

**Narratives of adventure, intimacy, conformity, and rejection:**

**Narrative inquiry as a methodological approach to understanding how women student athletes ‘do’ sport-related drinking.**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we offer narrative inquiry as a methodology for understanding how women student athletes 'do' sport-related drinking. 11 women student athletes took part in individual face-to-face interviews each approximately one hour in duration. Data were analysed via structural and thematic narrative analysis to identify public and private narratives, narrative tensions and narrative silences. Findings are presented in the form of analytical abstraction (Story analyst) and creative non-fiction (Storyteller) to both discuss and show theoretical understandings. Two public narratives, 'Drinking adventures' and 'We are family,' were identified as meta narratives via which women student athletes learn how to 'do' drinking. However, three private, counter narratives, 'Fresher do this,' 'Know your limits,' and 'The Ghost story,' revealed narrative tensions and contradictions. These findings provide new insights into the nuances, complexities, and power dynamics surrounding women student athletes' drinking practices and can be used to inform more specifically tailored health interventions.

**Keywords:** women's sport-related drinking stories, sport culture, athlete wellbeing, students

## **Introduction**

Student athletes drink more alcohol, drink more frequently, and engage in more heavy episodic drinking than their non-athlete peers (Martens, et al., 2006; Partington et al., 2013; Zhou & Heim, 2014). This relationship between hazardous drinking and engagement in student sport holds across countries and continues even after active engagement in sport has ceased (Green et al., 2014). Whilst potential mediators of the relationship have been explored the role of gender in the alcohol-sport relationship has been largely ignored, with assumptions made that women athletes 'do' drinking in the same way as men (Palmer, 2011; 2015). Palmer (2014) argues that women's sport-related drinking is a topic that has 'largely eluded sociological inquiry' (p.266). Studies of all women drinking groups in sport are rare and more research is needed that explores 'how women involved in sport do drinking' (Palmer, 2014, p. 267).

Gender convergence in drinking behaviour has been noted in student drinking (Heather et al., 2011) and there is evidence that this is the case in sport. O'Brien et al. (2008), in an exploration of the drinking patterns of student athletes in New Zealand, reported no significant differences in men and women athletes' levels of drinking. They concluded that women university athletes drink in a similar manner and suffer similar consequences as men.

Other studies have suggested a nuanced relationship between gender, and sport-related drinking. Palmer's (2015) exploration of the role of alcohol in creating and maintaining personal and social identities amongst women supporters of Australian Rules football uncovered experiences that were different to the masculine oriented discourses of 'problem women' and 'ladettes.' Similarly, in their study of the alcohol consumption of women rugby players in France during the 'third half-time,' Fuchs and

Le Hénaff (2014) found that while women players engaged in similar heavy drinking to their male counterparts to maintain their identities as rugby players, they demonstrated restraint in certain contexts to enact a version of femininity that established their identities as women.

Previous research has highlighted the relevance of ‘identity’ to the alcohol-sport relationship. In a series of studies Miller and colleagues distinguished between ‘jock’ and ‘athlete’ identities, revealing links between the ‘toxic jock’ identity and a variety of health compromising behaviours, including heavy drinking (Miller et al., 2003; Miller, Farrell et al., 2005; Miller, Melnick et al., 2005; Miller et al., 2006; Miller et al., 2007; Miller, 2009). In an ethnographic study of a UK college campus, Sparkes et al., (2007) described twelve commandments (rules) that they believed operated as a series of structuring practices that defined an idealised jock culture. Several rules concerned heavy drinking. Neither jock identity nor jock culture were gender neutral. Miller (2009) reported hegemonic masculinity as the bedrock of the ‘jock’ identity, and Sparkes et al. (2007), describe the twelve commandments as ‘a practical and symbolic manifestation of a dominant, heterosexual, masculine orientation to the world’ (p. 295).

Whilst this research is useful, the relationships between contemporary women’s identities and sport-related drinking have not been fully explored. Toffoletti et al. (2018) highlight the multiple complex and conflicting discourses currently circling around women in sport. Women are participating in a broader range of sports, their sporting achievements are receiving greater attention and there is increasing interest in women as fans, officials, and administrators. Debates continue about pay disparity and the nature of media attention, and the rise of an apparent fourth wave of feminism adds further complexity (Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019; Toffoletti et al., 2018).

Palmer and Toffoletti (2019), highlight the need to explore the different discourses that contemporary women are drawing upon to manage sport-related drinking within a climate of post-femininity. Palmer (2011) argues for new theoretical perspectives that move beyond the ‘holy trinity of sport, beer and men’ (p. 172) questioning the analytical utility of hegemonic masculinity when women are the subjects of study (Palmer, 2011, 2014, 2015; Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019). In this paper we move beyond notions of hegemonic masculinity, utilising an all-women participant group, and applying the methodology of narrative inquiry to provide new insights into women’s sport-related drinking.

Narrative inquiry assumes that people draw upon narrative resources that are socially and culturally available, using stories to make sense of who they are, their life experiences and how to act within the culture (McGannon et al., 2020; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narrative theorists treat stories as sites of analysis, studying participants’ stories, and the socio-cultural context within which they are embedded, viewing identities as both socially constructed and individually nuanced (Ronkainen et al., 2016; Smith, 2016). Narrative inquiry reveals the ways in which cultural scripts serve as maps that shape identity development, and how people appropriate, edit and/or resist the stories they encounter when structuring their identities (Blodgett et al., 2017; Carless & Douglas, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Just as our personal identities are gendered so too are our stories (Gergen, 1994, 1997). Gergen and Gergen (1993) contend that the ‘Momomyth’ or hero’s story does not accord with women’s life writing. The man’s story is an achievement story, where all is subsumed by the desire to achieve the goal. The stories of women deviate from this linear plotline: ‘The heroine tells a story oscillating between togetherness and separateness, desires of others and for oneself’ (p. 38).

Douglas and Carless' (2006) study of the narratives that professional women golfers used to make sense of their identities in elite sport, exemplifies this point. They did encounter the 'performance narrative,' a narrative, based upon typically masculine traits such as competitiveness, aggression, and strength. However, they also found two alternative narratives, 'a discovery narrative,' and 'a relational narrative,' suggesting that these women had multi-layered stories and identities that did not conform to linear 'male' narratives.

Narrative inquiry has been utilised across a range of contexts including spinal cord injury (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2002), eating behaviours (e.g., Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012), flow (Sparkes & Partington, 2003), ageing (e.g., Partington et al., 2005; Phoenix & Smith, 2011), elite sport (Carless & Douglas, 2013) and Alcoholics Anonymous (Pollner & Stein, 1996). However, it has never been applied as a methodology for understanding women's sport-related drinking. A narrative methodology offers both theoretical and practical benefits. It enables us to understand women drinkers' cultural identities as fluid, socially constructed and individually edited and can show how women's identity construction is constrained by limited narrative resources. Finally, stories can be used as an entry point for change, teaching people what to pay attention to and alternative ways to behave (McGannon & Smith, 2015).

In utilising this methodology, we aim to answer Palmer's (2011) call to i) conduct more women-oriented alcohol-sport research, ii) move beyond hegemonic masculinity as a framework for studying women and iii) provide a nuanced interpretation of how contemporary women student athletes 'do' drinking.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Participants and sampling***

Participants were 11 women university athletes. The athletes were studying at undergraduate (N = 8) or postgraduate level (N = 3). The undergraduates were a mix of first years (N = 3), second years (N= 4) and third years (N = 1). Athletes were recruited from rugby (N = 3), water polo (N = 1), netball (N = 1) and hockey (N = 6). These sports were purposely chosen (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) based on previous research indicating that team sports are most likely to have heavy drinking cultures (Partington et al., 2013). The athletes represented their university in national league and inter-university competitions.

### ***Procedure***

Following full institutional ethical approval, university coaches were contacted via email to obtain permission to approach athletes. Coaches provided contact details for team captains and an outline of the research was provided in an email to captains. As captains had a line of communication with their teams, they circulated the information to all team members. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered. Most participants were recruited this way, however, recruitment also happened through peers (snowball sampling) (Smith & Sparkes, 2013).

Prior to main data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with a woman postgraduate student who had been a student athlete for the previous four years and was a similar age to participants (23-year-old netball player). Following the pilot interview, minor question modification took place. Main interviews were completed in a university classroom. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, a woman in her late 20's (JS), who had previously been a student athlete at a different institution.

At the start of each interview the researcher provided a verbal and written explanation of the study. Participants were invited to ask questions and then were asked to provide written informed consent. Interviews lasted on average an hour, and were audio recorded. A semi structured guide was used allowing the researcher to direct the interview but also be guided by participants' responses. Participants were encouraged to depart from the guide where it felt appropriate to them, and the interviewer followed them down their trails (Riessman, 2008). Broad, open-ended questions were used to provide an entry point for storytelling (Busanich, et al., 2014) e.g., 'tell me about how you became part of your team?' 'What influence has drinking had on your social experiences with your team?' To invite stories prompts were used, e.g., 'tell me about a time when ...' and 'do you have any stories about that?'

The interviewer kept a reflexive journal, recording her own experiences of being on a university sports team, how this might impact on her interactions with participants, and her reflections on each interview. The interviewer continued to add to this journal to maintain a reflexive stance, and to monitor the sensitive nature of the topics discussed (Smith & Sparkes, 2013). Multiple entries were made over five months, spanning the time from the pilot interview until after the final interview had been completed. The information in the journal was used to help the interviewer ensure that she had not simply sought out and confirmed her own personal story in the data but had engaged with the participants' stories. It was also used in the discussions between the research team when analysing the data and revising the creative non-fiction. In particular, the diary enabled consideration of what Day (2012) terms understanding power in the research relationship, the role of the researcher in applying a qualitative approach, and the problematising of identity and positionality. The extracts below are examples of the researcher's reflexivity.



“Trying to put hockey players at ease initially by saying I play their sport but could also have reverse effect of making them worry about whom I know. Is this a means of me trying to gain acceptance, rather than serving a function for the participants to know I play sport?”

“Reluctant to say I played hockey. Don’t think I actually admitted that I played hockey for fear of P asking who for, as the P plays for my local rivals. Reminded myself not to judge participant based on her membership of this team. Interview and research not related to my on the pitch/league competitive attitude, but hard to separate the two.”

“Didn’t realise how emotive these issues (Sport, team bonds & drinking) can be. Some participants have spoken with tears in their eyes. When participants have discussed the senior and fresher split, it has made me very uncomfortable. Have I been complicit in this behaviour in the past? What is my role now in relation to this - as a researcher, as an athlete, as a woman?”

### *Analysis*

Smith and Sparkes (2009), highlight two approaches to analysing narratives, ‘story analyst’ and ‘storyteller.’ The story analyst steps back from the story and uses analytical techniques to develop theoretical abstractions. For a storyteller, the story itself is analytical and theoretical, without the need for abstractions. As Smith and Sparkes explain, story analysts ‘tell’ theory, storytellers craft a story to ‘show’ theory, communicating it through character/narrator, dialogue, setting, theme, and plot.

There are strengths and weaknesses to both approaches. The story analyst has some control over the way the story is interpreted (McMahon, et al. 2019). Narrative types can be distinguished, and it is easier to identify problematic narratives, thus

opening pathways for change. However, the opportunity for multiple interpretations can be lost.

The storyteller approach allows for multiple understandings, including possibilities that the researcher has not considered (Frank, 2010). The identity of participants is better protected, the lifeworld is presented in a coherent and embodied way (Smith et al., 2015), and the reader is called upon to bear witness and share the story with others (McMahon et al. 2019). But creating a good creative fiction is challenging. Researchers must effectively marry proficiency in creative writing with reflexivity regarding epistemology and theory (Smith et al. 2015). The intended theoretical insights, and impact may be missed (Frank, 2010) and this type of work can struggle to gain legitimacy (Sparkes and Smith, 2014), resulting in it being ignored (McMahon et al. 2019).

Smith and Sparkes encourage shifting between the two standpoints, to better reveal and construct the complexity and diversity of stories. We adopted first the standpoint of story analyst, to gain an understanding of the complexity of women student athletes' drinking experiences, and then the perspective of storyteller to show the theory and complexity in action.

When adopting the stance of the story analyst, we followed Phoenix and Smith (2011), utilising structural and content analysis to explore how stories showcased certain identities and values. We examined how cultural resources were drawn upon to create plots, whilst also problematising dominant stories by recognising tensions, inconsistencies, and counter narratives (Fivush, 2010; Phoenix & Smith, 2011). Our understanding of the content of the stories was guided by the work of Palmer (2015), Fuchs and Le Hénaff (2014) and Sparkes et al (2007).

As storytellers, we strived to show, rather than tell, our theoretical findings in a way that authentically captured emotions, experiences, contexts, and social interactions over time (Cavallerio et al., 2016). A multi perspective story was created based upon the theoretical findings from the analysis. We used phrases from the interviews to enhance ‘the expression of a reality,’ and the potential ‘generativity,’ (Barone & Eisner, 2012) of the work.

### ***Representation***

We chose to present our findings as both analytical discussion and creative nonfiction for various reasons: to provide insight into how we had influenced these stories; to utilise the opportunity narrative presents to open up multiple understandings and perspectives, highlight tensions, contradictions and complexity and explore differences across and within participants. Finally, we hoped to enable readers to find a character they could identify with, and to gain insight into and empathy for characters deemed to be different to themselves (Smith et al., 2015).

Our story takes the form of a creative nonfiction, i.e., fictional but based on empirical data (Smith et al., 2015). This falls within the umbrella term coined by Richardson (2000) as creative analytical practice (CAP). As is usual with CAP, we employed techniques of fiction to communicate our findings in emotionally compelling ways (Cavallerio et al., 2022). Our fiction involved multiple, complex characters in a purposeful attempt to capture nuanced experiences, demonstrate that narrative resources were not equally accessible, and show individual experiences in action, situated within the relational context of which they are a part. However, characters are composites to disguise identities and to best reveal the findings in the data (Smith, 2013).

The creative non-fiction was co-written by two of the team (EP & SP), both of whom have creative writing experience and qualifications. The story was shared with the rest of the team, who acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2017). The ‘critical friends’ discussed with the writers the realism of the world that had been created, which characters and storylines they identified with and why, how they understood the data, what emotions were elicited whilst engaging with the story, and how the writing could be refined to ensure that the story was evocative and compelling. Different perspectives were presented to challenge the writers and to help them to develop and showcase the empirical interpretations. JS’ reflective journal was used to inform the discussions and prompt team members in their own reflections and interpretations. Writing was an iterative process, whereby details were re-crafted based on further feedback to show the findings as fully, meaningfully, and evocatively as possible.

### ***Judgement***

We adopted a relativist approach, selecting criteria to be judged on that pertained to our philosophical positioning and our study methodology and aims (Smith & McGannon, 2017). We aimed for naturalistic generalisability (Smith, 2018), seeking to produce findings and present our work in ways that would speak to and resonate with our readers. We draw upon the suggestions of Barone and Eisener (2012) and Richardson (2000), that our work should be judged on artistic merit, expression of a reality, illumination, and its ability to impact in emotional and visceral ways.

### **Discussion of results**

## *Story analyst*

There were two dominant or ‘stock’ drinking narratives circulating in the culture that served as meta narratives for drinking behaviour (Bell & Roberts, 2010; Sommers, 1994). We discuss each below and then consider three counter narratives (Fivush, 2010) that were revealed privately in the interviews but could not be told publicly.

### *‘Drinking adventures.’*

There’s always a funnel, everyone has funnels... you’d do a can out of a shoe or through a sock ... it’s just hilarious, it’s just like tradition that’s what you do... normal nights are never as fun anymore, just because I have such a good time on a Wednesday, and everything is just so outrageous that everything else seems quite boring now. I think just how fun the nights are... we play these games; we do player of the day and whoever got player has to see off a drink and stuff like that... Looking back on my freshers when I was absolutely mortal, doing all these funny things, it’s like the best memories for me ... even the day after hearing everyone’s funny stories about being drunk is a massive part of it, like we have S&C (strength and conditioning) on a Thursday and we’re all hungover and we’re all discussing what happened yesterday, that’s a massive part of it.

This meta-narrative was used to guide and enforce behaviour, especially that of new team members. It was particularly targeted at first year students commonly known as ‘freshers.’ Freshers are not only new to the team but also to the university and are learning about and being inducted into the culture, trying to establish themselves and gain acceptance. The story was circulated by senior players and shared via social media, face to face at team socials or during training sessions. Legacy versions of ‘Drinking adventures’ about bygone moments in team history were also told. Favourite stories were regularly retold, even after leading actors in those stories had left.

In terms of narrative type and structure, this is an ‘epic,’ focused on the adventurous exploits of a hero (heroine) or group of heroes (heroines) (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). It is also a ‘comedy’ (Gergen & Gergen, 1997). Bad things could

and did happen, but the story always had a happy ending. Negative moments were positively reframed as shared humorous incidents. These stories were not about emulating men's drinking behaviours, or about attracting men. The focus was upon fun, pleasure, and empowerment. This aligns with some conceptualisations of post-feminist femininity described by Palmer & Toffoletti (2019).

There were, however, tensions present in this narrative. When told in the private setting of the interview, some participants talked about the costs of the epic adventures such as injury, reduced fitness, weight gain and poor academic performance. However, these costs were rationalised as a reasonable price to pay for the adventure.

Thematically, this story is about alcohol fuelled hijinks. Heavy drinking is the pivotal mechanism that underpins comedic and outrageous adventures. This story celebrates what Palmer (2015) refers to as 'hegemonic drinking' – dominant practices that cut across gender and sport-related drinking, that are not about enacting or expressing a particular form of masculinity or femininity. However, there were differences. In the male adventure story, aggression, competition, heterosexual conquest, and bodily exhibition are central features of the adventure. Such practices were absent from these women's stories. Although competition was mentioned, more emphasis was given to fun and enjoyment.

Interestingly, the experiences recounted by Fuchs and Le Hénaff's (2014) women rugby players, during times when the team were alone, i.e., without the presence of men, were more like the male jock adventure story. Fuchs and Le Hénaff's participants recounted stories of bodily exhibitions, provoking men in a petrol station, and the need to go one better than last time because of competition between players. In contrast, in the presence of male rugby players at the bar and nightclub, although more

intense drinking took place, behaviour was more restrained. In the current study, the adventure story was associated with times when other teams were present, including men's teams. This may contribute to feelings of restrictions on the body. As found by Fuchs and Le Hénaff the way in which women athletes 'do sport-related drinking,' may differ depending on context and who else is present.

*'We are family'*

We're so close and we get on so well, we've never ever argued... there's never ever been fall outs, there's never been conflict or anything like that and everyone is equal. I think that's quite important for us, performance wise as well... if you've got a strong relationship with everyone on your team it's going to reflect in your performance, because you have this team effort... fresher's year every Wednesday I was always just so, so drunk, but the seniors would always look after me, so it made me closer to the seniors... When I've been a senior it's been the other way around, so I've got to know the freshers really well. I feel like I've taken care of the freshers.

This story has what Ryan (2008) called a 'dramatic' structure, i.e., a buddy story, that interweaves evolving networks of human relations and performance narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2006). To use Douglas and Carless' (2006) terminology, this is a 'relational narrative.' The focus is on care and connectedness not competition or achievement. The themes of this story are friendship, equality, and caring for each other. Alcohol is the elixir that opens the door to emotional intimacy. Shared drinking experiences allow participants to bond and to take care of each other. Senior players take on the role of 'sport mum' for a group of first year students, and it is their job to look after their 'daughters,' and teach them how to 'do' drinking.

This relational narrative is not present in the findings of Sparkes et al. (2007) and does not reflect notions of hegemonic masculinity. Rather it reflects the complex and multi-layered women's narratives identified by Douglas and Carless (2006) and Gergen and Gergen (1993). Although the focus is on caring and emotional intimacy,

links are made to the performance narrative in sport (Carless & Douglas, 2006). Emotional intimacy is deemed to be essential for successful sports performance, and heavy drinking is legitimised as a vehicle for performance enhancement. Like the ‘Drinking adventures’ story, there is some evidence of drawing on post-feminist resources e.g., the pleasure, empowerment and sporting success derived from women’s friendships (Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019). This resonates with the findings of Fuchs and Le Hénaff (2014). As with the ‘drinking adventures’ story, this story was told by senior players but was also assimilated and retold by other players.

Although these two stock narratives encouraging heavy drinking were the dominant public narratives within the culture, narrative tensions were evident. Participants reported conflicting ‘points of articulation among culture, lived experience and storytelling’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998 p. 167). ‘Concealed’ stories served as analytic tools that shed light on these conflicts, revealing the underside of stock stories (Bell & Roberts, 2010). The two dominant narratives that drinking is fun and that it facilitates emotional intimacy and empowerment were challenged by three ‘tragic’ counter narratives that focused on themes of rejection, bullying, shame, and social isolation.

*‘Fresher do this’*

Uni sport there’s a hierarchy so it’ll be like fresher do that, fresher do this, and you have to do it, ... if you say no its very much like ‘why are you saying no, you’re a fresher, you should do what I want’, so you have to do it. When we got there, they gave us a drinking vessel... I got one of the worst ones which was a pint of milk, that had a little bit of milk in it that was off, like proper off and like if you didn’t drink out of it like you’d get punished or have to down stuff or do something... because I want to fit in, I don’t want them to have this awful opinion of me it had to happen, I had to go there even though I didn’t want to.



The themes of this story were power, hierarchy, and fear. Senior players exert power over the freshers. Freshers must comply or be punished. Punishment initially involves outrageous drinking or eating challenges. Continued deviance is punished by ostracism from the team. This story was not told publicly but was told within the safe space of the interview. Participants talked about feeling compelled to drink far more than they wanted to and to carry out repulsive acts, such as drinking from a shoe, due to fear of the consequences of non-compliance.

This story is consistent with the concept of hazing, a common activity within student sports teams used to initiate new team members (Diamond et al., 2016). Although the terms ‘bullying’ and ‘hazing’ have been used synonymously in the literature, Diamond et al. (2016) make the point that they have been differentiated on the basis that bullying is an activity carried out on an unwilling victim whereas the ‘victim’ of hazing may be a willing participant. Further exploration is required around this notion of ‘willingness.’ Although these participants could be viewed as having agency and exerting choice, the women that told this story felt they had no choice but to comply to gain acceptance.

Diamond et al.’s review found that the cycle of hazing resulted in both short-term and long-term physical and mental health problems for participants. Sharing this concealed story and using it to prompt dialogue that can challenge misperceptions around hazing (e.g., that such activities are necessary for team bonding and to establish the leadership hierarchy) maybe a useful step in initiating behaviour change.

This story calls into question the notions of caring and the sense of emotional intimacy publicly espoused in the ‘We are family,’ narrative. The story was told by freshers as well as senior players who had ‘made it through’ their fresher year.

*'Know your limits'*

If you are too drunk to go out after pre's because you can't handle your drink, then everyone's a bit like 'really?! Like you should know your limit... If you constantly keep doing stuff then someone is going to have a word with you, so like one girl would keep just getting 'blackout' drunk and start fighting with everyone and we're like that's not what a Wednesday is meant to be and it was an older girl as well so I feel like I can say something to her and be like it's not on... you need to learn to control your drink. You've been doing this for three years now, surely you should know your limits by now.

This privately told story mirrors the experiences of Fuchs and Le Hénaff's (2014), rugby players who experienced tension between conspicuous consumption and appropriate restraint. Athletes were expected to learn how to handle their drink, to hit the right note in terms of 'drinking adventures' and not become a burden or aggressive. Here we see narrative tension between this story and both dominant narratives. In the dominant narratives, drinking is presented as fun and a route to emotional intimacy but there is a caveat: if an athlete cannot handle her drink, her drinking becomes annoying or a source of conflict. Senior players were judged to have had time to 'learn how to drink appropriately.' Interestingly, whilst publicly endorsing the dominant narratives, it was senior players who privately told this story. They felt responsible for ensuring that sports nights were epic adventures whilst at the same time ensuring the safety of their teammates, and experienced frustration at fellow senior players who shirked these responsibilities and instead became a problem themselves.

Sparkes et al. (2007) talk about the way in which a set of rules are used as structuring practices that define an idealised jock culture. Those who do not adhere to the rules are punished by exclusion. In the telling of the 'know your limits,' story we see how narratives also act as structuring practices. The team culture disciplines these

women to behave in a certain way in relation to sport-related drinking, and it holds them accountable for their own behaviour.

*'Ghost story'*

I was just so shy and so quiet, and I didn't do the funnels like when they told me to, I didn't get up and make a complete idiot of myself, I didn't sing in front of them, I didn't do solos. I was just like no I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it... last week I was told the other girls don't feel like I am part of the team, and they find me shy and quiet and awkward, so they gave up on me. I feel like they have kind of blown me off, they just don't talk to me... I have the team identity thing, like people know that I play hockey, I wear the kit, I have got all the stuff that says hockey on the back. When we see each other around uni we say hello to each other but we have a group messaging app, and people can say 'I am going into town for lunch, who wants to join me?' or 'I am in the SU, does anybody want a drink?', and I don't feel I can reply saying 'yeah I'll go with you,' because I feel like they wouldn't want me there.

We have named this the 'Ghost story' to represent the way that tellers of this story feel amongst their team. This story was told by players, usually freshers, who felt unable to engage in the heavy drinking behaviours characteristic of the epic night out. These players described themselves as existing on the fringes of the team, present, but rarely acknowledged or involved and precluded from the emotional intimacy shared by their heavy drinking teammates. Although senior players would attempt to persuade them to drink, continual refusal by an individual resulted in them being given up as a lost cause. Whilst some of these players still attended nights out, most avoided them, and over time drifted away from and eventually out of the team.

***Storyteller***

Having identified and analysed the dominant and counter narratives, we now show them in action via a multi perspective creative non-fiction. Characters were purposely selected to demonstrate that the narrative resources were not equally available and that

whilst some women experienced empowerment and agency through sport-related drinking, this was not the case for all.

Alex put down the weights she'd been using for her deadlift and sank onto the floor. She took a sip of water from her sports bottle. God, she was dehydrated, but it wasn't surprising after last night. Across the room Chloe, Hannah and Lauren continued with their workouts. They were struggling too, she could tell. Early morning strength and conditioning on a Thursday was tough after Wednesday night, but it was a good way of catching up on all the chat.

'Epic night last night,' she said. 'Can you believe that fresher Claire actually got up and sang that song?'

'I know, hilarious or what?' Lauren grunted as she straightened up from a squat. 'Hannah's got the whole thing on her phone haven't you Han?'

Alex turned to Hannah. 'No way!' You've got it?'

Hannah nodded. 'Yup. I'll post it now.' She put down the med ball she'd been using and went over to her bag. 'I need to message Christy as well. We had a good old chat last night. She's upset about splitting up with her boyfriend.'

'Was that when we were in 'Legends?'' Alex said. 'I wondered where you two had gone. You disappeared for ages.'

Hannah pulled her phone out of her bag and sat cross-legged on the floor beside Alex.

‘Yeah, Christy got quite emotional last week after a few drinks. It’s nice that she’s opened up to me.’

Alex nodded. That was good. It really made a difference when people let their guard down. Her closest friendships had come from hockey nights out. It was good for the team too and as captain, that was important to her. But there was a cost. She had a killer hangover and an assignment due today that she hadn’t finished. She took another gulp of water from her bottle. ‘I could kill you Lauren, for making me do that second boat race. I haven’t felt this rough since we were freshers. Remember that night we went to ‘Rocco’s’ after the Loughborough game?’

Lauren had put down her bar and was towelling off her face. She lowered the towel and grinned. ‘You mean the night that Birdy got her wings.’ She turned to look at Chloe. ‘Fly Birdy, fly,’ she chanted.

Chloe groaned, but she put down her weights and dutifully flapped her arms, earning herself a round of applause from the others.

‘You were a legend that night Chlo,’ Alex said. ‘You know they banned all the university sports teams from ‘Rocco’s’ after that.’

Chloe picked up the weights again. ‘Hey, I’d like to point out that okay, yes, I fell off that table-’

‘and tried to serve us all from behind the bar,’ Hannah chimed in.

Alex laughed. This was exactly the kind of banter that made the team so great.

‘But,’ Chole cut in, raising her voice to compete with the laughter, ‘that was also the night I finally mastered funnelling.’

Alex nodded. 'That's right you did.'

She turned to Chloe. 'Remember how bad you were at funnelling when you first joined the team? All the seniors tried to teach you and you just couldn't get it.'

Chloe grimaced. 'It was awful. I thought I was going to drown.'

'I'll tell you who's really improved at funnelling,' Lauren said, 'Jenna.'

Alex nodded. 'Yeah, I saw that. She's got good craic too. And did you see her when we made them do Edward Cider hands? She saw off both pints.'

Lauren bent down to pick up her bar. 'She hasn't missed a single social.'

'She was sick after the sh\*\*t mix though,' Hannah said.

Chloe rolled her shoulders. 'Who isn't sick after a sh\*\*t mix? Remember when we were freshers and the seniors made us do it three times in one night? Our freshers have it so easy compared to us.'

Lauren snorted. 'Yeah, Hannah was sick on my shoe and then Alex slipped in it and broke her ankle and couldn't play in the quarter-final.'

Alex shook her head. 'Don't remind me. Coach was so angry. Remember how she dragged us all into the sports hall and yelled at us for throwing away the match and the championship.'

'I'd never seen her so angry,' Chloe said. 'Banksey cried afterwards.'

Alex nodded. Although she'd never told them, she'd cried too. Not in public. Her tears had come later in the physio's office when the physio told her she wouldn't play again for a month. And it wasn't just the injuries. She'd put on weight from

drinking too, but that happened to everyone didn't it? And they definitely played better when they'd bonded on a night out, but still.

'You know,' Alex said. 'Some of the freshers this year don't want to drink - Holly and Jess and Abbie.'

Hannah pulled a face. 'I think some of these freshers are a bit cocky. We had to do what the seniors said when we were freshers.'

'True, but I don't want to force anybody to drink if they don't want to.'

'They don't have to drink loads do they?' Lauren said. 'I've told them they could do three cans instead of six and me and Banksey drank most of their shots for them. They just have to show they're willing to get stuck in, meet us halfway.'

Alex nodded. 'I'll talk to Holly and Jess. Chloe, you talk to Abbie. The team has to be pulling together or we won't win.'

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Chloe scooped up the last ball and dropped it into the bag. It had been a tough training session, but the team was playing well. Except for Abbie. She sighed heavily. Abbie had performed well in the drills, but in the practice game against the seconds she hadn't been calling out for passes, and the others hadn't passed to her. If that happened in the game on Wednesday, they wouldn't stand a chance against Manchester. Chloe had caught Alex's look at the end of the game. She knew she had to follow through on her promise to talk to Abbie. She was Abbie's 'hockey mum,' after all.

She saw Abbie ahead of her walking back to the changing rooms alone as usual.

‘Hey Abbie,’ she called out. ‘Hang on a minute.’

Abbie stopped and turned round. She looked surprised.

‘Hi Chloe,’

‘So, big game on Wednesday.’ Chloe said, as they headed towards the changing room. ‘Win or lose it’ll be an epic night out afterwards.’

Abbie looked down at her shoes.

‘You’ll be coming out with us, won’t you?’ Chloe pressed.

Abbie looked uncomfortable. ‘I’m not sure. I’ve got an assignment for Thursday.’

Chloe stopped walking. She felt a flash of anger and tried to clamp it down. She had assignments too and she was a third year. She’d still make the effort for Wednesday night, so why couldn’t Abbie?

‘Come on Abbie,’ she said, ‘you’re a fresher, everyone knows that first year is easy. Your marks don’t even count. It’s an important night, the girls will be expecting you to be out.’

Abbie had stopped too. She shifted her weight from foot to foot. ‘I don’t know, I mean this assignment is important to me. I want to do well.’

Chloe frowned. She wanted to do well in her degree too, but she couldn’t just blow off Wednesday nights. They were too important.



Abbie bit her lip. 'They won't even notice that I'm not there. I know they don't like me.'

Chloe sighed. 'It's not that they don't like you. You just have to make an effort. Join in, do some of the challenges, show them that you're part of the team.'

'But I can't do the challenges,' Abbie said. 'I can't drink like that; I'll be sick.' She blushed. 'I didn't drink before I came to Uni. My club at home wasn't like this.'

'You don't have to be good at it,' Chloe said. 'You just have to have a go, show them you're up for it. People don't mind if you're sick, they'll respect you for trying.'

Abbie let out a breath. 'I find some of them scary when they've been drinking. That blonde girl, the one who's always shouting and telling people to drink, she makes me nervous.'

'Lauren?'

Abbie nodded.

If Chloe was honest, she found Lauren a bit much when she was drunk too.

'Lauren's social sec and sometimes she gets a bit carried away when she's had a few drinks, but she doesn't mean anything by it.' Chloe lowered her voice. 'Look, I didn't really drink before uni either. I was rubbish at funnelling and couldn't do any of the challenges. But you just have to get through this year and then they'll back off.'

Abbie's eyes widened. 'I thought you enjoyed drinking. You always look like you're having a good time.'

Chloe shrugged. 'I do enjoy it more now, but I hated it at first.'

‘So what happened?’

Chloe bit her lip. She didn’t really want to admit all this, but she knew she had to try with Abbie.

‘I spoke to my cousin. She was a second year, so she’d been through it already at her uni. She told me that when she was a fresher, she did stuff like having soft drinks in her sports bottle to make it look like she was drinking even when she wasn’t. And then she’d go to the toilet when they started the drinking games.’ She paused remembering back to three years ago. ‘The soft drinks and stuff were a great way of coping at first, but I saw that extra bond they had with each other, the ones who drank, and I wanted that too. I decided to make an effort. I had to learn to drink, practice it you know? It was totally worth it.’

Abbie still looked uncertain. ‘What about Holly and Jess? They’re freshers and they don’t want to drink.’

Chloe took a breath. It was weird. They hadn’t had freshers saying no before. Alex and Lauren still weren’t sure what to do about it. But Abbie didn’t need to know that. All she needed to know was that Holly and Jess weren’t the right people to model herself on.

‘And because of that no one really knows them, they’re not really part of the team. It’s hard to play together as a team on the pitch if we’re not a team off the pitch. Drinking helps with that. People tell each other so much more stuff when they’re drunk, you know?’

‘I suppose so.’

Chloe frowned. Abbie still looked unhappy.

‘Just go along with it this year, do what the seniors tell you. Come to the socials, join in with the challenges. I can do some of your shots for you. You just have to meet them halfway.’

She gave Abbie an encouraging smile. ‘So, I’ll see you at the match on Wednesday and then we’ll all go out and have a good time after.’

Abbie was silent for a minute and then she cleared her throat. ‘Maybe.’

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The common room in the hall of residence was filled with students sitting chatting. Chloe frowned. There was no sign of Abbie. She must be in her room. Why was the girl so anti-social? She’d told Abbie what to do, but Abbie hadn’t done it. She’d avoided the socials and even started missing training. Alex hadn’t played her in the last three matches and Chloe didn’t blame her.

The others had given up on her. They didn’t even mention her anymore. This was Abbie’s last chance before Chloe gave up on her too. If she could just persuade Abbie to come to the next social and do the onion challenge, it would at least show that she was willing to make an effort.

Chloe headed out of the common room and took the stairs to the second floor. Abbie’s door was shut and there was no noise coming from inside. Abbie was probably studying. Chloe knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again, more loudly.

‘Abbie? It’s Chloe, are you in?’

The door to the room next to Abbie’s opened and a girl with long dark hair and glasses stuck her head out. ‘Abbie doesn’t live here anymore,’ the girl said. ‘She dropped out of uni last week. She’s gone back home to Yorkshire.’

‘What?’ Chloe blinked. ‘Abbie’s not at uni anymore?’

‘It’s not exactly surprising,’ the girl shrugged. ‘She was so unhappy.’

‘Unhappy?’ Chloe stared at the girl.

‘Yeah. She was being bullied. Didn’t she tell you?’

‘Bullied?’ Chloe’s eyes widened with surprise. ‘Poor Abbie, no, she never said anything. Was it people off her course?’

‘No, it was the girls on her hockey team. She said she used to love hockey before she came to uni, but she just couldn’t cope with the way she was treated here.’

Chloe swallowed. ‘Abbie felt bullied on the team?’

The girl nodded. ‘Apparently these senior girls had all these rules that you had to follow to do with drinking. It was all ‘fresher do this and fresher do that,’ and if you didn’t do what they said, then you got shut out of everything.’

The girl pulled a face. ‘I told Abbie they didn’t sound like the kind of people I’d want to be friends with, but she said it was her fault, because she was boring and no fun.’ The girl paused. ‘I used to hear her crying sometimes in her room when she got back from practice. I told her to speak to the coach about it, but she didn’t feel like she could.’

Chloe felt her cheeks flushing. How had it come to this? Sports night was fun wasn't it? It was all a laugh.

'I could give you Abbie's home address,' the girl said. 'I'm sure she'd like to hear from a friend.'

'Thanks,' Chloe mumbled. She waited as the girl went back into her room.

Guilt flared in Chloe's chest. Had they bullied Abbie? No, that was crazy, they weren't bullies. The team was about friendship. The drinking was just to help with the bonding.

The girl was back. 'Here you go.' She handed Chloe a piece of paper. 'Well, I've got an assignment due tomorrow, I'd better get back to it.'

Chloe stood for a moment after the girl had gone, staring at the piece of paper in her hand. She'd tried her best, but Abbie hadn't listened. They hadn't asked the freshers to do anything that they hadn't done themselves. This year's freshers had it much easier than previous years. Abbie had rejected them, not the other way round. Abbie hadn't tried. No one really wanted to funnel or bite into onions, but you did it, didn't you? It proved you were part of the team.

Her phone beeped. It was Christy. *'Just out of my lecture, are you around for lunch? Mark called me last night. Really need to talk.'*

Chloe was glad that Christy felt she could talk to her. Christy had thrown herself into the challenges, and it had made all the difference. She looked at the piece of paper in her hand. It was a shame, but Abbie just wasn't a good fit for the team. She crumpled up the paper and shoved it into her pocket. Then messaged back to Christy.

*'Be there soon.'*

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have identified, discussed, and shown two dominant public narratives, and three concealed counter narratives that shape women students' sport-related drinking. Like Fuchs and Le Hénaff's (2014) rugby players, most of these women publicly appropriated typically male drinking practices but there were important differences. For example, fun, pleasure, and empowerment were the focus rather than aggression, competition, and sexual conquest. Whilst these women told of 'epic' drinking adventures, equally dominant were tales of emotional intimacy. Heavy drinking was used to break down barriers and provided opportunities to demonstrate care and connection.

The three 'tragic' narratives of 'Know your limits,' 'Fresher do this,' and 'Ghost story,' highlight the nuances of women's sport-related drinking. The 'Know your limits,' story is one of restraint. As in Fuchs and Le Hénaff's study, restraint was about enacting a particular version of femininity – players were not allowed to be aggressive. It also functioned to ensure that the dominant public narratives were not violated. Players, particularly seniors, were expected to drink enough to be fun and engage in team bonding, but not so much that they become a burden or source of conflict.

Similarly, the stories of 'Fresher do this' and 'The Ghost story,' directly contradict the stories of fun, empowerment, and emotional intimacy, by extolling experiences of bullying, invisibility, and ostracism. All three of these stories show points of narrative tension offering important insights into the complex ways in which

women student athletes 'do drinking.' Some of these women could draw on post-feminist discourses such as empowerment, and agency but this was not the case for everyone. Our work has highlighted stories that have been marginalised and silenced, adding a new dimension to our understanding of how women do sport-related drinking.

Within the creative non-fiction we sought to demonstrate the complex social dynamics around alcohol and the ways in which these women were complicit in creating and sustaining them. This provides new insight into how individual women differentially manage their identities in relation to sport-related drinking. Alex, the captain, was aware of the tensions, as was Chloe, the hockey mum, but neither challenged existing dynamics, even though they had the power to do so. Senior players, such as Hannah, were locked into existing power structures – 'we had to do it, so they should,' whilst skilled drinkers, like Lauren, benefited from the current dynamics and did not want to change them. Abbie, the fresher, was complicit with her silence and withdrawal from the culture. We saw the beginnings of resistance from Holly and Jess, but their stories were told as cautionary tales of how not to behave.

This paper has contributed to the growing body of work that has sought to apply post-feminist sensibilities to theoretical understandings of women's sport related drinking (Palmer, 2015; Palmer & Toffoletti, 2019). In adding to this theoretical perspective, we have helped to further understandings of how recent socio-cultural shifts have shaped the drinking experiences of sporting women, highlighting key tensions and contradictions. In particular, we have provided support for Palmer's (2015) notion of hegemonic drinking – dominant practices that cut across gender lines, whilst also shedding light on the agency women feel (or do not feel), in terms of utilising sport-related drinking as a site for forging new types of femininities. By adopting a narrative methodology, we were able to provide insight into the strategies via which women

manage the tensions inherent in the social construction of their sporting/drinking identities and importantly, the cultural resources they draw upon in a post-feminist climate. Our findings demonstrate that post-feminism has not been universally empowering – the agency of women athletes is not equally distributed.

Further research is required to better understand how different women manage the tensions between the dominant narratives and their personal lived experiences. There is a need to consider the intersection of identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexuality) that women have and how these shape their sport-related drinking. We did not collect this information in the current study, and this is a limitation that future research should address. Further insight could be gained by sharing these stories with women athletes to elicit their responses to the stories, identify points of difference and co-create a broader range of narrative resources. Finally, our findings have duty of care implications for sports organisations. We identified issues of bullying, rejection and social isolation associated with women's sport related drinking, which should be addressed.

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