

Transformative Service Research in Collegiate Sport: Reframing the Service Environment Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This study applies a transformative sport service research approach to examine student-athletes' wellness within a collegiate sport setting. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were completed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the stop of play in Canada (early 2021). Findings denoted wellness was influenced by this time period as well as organizational factors which are within the purview of existing management practices. The study details the service environment to understand physical and mental well-being while taking into consideration the general and organizational environments which influence the student-athletes. Findings demonstrate that eudaimonic-related experiences (e.g., learning, development, relationship) are related to student-athletes' mental well-being. This research underpins the role of education, policies, and communication, which draws several implications for the service environment in a collegiate sport setting and the key stakeholders involved in producing an environment to enhance student-athletes' experience. The paper elaborates on the importance of the service environment and provides evidence of what student-athletes suggest management can change and focus their efforts on towards creating a transformative service environment. Theoretical implications for the transformative service research are put forward, including the co-creative aspects to determine programming which could contribute towards student-athletes wellness. Broader suggestions for change within the sport system and future research are also advanced.

Key words: sport system, student-athletes, wellness, development, eudaimonism

Introduction

The sport environment and its competitive nature are laden with risks for student-athletes; requiring a balance between athletics and academics simultaneously (Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013; Kim et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2020). Student-athletes are busy individuals spending many hours each day to focus on athletic demands such as time spent training, traveling to and from competition to academic



demands, which all influence their overall wellness (Breslin et al., 2017; Moleski et al., 2023). Bauman (2016) suggested that competitive sport may lead to poor mental health and that student-athletes face distinct mental health risk factors (e.g., negative emotional consequences of injuries, a higher risk of substance and alcohol misuse, and relationship problems). The combination of these pressures could be problematic for student-athletes which requires sport administrators to be aware of how the service environment can and does play a role in creating student-athletes' wellness.

Research in sport management has examined the impact of services experienced by a variety of sport stakeholders including athletes (Kim et al., 2020), high-performance sport student-athletes (e.g., Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015; MacIntosh et al., 2020), sport volunteers (e.g., Wicker & Downward, 2020), community organizations and their members (e.g., Dowling et al., 2021; Misener, 2020). Services and the intersection with users can impact well-being (Katz et al., 2020; Ostrom et al., 2015), making well-being essential for sport managers to understand (Inoue et al., 2020; Westberg & Kelly, 2019). Past studies addressed transformative service research (TSR) as important to understand the impact services have on a person's wellness (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015; Inoue et al., 2020). Transformative sport service research (TSSR) seeks to build a body of knowledge about the ways in which a person's wellness may be enhanced through a variety of sport-related services offered to the stakeholder (Inoue et al., 2020). Of consequence in this research, is the provision of services and how the student-athletes experiences those services which will purportedly influence wellness (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). Scholars have denoted the perspective that to understand mental health, one needs to consider the perspectives of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (e.g., Huta & Ryan, 2010; Huta & Waterman, 2014). Eudaimonia is characterized by the pursuit of meaning in life and nurturing one's highest potential in a manner aligned with one's core values and genuine self (Huta & Ryan, 2010). On the other hand, Hedonia is the pursuit of pleasure, delight, and ease (Huta & Ryan, 2010). Combined with a traditional focus of physical development and health of the student-student-athletes, a person's mental health is a critical consideration within the collegiate setting.

The purpose of this study is to determine the environmental factors within the collegiate sport environment which contribute to student-athletes's wellness. The study describes what student-athletes' believe influence their wellness (defined here as physical well-being and mental well-being, including hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives). The paper further explains how management can create transformative sport service environments for the student-athletes to help promote wellness. Notably, this study offers insights specifically contextualized within the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the "stop to play" within university sport in Canada. Employing qualitative research methods, this study underscores various environmental factors crucial to student-athletes' well-being. Emphasized is the importance of fostering a more secure environment for student-athletes. Additionally, this research contributes to enriching sport management theories by underscoring the significance of the service environment to its primary beneficiary.

Literature Review

Chelladurai (2014) identified different types of sports services, including participant services (e.g., community sport programs) that prioritize the end-user. This study considers participant services within the service environment to better understand student-athletes' experiences. Transformative service research (TSR) aims to create positive changes that improve individuals' lives within the ecosystem (Anderson et al., 2013; Anderson & Ostrom, 2015), with a focus on well-being outcomes. TSR is especially relevant in sport, where services can enhance the well-being of spectators and participants (Friman et al., 2018). The present study investigated how sport environments impact the wellness of student-athletes from the aspects of the physical and mental health.

Transformative Sports Service Research

The approach of using a TSR lens in sport management is known as transformative sport service research (TSSR; Friman et al., 2018). According to Inoue et al. (2020), TSSR can be defined as: "an area of research aiming to enhance or improve the well-being of sport consumers and employees (both paid staff and volunteers) by generating knowledge that has implications for the optimal production and delivery of sport services" (p. 286). TSSR postulates that the services rendered and how they are experienced by the consumer (in our study, the student-athletes), will produce overall feelings of wellness (Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). TSSR encourages researchers, practitioners, and organizations to look beyond the traditional firm-oriented outcomes of increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and service quality for financial gain. Through the TSSR lens, management can look to make improvements on the provision and delivery of their services for short- and longer-term implications on student-athletes' quality of life (Baron et al., 2014; Kean et al., 2019; Ostrom et al., 2015; Rosenbaum, 2015;). Researchers highlight key mental, physical, and social facets of the service environment crucial for management to consider and, perhaps especially important during the pandemic (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). While TSSR stems from the consumer services marketing domain (the origins stemming from service dominant logic), management scholars have realized these same principles have consequences on a variety of sport stakeholders, including the student-athletes who has been positioned in the literature as both a prime producer and benefactor of the organized activities (c.f., Chelladurai & Reimer, 1997). Ultimately, TSSR attempts to better understand the role of services in generating personal and collective well-being outcomes for people experiencing the services.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of transformative sport service research (TSSR) in various contexts, such as the National Football League (Katz et al., 2020). Weight et al. (2020) explored student-athletes' views on the prevalence of transformative and destructive coaches, effective coaching methods (e.g., enhancing self-efficacy belief), and the impact of coaching methods on sport self-efficacy belief. Service studies suggest possible links between well-being and

other desirable service outcomes (e.g., performance), but further empirical research is necessary. Social support perceptions have been shown to mitigate negative experiences resulting from interactions with others (Shorey & Lakey, 2011), whereas tangible support services are intended to enhance positive experiences (Fleischman et al., 2021). Moreover, competitive sport environments, like those found in collegiate sports, can negatively impact mental health due to factors such as extended time away from family and relationship problems (Bauman, 2016; Breslin et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic further challenged student-athletes' health by causing a stop of play, competition cancellations and postponements, changes to training environments, and reduced in-person activity (Schinke et al., 2018). Scholarship has demonstrated that the service environment can either hinder or help student-athletes' performance (MacIntosh et al., 2020). Accordingly, TSSR suggests this interaction can create changes in well-being, whether positive or negative, and therefore affect a person's overall wellness. This idea is central to this study during the COVID-19 stop of play, as collegiate sports are a microcosm of larger society experiencing the health crisis.

Wellness

Wellness, a holistic descriptor of an individual's state as per Myers et al. (2000), carries significant implications for management. Wellness is a way to orient one's life and relates to the understanding of body and mind; thus, wellness considers physical health (e.g., lack of injury, fatigue) as well as mental health. The investigation of how the sporting environments influence student-athletes' physical and mental health is of significant interest in the sport management literature (e.g., Kim et al., 2020). Both physical and mental health should be concurrently examined as is consistent with the perspective of wellness. Additionally, although there is no universal consensus to define mental health, scholarship recently has emphasized the importance of focusing on the positive side of student-athletes' mental health (Schinke et al., 2018). In this regard, the consideration of mental well-being from both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being perspectives can offer a deeper understanding of mental health (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Huta & Waterman, 2014). Specifically, hedonic well-being refers to an individual's cognitive and affective evaluations of ones' life; often containing three components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Eudaimonic well-being is associated with the highest human good; thus, it is often measured by, for example, meaning in life, good relationships with others, and self-actualization, distinguishing from the hedonic pursuit of pleasurable sensations or satisfying appetites (Ryff & Singer, 2006) Environmental factors are significant antecedents of both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Huta & Waterman, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2017;) as coaches and teammates play a significant role in influencing their student-athletes' well-being. Thus, the sporting environment is a significant factor in an student-athletes's mental health.

Past research has highlighted student-athletes' mental and physical health issues. Graupensperger et al. (2020) explored student-athletes' mental health in relation to teammate support and athletic identity changes during COVID-19. Those

with strong team support and connection had better mental health and stable athletic identity. Athletic identity changes influenced psychological well-being. Schary et al. (2021) examined the pandemic's impact on student-athletes' mental health. They found no effect on overall well-being but did note increased anxiety and sleeplessness, particularly in older student-athletes. Powers et al. (2006) defined physical wellness through principles related to overall health and physical activity. Optimal health requires good nutrition, exercise, sleep, and preventive measures. Yet, Van Rensburg et al. (2011) found that student-athletes often neglected their physical well-being, not prioritizing essentials like exercise and sleep.

Context of the Study: U-Sport

U SPORTS is the governing body for the collegiate sport in Canada and represents about 12,000 student-athletes (U SPORTS, 2021). In comparison with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the United States, which is a major revenue-generating entertainment business, U SPORTS's revenue is far less (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018). In the U.S., collegiate sports are cultural milestones with vast national attention. In contrast, Canada's U SPORTS may not always garner similar excitement or media coverage, reflecting differences in cultural values and media landscapes between the countries. Besides, U SPORTS student-athletes tend to receive considerably less financial support (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018). Universities can grant athletic scholarships up to the cost of tuition and mandatory fees, contingent on student-athletes' fulfilling basic academic criteria (U SPORTS, 2018). While Canadian student-athletes may not receive the same level of acclaim as those in the U.S. system, they stand out from their non-student-athletes peers due to their 25–30-hour weekly training, weekend game and competition travel, and the availability of support resources such as academic adjustments (Mishna et al., 2019). Notably, student-athletes in both governing bodies have equally important wellness needs, affected by their environment and available services.

Method

Given the infancy of TSSR and the insufficient understanding of the environmental influence on student-athletes particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic an exploratory research design was utilized in this study. Qualitative research was chosen as the method to collect data for the current study and to provide enriching accounts of the sports environment experienced by the student-athletes during the stop of play period.

Participants Selection and Recruitment

In the present study, a purposeful sampling technique was employed to ascertain the student-athletes' perspective (Patton, 2015). First, information about the study was posted on an intercollegiate sport website. Next, an email was sent by the Athletic Director to all university student-athletes regarding the study. Student-athletes interested in the study were asked to contact the primary researcher directly through

email to learn more about the research and their rights as participants (e.g., voluntary, anonymous, confidential nature of the research). If interested, the researcher and the participants set up a mutually agreeable time to conduct the semi-structured interview. Due to COVID-19 health protocols at the University, all interviews were completed using the Zoom platform during the stop of play period.

Demographics

Participants had to be 18 years of age or older, and currently a member of a college/university team. Participants could reside anywhere while taking part in this study (e.g., student-athletes that were off campus and living at home). Regarding gender, six identified as women, 10 as men. Participants were involved in a total of seven sports, including rugby (one), soccer (three), hockey (one), basketball (seven), volleyball (one), basminton (one), and football (two). Table 1 provides a summary of participants' demographic information.

Table 1
Key Demographics of Participants (n = 16)

Pseudonym	Gender	Collegiate Sport	Years in University
Morgan	Woman	Rugby	Senior
Finley	Woman	Soccer	Freshman
Riley	Man	Basketball	Sophomore
Jessie	Woman	Volleyball	Junior
Jaime	Man	Basketball	Sophomore
Skyler	Man	Hockey	Junior
Frankie	Man	Badminton	Junior
Carter	Woman	Basketball	Senior
Harley	Woman	Soccer	Junior
Peyton	Woman	Basketball	Freshman
Logan	Man	Football	Senior
Bobbie	Man	Football	Freshman
Parker	Man	Basketball	Junior
Alex	Man	Basketball	Sophomore
Tom	Man	Basketball	Senior
Peter	Man	Soccer	Sophomore

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview method was chosen to uncover student-athletes' perceptions of the service environment and the influence on their well-being. Questions were generated in part through a review of the literature on TSR and TSSR and wellness based literature. Since we were interested in student-athletes' beliefs and behaviour in relation to the phenomena it was important to garner their ideas on service level improvements (Husbands et al., 2017). The interview questions were

designed to be broad and general regarding the service environment and prior to conducting interviews, were pilot tested with sport management students to determine the structure and ordering of the questions as well as if any questions were ambiguous.

Participants were first asked about their sporting experiences and then to discuss what aspects of their sport environment made them feel cared for as an student-athlete. Follow-up questions included asking student-athletes to detail what they considered to be best practice towards making them feel cared for in their environment. Additionally, student-athletes were asked to discuss any aspects that they felt hindered their overall wellness. Prompts regarding physical and mental wellness were used to ascertain a more complete understanding of practices that promote feelings of wellness in their sport environment and those that they felt needed to change. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

Hennink et al. (2017) distinguished between two methods for gauging saturation: code saturation and meaning saturation. Code saturation typically serves as a gauge during data collection, indicating when all relevant concerns associated with the study topic have been captured without new ones emerging. In this study, code saturation was achieved by the ninth interview, facilitating the extraction of a diverse set of thematic concerns. In contrast, reaching meaning saturation necessitates 16 to 24 samples, according to Hennink et al. (2017). To pursue meaning saturation, this study engaged a minimum of 16 respondents, enhancing the study's rigour relevance for student-athletes.

The interview transcripts were revised and emailed to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the information. Participants had 10 days to respond to the transcript verification email, and if at that time, no response was provided, the transcript was considered verified. One participant provided minor changes. Once reviewed, the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 11 software which was used to organize and manage the data.

Thematic analyses are used to help identify, analyze, and report themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, an independent analysis commenced, where the researcher would read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Inductive analyses were used to generate initial concepts of what student-athletes experienced and perceived to be promoting wellness (see Patton, 2015). These first-order codes and their relative occurrences within the transcripts helped produce some potential themes (Camiré, 2016). Upon completing this level of coding, four authors then compared and discussed their first order coding, and the various relationships they perceived important (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These discussions allowed for second-order coding to be developed. Through constant comparison and collaboration over three separate coding meetings, the researchers team refined, named, and defined the results as presented below. In the member-check process, participants were asked to review their transcript, reflect on the experience and clarify any points, and confirm the relevance of the researchers' explanations (Camiré, 2016).

Results

A total of 16 interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed, featuring participants who had competed in high-performance sports at varying levels, from club to international competitions, such as FISU and single sport championships. The interviews, averaging 34 minutes in length and producing approximately 4,500 words per session, generated over 100 pages of data. Three main themes were identified as (1) Unsafe Sport Environment, which included concerns related to physical health, mental health, and general environment, including the impact of COVID-19; (2) Safe Sport Environment, which covered issues related to physical health, mental health, and general environment, along with organizational aspects such as policies, communication, and facilities; and (3) Suggestions for improving the service environment in college sports, which focused on two key aspects: (a) the support system and (b) the need to increase education for both players and parents at an earlier age.

Theme One: Unsafe Sport Environment

Of consequence in this study was that student-athletes had diminished feelings of wellness (both physical and mental) when they or someone they knew experienced or perceived negative elements within the sport environment. This included physical health (e.g., overtraining and injury from poor techniques taught and injury in the game) and mental health (e.g., experiencing micro-aggressions from relationships with the coach, administration, or teammate). Participants expressed how the use and integration of misbehavior by others led to the destruction of value and, hence, the deterioration of well-being. The role of the coach and their behaviour was influential towards the student-athletes experiencing unsafe sport. Some examples of this included the coach using threatening words, belittling a player in front of teammates, picking favorites, or excluding student-athletes from drills. Additionally, student-athletes discussed the importance the impact of COVID-19 environment and the stop of play.

Physical Health

Student-athletes noted many experiences with poor physical health that influenced their wellness including, excessive training and practice intensity, the coach or trainer not giving or allowing breaks during training and practice, poor nutrition information and, playing through injury. As they expressed, these areas of concern can be detrimental to their physical health. Of interest, most student-athletes felt that further education is required from coaches and trainers to ensure proper biomechanical movement patterns, a better understanding of preventative measures and avoidance of overuse injury as they felt that this would put the student-athletes' interest first. One of participants noted that: "I said just going with a high volume like practice every day, not having breaks. I think that's bad practice" (Parker, personal communication, April, 2021).

“The whole career that having to worrying about, if I get hurt, is that going to stop, the help the school is providing, if I get hurt, are all my all my scholarship going to go away, just let the athlete know we have your back, this program is there to protect you”(Bobbie, personal communication, April, 2021).

Another participant discussed their involvement in [contact sport], stating that injuries are common in practice and from games due to the “physical intensity” and noted that “it is not the same for everyone...some [players] are more aggressive than others” (Morgan, personal communication, April, 2021). This student-athletes went on to say that:

This attitude, which was particularly pervasive in contact sports, was a likely cause of physical injury, according to athletes. “One of my screws was hitting my ligament, so I had to get another surgery. A second surgery, I shouldn’t have practiced, but it was me wanting to play really bad and the coach seeing me wanting to play” (Riley, personal communication, April, 2021). Participant lamented on the risk of injury in their sport and the physical nature of practice:

“I think even just the dynamic within women’s sport is very interesting, especially on the field as soon as you become the black sheep. Putting yourself at risk for injury, harder tackles, people being more careless when they’re competing. It’s a very interesting dynamic that I’ve noticed, but it’s definitely there and creates an unsafe feel” (Finley, personal communication, April, 2021).

Generally, student-athletes felt that the physical side of wellness was well supported within the service environment since they were surrounded by many experts that could aid them with their knowledge and education in training and physical therapy, while also having available doctors to support their injury-related needs.

“I’ve noticed that some physical therapists, if adopted to the university sport culture and they won’t try to heal you as we try to heal you faster, so you can play instead of heal you in a better way for. I have heard some of my teammates say that they haven’t been assessed properly. They have to go seek is your therapist elsewhere. I think that’s an unsafe” (Finley personal communication, April, 2021).

Mental Health

Student-athletes emphasized the significance of their relationship with coaches, the availability of mental health professionals, and awareness of services offered. While university support was present, its accessibility was sporadic and occasionally perceived as too intertwined with the team. Greater knowledge about these services, both within and outside the team context, was desired. The coach and student-athletes’ relationship significantly influenced mental health, with some student-athletes’ feeling overwhelmed by sport-related pressures, struggling to balance academic and athletic demands, leading to feelings of diminished self-worth and anxiety. For student-athletes, the role of the coach and their behaviour towards the play could pro-

duce negative feelings and emotions. “Riley” said the following: “the coach said it, to kind of threaten to work harder because I’m wasting my time basically, but that’s how (we) my teammates and I, interpreted what he said” (Riley, personal communication, April, 2021). Furthermore, this participant noted that the [coach] “doesn’t really care beyond [the sport]. The only thing they care about is your performance. Sometimes you felt like you were just one in a group of people. You weren’t really any kind of focus of theirs.” This led to anxiety and feeling uncomfortable around the coach. Participants also talked about coaches picking favorites, being excluded from drills and feeling tension particularly as a rookie. Another participant talked about the hierarchy and fear to speak up, stating:

“The fact that teams are very hierarchical in structure, it’s quite a pyramid. I would say especially if you’re in your younger years, you don’t want anything that you’re saying about the team to get up and affect your role and affect your coaches or your older teammates or your teammates that are better than you” (Jessie, personal communication, April, 2021).

Student-athletes discussed experiences with feeling like there was bias or judgement from the coach or other players, bullying (e.g., online) and in practice, or pressuring student-athletes into something they were uncomfortable with.

“It kind of just made me uncomfortable whenever I talked to him. Even when he was my own coach. It was kind of just you could tell players to do certain things like go to the corner to get a puck or something or you could tell a player to hit somebody to make a good hockey play. But once you are telling people to intentionally go out and hurt somebody it kind of ruins the game for everybody” (Skyler, personal communication, April, 2021).

It is important to note that while student-athletes felt there was a need for a sport psychologist and were aware of this service, that people still may not access those services. “Finley” noted that it is not enough to “write on paper somewhere that there’s a mental health specialist for student-athletes, but you never met them, or you never been shown how to access that resource.” Thus, there seems to be more attention needed regarding how student-athletes can access these services internally to the organization while also having some additional support outside of the direct team environment.

General Environment

The pandemic was an important discussion point regarding student-athletes wellness. student-athletes noted the communication challenge was influencing their wellness regarding a ‘lack of feeling connected’ to the team (coach and players) and network (e.g., family). While technology was available to assist in communication, most student-athletes felt their relationships with their team were diminished due to the physical distance. Indeed, student-athletes expressed feelings of isolation, lacking the usual training habits due to health and safety protocols, feelings of unease due to not knowing if they would get to play or if a cancelation/postponement was looming:

“[...] so last year we had to go back home in March and then since then I’ve

been back to [city] to practice in October to November but really because of COVID everything shut down, so I've basically been back home since and yeah it's been pretty hard to be honest with school and everything and not having to be able to be active like we used to" (Morgan, personal communication, April, 2021).

Clearly illustrating COVID-19 and the stop of play had a major impact on how student-athletes were feeling during the time of the study. Participant noted how challenging it has been for them:

"I came into the [program] in the winter semester last year, and I have yet to step in the change room. The change room is like a haven for team culture, like that's your home. It has been kind of bizarre to try and get to know my peers. It's definitely been an interesting experience...its been tough" (Finley, personal communication, April, 2021).

"Its kind of just made me uncomfortable whenever I talked to him. Even when he was my own coach it was kind of just you could tell players to do certain things like go to the corner to get a puck or something. But once, or you could tell like a player to hit somebody to make a good hockey play. But once you are telling people to intentionally go out and hurt somebody it kind of ruins the game for everybody" (Bobbie, personal communication, April, 2021).

Theme Two: Safe Sport Environment

For student-athletes, wellness was based upon physical health (e.g., learning and training proper movement and technique for their sport, preventing, and treating injury), and mental health (e.g., understanding the need for mental health support, overcoming the stigma, role of stakeholders). Student-athletes notably discussed being responsive to and ideally proactive when it comes to social movements, and that the policies, communication, and facilities available for student-athletes in the service environment mattered.

Physical Health

Injury prevention, proper training, proper nutrition information, rest and recovery, support staff education/certification and availability, drug knowledge, and proper safety protection for certain sports (e.g., football) were notably discussed. Taking care of players' bodies through providing them with the appropriate resources and educational tools was considered important towards producing student-athletes' wellness. Participants noted that to promote physical health, it is paramount to hire properly trained and certified staff (including nutritionists, athletic and physiotherapists). Participants discussed the importance of prevention and treatment towards fulfilling physical aspects of wellness:

"I think it's a good idea to put in place programs that help the athletes [...] so that they don't have to worry, oh, if I get hurt, is that going to stop me [...] if I get hurt, are all my all my scholarship going to go away, like, just let the athletes know we have your back, this program is there to protect

you” (Skyler, personal communication, April, 2021).

Several student-athletes discussed the concern with keeping in good physical condition to enable their playing career to be healthy. Student-athletes believed that all coaches and trainers should be well educated in the proper techniques for their sport and support their physical health with appropriate exercises to aid in injury prevention and overuse problems.

Mental Health

Ensuring that players’ mental health is a priority and is taken care of through services like mental health coaches/psychologists/therapists were deemed essential by student-athletes. Many of the participants discussed the importance of knowing there is a professional to help them during times they feel stressed, anxious, or depressed. They also discussed the need to move past the stigma of people experiencing these states and being seen as weak. Student-athletes discussed feeling somewhat in conflict with the value placed on winning and the idea that toughness, persistence, and determination are key values in sport. Participants notably discussed this as a paradox in sport where one must be tough/resilient/steadfast, and if they are not, then the person appears weak, a perception that leads to feelings of inadequacy.

A first point of contact in the service environment for many student-athletes is their coach. The coach role was found to, unsurprisingly, at times hinder and at times promote positive mental health:

“He’s worked on confidence on visualization, with us, through [sport], and even just outside of what he’s been working on to help improve the mental side of [the game]. I was struggling to get to sleep. He just took me aside and taught me some breathing techniques just to help me calm down before trying to get to sleep when I’m stressed out at night” (Skyler, personal communication, April, 2021).

The coach checking-in was important for the student-athletes; however, the need to have another person at arm’s length or not involved with the team was also seen as paramount to producing safety as explained by “Skyler”:

“If you need somebody to talk to sometimes your coaches or teammates aren’t always the best because you fear some sort of judgement or something. When the team can give you kind of a list of contacts. Like hey if you are having an off day call this person and call this person. It will never get back to us” (Skyler, personal communication, April, 2021).

Ultimately, student-athletes were aware of the services to support mental health but did not necessarily use them despite the potential benefit.

General Environment

Student-athletes discussed their general environment and the need for proactive responses. Student-athletes felt that social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter) have been a focus of much discussion within the team and university setting both during the pandemic (and before). Systemic issues with racism and discrimination were discussed which notably were related to how people were feeling overall during

the pandemic stop of play. For instance, one of participants talked about issues of racism and noted that the coach had made a comment to them, “I’m from [country]. They made a comment to me about being a terrorist, and it was a coach, so that made me feel unsafe.” This person went on to say that as a “person of color, I would hear things stereotypes, about [my country] or about any other racial minority...a lot of ignorant things about the country” (Harley, personal communication, April, 2021).

Student-athletes discussed the importance of acknowledging and responding to these movements. Another participant noted that “there are a lot of negatives of everything going on. However, I feel like just having a positive environment and just you know teammates and coaches, if we can share it helps the environment become more positive” (Jessie, personal communication, April, 2021). For people of color that were interviewed, there was an acknowledgement on the effort being made by the university to bring education and awareness to team. Participant noted that in “February, the university did a lot...they brought in a lot of black students, and they have done a lot of meetings and they’ve educated everyone about it. They’ve done a lot of service to ask about our experience with racism or discrimination in sports” (Harley, personal communication, April, 2021).

Organizational Aspect

Student-athletes felt that the organization could promote safe sport through their policies (e.g., code of conduct), positive communication and available services in the facilities (use of physical space). One of participants noted the importance of having good programs and qualified coaches and medical staff, suggesting even that if they got “hurt or injured, that they had “a good doctor”, that if they were injured in some way, that “the program has their back” (Skyler, personal communication, April, 2021).

Student-athletes noted that team system issues, communication challenges with coaches, players, trainers, and support staff could at times cause feelings of isolation. While at times, people talked about being judged, bullied (e.g., online), having a sense of lack of communication, judgement, and favoritism.

Policies. Having documents in place (e.g., Code of Conduct) is important to prevent and respond to issues Student-athletes face:

“I’ve never experienced something that I think would break that code of conduct. So, I can’t say for sure what is written because I’ve never seen it before. But I don’t know. It’s reassuring, I guess, to know that in case, something was to ever happen, there’s something that’s written saying that it should not have happened” (Frankie, personal communication, April, 2021).

Positive Communication. Student-athletes noted that at times, personal one-on-one communication, and check-ups (or checking in) with the coach was important for them and that it helped provide for a sense of being cared for, like in a family. Participants remarked on the importance of “feeling of family and being one of the team.” They noted that “coaches do not always know how the student-athletes feels and that it should be more acceptable for an student-athletes to speak up without fear

of reprisal to playing time, status with the team” (Riley, personal communication, April, 2021). Another participant says: “important to promote shared experiences of dealing with injuries and to talk about what it means to play through an injury” (Peyton, personal communication, April, 2021).

“Being in touch with me, making sure that not only I’m okay, but I’m doing what I need to do in order to perform my best at practice. To ‘check-in’ and knowing what’s best for me, even if I don’t in the moment” (Riley, personal communication, April, 2021).

Facilities. Student-athletes felt that the use of facilities was important and that the created space bolstered their feelings of safe sport and feeling important. For instance, student-athletes remarked on the physical facility having services for the student-athletes to train and treat their physical health, but also having space dedicated to supporting their mental health. Student-athletes’ comments regarding the facilities included being happy with the fitness environment, having good equipment to train and prepare their body, and also having a space just to ‘chill’ and hang out.

Theme Three: Suggestions to improve the Service Environment

In general, student-athletes were concerned predominantly with their physical and mental health throughout the interviews. The notion of how to create an improved environment to foster student-athletes wellness centered around two main ideas: the importance of the support system (i.e., coaches, administrators, trainers, psychologists) first and then the need for further education of important stakeholders to bolster their own understanding of how to create safer sport environments.

Support System

The people around the student-athletes are the immediate support system. Student-athletes noted that ensuring proper coaching education and credentials of staff in their team was of the utmost importance to establishing trust. Participant noted that “number one is having a supporting staff for your team that really gets you [...] they know when to push you and when to ease off.” Student-athletes noted the need for educated coaching and support staff to understand how to prevent physical injury and the importance of understanding safety protocols (for things like dealing with a concussion). Importantly, student-athletes also expressed that beyond their immediate support of the coaches and trainers was a need to have a third party available or a person not directly associated with the team as expressed here by “Skyler” that “if they have a contact they can call that’s not directly with the team all of the time it probably helps make kind of a safe space for those individuals” (Skyler, personal communication, April, 2021).

Furthermore, what became clear through the interviews was that student-athletes relied on more than one person alone at a time, and that they needed to access more than just the head coach to deal with physical and mental health concerns. It is hard for only coaches to focus on creating safe sport environments as a priority since coaches also feel pressure from the school to win or produce respectable results. Thus, other stakeholders (e.g., administrators, ancillary staff) should be aware of the

problems and the importance of creating a safe sports environment.

Educating Players and Parents

Creating an environment for student-athletes to communicate and share their thoughts with one another was considered being proactive. This process arguably should take place through educating player's and coaches about safe sport. One of participants noted that:

“I think a big thing is promoting it to parents of a young aged athletes. I think just like you retain a lot as a kid, I think parents are often listening and making perception of sport. Between the early ages when their kids are enrolled in them. I think making clear advertising and demonstrating exactly how your specific program is going to incorporate safety into sport through physical and mental aspects” (Logan, personal communication, April, 2021).

Along with this idea, student-athletes also discussed the need to promote an understanding of physical and mental health at an even earlier age (e.g., within club sport) and that doing so would help create an environment that can promote wellness throughout the sporting system. As expressed by a participant:

“When you are younger you should have all these things kind of engrained into your head no matter how boring they are. You need to watch the stuff and that way, when you get older, if you make a higher level or something you don't have to worry about that stuff. I think when you are older you don't need it as much as long as you are taught it growing up” (Bobbie, personal communication, April, 2021).

Educating both players and parents early is vital for enhancing student-athletes wellness understanding. Student-athletes highlighted the significance of a safe collegiate space for dialogue, fostering student-athletes development and peer learning about wellness practices. Ultimately, advancing wellness understanding through education and advocacy will cultivate a more supportive environment.

Discussion

In the year 2020, the COVID-19 virus spread with great velocity throughout Canada. To curb the spread of the virus, the Canadian government implemented stringent policies that advocated for physical distancing and minimized interpersonal proximity. Although some studies have attempted to explore the experiences of student-athletes during the pandemic using surveys, these methods have limitations in terms of providing a comprehensive understanding of the depth and variety of perspectives during COVID-19 (Shepherd et al., 2021). This study highlights the unique challenges faced by collegiate student-athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting stoppage of play through qualitative research. The results indicate student-athletes have been experiencing feelings of isolation caused by the imposition of health and safety protocols, which have disrupted their usual training routines. Furthermore, they have expressed a sense of unease, as the uncertainty regarding the

likelihood of participating in their sport, along with the possibility of cancellations or postponements, has added to their concerns. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, we can work towards creating a more supportive and resilient athletic community. This study illuminates the wellbeing of Canadian student-athletes, both theoretically and practically. By highlighting student-athletes' perspectives, we identify how their wellness is affected by the transformative environment and its implications for their overall health. Our results indicate the pivotal role of service quality from coaches and staff in influencing student-athletes' well-being. Thus, enhancing knowledge and skills regarding student-athletes' wellness among these professionals is crucial. The findings also underscore environmental pressures requiring an organizational response, especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic's crisis management (e.g., training from home), whereby everyone's immediate environment created equilibrium challenges. This research is in response to a call for exploration into the emerging TSSR (Friman et al., 2018; Mulcahy & Luck, 2020). The current research contributes to the importance of sport services and how they are produced, delivered and consumed by the student-athletes and emphasizes the importance of understanding the needs and wants of the student-athletes related to physical and mental health.

Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution of this research is responding to a need for investigating the emerging sport research paradigm of TSSR, which is situated at the intersection of sport and services, with well-being as the result (Friman et al., 2018, Mulcahy & Luck, 2020). TSSR as an emerging viewpoint offers fresh insight for establishing holistic student-athletes (Kean et al., 2019). Cronin (2016) and Lerio-Werelds (2019) pointed out that value creation should be examined from a different perspective in TSSR research rather than a purely economic one to examine advantages that create a positive transformation to the well-being of individuals and society. This study has made contributions on the significance of the service environment on student-athletes' wellness and gives evidence on what student-athletes recommend management modify and concentrate their efforts on to create a transformative service environment. In addition to expanding research on the relationship between service environment and student-athletes' wellness, the results highlight the need to consider some mediating factors such as emotional and social components within the university/college sport setting throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second contribution relates to expanding the perspective on positive organizational behaviour from a theoretical approach by uncovering key factors involved in producing wellness within the service environment. This allows for a more holistic view of how services might improve a student-athletes' well-being. For example, how institutions communicate with their customer/consumer; what services are available to aid them when needed can engender an environment that produces feelings associated with wellness. With TSSR, the overriding idea of creating wellness, we argue, requires a holistic viewpoint.

For management, considerations regarding physical and mental health are par-

ticularly relevant in collegiate sport. A focus which considers physical and the positive side of psychological health including hedonic (e.g., feeling of pleasure) and eudaimonic (e.g., focus of learning, authenticity, and meaning in life) well-being, would help management consider how to better support the student-athletes. One key dimension contributing to eudaimonic well-being is positive relationships with others (Ryff & Singer, 2006), a central finding to the coach and student-athletes' relations, student-athletes and other stakeholders (theme: positive communications). While there is no consensus that one is more important than another, hedonic well-being does not last long as it is an affect-related concern, whereas eudaimonic well-being has a cognitive aspect and is oriented towards learning and development which coincidentally, are key areas of purported concern in collegiate settings. It suggests that paying more attention to the eudaimonic side of well-being provides student-athletes with the opportunity for a more sustainable personal development.

Practical Implications

Unsafe Sport Environment

Research denotes that wellness is essential for human beings (e.g., Myers et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and is strongly influenced by their environment. In this study, student-athletes noted their inability to control everything in their environment (e.g., training, practice, game, social in and out of sport) but that the support needed for their physical and mental health was for the most part, present. However, just because services were present does not indicate that they are used or to what degree they are sought by the student-athletes. Indeed, facilities and infrastructure, combined with an educated workforce can support both physical and mental well-being (e.g., therapists, administrative support, use of technology). According to the collegiate student-athletes in this study, there is an over emphasis on physical health of the student-athletes particularly within the grass root sport system but also within collegiate sport. While there have been steps in recent years to attenuate mental health concerns (Schinke et al., 2018), there has been less emphasis placed on the importance of mental health. Participants discussed that while physical health is undoubtedly important, the benefits of rest, recovery, and additional psychological support are not fully implemented, and a stigma still remains when discussing mental health.

Safe Sport Environment

In this study, student-athletes noted that the service environment created many opportunities for preventive and supportive health mechanisms to make them feel prepared and well, physically. Student-athletes lamented the role of wider support for the safe sport movement including stakeholders such as the coach, teammates, administration, and support staff. These people within the service environment play various roles. Student-athletes expressed a need for mutual support, transcending individual team boundaries, highlighting the importance of inter-team dialogue. This sentiment underscores the organizational culture's role in team success (Cole & Martin, 2018). The findings emphasize both institutional and team cultures as influen-

tial for student-athletes' well-being. Student-athletes should voice concerns without fear of consequences. Establishing outreach programs and spaces for sharing, rest, and recovery can reinforce student-athletes wellness values. To truly integrate student-athletes into the sporting organization, the service environment should evolve, ensuring student-athletes are acknowledged and their feelings not suppressed. This mandates changes in physical spaces, service design, and addressing student-athletes' needs and desires.

Suggestions to Improve the Service Environment in College Sport

Student-athletes also noted that there were improvements still needed within these service factors. For instance, the general and organizational aspects of the student-athletes' environment weighed on them, which requires the organization to examine their policies, communication, and facilities through various initiatives. This also denotes the importance of the support staff to ensure the environment is in fact focused on propagating student-athletes' wellness (Inoue et al., 2020; Lee, 2017). While programs may in fact be available, they also are not necessarily used or well understood by the players. Additionally, student-athletes' wellness within the created space of the university environment has been tested during the pandemic stop of play. Findings point towards the continued effort for administration to focus on facility usage and come up with possibly 'new' spaces designed to foster support for the student-athletes (Chang & Chelladurai, 2003).

The results of this study allude to the need to have employees (i.e., coaches, training staff) engage in formal training which involves the learner/consumer (in this case the student-athletes) and how they experience wellness in the service environment. Since, TSSR aims to improve the well-being of people (e.g., student-athletes), it becomes critical to have educated personnel in both physical and mental health. For instance, the results emphasize the importance of tailoring training to cater to the distinct needs and wellness views of every student-athlete. This suggests the necessity to move away from a one-size-fits-all training and develop approach and resonates with the unique challenges faced by student-athletes across diverse sports and roles. Adopting an student-athletes centric training model is validated by studies which highlight its role in fostering better outcomes, especially in the context of student-athletes welfare (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010). Furthermore, the results indicate the student-athletes needed to access more than just the head coach to deal with physical and mental health concerns. Besides, participants lamented that student-athletes also need space to speak up without negative repercussions to their playing time or fear of other types of reprimand. Therefore, it's beneficial to host regular feedback sessions, giving student-athletes a platform to voice their emotions, issues, and service environment experiences. Such insights can be woven into the continuous development of staff training materials. The value of such student-athletes' input in refining training methods and fostering a mutual understanding between coaches and their administrators has been emphasized in academic circles (Cushion et al., 2006). Our findings also note the key role the student-athletes play in crafting/creating sport programs to aid in their own wellness pursuit. Given the importance of eudaimonic

well-being as seen in the safe sport theme in our study, there is further argument to look at the eudaimonic side of student-athletes' well-being and its pursuit within collegiate sport particularly in light of evidence emerging on the mental health of student-athletes during the pandemic (Graupensperger et al., 2020). Therefore, as part of the development of a transformative service environment in sport teams or organizations, leaders and managers need to possess proper mental health literacy to manage the organizations (Gorczyński et al., 2020), which can result in more sustainable development of the people and stakeholders within the organizations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

First, the present study was limited to collegiate sport and in particular, a team sport setting. The data is not intended to be representative of all student-athletes. Perspectives from student-athletes who are a part of a team were sought in the current study. Therefore, further research in diverse collegiate sport settings (e.g., individual sports) is recommended. Additionally, the present study suggested transformative sporting environments that impact student-athletes' wellness. However, other mediators such as emotional and social components within the university/college sport setting will contribute to the understanding and influence of the environment on student-athletes' wellness including several factors outside of the control of a university setting. Further studies that are conducted on the service environmental factors and student-athletes' wellness could have a longitudinal research design and may highlight periodic moments where wellness oscillates such as a stop and return to play, a championship run or some other pertinent context. This study was conducted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when most student-athletes had to train at home. During COVID-19 home confinement, student-athletes were likely to experience some level of detraining, which is the loss of some or all of the morphological and physiological changes caused when one is training regularly (Sarto et al., 2020). Therefore, thoughts about student-athletes' wellness may have been heightened. Consequently, future research on TSSR within collegiate settings is warranted.

Conclusion

The impetus to prioritize development, learning, and continual improvements in order to foster stakeholder wellness across sports systems remains steadfast. The realm of collegiate sports, where the tenets of higher education uphold development and learning as cornerstones, concurrently emphasizes triumph on the playing field. Nonetheless, a concerted focus beyond the playing field is imperative to comprehend how services affect stakeholder wellness. In this regard, research and practice within sport management would derive benefits from delving into student-athletes' wellness and developing service programs that promote and actualize positive outcomes. It is incumbent upon management to ensure the creation of transformative sporting environments that stand as testament to the high importance accorded to student-athletes wellness. The recent pandemic and social movements have wielded considerable influence on people's actions and organizational planning, necessitating

further research to fully comprehend how student-athletes can develop, maintain, and optimize their wellness with a view towards enhancing performance. It remains an important focus for management to create safer spaces where student-athletes can thrive within the service environment and, this includes the various stakeholders that are key parts of the student-athletes' experiences.

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