophobic and wanted to know other’s sexuality as well as clearly demonstrating their own heterosexuality.
hearted when they’re off the mat than when they’re on the mat.” Other wrestlers’ comments elaborated how they were more light-hearted. Jill said, “when you’re off that mat, you’re happy and talking . . . . [You’re] more social.” Other comments indicate the wrestlers’ willingness to be more emotional when off the mat. Amber explicitly stated that only when she was off the mat was she willing to be emotional and expressive. She commented:

I have a very needy emotional side to me that not many people ever see . . . . [On the mat] we won’t even try to show tears in front of each other . . . but then once we get away from it, get away from the sport, we talk more {pause}. Then we’ll say, “oh, I was feeling like this, or I was like that.”

Off the mat, the wrestlers used words such as “friendlier,” “calmer,” “gentler,” “passive,” and “laid back” to describe themselves. Away for the stress and competitive nature and expectations of wrestling, the women appeared to let down their guard, take off their game faces, and relax and share with other people.

In addition, outside of wrestling, the participants claimed that they were more passive, another quality that is more traditionally feminine and a characteristic that they deliberately did not display in wrestling. “I think we are pretty passive people when we are not wrestling,” claimed Kirstin. Rebecca said that she was not a very aggressive wrestler on the mat, but she still put up a fight; however, off the mat, she said, “my personality, I think, is very passive.” Kirstin, who spoke a lot about passivity, said that off the mat she would describe herself as “passive and understanding more – it goes back to dealing with people. I don’t deal with people off the mat the same way that I deal with people in the room.” She also commented, “I’m more of a problem solver than I am an
aggressor when it comes to the outside world.” Contrasting her performances of passivity and aggression, Kirstin said, “some people are always gentle and passive and some people are always aggressive, but I think that we have the ability to turn that on and off.” Hence, the wrestlers turn their passivity on outside of wrestling and off, in favour of their aggressiveness, when on the mat. Although the wrestlers described themselves as more passive outside of the wrestling, they still seemed to believe that they were strong and independent off the mat. Their sentiments that they were more passive and needier were in relation to their strength, assertiveness, and independence within wrestling.

It is important that the wrestlers discussed these types of differences between on and off the mat using modifying adjectives such as “more” or “less.” Modifying adjectives indicate that the differences between their contextual performances are gradients of distinction rather than significant differences: on and off the mat they were still the same people. Using Bourdieu’s terminology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), they have the same habitus but they modify their performances in different fields. Furthermore, while the wrestlers felt that they could modify their femininity to display more feminine qualities off the mat, these women still displayed their gender in a manner that differentiated them for the “girly girls.” While they considered themselves as displaying more qualities associated with femininity – being emotional, friendly, talkative, needy, and passive – they were not dependent, soft, and weak. Rather, they seemed to remain the strong, confident, assertive women that they were on the mat and brought these qualities to their performances off the mat.
Head Held High: Always Confident and Strong

Confidence was a quality that the wrestlers said distinguished them from other women. Off the mat, as well as on, female wrestlers were confident; they were confident in their sense of self and confident in their abilities. Eight of the participants made comments about their self-confidence, exemplified by Jill when she claimed, “I feel confident about myself” and “I’m going to be who I am, and if they don’t really like it, I really don’t give a shit.” As self-confident people, the wrestlers talked about being confident in what they could accomplish; they felt that they worked hard at most tasks because they knew they would be successful. The participants made comments such as “you’re okay with winning; you’re okay with losing; you’re not afraid to go out and take chances and get what you want,” as Kate stated.

While all of the wrestlers indicated that they felt confident and self-assured, Kate explicitly said that confidence was related to successes and varied between wrestlers: she said, “I don’t think that you’re going to see [the] same confidence level in wrestlers that haven’t had success.” However, for those participants in the study who were less successful, they still expressed a high level of confidence in themselves. Jill, one of the younger and less successful participants made several comments and claims that demonstrated her self-confidence, including: “it’s not important for me to feel like I need to impress people,” “I’m a lot more confident and not too worried about what [other people] will think,” and “I feel confident when I’m around other people; it doesn’t really matter to me who it is.” Although level of success may affect wrestlers’ on-the-mat confidence, each of the wrestlers I interviewed expressed and demonstrated that they felt confident off the mat. Their expressed confidence is a quality that appears to be central
to their definition of their own femininity and is evident in their off-the-mat self-descriptions.

One specific way that the wrestlers said that they felt confident was physically; they reported that they felt strong and were capable of physically taking care of themselves. Specifically, I spoke with wrestlers about whether or not, and in what ways, they felt more or less confident than other women whom they knew in terms of where they could go and what they could do. I wanted to determine whether wrestlers felt less physically inhibited and restricted than other women due to their involvement in a combative sport. Participants’ responses were mixed as to the degree of their physical capabilities but each expressed that they believed they were confident, strong, and physically capable. One the one hand, ardent responses were expressed by some of the wrestlers such as Jacqueline who said, without a hint of hesitation or restriction, “I feel confident walking down the street.” Amber asserted that she was confident and she said, “maybe that’s one thing that maybe a female wrestler, compared to other female athletes, might feel, maybe just because the sport is so much contact . . . . You’re used to getting that physical.” Due to their participation in a physical sport, wrestlers were familiar and comfortable with grappling with others and physically asserting themselves, and they took these qualities with them off the mat. Since the wrestlers were used to being physically assertive, they stated that they were prepared to physically take care of and defend themselves outside of wrestling. “I think it does make me feel a lot safer in a lot of situations . . . . I do feel a lot safer, I think,” suggested Kelly, while Jill claimed, “I feel safer walking down the street at night.” Kate linked feeling confident to safety when she stated, “my confidence is higher so it’s probably I am safer because my shoulders are
square, or whatever. I carry myself in a way that’s going to not attract, you know, predators.” Thus, the wrestlers seemed to feel that, in comparison to other women, they were more physically confident, and capable of physically asserting and depending on themselves.

Two of the other participants, Laura and Rebecca, talked about moving from their small hometowns to larger cities in order to go to university and train with their current wrestling teams. They suggested that they had thought, or their families had suggested, that they should take precautions to protect themselves physically, even as simply as locking their doors or not walking alone at night. Both of these women, however, indicated that they felt safe and that they did not necessarily need to take proactive measures to ensure their safety — “obviously you can hold your own,” stated Amber — although they recognized that they should, and they did exhibit caution in their daily lives.

Alternatively, other wrestlers stressed that while they felt physically confident and stronger than other women, they still felt some restrictions in terms of where they could go and what they could do because their strength was not comparable to most men’s and certainly was not sufficient protection from violence with a weapon. When I asked Kate if she felt physically confident and safe because of wrestling, she replied by saying, “no. I’m too aware of how people die.” However, as noted, she also said that she was confident and, thus, carried herself in way that might deter others from challenging her. Discussing her own confidence, Kirstin stated that when she was younger she thought she was tough but, with more experiences, she now felt differently. She said:
As a woman, you just can’t compare. It doesn’t matter how strong I am, I mean other than I can move fast and I’ve got a few good moves that would work if I was ever in danger, in actual physical danger, my strength won’t hold up to a man; it doesn’t matter . . . . If I was in an actual fight, there is no way that [I] would be able to withstand any kind of punch.

Kirstin and other wrestlers who expressed this sentiment said they were careful and cautious, and avoided situations where their physical strength and safety might be threatened. While all of the wrestlers expressed confidence in terms of their physical abilities, they also indicated that off the mat they felt that they and other women were still physically restricted due to possible threats of violence.

In terms of strength when off the mat, the wrestlers spoke about their mental fortitude and, relatedly, dedication, determination, and control. Jacqueline simply stated, “I think there is still that mental toughness; you take that with you wherever you go.” One way in which the wrestlers specifically saw mental toughness applying to their off-the-mat experiences and performances was their belief that they could accomplish what they wanted by being persistent and dedicated. The wrestlers indicated that they believed that their mental toughness contributed to their off-the-mat success, such as in their achievements at school and in their careers. Amber said, “I’m just now starting my career, and so I have a lot of doubt, self-doubt and stuff, but now I use the wrestling to go by and say, ‘okay, well, if I can do that, I can do this.’” Hence, off the mat, wrestlers were strong, confident, and outgoing women who assertively pursued their interests, thereby exhibiting “masculine” qualities that they believed were part of their own femininity.
On and off the mat, the wrestlers said that they felt confident; yet, the wrestlers expressed that they were less self-confident off the mat because, while they had proven their abilities in wrestling, people off the mat were not necessarily familiar with their accomplishments and abilities. Kirstin, a very successful wrestler, commented:

If I walk into a room full of complete strangers, then I would say that . . . I’m not quite as confident as I would be with a room full of people that you know . . . .
You’ve made your mark in the wrestling world . . . . You don’t really have to answer to anybody [in wrestling].

In wrestling, people knew these women’s abilities and skills, which caused them to feel more confident, whereas off the mat, while they still felt confident, because people were not as aware of their abilities and success, they did not feel the same level of self-confidence. Kelly commented:

I think I do feel a little bit more confident when I am in wrestling because I’m with people that know what I’m doing . . . . When you’re not wrestling and stuff, it’s just like people don’t know – they don’t really know who I am . . . . I’m more confident when they know.

Off the mat, the wrestlers felt that they had more to prove to other people, including proving their own femininity. Since the wrestlers felt that they had to prove themselves to others, they expressed that they did not feel as self-assured as when they are on the mat.

I Like My Body

Associated with confidence and their physical appearance, the wrestlers appeared to have healthy body images. Despite possessing less traditionally feminine bodies than
other women, or perhaps because they had less traditionally feminine bodies, because they had more muscle mass, eight of the participants said that they liked their bodies, they were happy with the way their bodies looked, and they enjoyed the functionality of their physiques. The general sentiment they expressed was “I’m content with my body,” as Susan claimed, and Jacqueline said, “I think we are just comfortable with our bodies.” These wrestlers said that regardless of their size, they appreciated and liked how their bodies looked. Susan, who is small, commented generally on how wrestlers felt about their bodies: “wrestlers are more okay with their body, even though they may be bigger, or heavier, or stuff, they don’t mind it as much as some other girls might.” Jane, who recently moved up to a heavier weight category claimed, “I’ve never felt overweight or anything, no matter what weight I was. I’m more comfortable with my body.” Even when they were told that they were overweight, many of the wrestlers reacted with confidence. Kirstin, who wrestles at one of the heavier weigh categories asserted:

I hear that I’m fat all the time. I got told that I was skinny today and that wasn’t such a good thing either {laughing} . . . . I mean you just kind of take it with a grain of salt. I definitely don’t go home and shed tears over it.

Kirstin also stated:

I like being big; I like looking big; I like being tough, and fit, and defined . . . .

No matter what I do, I still have shoulders that are bigger than my hips {laughing}, and I still have hips that are the same size as my bust – I still look like a frickin’ ‘Y’, but to me it doesn’t really look attractive but it looks good to me.
Kirstin’s comments indicate that she recognized that her body was not attractive by social standards of femininity but, regardless, she still enjoyed the appearance of her body: she was happy with her muscles and body even though they were not typically feminine. Another participant, Susan, suggested that wrestlers have attractive bodies because of wrestling. “It shapes you nicer. You have a nicer body because you’re a wrestler. It’s tighter because you have muscles,” she said. Susan felt that she had a nice body as a result of wrestling; rather than being detrimental to her feminine appearance, she felt that her participation in wrestling was an asset for the appearance of her body and her off-the-mat displays of femininity.

The differences between these wrestlers’ comments may be related to body size. Kirstin is a heavier wrestler and Susan is a light-weight. Given that Kirstin is larger, she may be more sensitive to the ways in which her own body deviates from the social norms of femininity. Hence, wrestlers who are heavier may express similar sentiments to Kirstin, and lighter wrestlers may sympathize with Susan. I can only speculate, however, on the relationship between size and bodily confidence: I do not have sufficient data to address this issue. Regardless of their weight, most of the participants expressed that they were confident about and liked their bodies.

Prior to starting our interview, which was conducted after her wrestling practice, Kirstin, the same wrestler who commented that her body was shaped like a ‘Y’, a shape that is ideal for men, invited me to sit with her in the locker room as she showered. This wrestler and her team, similar to most wrestlers across the country, did not have a private varsity or club locker room and instead they shower and change in the general change room area in their university’s sport facility. Like many other wrestlers, Kirstin walked
around the locker room naked, showered in a communal shower, and chatted with me as she changed and got ready for our interview. Her display demonstrates comfort with her own body. Speaking specifically about this, she said, “I’ve got no problems showing off my body – no problems. They are just body parts; everybody has them . . . . There [are] not a lot of wrestlers that have shame with their bodies, and nor should they!” Several of the other wrestlers spoke specifically about being comfortable with their bodies, and as such, said that they were comfortable with being naked in the locker room in front of other women. Wrestlers contrasted their own comfort with being naked in public locker rooms with other women: Amber claimed:

[Wrestlers] are more confident so they’re just open. They’re more confident with their bodies . . . . You go to a change room, a public change room, and [other women] are changing in the bathroom . . . . Maybe it’s just that I’m used to changing in the locker room. I’m more confident with my body.

These comments indicate that the wrestlers felt and demonstrated confidence and comfort with their bodies, so much so that they had few concerns with being naked in semi-public forums, and they viewed this as a unique characteristic compared to other women whom they knew or other women whom they saw in these same contexts.

Unlike the confident participants discussed above, two women said that they did not like their bodies — “I don’t really like my body,” claimed Kelly — and they were not as self-assured about their size. In contrast to wrestlers who were comfortable with their bodies, a couple of the participants talked about other wrestlers whom they knew who had problems with their weight and showed signs of anorexia: “one of the girls on our team had an eating problem,” confessed Jill. Since wrestling is based on weight
categories, wrestlers weigh themselves every day, perhaps several times a day. For some participants, this emphasis on weight and making a specific weight category lead to an unhealthy approach to weight and they forced themselves to maintain a lower weight category than they should. In my experience as a wrestler, I witnessed several wrestlers' attempts to maintain a lower weight category through unhealthy eating and exercising habits. In contrast to their teammates and other wrestlers who liked their size and did not think they were overweight, these wrestlers wanted to be smaller. Jill suggested that her teammate's desire to be light was not based on a social idealization of small women but rested on making a particular weight category: "it's because she wanted to wrestle a certain weight class," she told me. FILAs polices about women's weight categories may encourage these types of behaviours.

How wrestlers use their bodies was also an element of their femininity that the wrestlers suggested was a unique quality of their own performances as compared to other women, especially "girly girls." Clearly, their very participation in a combative sport is a use of their bodies that is distinct from most other women. The sheer strength, control, and power that are required in the sport demands that wrestlers use their bodies to dominate others, which is distinctly different from a more bodily submissive femininity. Furthermore, as other gender researchers have indicated, women's use of their bodies and space is gendered: women's comportment and use of their bodies is different from men (Young, 1940). Compared to men, Young states that women use less space with their bodies; they are not as open with their bodies, in terms of expansive use of space; and they compartmentalize their bodies, using parts rather than the whole. According to Young's analysis of studies by Erwin Straus and Simone dé Beauvoir, and drawing on
Merleau-Ponty, women typically perceive their bodies as less competent than their actual potential: women may believe that they are not strong or capable of completing difficult physical tasks. In contrast to women who “do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force” (Young, 1949, p. 145) and women who will not use their whole bodies to engage in physical activities, female wrestlers appear to be a group of women who are comfortable with their bodies and are willing to use their bodies across different contexts.

On the mat, obviously, wrestlers engage their bodies and the bodies of their opponents: they are not inhibited in their motions. I would suggest that specifically in the sport, female wrestlers use their bodies with intention and they appear to have believed that they could accomplish what they wanted with their bodies, in contrast to Young’s claims. Off the mat, the wrestlers also seemed to engage their bodies and their surroundings. Their comments indicate that they were not inhibited with their bodies when off the mat: they moved with confidence through the world, they challenged themselves to complete daily tasks, and they asserted themselves physically. Female wrestlers do not seem to be “physically inhibited, confined, [and] positioned” (p. 153), which Young suggests is the typical corporality of women. Instead, overall, the wrestlers seemed to like and use their bodies. This result of the effects of wrestling on how they used and perceived there bodies is consistent with other researchers’ findings that suggest that sport is enabling for women and helps them develop physical competence and skill (Theberge, 2003), reclaiming their bodies as physically capable (Kane, 1995).
In Front of a Crowd: Variations in Off-the-Mat Performances for Different Audiences

Based on the theory of the feminine apologetic (Felshin, 1974; Griffin, 1998; Lowe, 1998; Malcom, 2003), prior to starting data collection, I speculated that female wrestlers would be more feminine off the mat in the presence of other wrestlers, especially male wrestlers, because these individuals have routinely witnessed their "unfeminine" performances on the mat. While this seems to be true in terms of their displays of heterosexuality and feminine appearance at post-tournament banquets, contrary to my prediction, the wrestlers indicated that they generally felt less feminine off the mat with other wrestlers. Amber claimed that with other wrestlers, including male wrestlers, "you see their highs; you see their lows, just because that's part of the sport. . . . You've kind of seen them at their best; you've seen them at their worst so there is more of a bond." Due to this bond and comfort, wrestlers said that off the mat with other wrestlers they were more rowdy, crude, and open, more characteristically masculine qualities. In this off-the-mat context and with this particular audience the wrestlers appear to have been less concerned with the social expectations of femininity and, hence, they exhibited less traditionally feminine performances.

Specific examples of wrestlers' less feminine performances off the mat with other wrestlers include their sense of freedom to behave and speak as they wanted. Seven of the participants said that they felt more relaxed with other wrestlers and they were comfortable openly speaking their minds without concerns of offending their audiences. Jill's comments are indicative of these assertions. When speaking about her off-the-mat experiences with other wrestlers, Jill claimed, "you can be rude, and gross, and funny.
We’re comfortable around each other . . . [my other friends], they’re not as vulgar, and silly, and stupid like us [wrestlers] when we’re together.” Amber’s comment suggests a possible reason why the wrestlers felt they could relax their performances in each other’s presence: “you’ve seen them when they’re super vulnerable [on the mat] so you aren’t as afraid to act like a goof or whatever.” In comparison, with their non-wrestling friends or acquaintances, these wrestlers said they were more shy and reserved, more traditionally feminine qualities, because they did not feel as close to these audiences as they did to people in wrestling. Due to their reservations, the wrestlers reverted to more traditional performances of femininity, as prescribed by the dominant gender schema and likely in accordance with their perceived assumptions of what these audiences of non-wrestlers were expecting.

An additional difference between wrestlers’ off-the-mat performances for wrestlers and non-wrestlers relates to physical comfort and closeness. Wrestlers said that because they felt comfortable with other wrestlers and since they were regularly in physical contact with one another on the mat, they were more physical with other wrestlers when they were off the mat. Amber said:

We’re maybe a bit more physical with one another. Like, that’s with the men too . . . you’re so used {emphasized} to the contact . . . and I think with girls too, I’ll come up to a girl and I’m just cuddling. I’ll grab on, like a two-on-one {laugh} and just talk to them.51

51 A two-on-one is a wrestling tie-up position of control. In this particular move, the offensive wrestler is holding an opponent with both of their arms with one hand at the wrist and the other wrapped around the arm holding on to the bicep.
Amber’s comment also raises another interesting point: many of the wrestlers said that they thought, in contrast to other women who are not wrestlers, they were more comfortable with men. Rather than feeling that they were required to be feminine and sexual with other male wrestlers, even though a number of the wrestlers were dating teammates or having sexual relations with other male wrestlers, the participants said that they felt that they could be more relaxed with male wrestlers. Laura made the bold claim that “we can hang out with the boys and it’s just like we’re like a group of people,” rather than being a group of women with a group of men. She seems to imply that there were times off the mat where their gender mattered less and they could let down their guard and not act out their femininity in terms of a socially prescribed formula.

On the other hand, while the wrestlers said that they were less feminine or even lacking many feminine characteristics in each other’s company, their openness with one another off the mat allowed them to talk and share with one another; hence, they were more expressive, intimate, and emotional with each other, qualities that are traditionally feminine. Nine participants claimed that they shared more with their wrestling friends: they told their wrestling friends more about their lives and their feelings than they did to friends who were not participants in the sport. “You talk about everything: whatever worries you, or any concerns you have about the sports, or anything,” said Laura. As they did in the locker room, wrestlers appeared to talk to each other off the mat about many intimate topics including their sexual orientation and their bodies. Sometimes the tendency to openness that the wrestlers expressed and displayed could be stymied by some of their more on-the-mat performances such as competitiveness. One wrestler, Kelly, said:
This is kind of what I feel about wrestlers: they’re so competitive . . . . I’m really competitive when it comes to sports and wrestling, but I don’t like to be competitive when I’m not wrestling. I don’t like having the competition when it’s not needed and that really bugs me a lot about wrestlers.

Wrestlers, therefore, expressed contradictory sentiments about being more or less feminine and open with other wrestlers off the mat.

Just as in certain contexts they noted that they “turned on and turned off” some of their personality characteristics, the wrestlers recognized that they also varied their performances for different audiences. Broadly, when off the mat, the wrestlers said that they typically felt more feminine when they were in front of an audience of non-wrestlers: “I find when I’m not with wrestlers, I feel a lot more feminine,” stated Kelly. The participating wrestlers also expressed mixed sentiments about their less feminine displays for other wrestlers. The participants’ comments suggest that their gendered performances for wrestling audiences changed based on their connection with the sport and the wrestling community. One wrestler, Susan, said that she felt less comfortable to be free and open, less like she could be herself, with wrestlers because she did not always feel comfortable and relaxed with her teammates. “In wrestling up here, I’m the quiet type almost,” she said. “It depends who I’m with and if I’m comfortable enough around them. Because, well, up here they kind of, I don’t know, they talk about things that I don’t really want to get involved in too much.” Rather than being open and relaxed in her performance with the wrestlers, Susan said that she felt that she could share her feelings with other friends with whom she was more comfortable, especially those who she had known longer and who shared her principles. Alternatively, another wrestler,
Rebecca, suggested that she was not as free with other wrestlers because she appeared to be actively trying to convince them to see her in a particular way. Rebecca, who had shared that her teammates previously had a negative image of her, said, “I’m more bubbly and stuff with my family and, well, my teammates too, but I don’t think the male teammates see that as much . . . . They see me as more serious, and smart, and studious,” and she admitted that she actively tried to display this image to other wrestlers in order for them to see her as such. As would be expected, the wrestlers’ off-the-mat performances for different audiences differed based on their comfort with the audiences members. For those with whom they were more comfortable and felt more connected, they exhibited less “put on” performances.

Overall, for those people with whom these women were close, many of whom were other wrestlers, it appears that they did not feel as much of a need to impress or manage their image and performances for these audiences. Instead, using Goffman’s terminology, is appears that they performed their back-stage character, which they seemed to suggest was less feminine. When they did not feel that they had to enact a particular performance, when they felt fewer expectations from their audience, then the wrestlers relaxed their performances and let go of some of the pretences of femininity. The participating wrestlers felt that they could be rowdier, less polite, and more openly explicit about topics such as sexuality with these audiences when they were back-stage. On these back-stages, the wrestlers were also more characteristically feminine in that they were intimate, expressive, and talkative with others. Overall, wrestlers’ back-stage performances appear to be a blend of both normatively masculine and feminine qualities,
while their off-the-mat front-stage performances emphasize their feminine qualities to a
greater degree as in their displays of their heterosexuality and attractiveness.

*R-E-S-P-E-C-T, Find out What it Means to Me*

On the mat, the wrestlers wanted to prove their abilities and win the respect of
others within the wrestling community; off the mat, the wrestlers appeared to want
respect from the public for their abilities and for women’s wrestling. The wrestlers said
that many people still did not know about women’s wrestling and the image of the sport
could still be quite negative, which seemed to be upsetting to them. The participants
indicated that there were a number of negative stereotypes about female wrestling
including that the participants are World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) professional
wrestlers; butch, mannish women; violent; or lesbians. In addition, they claimed that the
sport was also dismissed as a joke and people have dismissed the wrestlers by sexualizing
them. Each of these stereotypes and negative images of wrestling was concerning to the
wrestlers and they wanted to manage the public’s impression of women’s wrestling in
order to garner more respect for the sport and for women wrestlers.

Firstly, several of the wrestlers noted that many people still did not know that
women’s wrestling is a sport. Often when they told people about their participation in
wrestling, their listeners reacted with surprise—“what? what’s that?,” or “really? you
wrestle?” Some of the participants said that people were “caught off guard” by the fact
that there were female wrestlers. The wrestlers’ responses to people’s reactions of
ignorance about women’s wrestling indicate tolerance. Rather than acting defensively,
derspite being upset or perturbed, the participants said that they felt it was their
responsibility to educate people respectfully about the sport: “I think it’s my job as a
female wrestler to raise awareness about it," claimed Rebecca. Informing people about women’s wrestling was a way to promote respect for the sport and for the wrestlers. Kate said:

A positive image starts with me explaining things in a positive way. And so you want to say, “well, okay, actually this is what the sport is like: we do this and we do this.” And mostly people say stupid things through ignorance . . . I think it’s just important to try your best to educate people and not get your back up too much about what people say.

It is clear here that Kate felt that it was her job to educate people, correcting their ignorant and stereotypical images of the sport. As Rebecca said, “I think there’s a lot of misconceptions. I don’t think a lot of people even really realize that it’s out there.” To garner respect for the sport, the wrestlers wanted people to know that it was a sport, and a legitimate sport, and that the participants worked hard.

Unfortunately, sometimes when the wrestlers explained that women’s wrestling was a legitimate sport they still felt that people dismissed it as a joke – “some people are trying to make a joke out of it, and belittle it, and make it less than it is,” Kate said. Kate further explained how some people’s reactions were:

“ha, ha,” trying to make a joke of wrestling as something not worthwhile, and not appropriate, and something that should be a joke almost. And like “no, it wasn’t a joke. It’s something that took me places that you’ll never be.”

Kate’s comments are indicative of some of the flippant comments that wrestlers heard about their sport and their defensive reactions to these dismissals. The wrestlers also said
that people sometimes would “blow them off like you’re a joke,” as a means of writing off their athleticism and the sport. These types of reactions included simply not reacting - “I told someone I . . . wrestled,” Kate said, “and she was just like ‘oh’. I didn’t get any reaction” – not being interested, or offering platitudes such as “that’s nice” when they heard about the sport. These responses would seem to indicate that people did not know about wrestling and they did not want to know about it.

In my experience, one of the common misconceptions about wrestling, that both men and women wrestlers face, is that people commonly think of wrestling as professional or entertainment wrestling. Rather than distinguishing between amateur and professional wrestling, people believe that all types of wrestling are the same activity. Although entertainment wrestling calls itself wrestling, it is completely different from amateur wrestling. Given this misconception, wrestlers often find themselves explaining that their sport is not staged or acted out, that there is no ring, and competitors do not jump off the high ropes or hit each other with chairs or other objects. Instead, the wrestlers have to tell people that amateur wrestling, their sport, is a legitimate sport with an ancient history. Jill told people, “I do Olympic freestyle wrestling. It’s in the Olympics, and it’s an actual sport, and it’s not fake.” Female wrestlers face an additional problem when people conflate professional and amateur wrestling. In professional women’s wrestling, the participants are often scantily clad, traditionally feminine looking women, often with augmented breasts, and they sometimes have “panty matches” in which they wrestle in their bra and underwear. Laura commented that when people think of WWE, the image associated with it is “big boobs, muscles, and they just look so fake

52 Amber
all over,” which is not the image that the wrestlers wanted associated with them or their sport. Amber also commented on the public’s impression of wrestling:

The public, when they think of wrestling, thinks of the WWE or WWF . . . .

They totally think the first [thing] that goes into their head, they think of scantily clad women with, like, fake boobs {laughing} and, like, kind of a joke.53

The wrestlers were then eager to explain “there is no ropes, no punching, no kicking, no screaming, no biting.” Susan said, as well as displaying that they were not the sexualized woman of the WWE, but at the same time portraying and maintaining their own femininity. Hence, they took on the task of encouraging people to see wrestling as a sport with serious participants, and balancing this with helping people to see that wrestlers could be feminine.

In addition to the negative and erroneous images of wrestling that are portrayed in entertainment wrestling, female wrestlers must also contend with occasional negative media coverage of the sport. In my experience, female wrestling is relatively poorly covered in the media; indeed, all amateur wrestling receives little media attention. Much of the media coverage, especially in the United States, has focused on women’s right to wrestle (for example, see Gregory, 2004; Lilly, 2001; Schumer, 2004). While much of the media coverage about women’s wrestling is positive in that it promotes the sport, three of the wrestlers participating in this study commented on the sexual spin that the

53 WWF refers to the World Wrestling Federation. The WWF changed their name to the World Entertainment Wrestling (WWE) in 2002 after a court upheld a previous legal agreement regarding the trademark rights to the acronym WWF which is held by the World Wildlife Fund (World Wildlife Fund, 2004).
media sometimes applies to the sport and the participants. Two of the wrestlers talked about two of the same media stories: one a newspaper article about the Athens Olympics and another video documentary about a wrestler and a female boxer (Sharp, 2005).^54

According to these wrestlers, a Greek newspaper article during the 2004 Summer Olympics showed a picture of two wrestlers who were ground wrestling, as opposed to standing wrestling where both wrestlers are on their feet. One of the participants described the picture: “there was this position where this girl was – I guess one girl was kind of on her butt and the other girl looked like her face was in the other girl’s crotch.” Given the nature of the sport, sometimes the positions in which the wrestlers find themselves are very close and intimate but they are not sexual. Both participants that had seen this image were very upset because it presented a biased impression of the sport, especially since the caption that ran alongside the picture, as told to me by Rebecca, was “Sweet Smell of Woman,” according to her recollection. Images such as these sexualize wrestlers and the sport, and emphasize the athletes’ sexuality and gender over their talents and abilities as athletes. Although this particular incident is one very outrageous example, these two wrestlers said that they had general concerns about the negative image of women’s wrestling in the media.

In contrast to this blatantly sexualized media image, both wrestlers also talked about a CTV documentary about a wrestler and boxer. The documentary, entitled, Girls Don’t Fight (2005), presented a more positive image about the sport, but, according to one of the participants who knew the interviewee in the documentary, it too was biased

---

^54 Regarding the media story about the Athens Olympics, unfortunately, given that this image was in the Greek media, I have been unable to locate it.
and skewed. Some of the excerpts that were used in the program portrayed the wrestler as a bit of a masochist claiming, “I kind of like getting a black eye,” removing this phrase from the context of the conversation. This is a typical practice in the media, and one that upset the wrestlers who had seen the documentary. Yet, overall, those who spoke about it said that the coverage of this documentary was “well done” and was welcomed because it showcased women’s wrestling and brought attention to women in traditionally male-dominated sports.\textsuperscript{55}

WWE images of women’s wrestling and the images sometimes portrayed in other media outlets may sexualize female wrestlers, and individuals with whom wrestlers had spoken about the sport would occasionally sexualize them as well. When the participants told people that they wrestled, they reported that sometimes they received responses such as “were you mud wrestling? Were you jello wrestling? Were you corn wrestling?,” a comment that Kate shared with me. Certainly, these types of questions and comments were demeaning to the athletes and they were dismissive of their sport. These responses sexualized wrestlers as objects of display for other peoples’ titillating amusement: “they think it’s something sexual I guess. Like, ‘oh, you’re a wrestler! Yum!’,” Kate said. These types of wrestling – mud, jello, corn, and hot oil – are intended for audiences who ogle the participants. It could be argued that these types of wrestling are essentially soft pornography and are certainly not sport.

\textsuperscript{55} The media’s tendency to take interviewees’ responses out of context was harshly criticized by these two wrestlers. They were happy that as someone who knew the sport, and as an honest researcher, I would not misrepresent them, unlike the media.
Even if wrestlers are not wrestling in mud or jello, and even if the sport is not sexual, the wrestlers reported hearing some people suggest that they would watch women’s wrestling for the sexual connotations that they associate with the sport. Laura said that she had overheard heard people make comments such as “yeah, I’d come watch that: two girls wrestling. How could that not be fun?” Kate told me that as a response to a media question, she had heard a chairman of a state-level wrestling committee say, “the only reason to watch these girls would be to see them in their tight little suits.” Other responses that wrestlers received from the public, particularly from men, were comments such as “oh, I bet she’s an animal in the sack,” or “oh my god, I want to wrestle her,” or “I’ll wrestle with you {said seductively}. We can have a wrestling match later.” Sexualizing wrestlers in this fashion again belittles the women’s abilities and accomplishments; furthermore, it undermines the challenge that the wrestlers offered to traditional femininity. Rather than accepting female wrestlers as strong women, in order to diminish the threat to hegemonic ideals of gender that they offered, women wrestlers were recast into normative gender roles where they were sexualized.

Sexualizing wrestlers was one method of recasting them into a more traditional model of femininity. In contrast to focusing on wrestlers’ femininity, other stereotypes and responses to female wrestlers dismiss the participants as illegitimate females. One stereotype about female wrestlers that strips wrestlers of their femininity is an assumption and portrayal of wrestlers as lesbians. As assumed lesbians, wrestlers are reconstructed

---

56 Rebecca

57 Jill
as women masquerading as or pretending to be men (Kane, 1995), and, as such, they are assumed to be unfeminine. When I was wrestling, it was common to have people ask if I or my teammates were lesbians. However, participants in this study had mixed reactions to my questions about this stereotype. When I asked about stereotypes, Kirstin immediately replied by saying “oh, the whole ‘are you gay’ thing,” indicating that she was familiar with and had regularly heard these types of inquiries. In addition, when I directly asked each wrestler whether they were familiar with this specific stereotype, seven of the participants said that, yes, they had heard this often from people when they told them that they wrestled. Yet there was one wrestler, Susan, who indicated, “I’ve never heard that” when I asked her if people thought wrestlers were lesbians. Two other participants were aware that it was a common stereotype but they themselves had never had anyone ask them about lesbianism in wrestling. All of the wrestlers commented that they did know a few lesbians who wrestled but they were in the minority; furthermore, lesbianism was not an issue since the sport, like all sports, is not sexual, although it can be sexualized by observers. Labelling female wrestlers as lesbians is an attack that is used to denigrate the sport because by casting the participants as lesbians they are cast off as illegitimate women. As illegitimate women, wrestlers do not pose as significant a threat to the dominant, hegemonic conception of femininity.

As opposed to dismissing female wrestlers as a joke or as lesbians, the participants told me that some individuals, particularly men, also responded by wanting to wrestle with them. Kirstin said she interpreted these challenges as a positive response by men who had wrestled at some point in their lives and simply wanted a nostalgic return to the sport:
Most men at one point in their life, or most athletic men, have tried wrestling, so when they hear that I do what I do and I’ve done it pretty well, they’re “oh cool!
You want to go? You want to go?” (Kirstin).

Amber, Laura, and Jill suggested that when they went out to bars and men ask to have a serious wrestling match with them it was another way in which people made a joke out of the sport. Finally, and likely motivated by the same sentiment as when men made a joke of women’s wrestling, wrestlers also thought that men challenging them to wrestle was indicative of these individuals wanting to prove that “I can still beat up a girl that thinks she’s tough’,” as Laura suggested. According to these women’s reports, some men who were confronted by strong, confident women who did not meet their image of femininity appeared to be threatened and wanted to reassert their presumed male physical superiority, thus re-establishing and confirming the gender order that is assumed within society. Reflecting comments made by some of these participants, my experience as a wrestler was that men certainly assumed they could beat me and other female wrestlers; they believed that although we might be strong women, as men, they were stronger and they could beat us in a wrestling match. Jill insightfully commented, “I think most of the stereotypes that are out there are negative because they come from a very scared male orientated [sic] basis that’s still a bit freaked out about strong women.”

In response to these claims and challenges, the wrestlers said either that they recognized that some men could beat them, because of their testosterone, or they felt they could beat the men who we are making these claims. Kirstin’s suggested her response to a man might be, “buddy, pick me up and throw me over your shoulder. The testosterone just doesn’t compare,” while Jill said, “I can kick your ass, pretty much.” Amber, also
reflecting on the sexual undertones of these challenges by men, said she would respond
by telling them, “first of all, I’ll kick your ass, and second of all [laughing], excuse me
it’s not, it’s not sexual! Why are you making it sexual? It’s a sport!”

Another reaction that the wrestlers received from people when they told them that
they wrestled was that they did not look like wrestlers. The image of wrestlers that the
public seemed to hold, as reported by the wrestlers, was that of a large, mannish, butch:
“a lot of people think that women wrestlers – they envision some butchy, ugly, hairy
chick [laughing], I’ve been told,” reported Kirstin. Another participant, Kate, being
disparaging and dismissive of another sport, said that people pictured wrestlers to look
like:

German weightlifters: shorter, stockier, kind of a little bit dykish maybe, looks
kind of mannish, very aggressive, very, you know, not feminine at all. I’d say an
anti-feminine equals the idea of a wrestler, or a weightlifter or any aggressive
types sport.

The wrestlers reported that many people were surprised by the attractiveness of
female wrestlers, which can be understood in relation to the effort that the wrestlers put
into looking feminine, if not hyper-feminine. Regularly, the participants reported hearing
comments such as, “you’re a wrestler? . . . Well, you don’t look like a wrestler,” as
Jacqueline, Amber, and Kate all told me, as if they were being offering a compliment
rather than being disrespected. Kirstin relayed that she was told, “you’re not masculine at
all, and you’re, you know, really nice and you’re gorgeous!” The wrestlers, who put
effort into their feminine appearance, seemed to be genuinely pleased with these
responses as an affirmation of their femininity. Wrestlers indicated that they were proud
that they did not fit the stereotypes and that they did look feminine. In response to these types of surprised responses, Kate claimed she would say “well, thank you very much, I’m glad I don’t look like a wrestler.” This type of response does seem to fit with the wrestlers’ assertions that they could be feminine by looking pretty and being emotional. These types of “compliments” reaffirm their feminine performances and confirm for them that they were proving their femininity.

In conjunction with assuming that female wrestlers were likely to look like men, people also indicated to the participants that they thought that wrestlers would act like men: female wrestlers were assumed to be aggressive and violent. Laura said that people told her, ‘oh, if you wrestle you have to be, like, mean and, like, violent.’” Therefore, it appears that people sometimes assumed that the aggressiveness and physical strength that was exhibited on the mat would be a central component of wrestlers’ off-the-mat performances as well. Negatively, this was interpreted as an assumption of violence that some people could find intimidating or even frightening. Laura said that a friend of hers was initially scared of her. Retrospectively he told her: “‘I didn’t know how to take you guys, or, like, if you guys would . . . all of a sudden get mad at each other or something.’” Laura also simply commented that “I think a lot of people think [we’re] violent,” while Jill said, “maybe they look at it like ‘oh, she’s a mean person.’” Given that the wrestlers made a distinction between their on-and-off-the-mat behaviour, the participants’ comments seemed to express that they were surprised by these responses. They considered themselves to be more feminine and less masculine off the mat: they decreased the degree to which they displayed their aggressiveness and competitiveness in non-wrestling contexts. Despite the changes in their performances, people still appeared
to think “you are aggressive even though you don’t [act that way] towards other people, even though you don’t think of it like that, but [that is] people’s perceptions of wrestling,” stated Jane.

Some of the wrestlers said that while they did not want to be perceived as violent, they did want people to think of them as strong and tough, which they said was a positive image of the sport that they thought was common. Participants reported that peoples’ positive reactions were that women’s wrestling was interesting and “cool.” As opposed to dismissing the sport, these people found wrestling intriguing and they asked questions about the sport and details about their training. The participants indicated that some people told them they were “pretty tough chicks,” and men told them “I bet you’d probably kick my ass,” as Kirstin reported. The wrestlers, who wanted respect for their sport, felt that in some ways they tried to live up to this positive image of women’s wrestling in order to encourage a positive image of the sport, in contrast to the negative stereotypes previously discussed: “I mean maybe we come across a little tougher because of the stereotypes,” Kate claimed.

Although the wrestlers wanted to live up to the positive stereotypes, contradictorily, they said that the negative stereotypes did not affect how they acted. Instead, like Kirstin, they claimed, “public opinion doesn’t matter to me too much.” The wrestlers believed that, unlike other women, especially “girly girls,” they were not concerned with public opinion or audiences’ perceptions of them; yet, they recognized that they did modify their performances for different people and in different contexts. Idealistically and perhaps naively, they asserted the belief that they lived up to the positive image of the sport but were unaffected by the negative stereotypes, even though
they did try to prove their femininity while off the mat. The wrestlers had a difficult task of both disproving the negative stereotypes, which they claimed to do through education, and living up to the positive image of the sport. This is a difficult balancing act, which they did not discuss in enough detail in order for me to understand how they managed and negotiated this challenge.

There clearly are a number of negative stereotypes about female wrestlers yet the participants also said that they thought people who knew they were wrestlers did respect them. Amber stipulated a caveat to this claim and suggested that only people who knew about the sport had respect for female wrestlers as tough athletes. When talking about positive and respectful images and impressions of the sport, Amber said these were held “by people who know wrestling, either . . . other athletes in wrestling, or family and friends of wrestlers.” Her comments seem to imply that those people that did not know the sport were more likely to have a negative image of wrestling.

Given that negative images of wrestling seem to stem from ignorance of the sport, which wrestlers themselves were trying to correct, the participants indicated that as the sport receives more attention and positive, balanced media coverage, the image of women’s wrestling was changing. One of the more senior wrestlers who has been in the sport a number of years suggested that she thinks that the images and stereotypes about wrestling are slowly shifting. As people come to know wrestling and recognize the women as competent athletes and as feminine, they were more accepting and respecting. Stereotypes and images were slowly changing so that wrestling was coming to be “at least seen . . . as normal, and with respect,” claimed Kate. Overall, the wrestlers wanted people to accept them on their own terms. They were feminine but they were not
traditionally feminine: they could be emotional, talkative, social, and attractive, as well as confident, independent, and assertive. Rather, than enacting traditional femininity, female wrestlers combined masculinity and femininity and they wanted to be accepted and respected as such, both on and off the mat.
Chapter 6

Discussion: The Effects of Wrestling on Wrestlers’ Performances and the Social Definition of Femininity

According to the ten female wrestlers who participated in this study, their gender performances varied by social context. On the mat, which is the context about which the participants seemed most comfortable talking, female wrestlers enacted more traditionally masculine qualities, including being aggressive, competitive, and confident, and they decreased their performance of feminine qualities. When the wrestlers stepped off the mat, they shifted their gender performances and enacted more feminine characteristics, such as being more concerned with their appearance, displaying their heterosexuality, and being more social and talkative, and they decreased their more masculine displays of aggressiveness and strength. However, wrestlers’ performances and experiences were more nuanced than simply saying they were masculine in wrestling and feminine when off the mat. While the wrestlers’ contradictory and paradoxical worlds did entail different expectations, and while they modified their gender performances to fit with these different worlds, their enactments were not radically different between contexts. Some of the wrestlers directly described themselves in terms of sharp contrasts between these different stages, yet their actual performances, as many of their comments suggest, were more subtle as they finely modified their femininity to conform to gender expectations in both fields. Both on and off the mat, the wrestlers blended characteristics that are traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity.
Modifying Kirstin’s phrase, the wrestlers turned up and down, rather than on and off, particular qualities and elements of their performances within different contexts.

Generally, the wrestlers appeared to have difficulty defining femininity and describing their own gender and gender displays; yet, like their gender performances, the ease with which they spoke about their gender also varied by context. When I spoke with the wrestlers about their performances, they seemed to have quicker responses and greater ease talking about their lives on the mat. In contrast to discussing their femininity off the mat, where they seemed to have difficulty describing their experiences, the wrestlers spoke with relative ease about who they were and how they acted in the world of wrestling. Within the immediate context of wrestling, there are many identifiable expectations and rules for behaviour, which these wrestlers interpreted as trying to make them into “pseudo-men.” Interestingly, the expectations in the immediate context of wrestling, such as in wrestlers’ training rooms, are contradictory to FILA’s apparent attempts to enforce a more traditional model of femininity. However, given that some of the gendered expectations are relatively blatant within wrestlers’ daily experiences in the sport, it is not surprising that the participants found it easier to talk about themselves within this context as compared to their lives outside of wrestling. In wrestling, they felt that they knew, perhaps overly simplistically, how they were expected to behave and they attempted to conform to these expectations by heightening their performances of more masculine qualities and decreasing their traditionally feminine traits. Perhaps more importantly, the ease with which these wrestlers spoke about their on the mat experiences and performances demonstrates the centrality of this world to their lives and the degree to which they identified as athletes. Their identities and statuses as wrestlers was something
that they spoke about with confidence, and this status seemed to be pivotal for these women.

Many sociologists consider gender to be a master status. A master status is a significant status, quality, or characteristic that is central to a person’s identity: a master status is a quality that one holds which is more important than, cuts across, and over-rides other statuses that a person holds (Hughes, 1945). Gender as a master status indicates that a person’s masculinity or femininity is a dominant component of their identity, and is critical for their social standing and how they are treated by others. For example, when a person’s gender is unknown, others may find it difficult to interact with them and may not know how to treat them. Knowing or ascribing another person’s gender tells us the social scripts we should use in our interactions with them. Within our contemporary patriarchal society, a master status of woman still implies a person who is considered subservient to men: women are still considered by some to be innately inferior to men in Western societies (Barres, 2006).

For the ten wrestlers I interviewed, in addition to the importance of their femininity, their statuses as wrestlers also seemed significant to their own self-identity. When asked, the participants in this study specifically indicated that wrestling was a critical part of how they defined themselves, and it appears that it was a crucial status that influenced their behaviour both on and off the mat. Interestingly, on the mat, the participants seemed to suggest that they were wrestlers first and women second.

One indicator of how important wrestling was to the participants’ self-conceptions can be found in their discussions of how the sport made them feel unique and special. Seven participants stressed that they liked wrestling because it was a unique sport and
they felt unique and special because of their involvement in wrestling. Wrestling is “something different that no one else is really doing . . . I chose wrestling, again, because it’s unique,” said Jill, and Kelly commented, “I like the fact that not a lot of people do it and it’s not common.” Not only did they like wrestling because it was unique, but the wrestlers also indicated that they thought their participation in wrestling made them unique women, distinct from more traditional women and even from other athletes.\footnote{While the wrestlers may have felt unique, clearly they are not the only women who are not enacting traditional femininity. My point here is to discuss the wrestlers’ positions, and to talk specifically about how they perceived their experiences.} For example, Jill said, “I definitely think that [people] might look at me and think, ‘oh, this girl brings something else to the table.’”

Although wrestling is a distinct sport, women are also participating in other combative sports, such as boxing, soccer, rugby, and American football. Likely, these women also enact performances in sport that are similar to the wrestlers. Certainly, wrestling makes the wrestlers feel unique; however, performances of less traditionally femininity are also enacted by other women in other sports and in other fields. The wrestlers may feel unique, but we must consider their displays as part of a larger group of women who are resisting traditional femininity.

The importance of wrestling to the participants’ self-identities as wrestlers was most evident for those participants who had recently retired, were contemplating retirement, or had taken time off due to injury. The permanent or temporary lack of their wrestling identity and the subsequent perceived loss of uniqueness was disturbing to them. Kate commented that once you stop wrestling “all of a sudden you can’t have that
success and be special anymore.” Rebecca, one of the three wrestlers who was contemplating retirement, said that she felt she was going through an identity crisis: “if I can’t wrestle, what can I do, or what am I, like, if I’m not a wrestler? It’s such a part of my identity . . . . What am I if I’m not a wrestler?” Clearly, for Rebecca, her status as a wrestler was a key element of her identity, so much so that the loss of this role in her life caused her to question her identity.

All of the participants indicated that wrestling was something that they thought made them unique as women and their comments about their self-perceived uniqueness suggest that wrestling was a major part of their own identities. As a pivotal self-identifier and quality that influenced how others treated them, for these participants, their status as a wrestler seems to function as a master status. Wrestler as a master status appears to have influenced how these women thought of themselves and how they behaved in both of their social worlds – wrestling affected their performances of femininity and visa versa. Contrary to Coakley and White’s claims, as cited in Theberge (2003), sport appears to be an important arena in which these women developed their identities. Therefore, it seems that these women had at least two different master statuses that were both important for how they behaved in different social contexts: these participants had identities as women and as wrestlers, both of which, despite their contradictions for gender performances, were important for how they defined themselves as persons and how they acted on and off the mat.

Regarding the wrestlers’ perceived sense of uniqueness, I had initially speculated that these types of feelings would cause them to hold traditional views of femininity to which they could compare themselves in order to demonstrate their specialness, a feeling
associated with high performance athletics. These participants did not hold such a narrow perception of femininity, although their image of the “girly girl” was very traditional; however, they still expressed their own sense of uniqueness. At once they claimed that they were just like other women, possessing the positive elements of traditional femininity in that they were caring, social, and attractive, yet they were also different and distinct from many other women in that they were actively and deliberately embodying many of the positive elements of masculinity as well. In their performances, wrestlers were trying to blend the most valued and regarded qualities from both gender continua.

Nine out of ten of the participants strongly identified with their statuses and related roles and identities as wrestlers. Six of the wrestlers specifically said that wrestling was a key component of their lives, and it was something unique about them that they clearly used as a self-identifier that differentiated them from other people, especially other women. The one participant who did not seem to identify as strongly with wrestling or with the wrestling community identified more with her religious faith: her status as a member of her particular religion seemed to be more important than her status as a wrestler. While her membership in her religious organization was more important for how she identified, wrestling was still quite important to her and was important for how she saw herself as a woman, especially in relation to her friends who were not wrestlers. While she certainly considered herself to be a wrestler and exhibited many of the same personality characteristics on and off the mat as the other participants, there were minor degrees of difference in her performances as compared to her
teammates. For example, she did not talk as openly about her sexuality with them, although she did engage in “locker room talk.”

It is important to recall and note that of the ten women who participated in this study, six were current or former national team members. Their high levels of success may partially explain their strong associations with the sport. Thus, wrestlers who identified more strongly with wrestling and were very successful might have been more likely to speak about their involvement in wrestling as critical to who they were as persons and as an influence on their behaviour in various social contexts.

The participants were successful wrestlers who were accepted members of the wrestling community. Thus, their performances as wrestlers appeared to be adequate, by the standards of others within wrestling: the participants passed muster as wrestlers. As women, unlike some other women who blend gender qualities (Devor, 1989), the wrestlers were always recognized as women: hence, the wrestlers also “passed” as women. However, the wrestlers were women who did not entirely enact femininity as prescribed by social expectations. The wrestlers exhibited more confidence, independence, strength, and assertiveness than is typically associated with traditional femininity, in addition to accepting and displaying some qualities that are traditionally feminine. Although what constitutes femininity appears to be slowly changing,\(^9\) these

\(^9\) It is hard to determine precisely how femininity is changing because many researchers have adopted a post-modernist, relativist approach and they deliberately do not define gender. Many researches simply talk about gender or femininity and do not accurately state what these constitute, making it difficult to gather data on the changing nature of gender dictates. Given this lack of specificity of terms, it is difficult to conduct even a meta-analysis of gender research to assess the shifts in gender expectations over time.
wrestlers were certainly not your “typical” women in contemporary society. Despite their acceptable performances as women, their distinctiveness, in contrast to normative femininity, and their success in the wrestling community may partially explain why they identified as strongly as wrestlers as they did as women. Since they were different from other women and they did not fully conform to the expectations of this status, the wrestlers may also have made wrestling another master status for themselves, a status and resultant role that they were more successful at performing according to the external standards for these positions and enactments.

A master status also influences how others perceive an individual. Wrestler as a master status affected how other people perceived and interacted with these women both on and off the mat. Like other master statuses, such as socio-economic status, a master status as a wrestler is not as readily apparent as other master statuses, such as gender. Yet, knowing the status of these women as wrestlers may have affected how their audiences perceived them. They may be viewed positively as strong, competent women, an image which the wrestlers want to validate and embody. These audiences may be supportive and encouraging of their resulting alternative performances of femininity, such as the valuable social networks of family, friends, and supporters that the wrestlers discussed. Alternatively, a perceiving audience may view the wrestlers more negatively, questioning their femininity and legitimacy as women. It is perhaps in response to these audiences that the wrestlers then heightened their other master status as women, performing apologetic behaviour. Their dual statuses as wrestlers and women interact to influence how they are perceived by others and how they perform for these audiences.
The participants’ perspectives about gender and their own femininity appear to have been profoundly influenced by their statuses as wrestlers and their experience in the wrestling community. Due to their involvement in this traditionally masculine activity, the wrestlers’ perspectives on and performances of femininity were less traditional, and instead, they incorporated other qualities traditionally considered to be masculine into their own femininity. The wrestlers appeared to be personally redefining the meaning of femininity for themselves. The ideas about femininity that the wrestlers expressed, including the belief that women could enact both masculine and femininity traits, are akin to feminist theories of gender which suggest that gender is flexible, situationally specific, and a combination of both masculine and feminine qualities (Deaux, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Wrestlers enacted and displayed a number of characteristically masculine qualities, both on and off the mat, including competitiveness, assertiveness, aggressiveness, strength, fortitude, dedication, and independence, as well as several normatively feminine traits including sociability, emotionality, vulnerability, heterosexuality, and concern with their appearance. Many of the wrestlers specifically said that their participation in wrestling had influenced how they saw themselves and how they acted: if they were not involved in wrestling, they would not have become the women that they were at the time. By their own definitions of femininity, wrestling had made them more feminine.

More of a Woman

The participants in this study claimed that the qualities that they were expected to perform in wrestling were those that they had learned through their participation in the sport. They suggested or explicitly claimed that because of wrestling, they were
competitive, confident, assertive, aggressive, independent, and strong. Reflecting on their involvement in wrestling and their own identity, all of the participants made numerous comments about the effects of wrestling on their lives and their senses-of-self as women.

Regarding confidence, which was the characteristic most frequently commented on by the participants, they boldly testified that “wrestling makes you more confident . . . . Wrestlers have a lot of confidence,”

50 “I definitely think wrestling made me more confident,”

51 and “I think it, [wrestling] gives you confidence, and I think confidence gives you an advantage.”

52 As confident women, the wrestlers believed in themselves and their own abilities; they were comfortable and happy with their bodies and themselves; they were willing to tackle challenges and take risks; and they stood up for themselves and would speak their minds. Several of the participants directly stated that they were confident because of their involvement in wrestling. Kate stated that if she had not wrestled:

I definitely wouldn’t have been as confident; I definitely wouldn’t have had such a sense of self . . . . I think that what [wrestling] does give you is it gives you confidence that no matter what else is in front of you, you’ve done it harder, you’ve had it harder, this is nothing.

50 Kirstin

51 Laura

52 Laura
Other qualities that the wrestlers identified as those that made them distinct from other women, qualities that were central to their performances on and off the mat, were characteristics which the wrestlers ardently claimed they possessed and performed because of their participation in wrestling. In their opinion, they were independent and assertive because of wrestling: "I think I like wrestling because it shows you that you become more independent," claimed Susan, while Kate said "I probably wouldn’t be near as aggressive [if I didn’t wrestle]; I don’t think I have an aggressive personality, but I do more so now," and Laura stated "I’m more aggressive now than I probably would ever have been without, you know, without wrestling." These interrelated qualities of confidence, independence, and assertiveness were what distinguish them as women from "girly girls" and other women.

Overall, their confidence, independence, and assertiveness, and their experiences in wrestling made them stronger women, in their opinion. "I didn’t realize how strong you can be. I don’t know. Not like I was girly before, but I wouldn’t have really thought of myself as a strong individual," claimed Jacqueline, while Kate said, "as far as being female, it, [wrestling], teaches you just to be strong and to stand up for yourself." Their strength was physical, mental, and emotional. Compared to other women and other types of femininity, the wrestlers believed that they were stronger and this was because of wrestling. The "masculine" traits that the wrestlers possessed and performed, both on and off the mat, were effects of or enhanced by their involvement in the wrestling world which demands these types of enactments and behaviours.

Female wrestlers participating in this study indicated that they felt empowered because of their involvement in sport. As empowered women, they said that they felt that
they could do what they wanted, say what they wanted, and be whom they wanted, although these sentiments clearly do not admit how they regulated their own performances both on and off the mat. Kelly’s first response to my questions about how she thought of femininity was to assert, “it’s feeling empowered as a woman, I think, and being proud that you’re a woman.” She clarified these broad statements when she said that not all women were empowered, and that empowerment had not always been a part of femininity. Rather, she claimed, as women forayed into new areas and challenged gender prescriptions and restrictions, they became empowered. Thus, for Kelly, she stated that she was empowered because of her involvement in wrestling. While Kelly was the only participant to specifically use the word “empowered,” many of the other wrestlers made comments that suggested that they felt empowered and that this was linked to their involvement in wrestling. For example, Amber made the following comment:

I think being a confident, strong, independent person makes you a feminine woman because you just know what you want, you can make any decision you want, you can dress – and it leads into how you decide or want to look physically, how you want to be mentally, emotionally. And I think being involved in wrestling has made me become that person.

These types of responses indicate that the wrestlers believed that they were an empowered group of women who, like other non-traditionally feminine women, felt that they could perform their femininity as they chose, both challenging and conforming to social gendered expectations.
The participants expressed that they felt empowered because they were confident and they could do what they chose. Since they felt empowered, as I predicted, the wrestlers indicated that they felt fewer restrictions regarding what they could do, where they could go, and who they could be, as compared to other women. They felt capable of tackling challenges; many of the wrestlers indicated that they felt safe and unrestricted in their bodily actions and daily activities; they were comfortable with men; and they were generally self-confident and assured. Ultimately, the qualities that the wrestlers indicated that they developed in wrestling and took off the mat into other social contexts were empowering for them.

While the wrestlers stated or indicated that they felt empowered because they believed they could perform and act as they chose, their comments seem to ignore or dismiss the numerous rules and expectations placed upon them and others, to which they conformed, across social contexts. For example, the wrestlers stated that on the mat they were expected to be like men so they tried to conform to these expectations by behaving like “pseudo-guys.” Off the mat, the wrestlers actively attempted to “look like girls” and displayed their heterosexuality, indicating that they were conforming to social gender norms. The wrestlers were policing their own gendered performances, internalizing gender rules within these different contexts, and modifying their behaviours to conform to these expectations. While they may have felt empowered, their performances, like others in society, were constrained and limited.

Although the wrestlers indicated that they felt empowered, both on and off the mat, they also talked about feeling the need to prove themselves both as athletes and as
women. Feeling the need to prove themselves indicates that the wrestlers implicitly understood that there were expectations for their behaviour and performances to which they wanted to conform. While the wrestlers were staking claim to a different type of femininity than the norm, they also still felt the need to exhibit normative characteristics in particular circumstances and with particular people. Hence, these women seemed to lack the power or authority to act as they chose, like all within society who are restricted by social rules, dictates, and laws, and they still enacted performances which they felt were expected of them. I would suggest that many of the characteristics that the participants said that they chose to enact as part of their off-the-mat femininity were qualities that they likely felt were expected of women, such as looking pretty and attractive in order to prove their femininity. Foucault (1978, 1980), would suggest that these were not necessarily qualities that the wrestlers were independently choosing to perform; instead, they internalized the expectations and norms of society concerning appropriate behaviours for women. While they were willing to push the limits of what constitutes femininity, in terms of performing more characteristically masculine traits, they appeared to still have felt and wanted to display some elements of traditional femininity. Interestingly, both their self-perceived empowerment and their need to prove and conform were demonstrated on and off the mat.

Previously studies conducted by Blinde, Taub and Han (1993) and Theberge (2003) conclude that the empowerment that women can feel through sport may not transfer to other arenas or fields; these findings do not seem to completely reflect the experience of female wrestlers. To a certain extent, the wrestlers’ comments indicate that they were and did feel empowered in both of their worlds. The wrestlers took their
confidence, physical capabilities, assertiveness, strength, and independence into their off-the-mat performances and they demanded more for themselves as women: they rejected some of the imposed restrictions and limitations placed on women within their everyday lives as they asserted themselves and overcame challenges.

The wrestlers, like other female athletes studied by Blinde, Taub, and Han (1994), may have been empowered at the individual level but this does not seem to contribute to a commitment to collective empowerment for women. Only two of the participants openly identified themselves as feminists and three other participants explicitly said that they were not feminist. Those wrestlers who did not identify as feminists did not appear to work explicitly towards group empowerment for women. For example, one wrestler spoke disapprovingly of affirmative action and another wrestler told me after our interview that wrestling was not “about that women’s lib thing.” Wrestlers’ general lack of concern for women’s social empowerment may be related to their belief in individualism, as reinforced and validated by the individual nature of the sport of wrestling. The freedom and respect that they sought for their own performances of femininity did not mean that they wanted all women to enact less traditional feminine performances, perhaps in the interest of preserving the wrestlers’ own sense of uniqueness. The empowerment and respect that the wrestlers seemed to seek was personal.

The wrestlers’ gender experiences and performances support both the theories of the female apologetic (Felshin, 1974; Griffin, 1998; Lowe, 1998; Malcom, 2003) and the un-apologetic (Broad, 2001). Female wrestlers’ performances of femininity off the mat, which included attention to their sexuality and appearance, may be
interpreted as apologetic behaviour. They appeared to want to acclaim, reassert, and demonstrate their more traditionally feminine qualities. Dworkin and Messner (2000) would refer to these performances as reproductive agency in that they reproduce and support the hegemonic model of femininity. At the same time, the wrestlers maintained their confidence, assertiveness, and independence off the mat, qualities which are not normatively feminine. Demonstrating resistive agency (Dworkin & Messner, 2000), these masculine qualities seem to be a rejection of more feminine qualities, which the dominant gender schema defines in relation and in contrast to one another. Normative femininity is more passive, deferent, and dependent than the performances of the female wrestlers. Given that their performances were situationally specific and finely modified, the wrestlers also said they possessed some of these feminine characteristics as well: they would be passive in addition to their independence and assertiveness. Generally, the wrestlers were proud of their more masculine qualities and they enacted them regularly both on and off the mat; they were verbally unapologetic of their non-normatively feminine characteristics. Contradictorily, the wrestlers, while not embarrassed, per se, by their more masculine qualities, also appeared to feel the need to compensate or apologize for these more masculine behaviours with displays of more traditional femininity. Their performances appear to be a balance between their alternative empowered femininity and normative femininity – a balance which legitimated them as “real” women who could challenge gender norms rather than being summarily rejected, but which also limited their unapologetic behaviours.
The wrestlers' ideas about, definitions and performances of femininity were not entirely based on the normative, hegemonic model prescribed by the dominant gender schema. Instead, they partially rejected this type of femininity for themselves, which they disparagingly referred to as "girly girls," although they claimed that they respected other women who wanted to or believed that they should behave in a traditionally feminine manner. While the wrestlers claimed that they respected more traditionally feminine women, the image of normative femininity that they professed was fairly negative. The wrestlers may have offered general respect to women; however, I do not believe that they sincerely respected traditionally feminine displays, based on their negative descriptions of this type of women and the fact that they were rejecting many elements associated with this type of femininity. Given the wrestlers' beliefs about traditional femininity and their own gender performances, the challenge, as DiLorio (1989) discusses, which was an objective of this research, is to identify those elements of traditional femininity that female athletes accept and reject, in what contexts, and how they do so, rather than summarily asserting that sport is a challenge that women offer to normative femininity and patriarchy.

For the wrestlers participating in this study, I have outlined that they did not necessarily reject traditional femininity for other women, perhaps in order to hold themselves out as unique in contrast, but they themselves did not want to act or be thought of as traditionally feminine. They were not weak, dependent, subservient, or fickle women, which they defined as negative elements of traditional femininity. However, neither were they unfeminine. They still accepted and enacted qualities associated with femininity: they were warm, amiable, emotional, attractive, helpful,
heterosexual women, which are generally thought of as positive qualities of traditional femininity. More importantly, I would suggest, not only were wrestlers rejecting certain elements of traditional femininity, but they were actively embracing and embodying qualities that are normatively defined as masculine. The wrestlers were aggressive, assertive, confident, capable, determined, strong, and independent – qualities that are typically considered to be masculine and the privilege of men. Determining how the wrestlers rejected some elements of traditional femininity while appropriating and displaying qualities that are traditionally considered masculine is a much more difficult task.

I would speculate that the wrestlers first “tried out,” to use another stage term that would fit with Goffman’s theory, their more masculine performance in the world of wrestling where they were accepted, slowly incorporating these into their disposition or habitus, and then they brought these performances into their every day lives. This was likely a subtle process that would have been difficult to observe, and probably was not recognized by the individual wrestlers themselves.

It is impossible to delineate a causal relationship between wrestling and the enactment of this type of less traditional femininity. Many of the wrestlers offered speculations about the women that they might have been if they had not wrestled, suggesting they would not have been as confident, strong, and assertive. These musings are interesting, but are impossible to test. The wrestlers’ conclusions about their own femininity are drawn in relation to other women. While the wrestlers believed that it was through their participation in wrestling that they differentiated themselves from other traditionally feminine women, it is impossible to draw complete and verified conclusions
of the effects that wrestling had on their disposition and personalities; tenuous relationships are all we can draw, which is the stock-and-trade of social science research. In this regards, it is impossible to determine if the femininity the wrestlers enacted was a result of wrestling, or whether their less traditional femininity was the motivation for their initial involvement in the sport. Yet, the participants themselves strongly assert that it was their involvement in wrestling that shaped their opinions and performances of femininity. The wrestlers believed that their participation in wrestling was partially responsible for their alternative performances and perspectives on femininity.

**Seeing the Other Side of Femininity**

In addition to assessing how wrestlers' participation in wrestling affected their own performances, the purpose of this study was also to determine how their participation in the sport and their performances influence the social definition of femininity. Defining femininity is a collective action, although not necessarily a conscious one. Therefore, to begin to determine how female wrestling affects the social definition of femininity, I tried to investigate, from the wrestlers' perspectives, how their own performances affected other people's ideas about women.

The participants indicated that they believed that their "unique" feminine performances, in which they incorporated traditionally masculine qualities, helped other people to see another type of femininity; their performances demonstrated and showed people the other end of the spectrum of femininity. Since they were tackling a traditionally masculine and male-dominated sport that is very physically challenging, they thought that people viewed them generally in less traditional terms. The wrestlers suggested that simply seeing women engaged in combative sports, such as wrestling,
demonstrated and signalled a different type of femininity that is less “girly girl” and highlighted other empowered qualities that women possess: “just in general, women in sport has had a huge effect; like, ‘look, they’re not breaking!’,” claimed Rebecca. In addition, their abilities as wrestlers and the masculine qualities that they performed off the mat signalled to others that they were strong, capable women who were not weak and delicate. As compared to more traditionally feminine women, whose performances fit with or are a reflection of hegemonic femininity, wrestlers’ performances demonstrate greater strength, confidence, assertiveness, and competence. Thus, women in wrestling, as well as those in other sports, demonstrate an alternative model of femininity, although they also must contend with the negative stereotypes about female wrestlers and athletes. Jill commented that she believed that people responded to women wrestlers in the following manner: “they do look at them as being more confident, and strong, and hard working.” Laura said, “I think if [people] look at a lot of girls in sports and stuff, [they] see them as confident people doing their own thing.”

Kirstin, Jill, and Amber noted that the potential effects of wrestling on how other people view women are limited by the relative obscurity of the sport. These wrestlers’ comments suggest that if people do not see female wrestlers training, competing, and challenging themselves within the sport, then they are not exposed to the alternative performances of femininity that the wrestlers enact. Lamenting on how few people watch wrestling and how little exposure the sport receives, Kirstin said:

No, I don’t think it, [wrestling], has that big of an impact on society. I don’t think enough people know about it for it to have an impact, and I don’t think that it will . . . . The only reason that people know about it are people that have either
been past involved or have a kid that’s involved; that’s the only reason people
really know about it.

According to Kirstin, only people who witness female wrestlers see their alternative
performances, which limits the potential affects of wrestling on how people view women.

Despite the limitations that few people watch wrestling, it is important to consider
that the wrestlers were not simply keeping their alternative performances of femininity on
the mat. Given that wrestling influenced how the participants viewed femininity and
their own gendered behaviour, the wrestlers took their less traditionally feminine
performance off the mat; therefore, they also showed the other end of the spectrum of
femininity to others even when they were not wrestling. Off the mat, they still
demonstrated to others through their own gender displays that women are less fragile and
weak than they are sometimes assumed by society: “I think some people do recognize
you as being strong individuals [because you’re a wrestler],” stated Jacqueline. Perhaps
somewhat wishfully, the wrestlers indicated that they believed that people looked at them
and commented on their strength: “oh, well, she’s strong. She’s obviously athletic.”

At the same time that they were demonstrating less traditionally feminine
qualities, these women also portrayed exemplary elements of traditional femininity, such
as their hyper-feminine appearances and displays of their heterosexuality. In this sense,
the wrestlers also conformed to and supported traditional hegemonic gendered
expectations. Thus, at once their gender performances were contradictory and supportive
of traditional femininity, displaying both an alternative and traditional femininity at the
same time. For others, the wrestlers were simultaneously demonstrating an accepted
model of femininity but also offering resistance and incorporating different qualities into their feminine performances.

Female wrestlers are still recognized as women. None of the participants spoke about problems with others misrecognizing or misattributing their gender. The wrestlers were not mistaken as being men, nor did they appear to be androgynous: all of the participating wrestlers were consistently recognized as women. Hence, their regular demonstrations of feminine appearance, heterosexuality, emotionality, and sociability are key elements of femininity that legitimated them as women for their audiences, both on and off the mat. Additionally, they were also showing other people in a variety of contexts a different side to femininity that incorporated qualities that have traditionally been considered characteristically masculine and perhaps even inappropriate for women. It is their enactment of these types of qualities as women, who are recognized as such, that is the true challenge to femininity. These incorporations of characteristics into their performances are potentially powerful because they were still accepted as women but their femininity was not based on normative expectations. I suggest that the power of the wrestlers’ performances rests on these small changes and incorporations since their overall performances as women were not dismissed. Since they were recognized as women, their performances may actually have an effect on perceptions about women; rather than being summarily dismissed as not “real” women, they are recognized as feminine and thus they expose audiences to a broader spectrum of femininity by enacting less traditionally feminine qualities.

While the wrestlers were recognized as women and they offered gender displays that were both resistive and reproductive of traditional femininity, their performances
may not be interpreted as such by some audiences on and off the mat. On the mat, the
women suggested that they were made into pseudo-men and were viewed by male
wrestlers and others in the wrestling community as "one of the guys." This opinion
cannot be completely justified, given that many of the wrestlers were involved in
romantic relationships with other heterosexual male wrestlers, relationships in which they
described themselves as more feminine; hence, men wrestlers did not completely dismiss
women wrestlers as "one of the guys." Yet, overall, their femininity was still somewhat
minimized within the world of wrestling. The wrestlers themselves believed that their
gender was a secondary characteristic on the mat and their status as wrestlers was
primary.

On the mat, if their displays are interpreted primarily as the acts of athletes, then
their performances may not be fully considered or recognized as resistive of hegemonic
ideals. Rather, on the mat, their resistive agency may not be interpreted as a challenge to
hegemonic femininity; their performances may be chiefly seen as the performances of
athletes rather than women, decreasing, but not eliminating, the potential effect of these
performances to highlight alternative performances of femininity. On the mat, it is
possible that their performances could be interpreted as contextually specific and within a
sporting framework that is outside of dominant gender schema. Hence, more masculine
performances in sport are not necessarily highly effective in changing the dominant
image of femininity since they may not be interpreted primarily as the performances of
women, or they may not be considered resistive because they may be viewed as the
"exception which proves the rule", thereby reaffirming traditional femininity.
Off the mat, wrestlers' performances of non-normative femininity may also be dismissed by some in order to preserve the hegemonic model. As Kane (1995) notes, and as the wrestlers themselves described, challenging behaviours by women who do not fit the dominant model of femininity may be dismissed by discrediting or misrepresenting the actors. In their experiences off the mat and in their retelling of stories about people's responses to them as wrestlers, the participants indicated that they were disrespected and dismissed by some people. Some individuals did not recognize the participants as offering a legitimate performance of femininity simply because they were not enacting the hegemonic model.

Referring to women's wrestling and wrestlers as a joke appears to be the most common way that the wrestlers' challenges to femininity were dismissed. The wrestlers and the resistance they offered to traditional femininity were also written off by some people when they suggested that their performances were sexual, thereby re-inscribing their displays within the dominant gender schema. Suggesting that the wrestlers, despite the challenge they offered, were not really tough and strong is another means of rejecting the alternative performances of these women. The sentiment expressed by some seems to be that wrestlers may be recognized as strong, but they are still not really that strong or, perhaps more importantly, as strong as men. Laughing at and laughing off wrestlers' performances appears to be a method of re-signifying and diminishing wrestlers' resistive agency and non-traditional qualities in order to reassert traditional femininity. These types of responses, which the wrestlers described, are essentially a reaction and resistance to the wrestlers' resistance of traditional femininity. Rather than accepting the wrestlers' model of their own femininity, such responses appear to be a retrenchment and demand
for more traditional performances. The challenge to traditional femininity offered by the wrestlers’ gender performances off the mat are reinterpreted or dismissed so that they are not a threat to the dominant gender schema and model of femininity: their performances are limited by the resistive audiences who view and ascribe meaning to these enactments.

While the reinterpretation of the women’s displays by resistive audiences may decrease the potential of these displays to challenge the hegemonic model of femininity, these challenges were still recognized by these resistive audiences. By dismissing, resisting, and reasserting traditional femininity against the wrestlers’ alternative performances of femininity, these audiences implicitly indicated that they recognized the challenge to the dominant model to which they, in turn, offered their resistance. If these audiences did not recognize or accept the wrestlers’ performances as resistance to the traditional model, then they would not have had to retrench and reassert the hegemonic norm. The very utterance of a joke about women wrestlers, or the comments about their sexuality and strength were attempts to reinforce a traditional femininity upon these women that indicate that their displays were viewed as a threat to the norm.

These female wrestlers were also surrounded by supportive audiences and social networks. Many of the wrestlers’ coaches, fellow wrestlers, family members, friends, and even members of the general public were supportive and encouraging of women’s wrestling and of the wrestlers’ alternative performances of femininity. These supportive audiences provided a receptive stage that allowed for the participants’ less traditionally feminine displays, and they offered the respect that the wrestlers were seeking. These audience members in their receptivity were also offering a challenge to traditional femininity, a broader social challenge, because they did not attempt to force the wrestlers
to conform to the hegemonic norm. The space that they helped create for wrestlers to enact less hegemonic displays of femininity is important both for wrestlers’ individual challenges and performances, as well as for the social perception, understanding, and definition of femininity.

Overall, the effects of wrestlers’ enactments on and off the mat seems to be having some influence on how some people see and understand women and femininity. Many of the participants who had been involved in wrestling for a shorter period of time, those wrestlers who were not pioneers, reported different responses about people’s reactions than did more senior wrestlers. The more novice wrestlers recognized that there are some negative stereotypes about female wrestlers but they also identified a number of ways in which wrestlers are viewed positively, and their first response to questions about stereotypes discussed positive attributes of women wrestlers. More veteran athletes also indicated that more people now have positive responses to wrestlers overall. When speaking about the image and perceptions of wrestlers, Amber suggested, “I think it’s changing.” It appears that more people in the public are accepting of women’s wrestling and the wrestlers’ performances of their own femininity; there are increasingly more supportive rather than resistive audiences. Participants indicated that they were being offered more and more respect as athletes and as women, both on and off the mat, from their audiences. Thus, it appears that wrestling and wrestlers’ different performances of femininity are slowly being accepted by other individuals within society. This seems to indicate that wrestlers’ resistance to some elements of femininity is having an effect on how people view them as women and interpret their performances.
Expanding the Box of Femininity

Given that female wrestlers’ displays of femininity can potentially help others to see a different side of femininity, women’s participation in wrestling also helps to influence social beliefs and conceptions about women more generally. If the dominant gender schema is naturalized through the continual reproduction of this fabricated model of femininity by women who have internalized these ideas and believe that this is how one does femininity, then an alternative performance that does not conform has the potential to change the model itself. If, as Goffman (1959) argued, performances define reality, then different performances of femininity might help to redefine and reconfigure the reality of gendered expectations. While this is a lofty goal that is not simply accomplished by one individual, the effects of collective behaviour can help to shift what is considered normative.

As Bourdieu’s theory would suggest, the display of a different performance calls beliefs and ideas into question and brings assumed and unquestioned “truths,” which he refers to as doxic (Bourdieu, 1990), into the world of discourse in which people, groups, and societies debate concepts. In the case of these wrestlers, rather than assuming the dominant model of femininity, they offered a different performance that they also considered to be feminine, which incorporated elements and traits that are typically considered to be masculine. Their very displays of these alternative performances challenge the “truth” of the hegemonic, “original” model of femininity. Given the relationship between agency and structure to which Bourdieu’s generative statement speaks, wrestlers’ collective actions and the shifting perceptions and acceptance of their audiences may change the field of gender.
The wrestlers themselves believed that the way they behaved and acted, the way that they did their own femininity, could influence how other people saw women and what it meant to be a woman in contemporary society. Speaking directly to the issue of whether or not women’s wrestling can influence how other people see women and conceptualize femininity, one of the most senior wrestlers stated that these types of activities expand what women can do in our society. Regarding the effects of wrestling specifically Amber said:

I think it makes you more a woman {laughing} because you’re not just what you’re expected, what society expects you to do. You’re expected to be this and this box, like the mother . . . . It’s not just being a mother, or a child bearer, whatever, right, or a wife . . . . Now you can be a career woman, but now {pause} you can also be an athlete. I’m a wrestler but I’m also a woman.

As Amber bluntly stated, and as many of the other wrestlers implied, women’s participation in wrestling is another activity that women are demanding to do, another performance that they want to incorporate into their lives and their femininity. Although these were individual performances, they were collectively performed and, thus, their impact is social, affecting the social conception of women and the definition of femininity. By participating in these types of activities and taking on the qualities that are expected in these roles, women are expanding what Amber identified as the box of femininity. Rather than being limited to the role of wife and mother, very traditional roles with related traditional expectations of femininity, women’s opportunities are slowly expanding to include careers, sports,
and other fields of life. The wrestlers believed that women’s participation in wrestling helped to extend this box of femininity.

Expanding the box of what constitutes femininity within contemporary society not only includes the types of activities that woman can do, but the types of women they can be and the characteristics they can perform. For the wrestlers, expanding the box of femininity meant performing and demonstrating those more masculine characteristics that they believed they had partially developed as a result of their involvement in wrestling and having these presentations accepted as legitimate feminine displays. Hence, the wrestlers were strong, confident, and outgoing women who were social and pretty and they wanted to be accepted and respected for their enactments. As women collectively challenge the restrictions that were placed upon them by the dominant gender schema, and as more audience members accept their displays, they may be able to collectively extend the boundaries of what constitutes a legitimate feminine performance. As Amber said, “I’m still a girl, I’m still a woman, but I’m this, this, this, this, this, this, this, not just a person that had kids,” with the multiple use of the word “this” to indicate other qualities that she possessed and displayed which distinguished and differentiated her from more traditionally feminine women.

Wrestlers’ performances of femininity may affect how people understand women’s gender performances and the definition of femininity. The flexibility of social definitions permits, or at least allows room for, certain social performances. If social definitions are overly rigid, particular performances are simply not permitted: instead, they are denigrated, rejected, and suppressed as society imposes and enforces gender expectations. For women athletes, as other researchers have noted (Cahn, 1994; Kane,
1995), their less traditionally feminine performances have previously been resisted in favour of normative understandings of appropriate behaviour for women. It appears that over time, space has developed, socially created by supportive audiences, in which women can not only be athletes, they can be athletes in sports that were until recently still considered to be off-limits for women: the continuum for what constitutes women’s sports is expanding.

Not only is the binary of women and men’s sports challenged by women’s participation in such sports as wrestling, so too is the binary conception of gender. Female wrestlers were performing characteristics from both gender continua – masculinity and femininity. These women were enacting femininity in ways that drew on qualities that are characteristically considered appropriate for one or the other gender, as conceptualized within a gendered binary, and were displaying these while laying claim to their femininity. They can be women, but they do not have to be the women that they have been told to be by society: they can be strong and soft; emotional and stoic; attractive and sweaty; competitive and caring; and independent and needy to varying degrees within different social fields and for different audiences.

Their own performances influenced how they understood and conceptualized femininity. Thus, the wrestlers proposed an inclusive and liberal view of various performances of femininity. The model of femininity that they proposed, the spectrum of femininity, allows for a myriad of feminine gender performances that encompass many women, including their own less traditionally feminine performances, and they believed that femininity could be displayed in a variety of ways. Critically, they asserted that femininity is not just the traditional model of women as caregivers who are subservient to
men: instead, they considered themselves equal to men and claimed that they could do the same things as men while still maintaining their femininity. Wrestlers’ performances in a variety of social contexts, which they claimed were a result of their involvement in wrestling, are more complex than the gender binary, and they expose an alternative and more empowered femininity.

The changes in the perceptions of what constitutes appropriate performances of femininity are certainly historically and situationally specific. Social rules and expectations change: what performances are considered un-apologetic or resistive and apologetic or reproductive are only determined in relation to a specific socio-historical context or field. Therefore, we cannot consider gender static: gender changes over time. As the wrestlers’ very involvement in a combative sport indicates, the rules of gender performances are slowly shifting. Their own performances are contributing to the changing meaning of femininity. The continual challenge is to examine, review, and discover what changes are occurring and how these are accomplished.

**Back to Bourdieu**

Bourdieu’s theory of embodied social action is a useful paradigm for explaining female wrestlers’ individual performances on and off the mat, and the potential effects that women’s wrestling has on the social definition of gender. Bourdieu’s generative statement outlines the intricate relationships between habitus, capital, field, and action, and is attentive to the continual relationship between structure and agency. These component parts and relationships are applicable to wrestlers’ performances and social conceptions of women. For the purposes of this discussion, I will primarily focus on the
components of habitus, field, and action, and will only briefly consider wrestlers’ capital in and across fields. Although capital is a central component of Bourdieu’s theory, in this exploratory work I primarily focused on wrestlers’ beliefs, ideas, opinions, dispositions, experiences, and behaviours, and I did not explore in depth wrestlers’ resources.

One specific field that is important for understanding wrestlers’ lived experiences is the field of sport. As a demarcated field, the world of wrestling is a field of power with a social hierarchy, and it operates based on particular discourses and rules. The ethos and rules of the wrestling world are based on more characteristically masculine behaviours and ideals that encourage a competitive spirit and aggressive displays. These “rules of the game” dictate and structure appropriate behaviour, based on individuals’ own dispositions and capital.

Within this field, wrestlers have specific forms of capital. In wrestling, the strength of their bodies is physical capital; their status within the wrestling community and their success as competitors is symbolic capital; their relationships with other wrestlers, the wrestling community, and the viewing audience are types of social capital; knowledge of the rules of wrestling and understanding of the ethos of the sport are cultural capital; and the scholarships, sponsorships, and funding that the wrestlers receive are their economic capital. In addition, gender is also a form of capital (Shilling, 2004). In the field of sport, these wrestlers’ feminine genders are a liability rather than an asset. Given that women were discouraged and prevented from participating in wrestling until very recently, and the ethos of the sport still discourages feminine qualities, femininity and a feminine gender are not positive capital on the mat. In concert, these various capitals influence an individual’s social
standing and power, and their power affects their performances within the field of wrestling.

Finally, wrestlers’ habitus also influence their performances on the mat. Female wrestlers come to wrestling with their own conditioned personalities, or habitus. One element of their dispositions and personalities is their gender. Like all persons, they have been socialized to think of and perform their gender in specific ways. Although there certainly is leeway in the presentation of gender – people do not simply enact the hegemonic model of masculinity and femininity but incorporate their own unique elements into their displays – people still more or less conform to normative expectations. As women, wrestlers are already enacting their femininity in particular ways when they come to the sport. (In this case, it may be possible that their habitus is already somewhat radical in terms of their gender presentation.) In combination with their capital, and given the constraints of the field, wrestlers perform their gender on the mat in specific ways. These performances, as discussed, include characteristically masculine qualities – on the mat, the wrestlers were more aggressive, competitive, and assertive – and the wrestlers also decreased their displays of their femininity, including being less social and emotional, and less concerned with their appearance. Within wrestling, we can add up the components of disposition and resources to determine wrestlers’ behaviours or social actions.

Off the mat, as we have seen, wrestlers modify their performances. Bourdieu’s model adequately justifies why these performances are different than wrestler’ on-the-mat displays. Outside of wrestling, wrestlers are subject to different gender discourses because they are in a different social field. Compared to the world
of sport, the social world has different expectations for women’s behaviour, based
more on a dichotomous model of gender in which women and men are viewed
differently and distinctly from one another, and they are expected to behave
differently. In addition, the wrestlers’ capital is also distinct from their on-the-mat
resources, as capital is field specific. On the mat, wrestlers’ economic capital is not
critical; instead, success and symbolic capital are far more important. In contrast, off
the mat, in our consumerist society, economic capital is far more important for a
person’s social standing and power within a field. Compared to wrestling, off the
mat, wrestlers also have different types of cultural capital at their disposal, including
their education; they have different social relations and, and thus, different social
capital; and, additionally, their symbolic capital also varies, which is a function of the
other types of capital that they possess. Bourdieu considers symbolic capital to be a
form of capital that is not recognized as capital (Webb et al., 2002). Examples of
symbolic capital include prestige, reputation, status, and honour. Additionally,
wrestlers’ gender can be considered a form of symbolic capital off the mat.

I suggest that gender is a form of symbolic capital in that it is a bodily capital
that affects one’s standing in society. In our contemporary patriarchal society, when
other identities or subjectivities are similar, women, by simply being women, have
less caché than men and, therefore, have less symbolic capital. Generally, men, by
virtue of being men, are afforded greater respect and freedom in society and, thus,
they have greater symbolic capital. In other words, although capital and power vary
based on other statuses and qualities, such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity, and
identities must be considered as an intersectionality of multiple subjectivities, overall, as a class or category, men typically have more power than women.

Wrestlers’ different types of capital, combined with the different expectations of the field, influence their off-the-mat performances, and these performances are different from wrestlers’ on-the-mat displays. As noted, off the mat, wrestlers conformed more to traditional expectations of femininity: they were more attentive to their appearance, they displayed their heterosexuality, and they were more emotional and social. Yet, these wrestlers did not simply conform to the gendered expectations of this social field. Compared to other women, the wrestlers said that they were more competitive, assertive, and independent. They suggested that their different gender expectations were a result of their experiences in wrestling. I believe that wrestlers’ dispositions or habitus changed as a result of their involvement in wrestling and they transferred some of their more masculine on-the-mat performances to their off-the-mat social worlds.

As their off-the-mat performances demonstrate, the wrestlers did not simply accept the hegemonic binary gender schema. Instead, they held a broad and inclusive view of femininity which includes their own less traditionally feminine performances. I suggest that if we read Bourdieu’s generative statement in reverse, we can understand how wrestlers’ own performances affect their behaviours across social fields, as well as their beliefs about gender. Bourdieu’s theory postulates a interconnected relationship between the component parts of his generative statement such that rather than simply predicting social action based on field, habitus, and capital, it is possible to understand how action affects the other components; for
example how performances influences the habitus, or how the habitus and field are related. Bourdieu argued that the habitus, which is transposable across fields, is reflexive and shaped by an individuals’ own thoughts, which, given the interrelationship between the elements of the statement, are likely influenced by a person’s experiences. Drawing on social psychology, one can say that people typically behave in accordance with their beliefs and attitudes – to not do so is uncomfortable, which is referred to as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957 as cited in Baron & Byrne, 1997). Therefore, within Bourdieu’s statement, we can predict that a person’s actions will influence their habitus and will in turn further affect their behaviours.

It is difficult to determine retrospectively what wrestlers’ dispositions were like, or how they thought of themselves, prior to their involvement in wrestling. The wrestlers’ extensive experience in the sport likely influences their perceptions of their pre-wrestling selves. Through their involvement in wrestling, however, the participants claimed that their perspectives on gender have been affected as they came to feel empowered: their actions within wrestling allowed them to feel physically capable and confident. Given the relationships between action and habitus, wrestlers’ experiences and behaviours affected how they felt about and thought of themselves. Thus, their involvement in wrestling, which fosters feelings of empowerment, affected their dispositions. When factored back into the generative statement, their altered habitus influenced the wrestlers’ performances on and off the mat. Since they were empowered on the mat, the wrestlers felt more empowered generally, and with an empowered habitus they acted differently than other women in the social world. In addition, given their
altered beliefs about their dispositions and the theory of cognitive dissonance, their performances on the mat likely influenced their conceptions of women, such that their definition of femininity expanded to include their own performances and were, therefore, more broad, liberal, and inclusive than the dominant gender schema's model of femininity. It is important to note that their involvement in wrestling does not clean the slate of their previous gender socialization: wrestlers still enacted traditionally feminine displays, perhaps apologetically, across different social fields. Overall, their involvement in sport influenced how they performed their gender, and their performances affected how they defined gender and thought of themselves. Reading Bourdieu's generative framework as interrelated component parts, we can see how wrestling influenced wrestlers' own performances and definitions of femininity.

Finally, the relationship between wrestlers' performances of gender and the social definition of femininity may also be explained by Bourdieu's generative statement. Bourdieu suggests a relationship between structure and agency, such that the structure of a social field, and its social rules and discourses, affect people's behaviours. In turn, people's behaviours also shape the rules of the field. Off the mat, female wrestlers' performances of a less hegemonic femininity demonstrate an alternative version of femininity. Wrestlers' hybrid femininities (McNay, 1999), which are a combination of both masculine and feminine qualities, draw the concept of gender and femininity into the world of discourse – what we can discuss – and challenge the assumed "truths" of gender, masculinity, and femininity. As people witness alternative, less traditionally feminine performances, they may come to
recognize that femininity does not have to be limited to the traditional model and the notion of what constitutes femininity may slowly shift or expand.

These are slow, subtle shifts that the wrestlers may be affecting. If the wrestlers' performances were really outside the "rules of the game," using Bourdieu's sports metaphor, their performances would be rejected and others in the field would regroup to ensure that normative expectations were enforced or that the actors who were not conforming were removed from the field or flung down the social hierarchy so that they did not influence the field. These types of actions would be an act of symbolic violence in order to preserve the field and social discourses and expectations. I have outlined the types of resistive behaviours encountered by female wrestlers. These resistive behaviours can be seen as attempts to reinforce traditional femininity but they do not remove the actors from the field.

Rather than being rejected, wrestlers were meeting with receptive audiences who are supportive and respectful of their gender performances. I believe that female wrestlers are effectively influencing others' opinions and contributing to a general re-evaluation of femininity because their performances are not radically outside the norm of femininity: they are recognized as women but their behaviours are not traditional. Wrestlers' very displays influence the social field and conceptions of femininity, reflecting the relationship between structure and agency that is aptly captured in Bourdieu's theory.

Wrestlers' displays do not radically challenge or alter conceptions of femininity or destroy the dominant gender schema; furthermore, their performance in the field of sport do not drastically alter the world of wrestling, in that femininity is
still considered a quality to be avoided within this arena. Although wrestlers’
displays help to expose the unquestioned truths of gender and may help to extend the
spectrum of femininity and expand the box of femininity, they do not cause large
changes to the fields of their social actions. I would suggest that both on and off the
mat, wrestlers modify their performances to fit within the fields in part because they
lack the capital or authority to assert themselves in ways that fundamentally
contradict the structure of those fields. As women in the world of wrestling, a male-
dominated domain, their status and capital are less than men’s. Off the mat, in the
general patriarchal culture of our society, women, overall, have less capital than men
simply because they are women. Since they lack power within these fields, they may
feel constrained in their social actions and their actions, in turn, may not effectively
alter the social fields. Yet, the traditional definition of femininity is changing to
include qualities that were previously considered only legitimately masculine:
women can be independent, assertive, and confident while still being considered
women. It appears that women’s agency is slowly transforming social structures.
Women wrestlers are influencing both of their paradoxical worlds with their unique
presentations of their own femininity.

Using Bourdieu’s model, we can understand how wrestlers modify their
feminine displays to fit with specific fields, on the mat and off the mat, and we can
understand how wrestling influences their behaviours across fields. Furthermore, we
can begin to understand how wrestling and other non-traditional activities in which
women are engaged helps to shift the social definition of femininity within fields and
universally across fields. Bourdieu’s model explains the experiences of female
wrestlers, which I have explicated through grounded theory, and the changing model of femininity within contemporary society.
Chapter 7

Conclusion: Significance and Contributions of Research

The purpose of my exploratory research was to understand how female wrestlers performed their gender in the paradoxical worlds of wrestling and daily social life, and to determine how women’s wrestling influences the social definition of femininity, specifically whether the effects are contextually specific, or whether women’s wrestling has a wider, universal influence across social fields and is not simply limited to sport. Through ten unstructured, qualitative interviewers, I developed a grounded theory of female wrestlers’ gender performances and experiences in and out of wrestling. On the mat, wrestlers’ performances included more characteristically masculine qualities: they were aggressive, assertive, physically capable, confident, strong, and independent. Within this context, the wrestlers tried to deemphasise their more feminine qualities – they tried to limit their displays of emotions, particularly weakness, fear, and pain, and they were less concerned with their appearance. Off the mat, the wrestlers modified their performances and enacted more traditional feminine qualities, including attentiveness to appearance, demonstrations of heterosexuality, and an increased tendency to sociability and emotionality. Off the mat, the wrestlers’ performances were not entirely normatively feminine in that they still retained many of their on-the-mat “masculine” qualities, including competitiveness, assertiveness, independence, and confidence, but they may not have enacted these characteristics to the same degree as they did in wrestling. Hence, the wrestlers’ performances were contextually or field specific.

Regarding the effects of wrestling on the social definition of femininity, firstly I determined that wrestlers’ participation in sport influenced their own ideas about women
and gender, such that they held views of femininity that conform to a bi-modal, multifactorial model of gender: they proposed a broad spectrum of femininity with "girly girl" on one end and female wrestlers on the other. Furthermore, given the relationship between structure and agency, as outlined in Bourdieu's theory of social action, it is probable that women's wrestling and other non-traditionally feminine activities and performances may slowly influence the social definition of femininity within and across social fields. As the wrestlers took their off-the-mat more masculine performances into the social world, they demonstrated another side of femininity to their viewing audiences, thus exposing the fabricated nature of gender and femininity. Their performances draw conceptions of femininity into the world of discourse and may help to slowly change social structures which define legitimate feminine performances, on which individuals base their own gendered displays. Overall I conclude that wrestling does affect wrestlers' own gender performances on and off the mat, and helps challenge and extend the social definition of femininity across social fields.

Given that this research is an introductory, exploratory project, the theoretical assertions relating to gender performance and the potential effects on femininity are tentative claims that will require further research. Furthermore, there are a number of limitations to this project that must be identified. Most importantly, the language of gender serves as a serious limitation to this research and the report of the findings. We currently are ensconced in a gendered discourse which uses dichotomous terms to differentiate between men and women. Due to these limitations, in this work I have had to refer to some qualities as masculine or feminine, even though they are enacted by both men and women and should not be limited to or considered a quality owned and enacted
by one gender only. Just as we consider gender to be a spectrum, or even two spectra, the performances of gender are also not dichotomous but are a continuum of action. We are limited by our language in that we can label the spectra but we do not have the vocabulary to adequately discuss the content and categories within and between these spectra. Like the wrestlers, I have been limited to using modifying adjectives while attempting to explain the nuances in wrestlers’ performances and the overlap between masculinity and femininity.

A further limitation to this study is that I was unable to use field observations to witness wrestlers’ gender displays in a variety of contexts. Future research projects on this topic should include both interviews with athletes and observations of their behaviours. A comparison between individuals’ discussions and displays of their gender would be fruitful for addressing this type of research question.

Another limitation, although necessary, was that I have limited my research topic and interest in the effects of athleticism to wrestlers. Given the lack of academic works on this population, I thought it was important to examine wrestlers’ experiences, especially because they live in such paradoxical and contradictory worlds. For these and other practical reasons, I was unable to include other comparison groups of other athletes or even non-athletes. Therefore, I am unable to determine the relative effects of wrestling on social definitions of femininity, given that I cannot make claims about the effects of other activities or sports. I cannot answer such questions as: does wrestling have more or less of an effect on the individual performance and social definition of femininity than other sports? Do sports generally affect the social definition of femininity? Do sports have a greater effect than other fields of action, for example, women in the sciences?
How are other women’s experiences in different social fields similar or different from wrestlers? Social trends seem to indicate that femininity is shifting. Unfortunately, there is not enough research that evaluates what now constitutes femininity, let alone how sport or other activities have contributed to changing conceptions about femininity and gender. An investigation of other sports and other fields is a potential site for future work which could be conducted in order to understand contemporary femininity, and how femininity is shifting.

A significant limitation to this research was my status as an insider in the wrestling community. Despite efforts to minimize my bias through the selection criteria and trying to remain objective throughout the research process, it is impossible to bracket my own identity as a wrestler and my knowledge and opinions due to my involvement in the sport. I may have inadvertently taken for granted some of the wrestlers’ responses to my questions, rather than probing further for more information. I was sensitive to the fact that some of the wrestlers felt objectified and exploited by those who have interviewed them previously, such as by the media. In my attempts to conduct research that was fair to the participants, I may not have been as critical of their responses and I may not have asked them questions that should have been raised regarding this topic. Further experiences as a researcher will help to address this issue in future research that I conduct with female wrestlers.

In order to understand the effects of women’s wrestling on the social definition of femininity, I would like to conduct future research which includes audience members who witness wrestlers’ performances. I would like to conduct research with other male wrestlers, wrestlers’ coaches, co-workers, romantic partners, family members, and the
public to understand how they perceive women wrestlers and their beliefs and perspectives on the influences of women’s involvement in these types of activities for the social conception of femininity.

Future research on this topic should also consider the intersectionality of identities. Unfortunately, as mentioned, I was unable to conduct research that considered how other subjectivities, such as race, ethnicity, and class, also affected wrestlers’ experiences and performances of gender. Research that addresses these and other subjectivities would be fruitful for addressing not only wrestlers’ lived experiences, but also broader issues of gender and gender performances. An investigation of intersectionalities would require a larger sample size, sample size being another limitation of the current study.

In addition, this research focused on women and the experience of femininity for wrestlers. While some research exists on the experience of men and masculinity in wrestling (for example, see Curry, 1993), it, like women’s wrestling, is also an understudies area. The world of wrestling may be experienced by men as a hyper-masculine field, which may effects male wrestlers’ performances of masculinity – a rich topic for research. Future research could also consider the changing experience of male wrestlers, given women’s involvement in the sport.

Given the limitations cited above, the results of my study are a preliminary foray into the field of sport and femininity and are specific to wrestlers. Further research that incorporates audience members, comparison groups, consideration of multiple subjectivities, and different methods of data collection are required to address adequately the questions raised herein. Despite these limitations, this research does draw attention to
a sport that has previously been unexamined and offers initial explanations of wrestler’s
gendered performances, the meaning of these performances, and the effects of these
performances on the social definition of femininity.

Examining wrestlers’ conceptions, contextual experiences, and performances of
femininity draws on and contributes to the fields of sociology of sport and gender. In
relation to the sociology of sport, this research adds to this field by examining an athletic
activity that is virtually invisible in this body of literature and will hopefully help to
reinvigorate the debate about the ideological meaning of women’s participation in
athletics from the perspective of this specific sport. Regarding the sociology of gender,
and in the vein of feminist research, my work is grounded in and extends related studies
that critically examined gender performances and roles in and across different social
contexts (for example, see Deaux & Major, 1987), and women’s concurrent and varied
subjectivities. Other studies that have examined the contextual meaning of femininity
have focused on topics including women’s gender performance within the family and the
private home as compared to the public sphere (Ferree, 1990; Thompson & Walker,
1995; Zvonkovic et al., 1996), while the examination of gendered experiences in
relation to the intersection of gender and other subjectivities has included ethnicity and
race (Adu-Poku, 2001; Browne & Misra, 2003; Hooks, 1981), and socioeconomic status
(Arighi, 2001; Dietz, 2003). Generally, by examining the contextual paradoxes of
female athletes, especially in the masculinized sport of wrestling, this work contributes to
a body of sociological thought that attempts to understand how sports participation
affects athletes’ performance of their gender identity, how gender performance is
modified and situated contextually, and how individual everyday lived experiences and
actions contribute to social definitions of gender. Ultimately, given my feminist perspective, the aim of my work was to contribute to the ongoing debate regarding gender equality and the deconstruction of the dominant gender schema with its falsely imposed dualisms.
Bibliography


Knight, J. L., & Giuliano, T. A. (2001). He’s a laker; She’s a “looker”: The consequences of gender-stereotypical portrayals of male and female athletes by the print media. *Sex Roles, 45*(3-4), 217-229.


Wrestling with Femininity


Appendix A

Interview Topics and Potential Questions

The following topics will be discussed in the interviews. Potential questions are listed under each topic. The phrasings listed are examples of how I might address particular issues and ask particular questions. The wording will likely vary from interview to interview.

1. Participants' involvement in wrestling

"I'd like to know about your involvement with wrestling. Could you tell me the story about how and when you got involved in wrestling?"

Follow-up questions or prompts:

- How long have you been wrestling? How many years have you been wrestling?
- When did you start wrestling? How old were you? (What is your age?)
- Did you start wrestling in junior high, high school or university?
- Why did you start wrestling?
- Who are you currently wrestling with?

"You've told me why you started wrestling and why got you involved. I'd also like to ask you some questions about how you feel about wrestling and the wrestling community."

- What interests you about the sport?
- What do you enjoy about wrestling? (the sport and the community)
- What do you dislike about wrestling? (the sport and the community)
- Overall, how do you feel about your involvement in wrestling?
2. Participants’ perceptions about femininity and their own gender.

“As I’ve told you, I’m interested in what you think of as femininity and the effects that wrestling has had on your ideas about what it means to be a woman. Therefore, I’d like to ask you some questions about femininity, women, female athletes, female wrestlers, and yourself.”

- Do you think of yourself as feminine? What does that mean to you? What does femininity mean to you?
- What are some general descriptions that you would use to describe other women that you know (who aren’t wrestlers or athletes)?
  - If this is a problem, ask her to list 10 words that generally describe women that she knows
  - If she is still unable to answer, provide the list adjective checklist
- Do you think of these women as feminine? Why or why not? Do you think that these women are unfeminine in any way? How? Why? (May need to relate this question to her previous response regarding femininity.)
- Do you think there are differences and similarities between female wrestlers and other women that you know? How are wrestlers the same and different from other women?
- Describe other female athletes that you know.
  - If she is confused, rephrase this question it in relation to how she described other women that she knows. Would she describe them as the same or different? What qualities (words) are the same? What qualities (words) are different? If the question is phrased this way, the question below that explicitly asks about similarities and differences becomes redundant and should be skipped.
- Do you think of these women as feminine? Why or why not? Do you think that these women are unfeminine in any way? How? Why? (I may need to relate this question to her previous response regarding femininity.)
- Do you think there are differences and similarities between female wrestlers and other female athletes who aren’t wrestlers? How are wrestlers the same and different from other athletes?
- Thinking specifically about yourself and how you have generally described women that you know and other female athletes, could you describe to me how you see yourself?
  - If this is a problem, remind her about how she described other women that she knows and other female athletes. Get her to talk about herself in relation to how she has described these other women.
- Are you different or similar from other women (both athletes and non-athletes) that you know because you are a wrestler? How? Is this important to you? Why or why not? (For this question, I can refer to words she used to describe other women, athletes, and herself.)

- Can you tell me a story about yourself in which you felt like some of the words you used to describe yourself? (I can use this question to segue into the section on sport contexts.)

If it is not brought up in the previous discussions about other women, athletes or self, I will ask about femininity and attractiveness specifically.

“One thing that other people often say is an important part about being a woman and about femininity is appearance, or how women look. Essentially, other people say that being attractive is important for being feminine.”

- Do you think that appearance is an important part of femininity for other women? What makes a woman attractive?

- Is your appearance important for you?

- Please tell me about a time when you were concerned with your appearance? Where were you? Who was there? Why were you concerned about it?

- Are there times when you are not concerned about your appearance? When? Why?
3. Explorations about participants’ experiences of gender and their gender performance (how they dress, behave, think, and feel) in contexts associated with wrestling, including tournaments, practices, and other training activities.

“We’ve discussed how you see yourself generally and the differences between you and other female athletes and other women that you know. Now I’d specifically like to discuss how you see yourself as a wrestler.”

- In relation to our discussion about femininity and various people, how would you describe yourself as a wrestler?
  - If she finds this difficult, I will refer back to how she described herself previously. Is it the same? Is it different? For this question, I can use the adjective list if necessary.

- Could you tell me a story about yourself in wrestling that exemplifies how you feel about yourself as a wrestler?
  - Is it a tournament or practice?
  - If it was a tournament, were you winning or losing? If she was winning, also get her to describe another situation in which she was losing, and visa versa.
  - This line of questioning may make questions about wrestling competitions, practice, or training activities redundant. If so, exclude and ask questions about the other wrestling activities.

- Have you ever reflected back on how you’ve felt about yourself during a wrestling competition when you were in a match? When you think about that, how did you feel?

- We’ve talked about how you feel and think about yourself when you’re actually competing at a tournament. I’d also like to know how you feel about yourself when you’re at a tournament but aren’t wrestling in a match at that moment; for example, when you’re in the stands watching others between your matches or when you’re warming up. Could you describe to me how you feel then? How is it the same or different from when you’re on the mat competing?

- How do you think about yourself and how do you feel when you’re practicing or training? How is it the same or different from when you’re at a competition?

- What do you think other people’s impressions are of you when you wrestle? Drawing attention to the following groups of people:
  - Other wrestlers. Are there differences between male and female wrestlers? How do other wrestlers treat you?
- Your coaches? Have your coaches always been men? How do your coaches treat you? (Explore gender differences if they have had both male and female coaches.)
- Your romantic partner? (Will ask if they have one and whether their partner is another wrestler.)
- Your family?
- Your roommates? (Will ask who they live with.)
- Spectators? Do you think female and male spectators have different or similar impressions of you when you’re wrestling? What are the differences? What are the similarities?
- Other people that you know that aren’t involved in wrestling? (E.g. coworkers, friends or fellow students.)
  - Are you concerned about what other people may think about you (their impressions of you) as a female wrestler? Whose opinion counts?
  - Have people that you know talked to you about their impressions of you when you’re wrestling? About their general impressions of you as a wrestler? What do they tell you? Drawing attention to the following groups:
    - Other people in wrestling (male and female)
    - Romantic partner (if they have one)
    - Family (parents)
    - Spectators (male and female)
    - Friends or other people that you know who aren’t involved in wrestling

(These final questions may lead to a discussion on stereotypes and limitations on behaviour. If so, move to that section of questions.)
4. Discussions about the differences and similarities between their gender experiences and gender performances in sporting versus non-sporting contexts.

**On the mat:** wrestling tournaments, practices, cardio, weight-loss, weight training and other wrestling related activities.

**Off the mat:** work, school, home, social situations such as at restaurants or bars.

"We've talked about how you feel about yourself as a wrestler. I'm particularly interested in how you and other female wrestlers feel about yourselves and how you behave on and off the mat."

- Do you think there are any differences and similarities between how female wrestlers act when they are on and off the mat? Have you seen other female wrestlers act differently when they are on and off the mat? (For this question, I can give examples of when they're wrestling versus when they are at the bar after a competition.)
  - Describe these differences.
  - Describe these similarities.
- Do you think there are differences and similarities for how you personally behave on and off the mat?
- Can you tell me a story about these differences? Where are you? What are you doing? How about in your work life? At home? At school? (May not require all of these prompts if some of these areas are already covered.)
- Do you think there are any differences and similarities between how you think of yourself, and how you feel about yourself on and off the mat? Please describe.
5. How they act or perform their gender for different audiences of people, paying particular attention to differences and similarities between audiences associated with wrestling (other athletes, coaches, officials, and spectators) and non-sport related individuals (family, friends, lovers, employers, teachers/instructors, and general public).

“I’ve talked to you about the differences and similarities in how you see yourself when you’re on and off the mat. I’d also like to ask you about how you feel about yourself and your femininity when you are with a variety of different people.”

- Thinking about people that you know, do you think that they behave differently for different groups of people? Can you give me an example?
- Do you think you behave differently for different groups of people? (If necessary, I can give an example of differences for their boss and family.) How? Who?
- Do you think you act differently when you’re hanging out and socializing with your friends who aren’t wrestlers as compared to your friends who are wrestlers? How? Why?

Issues about performance for specific people may have been covered in discussions about performance within different contexts. If so, the above questions are redundant and can be skipped.
6. Exploration of any stereotypes related to female athletes.

"We've talked before about how you thought other people in wrestling and other people that you know think of you as a wrestler. I'd like to ask you about how you think the public thinks of female wrestlers in general."

- Describe what you think the general public's beliefs and impressions are about female wrestlers?
- Do you think there are stereotypes associated with female wrestlers? What are these?
- Are there positive and negative stereotypes? What are these?
- Do you think any of these stereotypes have any truth to them? Which ones?
- Do you think that stereotypes about female wrestlers affect how you act? Please describe.
  - In what situations?
  - For whom? (What audience?)
- Do you think that stereotypes about female wrestlers affect how you feel about yourself? Please describe.
  - In what situations?
  - For whom? (What audience?)

(I necessary, I can refer back to words she used to describe wrestlers, athletes and women.)

If she has not already talked about the specific stereotype of butch lesbian, raise this with her. These questions are necessary for inquiring about participants' sexuality.

"One of the stereotypes about female wrestlers that I often heard when I was wrestling is that we were assumed to be a bunch of butch lesbians."

- Have you heard, or have other people told you that they think female wrestlers are butch lesbians?
- Do you think your sexual orientation is important to other people generally?
- Do you think your sexual orientation is important to people in wrestling? Who?
- Do you think that it is important that other people in wrestling know what your sexual orientation is? Why or why not?
- Do you think that it is important for people in social situations (like at work or at school) to know your sexual orientation? Why or why not?
- If there are differences, explore these.
- Do you think it’s necessary to display and/or to hide to other people in wrestling your sexual orientation?
- To other people not in wrestling?
- Why or why not?
- How do you display or hide your sexual orientation to people? In wrestling? Generally?
7. Exploration of the perceived limitations on how women can behave and what women can do.

"Thinking more generally, beyond stereotypes, to limitations that may be placed on women and female wrestlers..."

- Do you think that women you know who aren't athletes feel that there are constraints for how they can act? What they can do? Where they can go? What do you think these constraints are?

- Do you think other women that you know feel that they can do particular things because they are women (that they have advantages because they are women)? What are these things (these advantages)?

- Do you think there are constraints and advantages for other athletes that you know who are not wrestlers? What are these? Are these different and similar constraints and advantages than the other women that you know? If there are differences, explore what they are and the reasons there are these differences.

- Do you think there are constraints and advantages on how you can act and what you can do?
  - In wrestling? What are these? Are these different or similar than the constraints and advantages of male wrestlers?
  - Off the mat? What are these (e.g. feeling safe and able to take care of oneself)? Are they different or the same from those on the mat?

- Are the constraints and advantages that you have as a female wrestler different or similar from other women that you know? From other female athletes? What are these differences and similarities? Why are there these differences?
8. Discussions about how participants think or believe that participation in wrestling has influenced their own gender and gender performances. Drawing on previous work about female wrestlers' experiences, I would like to ask them about whether or not they find sport to be empowering, and if so, how and in what contexts they experience empowerment.

“Related to what we’ve been talking about as constraints and advantages that women feel and have, and specifically constraints and advantages that you think you have, I’d like to ask you about how your participation in wrestling has affected your ideas and beliefs about women and femininity.”

- During the time that you’ve participated in wrestling, have your beliefs about what it means to be a woman and what women can do changed? How?
- Has your participating in wrestling affected your beliefs about yourself and how you see yourself? How?
- Has your participation in wrestling affected your opinions about what you can do? How?
- You described women that you know as...(use the description provided earlier). Are there portions of this description that you are trying to reject or to accept? Which ones? How do you do this? When and where do you do this?
- Do you think that your participation in wrestling helps other people to think of women in a new and different way?

Conclusion

“We’ve talked about many things during our interview ranging from your ideas about femininity, to how you think and act in different situations, to your ideas about stereotypes about female wrestlers, and how wrestling has affected your ideas about what it means to be a woman. Have we covered everything? Is there anything else that you’d like to tell me? Do you have any overall impressions about how wrestling has affected you that you’d like to share with me?”

“Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me?”
Adjective Checklist

- Active
- Acts of a leader
- Adventurous
- Affectionate
- Aggressive
- Ambitious
- Anxious
- Appreciative
- Assertive
- Attractive
- Aware of the feelings of others
- Boastful
- Calm
- Careless
- Catty
- Cautious
- Charming
- Coarse
- Commanding
- Competitive
- Complaining
- Confident
- Courageous
- Courteous
- Cruel
- Daring
- Decisive
- Deferent
- Dependable
- Dependent
- Determined
- Direct
- Dominant
- Dreamy
- Easily influenced
- Emotional
- Excitable
- Express feelings
- Fickle
- Flighty
- Flirtatious
- Forceful
- Frivolous
- Fussy
- Gentle
- Helpless
- Indecisive
- Independent
- Kind
- Logical
- Loud
- Mature
- Meek
- Mild
- Objective
- Passive
- Poised
- Polite
- Quiet
- Rational
- Realistic
- Relaxed
- Resourceful
- Responsible
- Rude
- Sensitive
- Sentimental
- Sophisticated
- Stable
- Stern
- Strong
- Stupid
- Submissive
- Superior
- Tactful
- Tactless
- Talkative
- Tough
- Unemotional
- Unexcitable
- Unfair
- Warm
- Weak
- Whiny
Appendix B

Data Coding Scheme

1. Femininity
   1.1. Traditional Femininity: The Girly Girl
   1.2. A Wrestler and a Woman
      1.2.1. We’re Pretty Too: Feminine Appearance
      1.2.2. Hear Me Roar!: Confident, Assertive, and Outgoing
      1.2.3. I’m my Own Woman: Being Independent
   1.3. Femininity from a Wrestlers Perspective

2. On the Mat
   2.1. Winning over the Men: Male Wrestlers and Coaches Responses to Female Wrestlers
   2.2. Keep your Women as Women: Institutionalization of Femininity
   2.3. Be a Man: On the Mat, Femininity is a Bad Word
   2.4. In Control: The “Masculine” Side
   2.5. On the Mat, in the Room, and in the Showers: Variability within Wrestling Contexts

3. Off the Mat
   3.1. Looking like a Girl
   3.2. “Get Pissed and Get Laid”: Wrestlers’ Sexuality
   3.3. Acting like a Girl
   3.4. Head Held High: Always Confident and Strong
   3.5. I Like My Body
   3.6. In Front of a Crowd: Variations in Performances for Different Audiences
   3.7. R-E-S-P-E-C-T, Find out What it Means to Me

4. Effects of Wrestling
   4.1. More of a Woman
   4.2. Seeing the Other Side of Femininity
   4.3. Expanding the Box of Femininity