

The ‘Toxic Jock’: an investigation of the negative impacts of toxic masculinity and ‘lad culture’ on society and sports.

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Introduction and Background

Newspaper headlines such as ‘The fear that lies behind aggressive masculinity’ with supporting by-lines of ‘Why do so many men love Jordan Peterson and hate the Gillette ad? If they’re truly strong they don’t need to prove their virility’ (*The Guardian*, 2019) highlight how the discussion of negative or ‘toxic masculinity’ has become part of the zeitgeist of modern times¹. The American Psychological Association (APA) recently released guidelines for psychological practice with boys and men, in part, as a response to the growing prevalence of a traditional masculinity ideology which includes ‘anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence’ (APA, 2018: 3) as well as the need to recognise that ‘masculinities are constructed based on social, cultural, and contextual norms’ (APA, 2018: 6). This ‘traditional masculinity ideology’ (often branded ‘toxic masculinity’ in common parlance) encompasses harmful and destructive behaviours and their societal ill-effects. Comprised within this (giving rise to the title of this article ‘toxic jock’) is the concept of ‘lad culture’ which is commonly associated with younger males, often centred on sports teams and including excessive drinking, anti-social behaviours and misogynist tendencies. A recently commissioned study (published online as ‘That’s What She Said: Women students’ experiences of ‘lad culture’ in higher education’) by the National Union of Students (NUS) UK (2013) found that ‘lad culture’ was defined by participants as ‘a group or ‘pack’ mentality residing in activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption and ‘banter’ which was often ‘sexist, misogynist and homophobic’. 50% of respondents reported sexism or ‘laddism’ and a culture of harassment at their third level institutions. Respondents categorised third level education as ‘gendered’ and reported strong levels of resistance on-campus to feminist initiatives aiming to improve gender equality. Perhaps most tellingly, the report stated that ‘lad culture’ was most in evidence in extra-curricular activities, in particular sports where, it was stated, sexism could ‘spill over into sexual harassment and humiliation’ (NUS, 2013: 26). This report provides a crucial exploration of the phenomenon of ‘lad culture’ and the ways this can negatively affect student experiences in higher education in the UK.

This strong connection between sport, sexism and sexual identities is the crucial intersection of this research study. The physical expression/aggression which sport provides when allied with a reductive understanding of sexual identities and expressed in a joking ‘banter’ can combine to create a ‘toxic’ atmosphere of misogyny and sexism. The reported negative impacts of this sub-culture includes young women feeling uncomfortable in their friend groups, feeling pressured to engage in sexual activity and instances of sexual harassment and violence. Such negative effects felt by young women in higher education in the UK were echoed and highlighted in *The Hunting Ground*, a (2015) film documentary on rape and sexual assault in universities in the US which provided a context for the global questioning of toxic masculinity and ‘lad culture’ mostly widely evinced in social media movements for change such as #metoo #balancetonporc etc. In their examination of the negative effects and impacts of toxic masculinity, the rise of such social media-based female protest and empowerment movements has resulted in greater individual empowerment regarding sexual identity and, in particular, harassment: for example, the *Everyday Sexism Project*, a website

¹ A more detailed review of popular references to this phenomenon appear in the literature review section.

established online by Laura Bates in 2012 to provide an online platform for women to post personal experiences of sexism and sexual harassment, encourages women to freely share their stories of sexism and harassment: 'by sharing your story, you're showing the world that sexism does exist, it is faced by women every day and it is a valid problem to discuss'. Often termed 'fourth-wave feminism', such global movements provide a key impetus for this research project, both in its methodological approach and our stated wish to consider women's real experiences of 'lad culture' in the world of sport and the impacts of such on their engagement in sports fields. These 'bottom-up' social media movements (which foreground personal protest and empowerment while also aiming to force positive change to dominant gender patterns and behaviours in society) are arguably bringing a valuable change in attitudes and knowledge.

Rationale

Since its foundation in 1884, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland has organised, managed and promoted Irish sports events and training through a network of local clubs and associations throughout communities in Ireland. With physical club spaces and training pitches, such local clubs traditionally organise training and competitions in the national sports of hurling and Gaelic football and foster a strong community cohesion and sense of shared pride (Cronin et al., 2009).

The lead researcher is heavily involved in Gaelic football and has played throughout her youth to now play at the highest level of amateur participation i.e. county-level, while also continuing to represent her local club. She had noticed that the negative impacts of 'lad culture' were becoming increasingly problematic within her sporting domain, both within her local club as well as in the wider world of inter-county sports. In her personal experience, she felt that the positive effects of participation in sports, especially as a member of a team, were being adulterated by the increasing frequency of damaging physical and psychological attacks of 'lad culture'.

Additionally, the 'inspiration' to undertake this research project stemmed, in part, from the aforementioned documentary film *The Hunting Ground*² released in January 2015 and premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. Lady Gaga² recorded an original song 'Til It Happens to You' for the film, which was nominated for the 2016 Academy Award for Best Original Song. This documentary examines 'rape culture' in American universities and the failure of certain higher level institutions to adequately or fairly deal with complaints and cases of rape and sexual assault. The film gave evidence that in certain cases where the assault was carried out by (male) students on sports scholarships, complaints were not pursued or investigated or, if they was an initial investigation, the charges were often dropped prior to criminal proceedings. The consciousness-raising power of the release of this documentary was succinctly described by the research team who were enraged on watching the documentary and determined to educate themselves and others on this issue.

These global and personal contexts provide a dual impetus for the research which centres on a two-tier research question whether negative masculinities work to increase societal divisions and whether there is a concentration of these negative impacts in sports-related fields.

² The involvement of Lady Gaga in co-writing and singing the title track 'Til it happens to you' (and the accompanying video) helped to publicise the documentary to a global audience. The artist's open discussion of the negative impacts of sexual violence on her and her family in interviews at the time had resonances with the feminist empowerment movements.

Popular and Academic Literature Review

As already stated, this research project evolved partly in response to the rise of toxic masculinity worldwide and partly in response to online feminist empowerment movements. To consider these global trends, we reviewed online sources which cover current events or issues intended for a general audience of readers and also reviewed more traditional media such as magazines and newspapers (including those published in higher level institutions for a student population). Such sources provided a key insight to general attitudes to and understanding of the key concepts as well as providing background and anecdotal information which was then supplemented with sources more academic in nature and influence.

Popular culture contains numerous references to stereotypes in gender. Within masculine stereotypes, the twin concepts of 'toxic masculinity' and 'lad culture' are commonly employed. A snapshot of popular sources which make reference to these concepts in the last few years, includes a recent article in *The Guardian* with the eye-catching title of 'Seriously, Meryl Streep? Toxic Masculinity doesn't hurt men - it kills them' in which comments made by the American actor regarding what she considers the pervasiveness of human (rather than gendered) defects are vigorously rebuffed and their mis-use for right-wing ideals is lamented:

Streep clearly has no idea what "toxic masculinity" means. I shouldn't have to say this, it should be obvious, but "toxic masculinity" doesn't mean that men are toxic or that masculinity is de facto toxic. Rather, it means that extreme forms of traits traditionally associated with masculinity, like aggression and stoicism, are toxic. Right-wingers, however, like to pretend the phrase is an attack on men because it's a quick way of derailing a conversation about rigid gender norms, and allows them to pretend that feminism is some sort of plot against men. Indeed conservative outlets like Fox News are already having a field day with Streep's comments (*The Guardian*, 1st June 2019).

In May 2018, *The Journal*, an Irish news website published an article entitled 'Lad Culture: we need to tackle masculinity head on' which describes 'lad culture' (the shared physical identity and sporting bonds of young males) as a toxic mix of misogyny and sexual aggression towards women: 'we call it banter, or 'craic', but there's something more toxic and damaging at work [in] testosterone filled dressing rooms'. Earlier in the same year (February, 2018), a third level publication *Trinity News* in an article entitled 'The contours of 'toxic' lad culture need to be understood', states that 'lad culture perpetuates the patriarchy and negatively affects the mental health of men'. Two years earlier (February, 2016), another third level publication, the *Glasgow University Magazine* asked students 'What is Lad Culture?' and reported that 'lad culture' was variously defined as 'groups of guys that act hyper-masculine...I see lad culture as drinking, being derogatory towards women...being loud, anti-social behaviour and travelling in packs'. In the previous year (October, 2015), BBC News Online published 'Lad Culture: it stops here' which reported on two new initiatives to 'tackle laddishness' which sees some London universities using online pledges to redress the negative impacts of 'lad culture' and the London School of Economics (LSE) also make active attempts to redress this negative sub-culture, whereby the LSE men's rugby team (which was temporarily disbanded in 2014 for distributing leaflets including insults directed at women and gay people) have now begun campaigning against lad culture.

Recent academic sources examining 'gendered' approaches to identity and self expression are also replete with references to toxic masculinity and 'lad culture'. (Jackson et al 2014) detail a study of 'laddism' carried out in a sports science course in Lancaster University which used three methodological tools of research; questionnaires, observations and interviews. In

keeping with the undergraduate definitions given in the popular Glasgow University source, students' definitions of 'lad culture' highlighted 'laddish' behaviours which had a negative impact in the teaching and learning contexts. These included: 'talking and generally being loud; being a joker; throwing stuff; arriving late; and being rude and disrespectful to lecturers'. While both female and male mature students reported these behaviours as having negative effects on learning, it was mainly female undergraduate students who were critical in this way. The study also reports on an aspect of 'laddism' which is 'hazing', an initiation process made up by the male members of sporting teams whereby new or potential team members are made to complete a series of tasks which may negatively affect their physical safety, in particular where it involves physical assault, injury, kidnapping or imprisonment or their mental health, in particular where it involves degradation, humiliation, harassment or ridicule. Such initiations are established for the new team player to feel that he has 'earned the right' to join the team and form strong bonds with other team players and a sense of belonging to the team. The authors detail the negative outcomes which such processes have on young male students and highlight ways to counteract these.

Austin (2016); Connell (2016); Costley (2010); Duncanson (2015); Goodey (2000) all highlight the ways that hegemonic masculinity can spill over into toxic masculinity while Jackson and Sundaram (2015); Jackson et al (2015) and Dempster (2009 and 2011) all highlight ways that toxic masculinity negatively affect women's lives. Majors (2017) and Phipps et al (2018) both also examine the ways that rape and sexual violence affect sports-based activities and provide a toxic backdrop to these fields. Such findings are in keeping with the results in the field of popular commentary i.e. toxic masculinity exists, it is a real and everyday occurrence in women's lives and its effects are potently felt in the field of sports and sport-based activities.

Methodology

An intent to assess the impacts of 'lad culture' on young female sports participants and a wish to empower these women in a traditionally male-dominated sphere led to the use of a 'transformative' research paradigm: '[a] transformative paradigm is a research framework that centers the experiences of marginalized communities, includes analysis of power differentials that have led to marginalization, and links research findings to actions intended to mitigate disparities' (Jackson et al. 2018: 111). The sensitivities inherent in the subject matter also required a careful approach to the research design and gave rise to an 'insider-research' approach which built on existing social networks and positioned the lead researcher 'within' rather than 'outside' the participant group:

As an insider, you are in a unique position to study a particular issue in depth and with special knowledge about that issue. Not only do you have your own insider knowledge, but you have easy access to people and information that can further enhance that knowledge. You are in a prime position to investigate and make changes to a practice situation. You can make challenges to the status quo from an informed perspective. You...have in-depth knowledge of many of the complex issues. This is vital when exploring a problem or issue in a detailed and thorough way. (Costley 2010: 19)

This approach was also essential in building the 'transformative' nature of the group and extending the impacts of the research far beyond the actual time period of the data gathering. Sarver Coombs and Osborne (2018) consider the ethical issues endemic to insider-research carried out in sports-related fields and point out the importance of sensitivity to the power roles within the relationship of the researcher and participants. As the lead researcher has an on-going sports-related relationship with the participants, this was particularly relevant to the ethical conduct of this research.

Therefore, taking a qualitative, descriptive approach to uncover deep, personal understandings, the key methodological tool chosen to gather primary data was a small, focus group. This facilitated the gathering of different perspectives and opinions in a specific time-frame and was valuable both as a means of gathering rich, meaningful data from the participants but also to facilitate the participants in engaging with each other in a meaningful and empowering manner (Caretta et al. 2015: 24). Kumar (2014) provided key guidance on conducting the focus group as well as practical help in making the experience as comfortable and free-flowing for the participants as possible. Kumar (2014) also provided key guidance on the optimum phrasing of topics for discussion and highlighted the importance of providing additional information for clarity and reference.

Ethical approval was sought and given in line with Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT) procedures. Members of a local, female, adult 'Gaelic football' team (of whom the lead researcher is a current member) were informed of the research both verbally and in written format and invited to participate. Six team members (aged 19-28) self-selected to attend and contribute to the focus group and written consent was given by all participants. A 'directed conversation' was conducted among the participant volunteers with the lead researcher functioning both as a facilitator and as an active participant. The focus group took place in a suitable room in the local club-house with which all participants and the lead researcher were very familiar and this enhanced the familiarity and comfort levels of the focus group, to the benefit of the data-gathering process. The focus group was recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

Findings

As previously stated, the focus group comprised 7 team members of a female sporting team. The benefits of sports for physical, social, emotional and psychological well-being and the ways that it builds social cohesion particularly at a local level through the local GAA club is described by the lead researcher as a 'given' among these women and formed an 'unspoken' backdrop for the 'directed conversation'. Shared physical connections in training and competition in the context of a local sporting organisation form the backdrop of these women's 'community' and 'underwrote' the focus group discussion. These 'unspoken' understandings provide essential socio-cultural depth and grounding for qualitative studies (Ritter, 2015: 104). It was also important that the focus group began with such shared experiences to encourage participants to express and share the positive impacts which their sense of belonging to the sports team brought to their lives (Thomas et al., 2017: 510).

The focus group provided a suitable means of examining the key concepts of 'toxic masculinity' and 'lad culture'. From the outset, the older participants displayed a working knowledge of both concepts. Their descriptions of such allied with additional information provided by the facilitator proved crucial in kick-starting the discussion (Kumar, 2014: 13). It was in listening to these examples provided that the younger cohort began contributing as they had gained an understanding of the questions being asked: for example, the initial discussion centring on 'how to recognise a 'lad'?' saw the older cohort describe common 'laddish' traits such as clothing, hairstyles, leisure pursuits and popularity. This discussion helped to provide a safe 'way-in' for less informed participants (Caretta et al., 2015: 6). One participant explained how she would get an uncomfortable feeling when alone with some of 'laddish' boys, simply because 'physically, boys are stronger and they could do anything'. The entire group were shocked to hear this but stated that they also could relate to this feeling of dread. This statement also had resonance with the lead researcher's experiences. Another

participant referred to her experience at a party when one such 'lad' would 'not take no for an answer'. The sexual threat underlying this phrase was understood by all members of the group. The participant stated that it was only when one of her female friends came to find her that the predatory behaviour stopped and she described how worried she was at the time and how much worse the outcome could have been. This initial discussion of what constitutes a 'lad' framed the mood of the ensuing discussion of what is meant by 'lad culture' which was variously described as existing on a spectrum ranging from rape culture, sexual predation and harassment, and sexual conquests or 'sleeping around' through casual violence and binge drinking. In the continuing discussion of the consequences of this culture, it was unanimously agreed that this spectrum of 'lad culture' constituted a huge problem, both for society broadly but also for women and female sports participants. One of the participants recalled a time when she was talking to a boy that she would consider a friend, who repeatedly told her that because he played Gaelic football at a 'high' (county) level, that she should 'go home with him': when he was told 'no', he could not understand nor accept why a woman would reject any high-performing athlete, especially himself. The participant described how she now feels uncomfortable and awkward when she is speaking to him, mainly because she is afraid that this may happen again and she will 'not be able to stop him'. This sexual predation creates a coercive and threatening atmosphere which all participants agreed was not just 'common' but also accepted: 'people have become accustomed to the idea of 'lad culture' which is often exculpated through the all-encompassing vagueness of the phrase 'boys will be boys'.

A further discussion ensued on the dangers posed to women of toxic masculinity and 'lad culture' and the warning signs to be watchful for in helping to 'ward off' unwelcome advances. The lead researcher fed particularly into this part of the discussion in the understanding that her experiences were also relevant and in sharing these, she could serve to inform and empower her team mates and participants. The initial 'rage' felt on watching *The Hunting Ground* returned and the belief in the importance of consciousness-raising and information sharing, as well as the need to listen to women's negative experiences of 'lad culture'. The need for all women and especially women in sport to share these techniques was agreed among the group.

The lead researcher found conducting the focus group to be a transformative process: personally, it posed challenges and offered opportunities while at a group level, it allowed for the sharing of knowledge and the building of empowerment. Perhaps most importantly, within the 'transformative' research paradigm, it foregrounded the voices of those (women) whose voices had been previously unheard and whose protests had been ignored or ridiculed. It allowed for the sharing of the experiences of the participants, analysed the power differentials and inequalities playing into these experiences and established actions which might serve to mitigate these disparities in the future (Jackson et al. 2017: 111).

Conclusions and Next Steps

The key methodological tool used to gather primary data was a focus group comprising participants drawn from a local, female, adult Gaelic football team of whom the lead researcher is a member. The outcomes of the focus group highlight the social and psychological advantages of being a member of a sports team. These positive effects are somewhat negated, however, by the prevalence of negative stereotyping within sport. Participants pointed out manifold ill-effects of 'toxic masculinity' in society in general as well as, more specifically, the presence of 'lad culture' within the world of sport. A principal theme which emerges is the extent to which the participants have experienced both physical

threatening and sexual harassment as a consequence of this 'lad culture' phenomenon. A secondary aspect of the research centres on the transformative impact of the discussion on the whole group, including the lead researcher, both in imparting knowledge of the phenomenon but also in sharing individual experiences. The negative impacts and consequences of 'lad culture' in sport were found to be real and powerful for this group of female sports participants and various means of counteracting these negative impacts were shared with 'transformative' effect.

The methodology also foregrounded an 'insider researcher' approach to take advantage of the unique perspective and context of the lead researcher as a team-mate of the participants. While keeping in mind the crucial need for sensitivity towards participants that is required by 'insider-research' approaches, it is worth noting that this close relationship pre-existed the research project and was of great value in facilitating in-depth discussions. This approach is also inherently valuable as it encourages meaningful participation of both the lead researcher and the participants with the possibility of increased awareness of and resistance to the negative impacts of 'lad culture', thus effecting 'transformative' change.

The key outcomes of this research project show that:

1. As identified in popular and academic sources, 'toxic masculinity' forms part of the contemporary debate concerning gender and identity and is a concept familiar to the research participants which was seen by them as having a negative influence on society and culture;
2. 'Lad culture' impacts on a wide range of sports-related contexts globally and ameliorates the positive benefits of sports for these participants and the lead researcher and for the wider community;
3. A landscape of sexual harassment is a modern menace, whether in work environments, higher education campuses or the field of sports. For these participants, attempts to negotiate this landscape centre on developing and sharing various strategies to rebuff or deflect threatening behaviours with varying degrees of success. The network of team-mates is a core aspect of these coping mechanisms.

This research examined 'toxic masculinity' and 'lad culture' as a means of understanding, theorising, discovering, deconstructing and placing in perspective the intersection of gender identities and social interactions. We gathered shocking information on the prevalence and acceptance of sexism and sexual harassment in everyday life and in sports-related fields. We considered the key themes evident in recent popular and academic sources dealing with these concepts. We also considered the ways that social media-based 'fourth wave feminism' movements can lead to engagement and empowerment. In assessing both the knowledge and attitudes of female sports players regarding this controversial topic, we have learned about their experiences of 'toxic masculinity' and 'lad culture'. In sharing these attitudes and experiences, the members of the focus group have extended their knowledge of these concepts and also gained in their understanding of constructive means of counteracting this culture. A follow-up session focused on developing these 'constructive counteractions' would provide one practical means of shifting the power relations in favour of the female sports participants. It would perhaps also be possible to harness the positive power of the focus group to establish an online community of these women and their networks of female friends (both sporting and non-sporting) to share their experiences and build their knowledge to the benefit of all. As fourth wave feminist movements are showing, it is the small steps of the few which may positively change the lived experience of the many.

However, to fully effect a 'transformative' paradigm at a broader level, sports clubs and organisations need to carry out needs assessments to examine power relations within their

organisations, consider the issue of trust in building a sense of belonging to the team or club and actively support a social justice framework to ensure transformative change (Jackson et al., 2017: 111). We believe that to discontinue the use of the phrase ‘boys will be boys’ (and the acceptance of power differentials and gender inequality which this implies) would be a first step in addressing the societal harm caused by ‘toxic masculinity’ and the negative impacts of ‘lad culture’ on the world of sport and society.

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