



Masculinity in Sport: Hegemonic Norms, Resistance, and Negotiation

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Abstract

The current study examines how college-aged men (ages 18 - 25) construct and negotiate masculinity in sport contexts. Using qualitative interviews with 24 male students from a large Midwestern university, the research examines how socializing agents may shape masculine identities, cultures, and behaviors related to toughness, competitiveness, risk-taking, or emotional expression. While previous research has established the prominence of masculinity in sport cultures, the present study extends this work by demonstrating that inclusive or alternative masculinities tend to appear in exceptional and context-specific ways within participants' narratives. The analysis demonstrates that masculinity remains a highly resilient and adaptable cultural framework, reproduced through socialization and peer regulation, and expressed through norms of toughness, competitiveness, emotional control, and physical pain. Although some men in the study described moments of relational openness or questioned the value of playing through the norms of masculinity, these forms of resistance or negotiation appeared partial, limited, and dependent on specific interpersonal conditions rather than representing broader shifts in masculine norms. Intersectionality also emerged in limited ways in this research; while a few participants alluded to racialized expectations or heteronormative pressures, the dominant patterns reflected shared generational and institutional contexts rather than clear differences across race or sexuality. Overall, the findings highlight the continued prevalence of masculinity in college men's sport experiences while illustrating how emergent forms of inclusive masculinity coexist in narrow and situational ways, contributing to ongoing discussions about gender, identity, and the cultural reproduction of masculinity in sport.

Key words: masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, sport sociology, gender norms, qualitative research

Introduction

Masculinity has long been recognized as one of the most powerful social agents for shaping self-identity, behavior, and social relations (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1992). Although recent decades have seen greater

gender inclusivity, increased LGBTQ+ visibility, and critiques of *toxic masculinity* (Kupers, 2005), traditional constructions of masculinity continue to hold significant influence in sport settings (Adams, 2011; Travers, 2018). For both theoretical and practical reasons, the present study examines how today's college-aged men experience and navigate these longstanding norms.

While much scholarly attention has addressed masculinity and emerging alternatives, a notable gap remains regarding how these dynamics appear in the

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lived sport narratives of current college-aged men. Even though this generation is often characterized as more accepting of diverse gender expressions, little empirical work has explored whether inclusive masculinities meaningfully shape their sport experiences or whether hegemonic expectations continue to operate as the normative and prevailing framework. Preliminary findings in the present study suggest that, even amid broader cultural shifts toward gender inclusivity, participants' accounts continue to reflect traditional masculine norms (Hasbrook & Harris, 1999; Light & Kirk, 2000). Instances of more inclusive or alternative masculinities do appear, but they emerge occasionally and typically as isolated exceptions rather than consistent patterns. In addition, the study reveals limited intersectional variation across race or sexuality, a pattern that warrants attention. This limited intersectionality is important because it raises the possibility that institutional and generational contexts within college sport may exert a homogenizing influence that overshadows identity-based differences commonly emphasized in the literature. Highlighting this dynamic helps clarify how masculinity still operate in contemporary sport environments not only as a hierarchical structure but also as a shared cultural script that shapes men's perceptions and behaviors.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how masculinity continues to influence the values, attitudes, and behaviors of college-aged men in sport contexts. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the researchers examined the roles of socio-cultural agents in the construction of masculine identities, as well as how participants enact or challenge masculinity in their sport participation. To help guide the trajectory of the paper, each research question corresponds to specific sections of the findings and discussion. To guide the investigation, the following research questions were developed to contribute to the scholarly conversation about masculinity as a dynamic, contested, and socially consequential construction within sport sociology and gender theory:

1. How do socio-cultural agents such as family members, peers, coaches, and/or media influence

the construction of masculinity among college-aged men in sport contexts? The current study uses to this question to frame the exploration of how the socio-cultural agents shape young men's early understandings of masculinity and how these influences continue to operate within sport environments.

2. In what ways do masculine norms may shape men's values and behaviors, particularly regarding competitiveness, toughness, risk-taking, and/or emotional expression in sport? This question guides the analysis of how the core dimensions of masculinity become embedded in men's sport participation and the meanings they attribute to athletic performance and bodily discipline.
3. How do men negotiate, reinforce, or resist masculine ideals through their lived experiences in sport? Using this question, the current study directs attention to the moments in which participants either conform to or challenge established masculine expectations, highlighting tensions, contradictions, and emerging alternatives within their narratives.
4. What are the implications of masculinity for men's health and social relationships and for broader cultural understandings of gender in contemporary sport? This final question leads the study toward examining how masculinity may affect men's well-being and interpersonal dynamics and how they contribute to wider cultural interpretations of gender within sport settings.

Literature Review

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity highlights how masculinity has traditionally been enacted through routine gestures, language, and bodily practices rather than fixed internal traits. Within sport, actions such as suppressing emotion, celebrating risk-taking, or disciplining the body can be understood as performative acts that reproduce dominant gender meanings. This lens informed the analysis by drawing attention to how everyday sport behaviors such as locker room rituals, interactions with teammates, or

responses to injury function as gendered performances. In the sociology of sport, masculinity has remained a central theme because it offers insight into how gender is deeply constructed and maintained across cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts. Connell's (1995, 2005) concept of *hegemonic masculinity* has been foundational in this regard, emphasizing how dominant ideals of manhood such as toughness, competitiveness, emotional restraint, and heterosexual dominance are (re)produced through routine practices and legitimized through social institutions. Connell's framework further highlights that masculinity is not singular but multiple. Complicit, subordinate, and marginalized masculinities coexist alongside hegemonic forms, each shaped by broader structures such as race, sexuality, and class. In sport, these dynamics are visible in the expectations placed on young men to embody physical dominance and emotional control (Messner, 1992; Drummond, 2002). While it remains culturally powerful, alternative masculinities may appear contextually, creating a layered and contested terrain of gender performance (Schippers, 2007).

Building on this, Anderson's (2009) *inclusive masculinity* theory argues that declining homophobia and shifting gender norms may create openings for men to adopt more emotionally expressive and less policed masculinities. Although inclusive masculinities do not replace hegemonic masculinity, they provide a useful conceptual contrast (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). In the present study, these theories guided the analytic process by offering coding lenses: narratives emphasizing dominance, stoicism, risk, or bodily sacrifice were understood as aligning with hegemonic masculinity, while accounts expressing emotional openness, collaborative team dynamics, or critiques of toughness were examined as possible expressions of inclusive masculinity (Öztürk & Koca, 2021). Intersectional scholarship further expands the analysis by demonstrating that masculinity is shaped by race, sexuality, class, and other social positions (Carrington, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Clayton, 2007; Singer, 2005; Tran & Lee, 2010). Research has shown how Black, Latino, Asian, and queer men encounter distinct

expectations and stereotypes in sport environments (Lee & Zhou, 2015). However, the present study revealed only limited intersectional differentiation in participants' narratives. While a few men referred to racialized expectations or heteronormative pressures, these references did not recur widely enough to form sustained thematic patterns (Anderson & Magrath, 2019; Anderson & McGuire, 2010; Chen, 2013). Therefore, intersectionality was applied in this study as a supplementary, rather than central, analytic lens acknowledging its importance conceptually, while recognizing its limited operation within this particular sample and context.

Another significant line of scholarship connects masculinity to health and risk-taking. Studies demonstrate that conformity to masculinity often encourages men to normalize injury, conceal pain, and participate in risky or harmful behaviors to prove toughness (Griffith et al., 2019; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Nixon, 2016). These insights help contextualize participants' accounts of pushing through discomfort, accepting injuries as signs of commitment, or valuing endurance and resilience as core masculine virtues. Such behaviors illustrate how masculinity shapes men's bodily practices and carries implications for long-term health. Media research further demonstrates how cultural representations can also reinforce the masculinity ideals. Male athletes are frequently depicted as aggressive, dominant, and emotionally controlled, while diverse or softer expressions of masculinity are marginalized or trivialized (Bruce, 2016; Kian et al., 2011). These media portrayals circulate widely among young men and contribute to shaping expectations of what counts as legitimate masculinity in sport.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional lens through which the present study examines the sport experiences of college-aged men. Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework offers an anchor for identifying dominant gender norms; inclusive masculinity theory highlights generational openings for alternative expressions; performativity theory emphasizes the routine enactment of gender in sport settings; and intersectionality

provides contextual awareness of how masculinities may be experienced differently across social identities. In this study, these frameworks were used not simply as descriptive theories but as analytic tools, with the coding process informed by the conceptual distinctions between hegemonic and inclusive masculinities and the recognition that intersectional differences emerged only in limited ways.

Overall, this merged framework situates the analysis within established masculinity scholarship while clearly specifying how the concepts were applied to interpret the interview data. It also aligns the theoretical framing with the study's findings by acknowledging both the continued dominance of masculinity and the restricted presence of intersectional variation in this particular sample.

Methods

Research Design

To investigate the socio-cultural construction of masculinity among college-aged men in sport contexts, the authors of this study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative approaches are adopted for exploring how individuals interpret their lived experiences and negotiate cultural meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative methods allow for nuanced insights into how masculinity is enacted, reinforced, and contested in everyday life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method. In addition to providing participants with opportunities to describe their experiences in their own words, interviews still allowed the researchers to probe relevant topics related to masculinity, gender norms, sport behaviors, and values as needed. This format also facilitated the exploration of other issues, such as peer policing, health risks, and family expectations, which may not emerge in survey-based research. A critical sociological lens was applied to recognize the structural dimensions of gender, including power, hierarchy, and inequality while the study was guided by interpretivist assumptions, which present the view that social reality is constructed

through interaction and meaning-making (Schwandt, 2015). This combination allowed for attention to both the personal narratives of participants and the broader socio-cultural frameworks in which those narratives are situated. Consistent with qualitative research standards, the researchers acknowledge their positionality and its potential influence on data collection and interpretation. The interviewers shared certain cultural reference points with participants, which helped facilitate rapport. But, throughout the study, reflexive memos were maintained to record interpretive decisions, potential biases, and evolving analytic insights. This stance supports transparency and strengthens interpretive rigor.

Participants

The target population consisted of male undergraduate students aged 18 to 25 enrolled at a large Midwestern public university in the United States. The geographic and institutional context of the Midwest is relevant, as regional sport cultures and campus norms often emphasize tradition, competitiveness, and tightly policed masculine behavior. These cultural features may shape how masculinity is understood and performed and therefore contextualize the findings. College-aged men are also in a developmental stage where identities and gender norms are actively negotiated in the context of peer groups, academic environments, and cultural expectations. A total of 24 participants were recruited using a combination of convenience sampling. Recruitment occurred through classroom announcements, flyers posted in intramural facilities, and word-of-mouth referrals, and it continued until thematic saturation was reached; that is, interviews no longer produced new conceptual insights or variations in the emerging codes. After approximately 20 interviews, the core patterns were well established, and four additional interviews were conducted to confirm that no new themes were appearing. At that point, saturation was judged to have been achieved, and data collection was concluded. Inclusion criteria purposely required that participants had previous or current experience in sports, whether formal (e.g., varsity or club athletics) or informal (e.g., recreational).

Table 1. Summary of participants

Category	Distribution
Age	18 (n=2), 19 (n=5), 20 (n=4), 21 (n=4), 22 (n=5), 23 (n=1), 24 (n=1), 25 (n=2)
Race/Ethnicity	White/Caucasian (n=14), African American (n=4), Latino (n=3), Asian American (n=3)
Primary Sport	Gymnastics (n=2), Soccer (n=3), Baseball (n=3), Basketball (n=3), Football (n=4), Ice Hockey (n=1), CrossFit (n=1) Swimming (n=2), Tennis (n=1), Lacrosse (n=2), Martial Arts (n=1)
Level of Participation	Varsity (n=15), Club (n=6), Recreational (n=4)
Academic Majors*	Music (1), Food Science (2), Pre-Med (2), Spanish (2), Criminology (1), Psychology (1), Kinesiology (2), Accounting (2), Education (1), International Relations (1), Packaging (1), Nursing (2), Physical Science (1), Economics (2), Business (1), Advertising (2), Pre-Law (1), Civil Engineering (1)

* Some participants reported double majors.

The sample reflected racial and disciplinary diversity, including White, African American, Latino, and Asian American men, with majors ranging from kinesiology to business, engineering, education, agriculture, and music. This diversity enabled the study to include multiple perspectives on masculinity within a shared institutional context. Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographic characteristics, primary sports, levels of sport participation, and academic majors.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in individual interview spaces on campus to ensure confidentiality and minimize external distractions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. With the consent of participants, interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken during and immediately after interviews to capture contextual observations and initial analytic impressions. The interview protocol was organized around five domains: (a) socio-cultural backgrounds and sport participation, (b) socio-cultural influences on gender norms, (c) masculinity attitudes, (d) masculine behaviors in sports, and (e) sport values. Questions were open-ended to allow participants to reflect broadly on their experiences, with probes used to elicit elaboration or clarification. Example questions included "Who or what has most influenced your ideas about what it

means to be a man?"; "How do you see masculinity expressed in sport settings?"; and "What values do you think men gain from participating in sport?"

To strengthen analytic reliability, participant checking was conducted informally by summarizing responses during interviews and inviting participants to clarify or correct interpretations. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and account for potential biases. Together, these procedures enhanced the overall soundness of the findings, supporting their accuracy, stability, and impartiality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coding discussions were also held among the research team to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and refine the definitions of emerging themes. In addition, the coding framework was iteratively adjusted as new insights developed, further increasing analytic consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. The process began with initial coding, in which transcripts were read line by line to identify meaningful segments related to masculinity, sport experiences, socialization, and emotional expression. These codes were then compared across participants and refined through constant comparison. In the second stage, axial coding was used

to group related codes into broader categories, such as “peer enforcement,” “injury and toughness norms,” or “emotional control.” This step allowed the researchers to examine relationships among codes and to organize the data into more coherent conceptual clusters. Finally, the categories were synthesized into four higher-order themes that captured the central patterns across the dataset. These themes reflected both shared experiences and points of tension in how participants constructed and negotiated masculinity in sport contexts. The analysis was conducted manually by the researchers. To maintain analytic rigor, the researcher used systematic spreadsheets, coding matrices, and reflexive memos to track code development, category refinement, and theme construction across all transcripts.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. Participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the study’s purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and confidentiality protections (Gerolamo et al., 2021). Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, analyses, and reporting to protect the identities of participants. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices and were destroyed after the completion of the study. Participation was voluntary, and individuals could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Results

Analysis of the 24 interviews revealed that participants consistently described masculinity as a socially reinforced identity, deeply connected to the values and behaviors expected in sports. Four major themes emerged: (a) socializing agents and the transmission of masculine norms, (b) peer enforcement and gender policing, (c) values associated with masculinity in sport, and (d) negotiations of conformity and resistance. Across these themes, masculinity was visible both as a dominant cultural script and as a contested ideal.

Socializing Agents and the Transmission of Masculine Norms

Participants emphasized that their understandings of masculinity were shaped early through interactions with family, peers, coaches, and media. Fathers and male relatives often modeled toughness and stoicism. One participant recalled, “My dad always told me not to cry on the field. If I got hurt, he’d say, ‘Walk it off.’ That stuck with me - that men don’t show weakness.” Such narratives reflect how masculinity normalizes emotional restraint and equates strength with silence in the face of pain (Connell, 2005). Coaches reinforced similar expectations, valorizing aggression and self-sacrifice. A student explained, “If you sat out with an injury, you were seen as soft. The coach would say, ‘Real men push through.’” This illustrates how sport institutions actively transmit hegemonic ideals by equating masculinity with endurance and dominance while marginalizing vulnerability (Messner, 1992, 2007). Media representations added to this process, with participants identifying professional athletes who embodied toughness and control as masculine role models. These accounts underscore how masculinity is embedded across multiple layers of socialization. This theme addresses Research Questions 1 and 4 by illustrating how socio-cultural agents shape men’s early constructions of masculinity within sport contexts. Through these socializing influences, participants internalized behaviors that prioritize toughness over well-being and emotional suppression over open communication. Such early messages continued to shape their approaches to health, vulnerability, and relationships well into adulthood.

Peer Enforcement and Gender Policing

Peers emerged as the most powerful regulators of masculinity, enforcing conformity through ridicule and exclusion. Participants described being teased or labeled “gay” when they deviated from norms of toughness, competitiveness, or heterosexuality. One explained, “In high school, if you didn’t play hard or if you cared too much about how you looked, people

would call you gay. It was a way to keep you in line.” This form of peer policing reflects the operation of masculinity as a hierarchy that legitimates heterosexual dominance and stigmatizes deviation. By casting certain masculinity as subordinate (e.g., sensitive or effeminate men), peers reinforced a binary in which masculinity was positioned as the cultural ideal (Anderson, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Even among participants who claimed that homophobic language had declined, they still admitted that ridicule remained a way of “keeping men in their place,” demonstrating the resilience of hegemonic frameworks (Anderson, 2011). This theme answers Research Question 2 and 4 by demonstrating how traditional masculine norms directly shape men’s behaviors and emotional expressions in sport settings. Peer enforcement shaped men’s emotional expression and relational dynamics. Athletes described emotional distance among teammates, hesitancy to seek support, and a sense that friendships were contingent upon maintaining a controlled, unemotional front. These dynamics limited emotional intimacy and increased pressures to conform to unhealthy behaviors.

Values Associated with Masculinity in Sport

Participants consistently identified competitiveness, toughness, and risk-oriented behaviors as the primary values derived from sport. One student commented, “Sports teach you to want to win, to push yourself harder than the other guy. That’s just part of being a man.” This aligns with masculinity’s emphasis on dominance, rivalry, and zero-sum achievement. Another participant highlighted pride in playing through injury: “I’ve had sprains, but I never sat out. It felt good to know I could take it.” Here, the hegemonic ideal of the invulnerable male body was reproduced, with injury reframed as a test of manhood rather than a health concern. Similarly, emotional restraint was valued as part of being masculine: “You can’t let people see you upset—it’s like weakness. Even if you’re struggling, you keep it inside.” Such narratives reveal how sport socializes men into prioritizing control,

strength, and dominance - core dimensions of masculinity. This theme further contributes to Research Question 4 by showing how core masculine values influence men’s sport-related attitudes, risk-taking, and bodily practices. Peer enforcement shaped men’s emotional expression and relational dynamics. Athletes described emotional distance among teammates, hesitancy to seek support, and a sense that friendships were contingent upon maintaining a controlled, unemotional front. These dynamics limited emotional intimacy and increased pressures to conform to unhealthy behaviors.

Negotiations of Conformity and Resistance

Certain participants described moments of conformity or resistance. Expressions of vulnerability, such as hugging or crying with teammates, challenged the expectation that men must always conceal emotions. As one participant stated, “After a big win or even a loss, we’d hug or cry together. It felt real. I don’t think that makes us less of men.” This illustrates how men selectively disrupt masculinity by broadening acceptable expressions of intimacy and care. Other participants resisted the glorification of pain and risk. A kinesiology major explained, “I don’t buy into the idea that you have to ruin your body to prove yourself. That’s not strength - it’s just dumb.” Such statements reflect an emerging critique of hegemonic ideals, resonating with Anderson’s (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, which argues that younger men increasingly embrace health-conscious and emotionally open masculinities.

Nonetheless, even resistant narratives reveal the influence of masculinity as a reference point. Participants framed their departures from toughness and stoicism as exceptions, not replacements, which underscores Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) argument that masculinity adapts to incorporate challenges while retaining its cultural authority. These patterns contribute directly to Research Question 3 by illustrating that men’s negotiations are not simple acts of acceptance or rejection but rather ongoing, situated processes. Participants simultaneously upheld hegemonic norms

in many areas of their sporting lives while selectively resisting or modifying them in others. Their narratives demonstrate that resistance often occurs in narrow, individualized moment - prioritizing health, expressing emotion with close teammates -without fundamentally dislodging the broader cultural expectations surrounding masculinity. In other words, men engage in a dynamic and uneven negotiation of masculine ideals, reinforcing dominant norms in some contexts while subtly challenging them in others.

Limited Intersectionality

Throughout the analysis, racial and sexual-orientation differences were actively explored; however, no consistent or recurring narrative patterns emerged across these identity dimensions. This analytic outcome supports the later discussion of limited intersectionality in the present study. Although a few participants of color referenced racialized assumptions about athleticism or social expectations, these reflections did not coalesce into a broader, systematic pattern that differentiated their overall experiences from those of white participants. Likewise, while heteronormativity surfaced in discussions of peer policing, it did not generate distinct narrative trajectories among heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants.

This clarification contributes to Research Question 4 by contextualizing how structural identity categories shaped - yet did not substantially differentiate - participants' sport-related experiences of masculinity due to . The absence of strong intersectional variation suggests that the shared institutional and regional context of a predominantly white Midwestern university may have exerted a homogenizing influence on men's sport experiences, overshadowing potential divergences tied to race or sexuality. In other words, hegemonic masculine norms operated as a dominant cultural script that participants - regardless of identity background - encountered and internalized in similar ways. This finding highlights that RQ4 cannot be understood solely through individual identity categories; rather, it must also be situated within the cultural environment that standardizes expectations around toughness, emotional

restraint, competitiveness, and bodily sacrifice. As such, the limited intersectional differentiation observed here underscores how institutional culture can smooth over identity-based divergences, resulting in broadly shared implications for men's health, emotional expression, and social relationships in sport contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the enduring significance of masculinity in shaping the sport experiences of college-aged men. Across themes of socialization, peer enforcement, and the values attached to sport, participants consistently described behaviors and ideals aligned with toughness, competitiveness, emotional restraint, and risk orientation. These patterns reaffirm longstanding arguments in sport sociology that masculinity remains a powerful organizing framework, reproduced through families, coaches, peers, and media (Connell, 2005; Messner, 1992). Socializing agents played a central role in transmitting these expectations. Fathers encouraged stoicism, coaches valorized playing through pain, and media representations reinforced images of dominant, aggressive athletes. These findings reflect Connell's (2005) assertion that masculinity is sustained through institutional and cultural practices that normalize dominance and marginalize alternative expressions of gender. Peer enforcement further strengthened these expectations: ridicule, subtle policing, and heteronormative judgments created conditions in which young men monitored themselves and each other to maintain masculine legitimacy. These dynamics illustrate how masculinity functions relationally - sustained not only by dominant men but by the complicity of peers who uphold its boundaries (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Masculine values also shaped participants' physical and emotional decision-making. Many normalized injuries, minimized pain, or framed physical sacrifice as evidence of commitment and strength. These behaviors align with scholarship on the culture of risk (Nixon, 2016) and demonstrate how masculinity carries personal costs, particularly for men's health and well-being. Likewise, expectations of emotional

restraint influenced how participants navigated relationships and team dynamics. While sport was occasionally described as a space for camaraderie, emotional expression remained tightly regulated, contributing to interpersonal distance and limited emotional support. These findings directly address Research Question 4, illustrating how hegemonic norms affect men's health behaviors, emotional expression, and the quality of their social relationships.

At the same time, the findings complicate a purely hegemonic portrayal of masculinity by revealing moments of ambivalence and resistance. Some participants emphasized the value of emotional intimacy -hugging, crying, or expressing vulnerability with teammates - while others challenged the glorification of pain by prioritizing long-term health. These narratives reflect emerging alternative masculinity consistent with Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, which suggests that younger men may be increasingly open to emotional expressiveness and relational closeness. However, these resistant practices did not constitute a wholesale rejection of hegemonic norms. Instead, participants framed such behaviors as situational or exceptional, indicating that resistance often occurs within the boundaries set by masculinity rather than outside of them. This dynamic demonstrates that men may negotiate masculine ideals in selective, context-dependent ways - simultaneously reinforcing dominant norms in many settings while cautiously challenging them in others. In this sense, resistance does not replace masculinity but coexists with it, reflecting the adaptive resilience of hegemonic gender orders (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

A notable aspect of the findings concerns the limited emergence of intersectional differences across race, sexuality, or class. Although some men of color referenced racialized expectations about athleticism or behavior, these reflections did not form distinct narrative patterns compared to white participants. Similarly, heteronormative pressures were present, yet they did not differentiate experiences in clearly patterned ways. This outcome does not diminish the theoretical importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989); rather, it suggests that the shared institutional

and regional context - a predominantly white Midwestern university with strong sport participation norms - may have produced a relatively unified masculine culture. Such institutional environments can create homogenizing pressures that blur identity-based distinctions, resulting in broadly shared experiences of masculinity across participants. Addressing this point strengthens the conceptual coherence of the study by clarifying that intersectionality was actively examined but did not manifest strongly in the dataset due to contextual factors - such as sample composition, interview prompts, and cultural characteristics of the institution.

Taken together, these findings affirm and extend existing theories of masculinity in sport. They affirm the centrality of masculinity by demonstrating how toughness, emotional restraint, and risk-taking continue to structure men's behaviors and interactions in sport. They extend theoretical perspectives by showing how men simultaneously engage in selective resistance, negotiating hegemonic ideals in ways that reflect both cultural change and the persistence of established norms. These ambivalent practices exemplify Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that masculinity evolves by incorporating limited challenges while maintaining cultural dominance. Deliberate and structured interventions can help cultivate healthier and more inclusive sport environments. Several practical strategies may include:

1. Normalize emotional expression and team support: Coaches can intentionally model and encourage communication about stress, disappointment, or vulnerability, reducing the stigma around emotional openness.
2. Reframe toughness and injury culture: Athletic staff can adopt policies that prioritize long-term health over "playing through pain," explicitly recognizing health-protective decisions as responsible and commendable.
3. Promote multiple pathways to athletic legitimacy: Instructors can highlight skill development, teamwork, leadership, and personal growth - beyond brute strength or dominance - as meaningful markers of sport participation.

By implementing such practices, coaches and educators can help disrupt the narrow boundaries of masculinity and support the development of more balanced and inclusive sport cultures.

Conclusion

This study examined how college-aged men experience and negotiate masculinity within sport contexts. The findings indicate that traditional masculine ideals continue to structure men's participation, identity formation, and evaluations of self and others. These norms were reinforced by socio-cultural agents and were reproduced through everyday sport practices. At the same time, the study revealed moments of ambivalence and resistance over the displays of masculinity. Therefore, the primary contribution of this study is its demonstration that contemporary college men simultaneously reproduce and selectively challenge masculinity, negotiating dominant norms in nuanced and context-dependent ways. Rather than operating as a fixed or monolithic structure, masculinity functioned as a flexible cultural reference point - powerful enough to shape behaviors and expectations, yet permeable enough to allow limited alternative expressions to emerge. Although intersectionality was emphasized in the theoretical framing, the empirical data revealed only minimal identity-based differentiation. This outcome appears linked to the shared cultural environment, where institutional and peer norms around masculinity may have overshadowed racial, sexual, or class differences in sport-related experiences. Acknowledging this contextual limitation clarifies why intersectional dynamics were less visible in participants' narratives and highlights the importance of cultural setting in shaping masculine practice. By intentionally challenging the norms that position dominance, silence, and self-sacrifice as essential to manhood, practitioners can create conditions in which diverse masculinities are validated and sustained. Future research should build on these insights by examining how men in more racially diverse, regionally varied, or non-university athletic contexts experience and negotiate masculinity. Comparative studies across sport

types or institutional cultures would further clarify when and how intersectional differences become salient. Additionally, longitudinal designs could illuminate whether the subtle forms of resistance observed here develop into more sustained cultural shifts in sport. Overall, this study affirms the continued influence of masculinity while illustrating its evolving contours among younger generations. By documenting both continuity and emerging change, the research contributes to broader conversations about how gender is constructed, contested, and lived within contemporary sport.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Jeong Dae Lee & Seunghyun Hwang

Data curation: Jeong Dae Lee

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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