

An Exploration of Canadian and Nigerian High Performance Women Wrestlers' Authentic  
Leadership Development Experiences in a Male-Dominated Sport

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## ABSTRACT

Sport management scholars have uncovered benefits from adopting an authentic leadership style among sport coaches (Kim et al., 2020), sport administrators/athletic directors (Cotrufo, 2014), and non-profit sport organization board members (Takos et al., 2018). However, there has been no scholarly attempt to learn about the experiences of high-performance women wrestlers who might aspire to become authentic leaders. Given the ongoing disparities between men and women leaders in sport organizations, arguably more should be done to understand the experiences of (and then support) future sport leaders who are women. Thus, this research study addresses these gaps by answering the research questions: (1) What are the authentic leadership development experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers? (2) What are the formal and informal authentic leadership development experiences of women who participate in a male-dominated sport? (3) What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of formal and informal authentic leadership development training among Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers? Participants (n=11) engaged in one semi-structured interview that revealed their mostly informal authentic leadership development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) experiences as members of their respective national teams. Analysis of the transcripts (65,342 words and 188 pages) followed Braun & Clarke (2006).

Findings revealed five major themes and several sub-themes. Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers' authentic leadership development was found to be impacted and influenced by the athletes' background influences and parental support. Participants reported developing authentic traits (i.e., resilience, optimism, confidence, and hope) that supported their development as authentic leaders both on (and off) the mat. Participants shared their experience

being bullied and body-shamed for their participation in a male-dominated sport and indicated feeling both supported by and frustrated with their national sport organization/federation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & DEDICATION**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Women have been, and are presently, prevented from attaining top leadership roles in sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), and business (Ingram, 2020), and in politics despite increased access to sport (i.e., Title IX), and legal protections against discrimination in North America (i.e., Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and United States Civil Rights Act). That such inequities still exist in sport organizations is especially troubling as sport management researchers have been attentive to these issues for over 40 years (Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

Recently, sport management scholars (see: Kim et al., 2020; Takos et al., 2018) have explored authentic leadership (AL) among sport coaches, administrators, and non-profit board members. However, and to the best of the author's knowledge, there are no studies that examine the AL experiences of high-performance athletes who are women. Given that these high-performance athletes who are women may very well become the next generation of women sport leaders, arguably more should be done to understand and support their leadership development. Thus, this research study aims to, first, close the gap in our existing knowledge by exploring and reporting on the authentic leadership development (ALD) experiences of high-performance women wrestlers from Canada and Nigeria, and second, to offer recommendations for stakeholders to better support them.

#### **Authentic Leadership**

Given the complexity and uncertainty in the environment of today's sport organizations (i.e., due to/brought about by technological advancements, climate change, and leaders' ethical failures, etc.), leaders are experiencing new and different leadership challenges (Billsberry et al.,

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2017; Robinson et al., 2016). According to O'Boyle et al. (2015), leaders are losing confidence in followers and in themselves because of these contemporary challenges. In response to such challenges and the changing leadership environment, Avolio & Luthans (2020) developed a more positive approach to leadership called authentic leadership (AL) that serves as the foundation of this current study.

According to Avolio et al. (2004), "authentic leaders can be directive or participative and can even be authoritarian" (p. 806). What is essential about the authentic leader, however, is that they adapt to circumstances and to the people around them to be more effective and influential. According to George (2015), "authentic leaders are people committed to meeting the needs of the interest groups they serve, [whilst] displaying values and self-discipline that inspires others" (p. 1). Moreover, Hoy et al. (1996), suggested authenticity manifests as an expression of one's convictions, accompanied by one's acceptance of responsibility for their own decisions. According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), AL "draws upon and promotes positive psychological capabilities [e.g., confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience] and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders...fostering positive self-development" (p. 94). Authentic leaders minimize their personal goals and focus on understanding and supporting those they serve (Howell, 1988). To date, sport management scholars have mostly focused on authenticity in sport organizations with respect to non-profit board members and sport coaches, finding positive impacts among both groups (Kim et al., 2020; 2022; Takos et al., 2018). Relative to other leadership theories (e.g., trait theories, situational leadership, transactional leadership, and transformational leadership theory), AL is still in the early stages of its conceptual development (Avolio et al. 2009, p. 424).

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Within sport management, scholars have dedicated tremendous efforts to understanding the role of transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership to achieve organizational objectives (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Sport management scholars have also studied the effects of leader behaviour on their followers' perceptions to better understand the influence process in sport organizations (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Broadly, the sport management leadership research that has been conducted, focuses on two main areas: (1) leadership by those in administrative positions and off-the-field management roles and (2) leadership by those in coaching positions and on-the-field athletic teams (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Recently however, sport management scholars have become interested in AL as it relates to both leader-centered administrative roles within sport organizations and head coaches (Kim et al., 2020, Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Yet, while Takos et al. (2018) investigated the effects of AL among board members with 51 in-depth interviews of those board members, the findings of their study suggests that the development of authentic leadership enhanced relationships among board members and can lead to improved organizational performance.

Existing research on AL in sport organizational settings has focused on those occupying board member roles (see Takos et al., 2018) athletes' perceptions of coaches' and administrators' AL in intercollegiate sport and referees (Kim et al., 2020; 2022) and on employees (Oja et al., 2019). AL in sport organizational research has mostly focused on the board and on coaches, and findings from those studies suggests AL can have meaningful positive impacts on organizational performance. According to Kim et al. (2022), authentic leadership displayed by administrative sport leaders plays a crucial role in enhancing both employees' attitudes and performance and in supporting a healthy workplace. In earlier research, Takos et al. (2018) studied AL among nonprofit sport organization board members, to better understand the impact of AL on board

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functioning. In that research, Takos et al. (2018) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with board members to explore AL, and findings from that research suggests that members believed relational orientation, self-awareness, and balanced processing of information were especially important to achieve followers' satisfaction, organizational commitment, and team effectiveness. Takos et al. found that board members who adopted an AL style were more likely to reduce disharmony, limit the formation of harmful subgroups, and eradicate trust issues (2018).

In yet another study, Kim et. al. (2020) sampled 224 American intercollegiate student-athletes, finding head coaches' AL positively impacted athletes' psychological capital (i.e., the positive developmental states of an individual that helps them to manage tough situations and improve performance, collectively referred to as "HERO" (i.e., Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism)). Similarly, McDowell et. al. (2018) found coaches' behaviours directly influenced athletes' psychological aspects and social-moral attitudes. Taken together, these AL studies demonstrate how sport management researchers have focused more on the AL of coaches and sport administrators than on athletes' experience of AL. Perhaps such focus is due to athletes not generally being considered as 'leaders' of sport organizations and are rather positioned as followers in the literature. For instance, Kim et al. (2020), found that coaches' displays of AL leads to developing greater autonomy and trust with athletes, which improved their overall satisfaction, their perception of choice, their enjoyment, and their commitment to training. Yet, the athletes' experiences either being or becoming authentic leaders remains unexplored.

### **Leadership Development**

To better understand the varied processes of how people generally and athletes specifically (as focused upon in the current study) become leaders and enhance their leadership, it should be helpful to first define and discuss *leader* and *leadership development*. According to



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Day and Thornton (2011), leaders who develop, refine, and expand their capacity to utilize specific leadership skills and behaviours are engaging in *leader development*. Notably, in this context, development refers to individual-based knowledge, skills, and abilities primarily connected to being effective in formal leadership roles (Day, 2000). *Leadership development* involves multiple people (i.e., both organizational leaders and followers) and is intended to support lasting change at the organizational level. In both *leader* and *leadership development*, a notable underlying assumption is that leadership skills can be learned and developed (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999).

While some scholars suggest enhancing leadership capabilities at the individual level can lead to positive outcomes at the group, organizational and societal level, others have questioned the value of leadership training and leadership development. For example, Gurdjian et al. (2014) found 30% of US companies lacked leaders with the right capabilities despite their significant investments in leadership training and development. Further, according to Beer et al. (2016), US companies spent \$356 billion on employee training and education, only to have trainees “revert to old ways of doing things...and the company performance doesn’t improve” (p. 3). According to Mobarak et al. (2019), employees must be trained according to their skills, interests, and abilities. However, relatively little is known about how high-performance athletes, including those who participated in this current research experience leadership development and training (and/or if training is offered). This lack of understanding is especially problematic given the current state of women’s underrepresentation in sport leadership roles.

### **Women in Leadership**

Scholarly interest in both leaders and leadership has focused primarily on males in leadership positions (Barr et al., 2009; Grappendorf & Henderson, 2011). As a result of

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predominantly studying male leaders, masculinity becomes valued and is often perceived as being a characteristic of effective sport leaders (Schaeperkoetter & Darvin, 2017). Furthermore, a disproportionate level of mass media attention on men's sport has also occurred, simultaneous to the relative inattention on women's sport, that has also played a role in reinforcing inequities between men and women (Baker et al., 2019; Fink, 2015). Worse still, is when traditional media does cover women's sport, consumers who see the sport leaders of those women's sports (e.g., as head coaches and athletic directors) more often than not, see men occupying those roles (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Moreover, according to Hall (2004), women who do ascend to leadership positions, despite incurring challenges in doing so, often lead careers characterized by fluidity, imitation, uncertainty, and survival. Thus, leadership in sport has become (and has always been) a particular struggle for women and especially when it comes to leading in a male-dominated environments, as women are held to higher standards and must do more to prove themselves (Shaw & Hoeber, 2003).

According to Curry (2012), women leaders must come to know their worth and their leadership identity through trial and error. They must engage in a process of building a leader persona that enables them to know themselves as a leader and to navigate an ever-changing, complicated, and sometimes discriminating professional environment. Yet by studying themselves and by improving their strengths and weaknesses (whether those are real or simply perceived to be weaknesses by others), aspiring women leaders develop a more robust leader identity awareness, which is an essential component of effective and authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Curry, 2000). Yet, however useful such a robust leader identity awareness may be, such self-development is a massive undertaking and added responsibility on women – who must overcome even more obstacles (e.g., perceived lack of skills/abilities) than

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their male counterparts to achieve a desired leadership position. Indeed, according to Madsen (2010), “the combination of the masculine nature of athletics and the masculine assumptions of leadership make athletic careers extremely difficult for women to successfully negotiate” (p. 3).

### **Women in Sport Leadership**

In North America, women and girls in sport have achieved remarkable progress over the last 50 years (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). For instance, the number of girls participating in high school sports has risen tenfold (Women’s Sport Foundation, 2016) and there has been a sixfold increase in women participating in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sport since 1972 (Women’s Sport Foundation, 2016). One might reasonably expect similar progress would have occurred with respect to women in sport leadership roles (e.g., as athletic director, head coach, assistant coach, etc.) with the knowledge that sport participation can, under the right circumstances, develop leaders (Hess, 2017; Martinek & Hellison, 2009). However, progress with respect to women in sport leadership roles remains frustratingly slow.

According to Acosta & Carpenter (2014), female leaders at the rank of head coach in NCAA women’s sport have declined in numbers from 90% occupying such roles in 1972 to just over 43% occupying such roles in 2014 (p. A-B). In that same report, Acosta & Carpenter (2014) noted that women coaches remain excluded from leadership roles in NCAA men’s sport and are underrepresented at the AD rank across the NCAA. Women are still experiencing rejection despite the growing number of women in professional sport and the increasing popularity of women’s professional sport (Martinek & Hellison, 2009; Morik, 2023). Indeed, significant work remains and advances are needed for women to be treated as equals (Morik, 2023). While the current research does not aim to right all of these wrongs, it does offer a humble contribution by

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presenting, for the first time, the experiences of high-performance women athletes who are (or arguably should be) on the path to becoming leaders in their respective sport.

### **Research Purpose & Research Questions**

According to Kim et al., (2020), a need exists for authentic leadership development (ALD) to help resolve the complicated contemporary challenges currently facing organizational leaders in sport management and related disciplines. These sentiments echo Dr. Kotter's (1996) view, who nearly 30 years ago suggested "it is not possible to manage organizations of the 21st century using frameworks from the 20th century and directors [leaders] from the 19th century" (p. 172). Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the ALD experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers, with a particular emphasis on their experiences competing as members of their respective national teams.

In this study, ALD includes the development of individual-level self-awareness, demonstrated understanding of individual-level strengths and weaknesses, and an awareness of the impact of such individual-level strengths and weaknesses on others (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). According to Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model (Figure 1), AL at the individual level is most likely to develop with support from existing leaders and the team/organization (that is, in this current study, the national sport federation/organization). Luthans and Avolio (2003) also suggested that trigger events or life experiences, often unplanned and spontaneous, will shape authentic leaders' perspectives, behaviours and values and that aspiring leaders' life experiences are critical to understanding and developing self-awareness. According to Luthans and Avolio (2003), when aspiring leaders understand where they come from, they can begin to explore and develop and refine who they are and who they will become as leaders.

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Three research questions guided this current study, including: first, (1) what are the authentic leadership development experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers? Second, (2) what are the formal and informal authentic leadership development experiences of women who participate in a male-dominated sport? And third, (3) what are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of formal and informal authentic leadership development training among Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers?

Women from both the Canadian and Nigerian national women's wrestling teams were selected as participants for this study, partially due to their remarkable *on-the-mat* successes in the sport. At the Olympic Games, for instance, Wrestling Canada (the national sport organization (NSO) for wrestling in Canada) has won gold, silver, and bronze medals with Mr. Daniel Igali a Nigerian-Canadian earning Canada's first gold medal at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia. Interestingly, Mr. Igali is currently the president of the Nigerian Wrestling Federation (the national sport federation (NSF) for wrestling in Nigeria). Historically, wrestling in Nigeria was thought of as a lethal martial art to be used for survival, but over time it developed into the more 'sportive' art of African wrestling (Desch-Obi, 2018) and is now a traditional sport loved by all. The Nigerian women's team has also achieved many successes since 1991, including producing Olympic champions, world champions and Commonwealth Games champions.

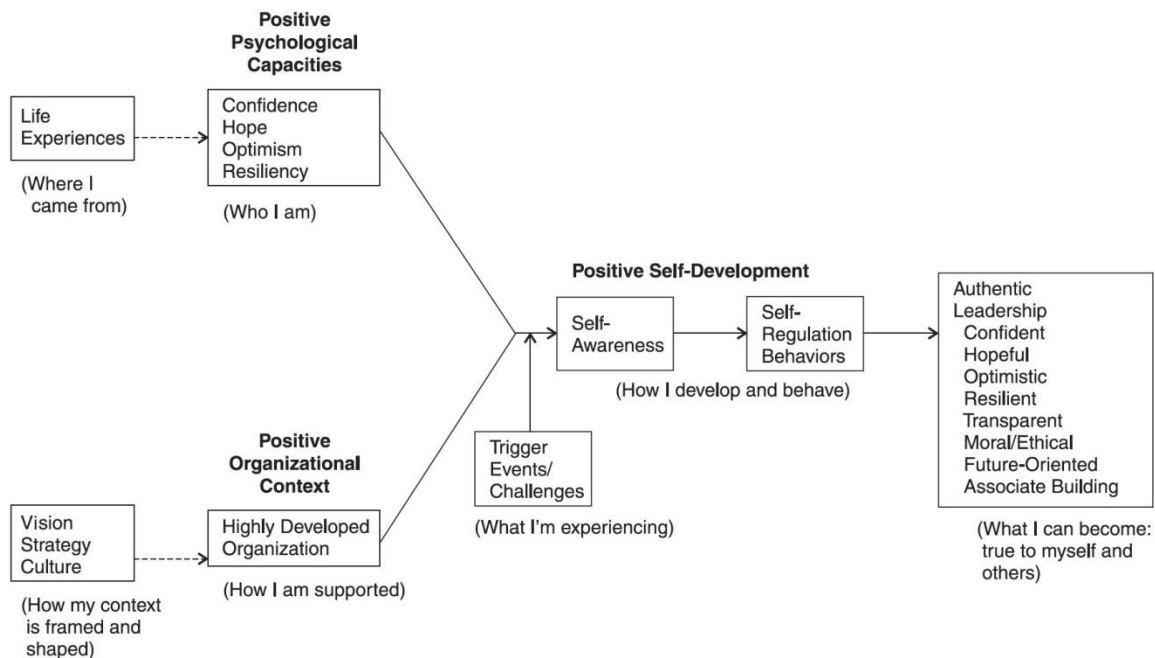
### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Doherty (2013) "theory should be the foundation of research (as it guides research questions), practice (as it aids explanation, prediction, and control) and teaching (as it advances students' learning and understanding, and subsequent research and practice)" (p. 5). In this current study, authentic leadership (AL) and Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model (Figure 1) serve as the theoretical frameworks that guide this research.

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**Figure 1**

*Luthans and Avolio's (2003) Authentic Leadership Development Model*



*Note.* From Luthans, F., & Avolio, B. (2003). Authentic leadership development. In K. S. Cameron & J. E. Dutton. *Positive organizational scholarship*: 241-254. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

AL is a contemporary leadership theory that scholars developed in response to increasing corruption, greed, and dishonesty among leaders (Bennis, 2007). According to Macik-Frey et al. (2009), “authentic leadership holds dimensions of inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence” (p. 455), that are all tenets of transformational leadership (Bass 1985; 1990). According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), however, AL extends and is distinct from transformational leadership because “authentic leaders are

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anchored by their own deep sense of self-awareness; they know where they stand on important issues, values and beliefs and they are transparent with those they interact with and lead” (p. 104). Authentic leaders promote and develop authenticity among their followers, through building enduring relationships and by relying on their influence, whereas transformational leaders are primarily interested in achieving organizational goals (Bass 1985; 1990).

### **Theoretical and Managerial Contributions**

While sport management scholars have studied authentic leadership among sport coaches, sport administrators and non-profit sport organization board members (see Kim et al., 2020; McDowell et al., 2018; Takos et al., 2018), high performance athletes’ ALD experiences have yet to be explored. Thus, the current research seeks to address this gap in the extant sport management literature. By answering this study’s three research questions, the researcher seeks to uncover whether and to what extent the high-performance wrestling context in Canada and Nigeria is supporting and preparing the next generation of women sport leaders.

Findings from this research can serve the sport management academy and practitioners (e.g., athletic directors and coaches and NSO/NSF administrators) who are interested in better understanding the experiences of aspiring women leaders in order to better support them. Findings from this current study (e.g., regarding the unique challenges experienced by women who compete in male-dominated sports) should also be useful to leadership trainers, educators and coaches interested in developing more effective leadership development programs.

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### CHAPTER II

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of literature that is relevant to this research in order to identify areas for scholarly contribution. Recall, the purpose of this research study was to explore the authentic leadership development (ALD) experiences of high-performance women wrestlers from Canada and Nigeria. This chapter is presented in five sections meant to introduce and provide sufficient background on the following topic areas: (1) Leadership; (2) Contemporary Leadership Theories; (3) Authentic Leadership; (4) Leadership Development; and (5) Gender and Leadership Development. The first section (Leadership) includes a discussion about early leadership research with an emphasis on qualities that at that time distinguished leaders from non-leaders. The second section (Contemporary Leadership Theories) highlights the role of leader behaviours and their impacts on followers. The third section (Authentic Leadership) elaborates on the emergence of authentic leadership as a response to the perceived shortcomings of the existing leadership theories, while the fourth section (Leadership Development) reviews research on leadership development. The last section (Gender and Leadership Development), highlights some of the unique challenges facing women who aspire to become leaders.

#### **Leadership**

Over the last 40 years, leadership has been one of the most widely researched topics in organizational theory (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Most definitions of leadership reflect the view that it involves a process in which intentional influence is exerted over others. For example, Barrow (1977) believed that leadership is “the behavioural process of influencing individuals and groups toward set goals” (p. 232), while Gray (2004) suggested leadership is “knowing what should be done and influencing others to cooperate in doing it” (p. 76). Leadership definitions



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differ notably regarding who exerts influence on whom, what is the intended purpose of the influence, in what ways is influence exerted, and with respect to the individual and organizational level outcomes from such influence.

Whereas early leadership theories focused on qualities that distinguished leaders from followers, contemporary leadership theories examine additional variables, including situational factors and individual leadership skills (Wolinski, 2010). Contemporary leadership scholars have discovered that a combination of leadership personality traits, behavioural characteristics, and specific leadership skills (e.g., kindness, thoughtfulness, creativity, effective communication skills, self-awareness, integrity, empathy, engagement, passion, ethical, accountability), as well as the leadership situation or context impact leader effectiveness (Wolinski, 2010).

The scientific study of leadership began at the turn of the 20th century with the Great Man Theory (i.e., a leader is a person who is blessed with unique qualities from birth and is thus uniquely suited for positions of power that capture the masses' imagination) and other trait-based perspectives, which argued leaders should possess certain dispositional characteristics (Mann, 1959; Stogdill, 1948). However, over time, leadership trait theories largely fell out of favour with leadership researchers (see e.g., Zaccaro, 2007). In place of those trait-based perspectives, researchers would turn their focus on leaders' behavioural styles including, for instance, how leaders treated their followers and the behaviours they used (Stogdill & Coons, 1957).

Situational leadership theories or contingency theories became more prominent in the second half of the 20th century (Fiedler, 1967). Those situational theories (see e.g., Blanchard et al., 1993) highlighted the particular importance of the leadership context coupled with the needs (i.e., the need for direction and/or support) of followers. And, in the modern era, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and also authentic leadership have all

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emerged, as scholars have turned their focus to the complex interactions and relationships among leaders and followers, with an appreciation for the specific contexts or situations in which the leadership influence relationship occurs (Bennis, 2007).

### **Contemporary Leadership Theories**

Contemporary leadership theories are focused on both the leader's behaviour and the leader's ability to influence followers' behaviours (Madanchian et al., 2016). Specifically, the transformational leadership model, popularized by Bass (1985; 1990) has greatly influenced the development of authentic leadership and other contemporary leadership theories (i.e., servant leadership, humble leadership, etc.). Indeed, according to Barling et al. (1996), a charismatic transformational leader is one who can shape an organization and make positive impacts.

Building on the transformational approach to leadership, and according to Avolio et al. (2004), authentic leaders are those “who are deeply aware of how they think and feel and how they are perceived by others...and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (Jex & Britt, 2008, p. 325). Authentic leaders are true to themselves and show genuine care and concern for others. Further, authenticity has been defined as “owning one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs ... [and] expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with [those] inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p. 382). According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), authentic leadership is “a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, [fostering] greater self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders” (p. 94).

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### **Authentic Leadership**

Authentic leadership has become a popular contemporary leadership theory in business and organizational studies (Northouse, 2013). According to Bennis (2007) and others (see e.g., Luthans & Avolio, 2003), the AL theory emerged in response to varied issues surrounding the global economy, political turmoil, and corruption at the turn of the 21st century. Since then, AL researchers have found organizational leaders who practice/deploy AL are more likely to have participative, enthusiastic, motivated workers working within psychologically safe cultures (Walumbwa et al., 2018). The AL theory is both grounded within and extends more established leadership theories, like transformational leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

According to Walumbwa et al. (2008), authentic leaders are moral actors who possess high ethical standards that guide their decision making and behaviour. As Luthans and Avolio (2009) suggest, “the goal of the authentic leadership initiative is to understand what truly shapes positive development in leaders and also followers, teams, organizations, communities and entire societies” (p. 303). Within the transformational leadership model, Bass and Avolio (1993) suggest that positive organizational outcomes (i.e., effectiveness) could be achieved when transformational leaders are present, but within the AL model, Luthans and Avolio (2003) argued that within organizations, both leaders and followers can realize their full potential.

Leadership trait theories have also influenced the development of authentic leadership. The fundamental premise underlying the trait approach to leadership is that leaders possess traits that non-leaders lack. Such traits include, but are not limited to, intelligence, dominance, self-monitoring, and social perception (Jex & Britt, 2008). According to Luthans and Avolio (2009), self-awareness and social perception are two notable aspects of AL. Also, authentic leader traits

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include efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency (Luthans & Avolio, 2009). According to Yukl and Van Fleet (1992), four traits that predict managerial effectiveness and advancement within organizations exist, including: a high energy level, integrity, stress tolerance, and emotional maturity, which are traits like those found in authentic leaders.

The behavioural theories' influence on AL can be seen in the distinctive behaviours that distinguish effective and authentic leaders. For example, Endrissat et al. (2007) contended that a leader's behavioural integrity is the perceived alignment between their words and deeds and the extent to which employees believe their leader 'walks her talk.' According to Endrissat (2007), authentic leaders also promote associate-building in developing their followers – they see the best in them and can identify and nurture their unique skills (Harvey et al., 2006). Authentic and transparent relations between leaders and followers also enhance feelings of trust between them. Such trust is thought to be key to organizational performance because “by building trust through demonstrating vulnerability and self-disclosure in stable situations, leaders and followers [are] able to confidently rely on one another in situations of time pressure and crisis” (Avolio & Reichard, 2008, p. 337).

Regarding effective communication, Mazitis and Slawinski (2008) argued that the presence of “authentic leadership may impact the type of dialogue that takes place in organizations” (p. 438). Furthermore, an appreciation for authenticity in the workplace “allows the authentic leader to encourage open and honest dialogue among organizational members” (Mazitis & Slawinski, 2008, p. 438). The implications are clear that openness and honesty – authenticity – leads to organizational effectiveness; however, research examining AL and organizational effectiveness has been limited in the sport management discipline. In management research, Endrissat et al. (2007) were among the first to qualitatively test AL, as their research

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sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What constitutes ‘good’ leadership? (2) What is the leader’s responsibility? (3) How is the relationship between leader and follower perceived? and (4) What serves as leadership legitimization? In that study, Endrissat et al. (2007) conducted interviews with 26 male and female managers of varying age categories and from different hierarchical organizational levels to glean multiple perspectives to better understand whether managers shared a common understanding of leadership. Ultimately, Endrissat et al. (2007) found managers believed there were five characteristics of a leader, including: one’s own position, binding commitment, relationship to business, social proximity, and authenticity. Several managers indicated a requirement to be a leader was their ability to state one’s stance clearly. Furthermore, the ‘binding commitment’ characteristic suggests that to be perceived as a leader, one must be straight-forward and consistent. Participants also suggested that leaders must have a good relationship with (or commitment to) the organization. In their research, Endrissat et al. (2007) offered an empirical argument that distinguishes authentic leadership from research framed by other leadership theories, finding something special exists about the concept of authenticity and that leaders can benefit from being genuine and honest.

In sport management research, Takos et al. (2018) sampled 51 board members in order to better understand the impacts of AL in nonprofit sport organization boards. Takos et al. (2018) found that board members believed that relational orientation, self-awareness, and balanced processing were especially important. Board members who adopted an authentic leadership style at work were more likely to reduce disharmony, limit the formation of harmful subgroups, and eradicate trust issues on the board (Takos et al., 2018).

In other sport management research framed by the AL model, Kim et al. (2020) sampled 224 American intercollegiate student-athletes. Their findings suggest that the head coach’s AL

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positively impacts student-athletes' psychological capital. Furthermore, these findings suggest that coaches' AL leads to more autonomy and trust with their athletes, improved satisfaction, enhanced perceptions of choice, enjoyment, and commitment to training (Kim et al., 2020).

However, notably absent within the extant sport management literature is research on ALD in general, and specifically, research that centres the athletes as participants, in which the athlete is envisioned as an authentic leader and/or as an aspiring/future authentic leader.

To the best of the author's knowledge, AL research conducted in sport management has only conceptualized the athlete as a follower and not as a 'future leader'. Thus, this study is both unique and contributory, as it places the athlete's experience as a leader and of leadership situations in the forefront. It is of theoretical interest to understand more deeply how women athletes experience [authentic] leadership development in their sport, which (in this research) is traditionally dominated by men and as such, is masculinized.

### **Leadership Development**

Leadership development (LD) is particularly important because the leadership abilities of business leaders influence the outcomes of employees (i.e., job satisfaction) at every job level. Yet, without the resources and skills needed to lead effectively, organizations can struggle. According to Day et al. (2014) it is essential to differentiate between developing *leaders* and developing *leadership*. According to Day et al. (2014), "leader development focuses on developing individual leaders, whereas leadership development focuses on a process of development that inherently involves multiple individuals" (p. 64). Notably and according to Day et al. (2014), a rather significant limitation of past leadership research was its focus on personality at the expense of a greater focus on the longitudinal and multilevel nature of LD. Indeed, according to Day (2011), studying LD involves mapping understanding within and

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between person change patterns, as well as those involving groups, teams, and larger collectives over time. When framing one's leader and leadership development in a leadership development model, leadership tends to become less as a way of behaving and more of a state of mind.

According to Hesselbein (2003), it is through understanding the nature of oneself, of others and of collectives that an individual can reach a more thorough understanding of what it means to be a leader and achieving a greater mastery of the practice of leadership.

According to Day et al. (2014), LD research should focus on the centrally important processes to both *leader development* (i.e., intrapersonal processes) and to *leadership development* (i.e., interpersonal processes) over time. Hesselbein (2003) noted that the focus should not be on the *how to's* of leadership (i.e., learning specific leadership-related traits and behaviours), but on the *how to be's* of leadership (i.e., learning about developing values, principles, and confidence). Thus, effective LD programs must consider both the individual leader's authentic and intrapersonal development and the social mechanisms underpinning leadership. When that happens, Day et al. (2014) suggests that individuals' leadership development may be a source of competitive advantage.

### **Gender & Leadership Development**

Women are routinely subjected to workplace discrimination (Fletcher, 2001), and they are sometimes deemed as incompetent or as unqualified for leadership roles. Their intentions and efforts may sometimes be thought of as a form of masculine imitation (Shaw & Slack, 2002). According to Okafor et al. (2005), women's lack of effective power and influence has been a general impediment for their participation in leadership positions. In some instances, however, more specific, and explicit policies forbid women from ascending to top leadership roles (Herminia et al., 2013). Coupled with the subtle *glass ceiling* effect (an invisible barrier that

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prevents women from advancing in their careers past a certain level), women have been and are still prevented from attaining leadership's top levels (Okafor et al., 2005). Indeed, according to Schull et al. (2013), men have tended to scrutinize women's leadership efforts and as a result, some women have been left with little or no confidence to lead men and those who are confident enough, face negativity. Opportunity to compete for or win decision-making positions are being denied as well because masculinity is seen as a crucial characteristic of effective leaders.

Management practices have traditionally been controlled and informed by masculine codes of behaviour, ensuring that women are unheard (Maddock, 1999). Such biases come in the form of entrenched cultural and organizational rules and beliefs and "structures, practices, and patterns of interaction that inadvertently favour men" (Ely et al., 2011, p. 4). According to Ford (2006), many organizations still view leadership through a masculine lens that features "macho, individualistic and assertive behaviours" and discourses that are valued more than "feminine qualities such as empathy, capacity for listening, [and] relational skills" (p. 96). Yet, when women leaders use their relational skills to lead, their behaviour can be conflated with femininity and motherhood (Fletcher, 2004). In a sport management context, for example, Burton et al. (2011) surveyed 276 NCAA Division 1 athletic directors with the goal to determine how respondents evaluate male and female candidates for leadership roles in college athletics (i.e., as athletic director, compliance director, or life-skills director). Burton et al. (2011) found that even though female candidates for the position of athletic director had the same qualifications as their male counterparts, they were viewed as too feminine for the role. Female candidates were seen as more feminine if they applied for positions in life skills that are primarily held by women. According to Burton et al.'s (2011) research, men were more frequently chosen for positions as athletic directors compared to their female counterparts despite having the same qualifications



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and traits. Such research supports the claim that men are frequently chosen for leadership positions not just because of their qualifications and experience but also because of the widespread belief that masculinity is required for such positions. Indeed, there is a common assumption that managerial positions call for masculine characteristics like competitiveness and assertiveness. Though, in contrast to their male counterparts, women who exhibit such masculine traits frequently do not get the same leadership opportunities. Additionally, when women do succeed in obtaining leadership positions, their colleagues frequently judge and disapprove of them because they exhibit such stereotypically masculine traits (Burton et al., 2011).

For LD processes that are targeted to a female audience to be most effective, it is necessary to consider different personalities and the qualities of individual leaders, including notably, their gender, given that both leadership theories and gender role theories suggest that women and men utilize different behaviours when in positions of leadership (Eagly, 2013; Eagly & Wood, 2016). For example, research suggests women leaders tend to be more democratic and participatory, while their male counterparts tend to be more independent and assertive (Eagly, 2013). Public management research has similarly found gender differences in terms of management styles (Eagly et al., 2003). For example, Eagly et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership found that female leaders were more transformational compared with male leaders and were rated higher than their male counterparts on both transformational leadership and transactional leadership. Similarly, public, and non-profit management research has found gender differences between men and women managers in terms of values and with respect to behaviours (Hamidullah et al., 2015; Jacobson et al., 2010). Thus, appreciating that differences do exist in terms of leadership style and behaviours between

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male and female leaders is critically important to leadership developers, as leadership training will likely have different effects on participating men and women.

With respect to leadership training for women, Harris & Lieberman (2012) suggest there are several key factors must be considered. Notably, because LD is often conducted with sector wide groups and varies greatly in terms of design, organizational leaders should both be visible during training and ensure sufficient resources are available for training. Further, longitudinal evaluation should be adopted to ensure program continuity and in order to support necessary improvements that meet the needs of aspiring women leaders (Price & Weiss, 2011).

Ely et al.'s (2011) leadership development model adopts a gendered perspective to better incorporate two key learnings from the leadership development literature. The first key learning is that leadership identity development, that is, developing the self is critical; and a second is that understanding biases within organizations should be emphasized during leadership training. According to Ely et al. (2011), women's LD programs should give women participants a gauge to discern how 2nd-generation gender bias impacts their potential, while still encouraging them to discover their purpose. According to Ely et al. (2011), LD participants – and especially women participants – can also develop strong peer networks of support that extend beyond the duration of such leadership development programs. Furthermore, Burton (2015) suggested that conversations on women's leader identities and lived experiences “must include positioning gender as a fundamental aspect of organizational and social processes” (p. 156).

Notably, according to Eagly et al. (1995), men and women leaders are not so different in terms of their overall effectiveness. Rather, leader effectiveness scores tend to favour men when the setting is male dominated and when a large percentage of subordinates are male and when the role is perceived to be more suitable to men (e.g., the role requires limited cooperation, or it

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demands more control). Yet the same comparisons favour women when those conditions are reversed (Eagly et al., 1995). The implications of these findings are encouraging for female leaders and for leadership because such findings have established that all the aspects of leadership style on which women exceed men relate positively to leaders' effectiveness, and, therefore, leadership training of women should be an added advantage to women leaders. However, it is possible that aspiring women leader participants in the current study who are involved in high performance wrestling (i.e., a context that is male dominated with traditionally masculine values) may be hindered by the context and culture of the sport, as Eagly et al. (2015) determined was true in their research. Thus, this current research study seeks to uncover the experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers.

A notable theme from several studies reviewed in this chapter is that AL research (however unfortunately and perhaps unintentionally) has ignored significant social issues with respect to why women have a harder time practicing authentic leadership than men do. First, according to Hopkins and O'Neil (2015) the mindset of 'think manager, think male' remains the norm and favors a leader's masculine characteristics. A woman will draw criticism if she exhibits characteristics that are typically associated with masculinity. Surprisingly too, is she receives criticism for being too feminine. Second, is the gender-neutral organization upon which the idea of authentic leadership is based does not accurately reflect the fact that reality is gendered. Even in more progressive organizations, there are often norms that support men and impede women, including policies and structures that women find more challenging to navigate. Third, is according to Hopkins and O'Neil (2015), AL perpetuates the notion that women are outsiders in leadership roles, implying that women face greater challenges to earn the trust of their followers.

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### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins with an overview of the general importance of positionality statements in qualitative research, followed by the researcher's own positionality statement, to provide a more nuanced and complete picture of the research and the deeply personal connection between the researcher and the topic of leadership and the research purpose. Also in this chapter, the philosophical foundations of the current research study are presented with detailed description of the specific qualitative methods used to collect and analyze the data.

#### **Positionality Statements**

Positionality statements enable researchers to discuss their personal experiences in relationship to their research topic and describe their worldview and the position they hold about a specific research project and its social and political context (Foote & Bartell 2011; Malterud, 2001). It is through understanding one's positionality that a researcher can become conscious of how their biases, values and experiences affect their research. According to Ormston et al. (2014), researchers should aim to achieve 'empathetic neutrality;' that is, they should strive to avoid obvious, conscious, or systematic bias and be as neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation, and presentation of data. Disclosing one's positionality encourages a researcher to acknowledge and define themselves in their research while attempting to understand their part in it or influence on it (Cohen et al., 2011). Specifically, an individual's preconceptions include their learning and beliefs from previous personal and professional experiences.

The researcher's worldview or the place from 'where the researcher is coming' reflects their ontological assumptions about the world (i.e., one's beliefs about the nature of social reality and what is knowable about the world), epistemological assumptions (i.e., one's beliefs about the

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nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature (i.e., one's assumptions about the way we interact with our environment) (Bahari, 2010; Grix, 2019; Marsh, et al. 2018; Sikes, 2006). Researchers should also understand that their values and beliefs may change over time. For instance, Rowe (2014) suggested the subjective and contextual aspects of a researcher's positionality or 'situatedness' change over time as the researcher goes through different phases of the inquiry process. Researchers who may have once been viewed as an outsider in a setting they have been studying can, over time, become an insider due to "getting friendly [and] less distance[d]" (p. 324). Through positionality, the researcher can incorporate her social world experience into the research. Thus, the positionality statement offered here is unique to me, and reflects my experiences and how those experiences impact all aspects of the research process.

### **Researcher's Personal Positionality Statement**

I grew up among six siblings, of which I was the sole female and the sole child interested in sport enough to become an avid participant. My mother and all my brothers forbade me from participating in sport, even though sport was a place where I felt a great deal of belonging. My father was the sole family member who supported my interest and engagement in sport. Yet, it was impossible for me to quit because of the feelings of excitement I experienced and the friendships I made while participating in the sport of wrestling.

While I would say my leadership awareness started when I joined wrestling at age 14, I was unconsciously and informally practicing leadership among my friends during my high school years. For example, I would stand up for my friends when they were being bullied and those acts of bravery earned me an informal leadership role among my peers, which I maintained until I graduated from high school. Three years after I graduated from high school, I became the Nigerian National Champion in women's wrestling. I also became African Junior Champion in

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Egypt in 2010 and an African Senior Champion in Morocco in 2011, where I maintained these titled positions for 11 consecutive years (from 2010 to 2021), winning either gold or silver medals in each competition.

Those early athletic career achievements in wrestling earned me a captaincy on the Nigerian team, which came with leadership responsibilities and duties. As team captain, I was privileged to work closely with the coaching staff for a long period of time. As an athlete, I have learned to take risks, to have confidence in myself and to be team oriented. While in university, I was the sports director of my department and faculty, and I wouldn't have been able to lead the students and athletes from the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences of Adekunle Ajasin University in 2011-2012 had I not been trained in wrestling to take such bold steps.

Throughout my wrestling career, I also experienced challenges, including competition failures, lack of funds, and injuries. I honestly believe had these obstacles not been there, I would have won some matches that I lost closely, and I would have recorded even more achievements. But lack of funding and training facilities were major challenges for me. Still, I am a two-time Commonwealth Games champion (Glasgow 2014, Gold Coast 2018) and two-time Olympian (Rio 2016, Tokyo 2020). During all of those major competitions, I can recall that my lack of confidence in myself played a major role in the matches that I lost.

In my experience, the confidence needed to win in matches at the highest level is developed from competing consistently. In my case, I hadn't competed often enough due to a lack of funding and a lack of sponsors, which caused me not to be well prepared. Today, my level of training is still good enough for me to win in some competitions like the African and Commonwealth Games, but it is not at the level it was when I competed at the World Championships and at the Olympic Games.

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The environment in which I lived and my social surroundings both taught and encouraged me to take up leadership among my friends and for me to strive to occupy the sport director role in my university, even when I was a novice leader. The positive—and at times—challenging experiences I incurred as a wrestler and student athlete triggered my interest in developing and changing my leadership pathway, which led me to apply for a Master of Arts (M.A.) degree in sport management, despite having graduated with a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) degree in an unrelated discipline. I decided to apply to Brock University because it's one of the best schools that offers sport management and has produced graduates that are doing well today in their careers, and this was exactly what attracted me to Brock University.

While I share my background, personal experiences and views, I understand that my experiences might be very different from others because of societal and geographical differences and because of other differences (i.e., coaches, managers, fans, family, teammates, etc.), all of which can impact an athlete's life in sport and in leadership. I want to be 'that leader' who leads authentically and who has positive influence on others' leadership journey. But I believe I cannot achieve these goals without a better understanding of leadership development. Thus, I began this research process to learn more about the experiences, challenges, and trainings of other high-performance women wrestlers from Canada and Nigeria that inspire their authentic leadership development and in learning about their experiences, to better understand how coaches, researchers and sport leaders may more effectively support them in the future.

### **Philosophical and Paradigmatic Approaches Underlying the Research**

The philosophical foundations underpinning this research study consist of ontological assumptions regarding the nature of reality and epistemological views regarding what can be known (Bell et al., 2018). Appreciating that the purpose of this research is to explore the ALD

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experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers, the ontological approach is interpretivism.

Interpretivism is a philosophical approach that holds that people interpret their social environment, understanding and knowledge of the world around them through their experiences and through their reflections on those experiences (Helmi & Pius, 2020). Interpretivism is appropriately connected with qualitative research methods as interpretivists seek to understand a given phenomenon (i.e., authentic leadership development) based on participants' experiences and interpretations of their experiences using various qualitative data collection processes. In this way, researchers can better learn about the phenomena under study alongside participants who are being studied. Qualitative researchers find meaning within events through interactions with others in specific contexts and research in the interpretivist paradigm most often begins with an open-ended inquiry and ends with tentative (i.e., non-generalizable) conclusions drawn from findings (Helmi & Pius, 2020). Interpretivists assume access to reality happens through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments (Myers, 2008), and use approaches like unstructured interviews and participant observation (Myers, 2008).

In this study, the researcher sought to gain unique in-depth insights into and from the lives of participants to gain an empathetic understanding of why participants acted the way that they do. In this study, the researcher was interested to explore trends and patterns from the data, understanding that society and individuals' realities are shaped by their interpretation. Further, the researcher was interested to know whether her own experiences and interpretations of those experiences (as someone who is as close to the phenomena under study as participants are) align with or converge from those of the research participants. Thus, the researcher used an interpretivist approach to collect, analyze, and represent the findings.



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### **Participant Sample and Recruitment Strategies**

The sample for this research was comprised of 11 (n=11) high performance women wrestlers from Canada (n=6) and Nigeria (n=5). To qualify for this research, interviewees must have been high performance women wrestlers from either Canada or Nigeria at the time of the interview. For this research, high-performance classification was considered to be, athletes who participated in international competitions (e.g., Commonwealth Games, Olympic Games) and/or held a position on the national team. The 11 participants who met the above criteria included world champions and Olympic and Commonwealth Games champions from Canada (n=6) and Nigeria (n=5) who were recruited so that the researcher could collect relevant data.

To recruit participants for this study, an introductory letter stating the researcher's background, interests and the research purpose was sent to prospective interviewees via email. This process was relatively straight forward because the researcher is known to the population she's sampling from. The researcher had also built good professional relationships (gaining trust and confidence) with potential participants over the 10 years of competing against and with each other at various wrestling tournaments. After the first/initial round of email recruitment, another email was sent out after two weeks as a reminder and to invite interested participants to share the invitation email with other qualified candidates. Following the guidance from Brock University's Research Ethics Board (REB), the researcher made considerable efforts to avoid putting pressure on participants to be involved in the research, such that all recruitment was conducted via email and the researcher did not speak with prospective interviewees in person about the study.

Three potential participants, who were contacted as part of the initial recruitment process to broaden the scope of the research were not included in the final research sample, because they did not meet the inclusion requirements because they had recently left the sport to pursue

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coaching. In total, 15 active high-performance wrestlers were contacted (as well as 3 non-active or retired wrestlers), and 11 completed the interview. The four wrestlers who did not respond to either of the two emailed invitations to participate in this research study did not participate.

### **Consent & Ethical Issues**

Before this study began, the researcher presented a successful research proposal and submitted a written application to conduct research to the Department of Sport Management at Brock University and the Brock University REB. Interviewees were asked to read and sign the letter of consent to both participate in the research and allow for audio taping of each interview before they took place (see Appendix B). The researcher was responsible for ensuring that each participant fully understood the purpose of the study and what was required and expected of them. In compliance with guidance from the Brock University REB, participants completed and signed all forms, and the researcher reminded each participant that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason (e.g., because of disinterest or distress etc.), though none of the participants chose to withdraw from the study once the interviews began.

Consent forms that outlined the researcher's responsibilities and each interviewee's rights were also provided to each prospective interviewee via email and before the interviews. If they chose to participate after reviewing those materials, each interviewee was asked to complete (i.e., read/sign/date) the consent form (see Appendix B) and return it to the researcher via email. As a final check for receiving informed consent, the researcher also asked for and confirmed verbal consent to participate before each of the scheduled interviews began.

In this study, the researcher offered participants confidentiality, meaning no names, or otherwise personally identifying questions or responses were asked for nor collected. The signed confidentiality statement included with the consent form was also adhered to, and all recordings

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related to each participant were destroyed after they were transcribed. In the next chapters (Findings and Discussion and Conclusion), no names or otherwise personally identifying characteristics are used to ensure participants' confidentiality is maintained.

### **Data Collection Strategies**

The primary data collection method chosen for this study was semi structured interviews, chosen because of the flexibility they offer, which was necessary for this research due to the exploratory nature of the project and its research questions. Semi structured interviews were intentionally used to capture and to probe deep into conversations with the participants that enabled the researcher to gather rich data regarding the lived experiences of the women wrestler's leadership development in a male dominated sport.

Using semi structured interviews allowed for the interviewees' views and answers to guide both the interview and the interviewer (Bell et al., 2018). The semi structured interview also enabled the researcher to modify and adjust the order of questions and ask follow-up probing questions based on the interviewees' answers to certain questions and their interests that were revealed during the interviews.

According to Patton (1990), one benefit of developing an interview guide to use in conducting a semi-structured interview is that it helps the interviewer utilize the limited time available in interviewing. Further, Patton (1990) suggests four reasons to use standardized open-ended interviews, including: determining the exact instrument used so that it can be inspected by others who may use the research findings; to minimize variation among multiple interviewers; to ensure the interview is highly focused so that time is used efficiently; and so that the analysis can be facilitated by making responses easy to find and compare.

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### **Semistructured Interviews**

An interview guide was developed in order to conduct semi-structured interviews, which included purposeful questions and topics that needed to be explored by the interviewer (DiCiccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Where unstructured interviews might unintentionally skew towards the interviewer's interests (Gray, 2009), employing the semi-structured interview method helped to manage time and focus during each interview.

By conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to understand and question participants' experiences with and feelings about ALD. The interview guide also featured several open-ended questions, to elicit from interviewees meaningful (i.e., thick, rich, deep) insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and information regarding interviewees backgrounds, their ALD experiences, and their experiences participating in a male-dominated sport. From the researcher's perspective, the semi-structured interview method was appropriate to use, given the project's exploratory nature and its objectives to understand participants' experiences. Some examples of the questions asked were: (1) Can you please describe your experience competing in a male dominated sport? (2) Tell me about your background and wrestling career (in Canada or in Nigeria)? And (3) Can you reflect on any informal leadership development training you've experienced as a high-performance wrestler (e.g., mentorship, coaching opportunities)?

Several procedures were used to ensure participants' confidentiality and to protect the integrity of the study. For example, writing in a reflective journal, simultaneous to conducting the audio recorded interviews helped the researcher to more fully comprehend and later analyze each participant's responses to the interview questions and capture other meaningful aspects that the researcher could have otherwise overlooked in the moment (e.g., interviewees' verbal tone

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and body language). The researcher also took reflective notes during each interview, which proved to be useful upon reviewing the transcripts and the interview guide.

### **Development of the Semistructured Interview Guide**

In this current study, the researcher developed the semi-structured interview guide in consultation with her supervisor to gain in-depth understanding of the interviewees' experiences regarding ALD in the context of their high-performance sport. As part of that process, the researcher conducted two pilot (practice) interviews with her supervisor, where the first of the two interviews involved the researcher acting as the interviewee and where the second of two pilot interviews involved the researcher acting as the interviewer. These two pilot interviews helped to build the researcher's confidence and to understand the timing and pace of the interviews, given the researcher could rehearse the questions prior to the real interviews.

The process of transcribing and reviewing the pilot interview transcripts was also useful and educational as it helped to reduce errors and potential risks (e.g., distress/fatigue etc.) in the main study. The two pilot interviews also helped with respect to deciding/determining whether the method for data collection was effective in terms of answering the research questions.

Each interview question was designed following Luthans and Avolio's ALD model (2003) and meant to elicit participants' responses for analysis. Each question was first tested and refined through the two pilot interviews, to ensure the questions would generate meaningful responses and necessary data to answer the research questions. It was expected that each interview would be about 45 to 60 minutes in duration, based on the timing of the pilot interviews (the two averaged approximately 60 minutes). However, because participants were active high-performance athletes who had busy schedules (i.e., practices to attend and competitions to prepare for), the interviews ranged in time between 20 and 52 minutes.

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The semi-structured interview guide contained 11 questions with an additional 16 probing/follow-up questions. All of the initial questions were designed to be open-ended and to intentionally elicit from participants descriptive responses and to encourage them to share their experiences in leadership and wrestling. For example, the first question was meant to invite interviewees to reflect on how they became interested in and joined the sport of wrestling. Some of the participants shared that they joined in elementary school, a few in high school, and some joined because they were drawn to the sport after watching wrestling on their television at home – they were inspired and wanted to be like the champions they saw on TV.

Participants were also asked about the leadership training they received in wrestling and about their leadership experiences in a male-dominated sport. Notes were taken throughout each interview, and there were follow-up questions based on their responses to them. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the interview recordings using a third-party transcription service. Then, after each interview was transcribed, the transcript was sent back to each participant asking them to review it and to offer the opportunity to add any additional information. None of the eleven participants requested any revisions or changes.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

The researcher employed a theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which “thematic analysis would tend to be driven by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area” (p. 84), specifically, high performance women wrestlers’ ALD.

Thematic analysis (TA) is a qualitative research approach that has been widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), and King (2004), TA is a useful

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method for examining participants' varying perspectives and highlighting similarities and differences to generate unanticipated insights. TA is also a useful tool for researchers who must summarize key features of a large data set, given it forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handle data and produce a clear and organized final report (King, 2004).

In using TA, the researcher is tasked with finding themes through a thoughtful and creative engagement with the data and their reflexivity in the analytic process. Notably, themes do not automatically exist in or emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes must be created and searched for using a rigorous and systematic approach, which is referred to as developing, constructing, and generating themes (Braun et al., 2016; 2018).

According to Ely et al. (1997), "themes emerging' can be misinterpreted to mean that themes 'reside' in the data, and if we just look hard enough, they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them" (Ely et al., 1997, p. 205-206). Similarly, according to DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000), a theme is "an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole" (p. 362). In practice, themes are identified by bringing together components of ideas or experiences, which can otherwise be meaningless when viewed alone (Aronson, 1994). Once identified, themes appear to be significant concepts that link substantial portions of the data together (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Themes are not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures but rather on whether they capture something important with respect to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) theoretical thematic analysis, the researcher took several steps to analyze the collected data. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data,

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listening to the recorded interviews over and over again and then read through each verbatim transcript line by line multiple times, making notes on each transcript based on Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model. Second, the researcher followed/used Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model in order to generate initial codes, while heeding Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice to "code for as many potential themes/patterns as possible" (p. 89). Third, the researcher created mind-maps to visualize how codes aligned with or converged from Luthans and Avolio's (2003) model in an effort to code the data towards specific themes. Fourth, the researcher reviewed and refined the codes and themes, checking for accuracy and holistically considering the appropriateness of the full data set. Fifth, the researcher reviewed and refined the overall data. In the sixth and final stage, the researcher selected thick, rich, and compelling extract examples (i.e., quotes) that captured the heart of the qualitative story.

To ensure rigor, reliability and consistency throughout the research process, the researcher searched for codes from the transcript directly one after the other and followed a data-driven inductive analysis as a guide (see: Braun & Clarke, 2006). To manage the data, NVivo software was used as it enabled the researcher and her supervisor to work competently with complex codes and the amount of text (that was, in this case, 65,342 words and 188 pages in total). The researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading through all the interview transcripts in order to understand the overall themes and patterns that emerged, and through this process, codes were developed based on the research questions. The set of initial codes and subsequent themes that were identified during this process were compiled to reveal the key concepts and ideas relevant to the research questions. Once generated, the codes were then applied systematically to each interview transcript, and once all of the transcripts were coded, the



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researcher reviewed the coded data to identify patterns, relationships, and themes. The broad themes and the specific sub-themes that were uncovered are presented in the next chapter.

### **Trustworthiness**

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest evaluating qualitative research should be based on its trustworthiness, and to ensure qualitative research is both credible and confirmable, respondent validation is needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To achieve credibility, the researcher must ensure their study measures or tests that which was intended. For qualitative research to be transferable, it is important to demonstrate that the research results may be applied to a wider population. In this study, the researcher took careful notes to avoid asking each participant leading questions. Acknowledging one's biases is also important in qualitative research to prevent the researcher from influencing each participant and ultimately, the research findings. Reasonable efforts were made to eliminate bias and to ensure that the interviewees were not influenced or misled by the researcher given the researcher herself was also a national athlete. For example, the researcher remained neutral in tone and demeanour throughout each interview to avoid eliciting biased responses and to avoid sharing personal opinions that might have guided interviewees in one direction or another. The researcher shared with participants that their responses would be collected and analyzed together and would not be linked to any coach or administrator.

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### CHAPTER IV

#### FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to explore Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers' formal and informal authentic leadership development experiences in a male-dominated sport. The researcher collected data from 11 participants regarding their experiences via semi-structured interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and analyzed the data following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) thematic analysis. The research findings in this chapter are presented in two sections. In the first section, findings analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) thematic analysis are outlined; and, in the second section, a summary of the findings, according to broad/major themes and emergent sub-themes from the thematic analysis are revealed.

#### **Findings**

This study utilizes Luthans and Avolio's (2003) Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) model (Figure 1) to explore the ALD of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers who compete in a male-dominated sport. Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model is comprised of several components, including: (a) Life experiences; (b) Positive psychological capacity; (c) Organizational context; (d) Positive self-development; and (e) Trigger events and challenges, all of which were used to guide the formation of the study's research questions and the interview guide. Ultimately, five themes were identified from the analyzed data that aligned with Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model, including: (1) Background influences; (2) Authentic traits; (3) Organizational context; (4) Self-leadership; and (5) Development. See Table 1 for a summary of the themes and sub-themes.

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**Table 1***Summary of the themes and sub-themes*

Theme	Sub-theme
Background influences	Family Hardship Support network Introduction to sport
Authentic traits	Confidence Hope Optimism Resilience
Organizational context	Supportive Unsupportive
Self-leadership	Self-awareness Self-regulation Desire to lead
Development	Leadership experience Winning and losing Overcoming judgement Role model

**Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes**

In this section, the five major themes identified, and their respective sub-themes are presented with illustrative quotes from each of the 11 research participants. To ensure participants' confidentiality, the researcher removed all participants' names and otherwise identifying aspects. These findings and the participants' quotes are illustrative of the five

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broad/major themes found through the analysis, including: (1) Background influences; (2) Authentic traits; (3) Organizational context; (4) Self-leadership; and (5) Development. In the following sections, each theme and its respective sub-themes are presented.

### **1.0 Background Influences**

The Background Influence theme was found to include a participant's personal history (i.e., family influences, early life challenges) and key trigger events (e.g., personal hardships, unsupportive people, facing/overcoming judgement), all of which played a role in shaping individual's traits (e.g., drive, resilience, confidence). The first theme of background influences is represented by four sub-themes, including: (1) Family; (2) Hardship; (3) Support Network; and (4) Introduction to sport. Each sub-theme will now be discussed.

#### **1.1 Family**

The first subtheme of Family was found within the Background Influences theme, where seven of 11 participants mentioned the significant role their family played in their wrestling career. Five of the 11 participants shared that their parents supported their participation in wrestling, though other participants shared they felt unsupported because their families were not comfortable seeing them participate in what they perceived was a "traditional male sport." For example, when Participant 7 told their family they wanted to start wrestling, their family pushed back against the idea of them wanting to be a wrestler. This participant recollected, stating: "when I first said I was going to start wrestling, my mom was like no, you're not." Some parents disallowed their daughters' participation in wrestling, given their desire for them to focus otherwise on studying.

For example, Participant 3 reflected on their parents' views, stating: "they always want their child to go to school. So, whenever I go for training and get back home, it is all hell ... so,

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all that was just one of the things giving me stress. It was weighing down on me, and even parents too are not helping.” Furthermore, Participant 7 shared:

My mom's like, not having my older brother and I wrestle but that's why I wanted to wrestle because I wanted to do everything my older brother did. And I was like, I'm wrestling. And my mom said, no you are not.

Several participants also shared that they persevered by staying true to their dreams before their parents eventually showed an interest in wrestling once they started winning major competitions. These participants said that if they had stopped wrestling, they would not have eventually become a champion today or a potential sport leader, which suggests family influences can be significant.

While some participants mentioned they felt unsupported by their family, others described feeling fortunate because they received the necessary support to progress in their careers. For example, Participant 9 shared:

I grew up with parents who encouraged me. I know we always joked that my dad wanted boys but he got two girls that wanted to do everything he wanted to do. We wanted to be outside in the mud and drive the trucks in the four wheelers and work on cars. And we both played rugby and we wrestled and like, he taught us how to street fight. And I also grew up with a mom who was in a male dominated trade – she’s an electrician. So, I grew up with really, really strong positive role models. My parents are fantastic. I grew up with a dad who told me I can do anything I set my mind to and mom who led by example who worked her whole life from age 18 till now in a male-dominated trade. And she's one of the best in the business, so I've had so much positive influence. Wrestling was never a second thought I know it’s been for other people.

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### 1.2 Hardship

The second subtheme is Hardship. Through experiencing hardships, the research participants spoke about having become more aware of what others were going through, including the vulnerability that exists in everyone's life, the similar things they had experienced, and others' fears and hopes. While most participants talked about hardship in some way, three participants were particularly insightful related to this subtheme, where they indicated they experienced hardship in their family and in their careers, which could have affected their future in wrestling. For example, Participant 11 said she had to quit her gymnastics class and join wrestling because her family could not afford to pay for gymnastics class, commenting: "I was drawn to gymnastics, but financially my family couldn't afford gymnastics because it's kind of a costly sport. So, I played all the other school sports."

Furthermore, Participant 6 said there her family experienced poverty, and she wanted to be the bread winner. She knew that if she was able to become a champion in wrestling, she could achieve that, stating "I came from a family where we're not so buoyant like that ... so, I realize that if I become a wrestler, I can change my family from being not so poor to becoming a better family. I can change my generation." Participant 9 also recounted having experienced hardship in terms of experiencing bullying and harassment in the sport by teammates and men who perceived she was physically becoming like a man. This experience could have led to her quitting wrestling at an early stage. She got bullied because of her body size to the extent that she almost lost her self-esteem and her desire to continue wrestling. In response to a question about her experiences competing in a male dominated sport, Participant 9 responded: "I had horrible examples when I was a bit younger, in bullying for sure. And I, I swear to myself, I would never be that person that made some young wrestlers feel invalidated." In this current study,

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Participants 6 and 11 further recalled their experiences of hardships were influenced by their childhood experiences, which led them to want to create an avenue where they could help other girls. In this case, hardships were found to trigger participants to act in an intentional way, and especially for those who felt they could have enjoyed some privileges in sport as a child but for some reason (often beyond their control) they did not.

### **1.3 Support Network**

The third subtheme is Support Network. Seven participants reflected on how they experienced support from their coaches, teammates, seniors, friends, and members of their extended families. Most participants were motivated to stay in the sport because of such support and encouragement from multiple sources (often the coach). For instance, Participant 4 said:

My coach encouraged me. He encourages us the way he teaches us, the way he tells us, like, do this, do that. And when we do it, we tend to gain from it. We're able to learn from what he tells us to do. Like, he encourages me. At competition when he tells me, you're going to win this fight, you're going to do this, you're going to do that and when I put this into practice, I see that it's very impactful for me.

Similarly, Participant 9 shared:

Coach, he was always encouraging. I think I was in grade nine and I started to show some talent in the sport. Maybe he saw something in me and he sat me down. He's like, 'I want to talk about some long-term goals for you in wrestling.' He's like, 'are you okay with that?' And I was like 'sure.' He didn't let me make little goals so, it was always big goals."

Participant 6 was also inspired by her coach and how he was able to overcome his own challenges and weaknesses and become an award winner as 'the best coach of the year.' This

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participant remarked: “from the kind of stories I heard from him, it was like when he joined wrestling, he wasn't so good like that, but he pushed that career, and he became the top [coach]. He was so dedicated to the sport.”

Participants also shared how their teammates were supportive and encouraging. For example, Participant 5 felt lucky to have great teammates and Participant 6 said “I'm very privileged to get to train in a room with men and women...I have good teammates who are both male and female.” Participant 6 further shared her own experience with having supportive teammates, noting:

During my first competition, the way they encouraged me, I was surprised, I thought it's not possible, that everyone normally faces his or her own game. But they were encouraging me like it was nothing, and it encourages me to bring out the best in me, like I should go there and wrestle strong...and when I eventually went into the wrestling mat, it was only me, but still, they were supporting me from outside...and when I got there, fortunately for me, I won the match. When I got home, I sat down, and was thinking, wow...if these people had not encouraged me, I would have lost.

Participants also indicated that those who were senior to them (i.e., older, and more experienced wrestlers) served as role models for them because they looked up to them for advice based on their experiences. For instance, Participant 7 shared: “I learned a lot. I had a lot of senior people helping me out.” Moreover, participants' friends and extended families were described as supporters who were external to the team and who motivated them to ‘keep on,’ so they could maintain their status as a champion and continue to be proud of themselves. For Participant 7, that person was her dad, about whom she commented: “he taught me how to be a leader in anything. He lives and breathes by being humble, confident, being assertive in who you



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are. And he got me into weightlifting young and just training hard young.” The support and encouragement participants received from those within their support network were found to be vital to their success on the wrestling mat and to their career progression. Participants who received support throughout their careers were found to hold intentions of participating in a virtuous circle, as they support younger wrestlers and give back to the community which had given to them.

### **1.4 Introduction to Sport**

The fourth subtheme is Introduction to Sport, which was representative of the various ways participants were introduced to the sport of wrestling. All participants spoke about diverse ways they were introduced to wrestling; however, ten of 11 participants discussed their experiences during this initial phase. Participant 2 stated:

So, I started wrestling when I was 11. I was in elementary school, and I was just drawn to the athleticism, seeing people rolling and doing gymnastics-type stuff. And so, I tried it and loved it. So, I did my first tournament in grade seven. I was the only girl on the team. Um, and I just kind of fell in love with it through high school.

Several participants started wrestling in high school, like Participant 5 who noted “I started wrestling in my last year of high school.”

Many participants revealed they could not start wrestling earlier than high school, given that the sport of wrestling was not held as an option in their province or was only offered as an extracurricular school activity. As a result, it was only when some athletes reached high school that they developed an interest in wrestling and were inspired to try the sport, having by that time watched wrestling on television or attended live matches. Given there were so few opportunities

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for some participants to start wrestling in elementary school, they struggled to enter the sport by themselves. For example, Participant 4 shared:

I've never been to Stadium before, and I wanted to see what an actual stadium looks like. So, I decided to go to Stadium and when I got there, I started looking around and saw different kinds of sports, like gymnastics, badminton, and wrestling. When I saw the way, they were wrestling...these are the things I used to see in those movies...I was drawn to the sport after that, and the wrestling coach came up to us like he was telling us to come and join the sport.

Participants also discussed the importance of participation in wrestling for women. For example, Participant 2 commented "I just loved everything about it. I loved competing, competing at a high level on a stage. I loved how empowering it is for a woman." Participants also explained how wrestling made them feel confident in their leadership abilities, especially in a society in which men dominate top leadership positions. In response to a question about what ways has the sport of wrestling helped or hindered their leadership development, Participant 2 suggested "I would honestly say it's only helped; wrestling is a type of sport that is only going to build your character and confidence." Collectively, participants believed they had, through wrestling, acquired sufficient training to lead in the sport domain or in other organizations, indicating that they no longer held self-limiting attitudes towards leadership. For example, Participant 7 shared her feeling that "I'm ready to go out into the world and be a leader in any sort of situation... I feel confident in myself that I can lead any outside group."

### **2.0 Authentic Traits**

The second theme is Authentic Traits, and it is categorized into four sub-themes, including: (2.1) confidence, (2.2) hope, (2.3) optimism and (2.4) resilience, all of which are main

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components of the Authentic Leadership theory. Related to this theme, Authentic Traits are those that help make an athlete transparent and ethical, informs their values and principles, all of which enable them to overcome challenges and lead authentically (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). During the interviews, participants reported focusing on developing their positive emotional states (e.g., confidence, optimism, hope, resilience) through wrestling and suggested they could identify and develop these strengths on and off the mat. Each subtheme is discussed in the next sections.

### **2.1 Confidence**

Among participants, confidence was found to be a strength they developed from life experiences, where several shared that while as young people, they did not like to speak with those with whom they were not connected, but through participating in wrestling, they developed confidence to speak to others freely. For example, P4 shared:

I'm a very shy person. Like, I don't like talking to people that much, but through wrestling, going to competitions, meeting different people, and words of encouragement, I heard from people I'm wrestling with changed my communication skills. Wrestling has helped my communication skills [and] wrestling has boosted my self-esteem.

According to Participant 3, wrestling “helped me because growing up, first, I'm this type I just like being by myself, not getting involved, shying away from things. But all the experience I've gathered today, now instead of shying away from it, I'm like, I would love to play this role. I would love to do this and that.” Furthermore, Participants 2 and 10 talked about how wrestling helped build their confidence and their character, leaving them with the spirit of ‘I can do anything, and I am ready to lead.’ For example, Participant 2 said:

Wrestling is a type of sport that is only going to build your character and build your confidence. I've been blessed to travel and experience many different rooms and

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leadership styles. I feel like I have been able to adopt what I feel works or recognize that things don't work for everybody. And so, I've expanded my knowledge base on that. Similarly, Participant 10 shared how wrestling helped her to develop her confidence to lead, stating “wrestling has already built me up. Whether I’m with my loved ones, family, or friends, I’m very bold and I have confidence in myself that I can do anything I set my heart to.” Furthermore, Participant 10 also shared that while she was initially afraid to step onto the mat to wrestle during her first tournament, her teammates and coaches encouraged her, and she ultimately won a gold medal. She said that since that moment her confidence developed and it made a huge difference in who she would later become “because even our training, everything requires confidence. If you don't have confidence, you won't be on the mat.”

Based on participants’ responses, they found that they most developed their confidence in the practice room and competing stage. Participants 11 and 9 confirmed they can now confidently share their knowledge with others and that they believe in themselves. According to Participant 11:

For wrestling, you have all these different skills and to show them in front of a group of people, one, you must have confidence. You must be able to articulate points. You have to be like on your toes and ready to adapt to each leadership [style], like each style of the people that you're trying to teach.

Participant 9 also shared that “all the experience I’ve gotten, I think it'll help for the future ... as a coach.”

### **2.2 Hope**

The second subtheme within Authentic Traits is Hope. According to these athletes, Hope is a proactive way to think about the challenges they have experienced which aligns with

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Luthans and Avolio's (2003) definition (as seen in Snyder et al., 1991) of Hope as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (1) agency (goal-directed energy) and (2) pathways (planning to meet goals)". Athletes described being able to objectively analyze their challenges, clearly identify them, and determine the impact of potential pathways towards solutions. Several participants also indicated they hoped to be a good leader, worthy of others' emulation. They hoped for a brighter future in their careers and said they could see glimpses of light ahead of them. For example, Participant 4 shared: "I'm happy doing this sport, wrestling, I'm so happy. And I also want to encourage others, I feel like I could encourage other people to come to this sport." Participants shared they wanted to be an inspiration for younger athletes, and they hoped to share their successes and failure stories, because an inspiration for their future leadership is to prevent others from making the same mistakes they made; and in some instances, to correct problems they experienced with their national organization. For example, Participant 6 shared:

It's had a very good effect on my leadership development. When I'm in position, I know what athletes need now. Cause I, as an athlete when I was under them, I know the kind of things they do for me. So, when I become a leader, I have experience already. Yeah. I know what to do. I must do this for my athlete. I must make sure even if I decide to become a coach, I know what my athlete needs they need to be comfortable. They need to train. You know, so many things. When I grow older, when I'm leading in society, I have to make sure that I provide solutions to my organization's problems. I have to be there for them. You know, I must be at the front. I must make sure I hear them all the time, their opinions, I have to make sure that I coordinate them, make sure that everyone is in order.

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### 2.3 Optimism

The third subtheme within Authentic Traits is Optimism, about which athletes shared that staying optimistic about any situation allowed them to study more, keep their goals and pursue their dreams. Several participants indicated they saw themselves as leaders. For example, Participant 6 said “I saw myself as a leader, as a role model.” After being active as a wrestler, Participant 6 said she was ready to take on a leadership position and that from the experience she gained, she would be able to lead well. P6 shared: “I consider myself a leader in wrestling and even every other area of life.”

Participants were optimistic about the future and about the leadership positions to which they aspired. For example, Participant 11 indicated she wanted to work in a public sport organization, stating, “I think that I’ll want to work in sport,” whereas Participant 1 believed she had bigger things coming for her as a leader in the future, suggesting: “it’s [wrestling is] preparing me to be able to face all those challenges coming my way.” Moreover, Participant 7 said she was ready to go into the world and be a leader wherever she might find herself, noting, “I’m ready to go out into a world and be a leader.” Participant 9 hoped to become a coach and was optimistic about her coaching skills, remarking, “I would like to work on encouraging my wrestlers, my teammates, my wrestlers, if I end up being a coach one day.”

### 2.4 Resilience

The fourth subtheme within Authentic Traits is Resilience. In this study, resilience was found among participants to be a concept which captures how they could cope with, adapt to, and navigate through their respective careers and in response to setbacks (e.g., *bending but not breaking*). Several participants shared their experiences that while they faced moments when they felt like quitting the sport entirely, they were able to turn their stories around by capitalizing

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upon what should have been a setback and making it a springboard to success. For example, Participant 1 explained that “training has taught me not to give up. Sometimes in training, I might be tired and like being at the level of giving up. I've been at the level of giving up, but I encouraged myself to never give up.”

Eight Participants believed that demonstrating resilience in the face of tough match challenges could be especially difficult. As they discussed however, they refused to give up their dream of becoming a champion, despite losing several matches and facing setbacks due to injuries. For example, Participant 4 shared:

When I lost in the competition, I was crying. I was very sad. Why did I lose, was my thought. I was down for some time, but I was able to pick up myself. I was able to encourage myself that I can do this like encouraging myself not to give up, not to just give up on my dreams because I thought I was going to win the tournament. And today I've been able to win a gold medal in that same weight category. That experience really pushed me. It's really motivated me more to do this sport.

Participant 2 also demonstrated resiliency in her career, returning to wrestling after a maternity break while still maintaining her champion status. For women in general (and women who wrestle in particular), childbearing has been perceived as a setback and as a potential career ending obstacle for women athletes because of the changes in the body system and expectations from/of families and society to focus on childcare at the expense of all else. For example, Participant 2 shared: “women, especially in wrestling coming back after being a mom and nobody understood it, people are like ‘oh that's so cute, you want to wrestle after having kids, Like, good job’ and I was like, ‘you don't even know what my life is’.” However, Participant 2

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felt empowered by her decision to continue to compete, hoping to inspire other women who have been and will perhaps one day be in her shoes to follow their passion. Participant 2 shared:

I am a hundred thousand percent leader. And you know what though? And I was one of the first women, especially in wrestling to come back after being a mom and nobody understood it...I want to be able to show these next generations or other women in every sport that I'm like, you don't have to just [quit] because you're a mom.

All participants shared that they were able to face life's difficulties as it comes through the power of resiliency that developed on and off the mat.

### **3.0 Organizational Context**

The third major theme found was Organizational Context, which includes two sub-themes: (1) a supportive organizational context; and (2) an unsupportive organizational context. The sub-theme of supportive organizational context was found to serve as a morale booster for individuals and a trigger for authentic leadership development. Conversely, an unsupportive organizational context was found to be a factor in decreasing one's self-esteem and confidence. Notably, all participants affirmed that their national sport organization or federation served as a supportive force in their wrestling careers. However, that is not to say that participants believed no issues existed with their respective NSO/NSF.

### **3.1 Supportive Organizational Context**

The first subtheme found was supportive organizational context, about which all participants discussed the important role their respective national sport federation/organization played, especially regarding the funding they received to attend competitions, which enabled them to close the gap between them and their male counterparts. For example, (Canadian) Participant 11 shared "Sport Canada funds our sport of wrestling, through different funding



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streams. So, it's had a huge impact on my career as a high-performance athlete.” According to Participant 11, winning at major competitions also gave them an advantage, where she remarked “women’s wrestling is funded more than males based on our results. So, we’re not hindered in that way through funding.” National tournaments, organized camps, travelling, and exposure to others’ cultures, and the financial assistance received (e.g., scholarships, monthly salaries, health insurance) were found to be tools of leadership preparedness that participants could use both on and off the mat. Furthermore, Participant 11 shared how funding impacted her career and her leadership journey, stating:

I'm a carded athlete. So, I get paid each month to continue to wrestle. Sometimes I can get some of the opportunities to travel paid for through NSO/NSF. Funding from Sport Canada has influenced my career because it allowed me to go to higher competitions, travel around the world to get different experiences.

Participant 5 shared “I've been financially supported by [the NSO/NSF] since 2017, so that's been obvious, and very helpful. Similarly, Participant 8 said their “National Sports Federation has done a lot. Through the National Sport Federation, I was able to travel and mingle with other tribes and other countries.” Participant 2 also shared her experience, noting they “don't know if I would've travelled across the world to a whole new culture so easily [were it not for the NSF].”

### **3.2 Unsupportive Organizational Context**

The second subtheme found was Unsupportive Organizational Context. Participants most frequently described frustration about the organizational lack of formal leadership training, which they described as being a threat to their progress. Broadly, threats to progress were found to include, but were not necessarily limited to, not receiving expected recognition and support from either the government or the national sport federation/organization, even with their evident

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progress in the sport. For example, P2 was unhappy with what she believed threatened her progress, stating that “women in wrestling are unheard of.” Participant 9 spoke about almost quitting wrestling because of her national sport organization. She became depressed and lost interest in competing, having been deprived of representing her country in her weight category for a period. She reflected: “a little earlier in my wrestling career it felt like I kept getting shut down and it didn't make me want to wrestle.”

Most participants complained that their organization did not provide them with any opportunities to experience formal leadership seminars, courses, or conferences. For example, P7 said “formal training in leadership? Honestly, no.” Instead, interviewees described how they acquired key leadership skills and experiences through informal training on and off the mat. For example, participants described how leading wrestling training classes and acting as a captain or senior teammate was informal leadership training for their future. About this, P5 shared:

I think anything that can contribute to who I am as an athlete can contribute to who I am as a leader. They've given me the opportunity to coach and be around younger athletes and kind of build into the next generation. And I enjoyed doing that. Definitely informal ... taking the next step forward and mentoring other younger athletes, but everything's been informal.

Participants shared they wished to have had more formal leadership training that they felt was (or, could have been) important to their leadership growth. Interviewees suggested such training could have taught them how to express themselves in public and how to influence others.

Participant 11 provided an example of this issue, stating:

I think it would've been nicer to do, there's like opportunities to do like leadership conferences I've heard of. So, conferences like bringing everyone together to learn from

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one another. I've done it in high school. I went to a conference in high school for three days and it was all about leadership, it's like giving you the tools to lead the confidence to speak in front of people, the, um, the ways you can try to influence others. Like just learning all these different tools. I learned that at a young age in high school, but I think it would be unique to have a conference like that for high-performance athletes.

Participants also expressed how they felt their national sport federation/organization was supportive and unsupportive in certain ways. For example, Participant 8 expressed being frustrated with her sport organization and non-governmental organizations that could not fully support her. Specifically, Participant 8 described how she still struggled despite her athletic fame and how the organizational support in wrestling was not there for her, compared to support she would see other athletes receive, in sports like soccer and athletics. She described how she wasn't fully supported to compete at some international tournaments because of lack of funds and how that experience had diminished her faith in the NSF/NSO and lead her to consider retiring from the sport. Participant 2 expressed regret about her sport organization falling behind other sport organizations in the United States, feeling that "sport isn't prioritized" in Canada. Participant 2 shared that: "one of the big gaps is our lack of funding in Canada. We don't have money. They don't prioritize sport like they do in the [United] States. So, we have a lack of funding here. I'm able to compete but I've self-funded a lot too."

### **4.0 Self-Leadership**

The fourth theme is Self-Leadership, which encompasses how athletes' behaviours (i.e., their habits and choices) impact others. Within this theme, three sub-themes were found, including: (1) Self-awareness, (2) Self-regulation and (3) The Desire to Lead. From the analyzed data, it was found that most participants were encouraged and intrinsically motivated to continue

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working on themselves and especially so, when they realized they were developing their leadership skills for the future.

### 4.1 Self-Awareness

The first sub-theme found within Self-Leadership was Self-Awareness. Participant 11 described her self-awareness as the reason she decided to study sport business/management, noting:

I took sport business/management as well, as I hope to, one day work in sport...[and] I feel like wrestling shows me a career path and helped me develop leadership skills like public speaking and running practices. I've done motivational speaking a ton.

Similarly, Participant 2 realized that taking the time to develop herself has had a great impact on her career progression, remarking:

Literally just getting a taste for having potential. I had to work for things and then I started seeing what working for things could pay off as. I was like, if I put in more work, I'm going to get here. And then if I could do that, I can do this. And I saw a progression, it felt empowering to me that I could achieve something.

Participant 2 added that by developing herself, she could voluntarily take on leadership roles, including the role of acting as a coach/trainer, stating: "I have jumped in corners internationally and had to coach teammates. I am somebody who loves to learn and dissect things. So, I will help teammates or other athletes or even just talk with coaches...and sometimes I run practices."

Participant 3 said the lessons she learned will help her to give something back in the future, noting: "I've gone for leadership training. I have my certificate, I'm certified. So, in that aspect, I know I can give something better to anyone." Conversely, Participant 8 discussed her perceived areas of weaknesses that she was determined to work on, commenting:

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I'm always shy in the public, to speak. So, I want to really come out from that. You know, that's an area and that's the number one thing I am working on...I don't want to, you know, pretend to be somebody else in public...I don't like pretending to be somebody else. I just want to be who I am in public.

### **4.2 Self-Regulation**

The second sub-theme found within the Self-Leadership theme was Self-Regulation. Through and with self-regulation, authentic leaders can demonstrate their ethical/moral behaviour by “walking the talk” and role-model enhanced self-discipline and self-commitment (Avolio et al., 2004). For example, Participant 10 described learning how she could control her emotions by participating in high-performance wrestling, stating: “if you know how to control yourself, how to behave yourself, how to move around. So that's already like me, how to control my achievements.” Similarly, Participant 5 talked about how wrestling helped her grow [as an authentic leader], sharing that “wrestling had given me the opportunity to build into a new person, it helped me to grow in discipline, dedication, and focus. It helped me to learn how to talk to other people in ways that are truthful.”

### **4.3 Desire to Lead**

The third sub-theme found within the Self-Leadership theme was the Desire to Lead, where all participants indicated they wanted to be role models for the younger generation, and that they were ready to put the work and energy in to live and lead by example. Furthermore, all participants explained that they were able to succeed in their careers because other people supported them, and that they were willing to return those gestures to the next generation. Interviewees explained that the positive and negative experiences they had on their leadership journeys could be an important guide from which others could learn from. For example,

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Participant 1 said “those younger ones coming from behind need encouragement, and I can encourage them. I'm pushing to be a better person for the younger ones coming because I want to be their mentor.”

Participant 9 also shared that her passion was to learn how to encourage others, claiming: “I would like to work on encouraging my wrestlers, like my teammates, my wrestlers. If I end up being a coach one day...to like work harder in a positive way.” Participant 4 said she loves to “make people around me happy, put a smile on their faces. That's one of my goals.” In response to a question about whether participants considered themselves to be a leader, Participant 7 shared: “when I see someone leading, I want to emulate that, and I hope that other people could look at me and want to emulate me as well.”

### **5.0 Development**

The fifth theme found is Development. In this context, Development refers to the process by which a participant described how they built their capacity to expand their knowledge, refine their skills, grow their confidence and abilities to become an authentic leader. Within the theme of Development, four sub-themes were found, including: (5.1) Formal/Informal Leadership Experiences; (5.2) Winning and Losing; (5.3) Overcoming Judgement; and (5.4) Role Models, all of which are discussed in the next sections.

#### **5.1 Formal/Informal Leadership Experiences**

The first subtheme found within Development was Formal/Informal Leadership Experiences, where eight participants spoke about how their leadership experiences in high performance wrestling impacted their authentic leadership development. Participant 11 spoke about how she learned to lead through the leadership experiences she had and how she was able

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to put those training/lessons into practice. Participant 8 discussed the two types of formal and informal leadership training she received and their relative importance, where:

We have junior wrestlers that are training with us for now, and on Fridays and Wednesdays when we have wrestling, we make sure we put them together. Telling them you come here; you have to wrestle this way. You have to wrestle that way; you have to do this. Try to make sure that they are calm and tell them the things they need.

With respect to formal and informal leadership training, Participant 11 shared:

I think sometimes class (i.e., formal training) is kind of just to establish what kind of leader you are. Once you kind of like, know what kind of leader you are or like, your best qualities as a leader, then you're more prepared to utilize them. However, I think sometimes more informal [training], whether it's your coach saying 'okay, you go run warmup, or you go show this move or you go help run out the kids' practice.' I think those more informal [trainings] are sometimes a little bit more beneficial because it's like you're just thrown into the mix and you're like getting the experience right there...[and] with the national team, we went to Japan to run practices for different clubs there.

Participant 4 spoke about her formal leadership training experiences in national camps, where “when they bring us together for camps, in those camps, they organized a seminar more like leadership training.” In this session, she mentioned that they were being taught “how to be a good leader, how to be a true leader, how to impact society.”

### **5.2 Winning and Losing**

The second sub-theme found within the Development theme was Winning and Losing. Six participants talked about how winning and losing at major competitions impacted their decisions to pursue leadership roles. For example, Participant 11 shared her experiences with

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winning and losing, where she described how if she lost, she was determined to never be kept in a box and how she capitalized on winning, sharing:

So, I was eliminated from the world championships, but that kind of propelled me into the next stage of my career. Because understanding how good everyone was at that level. So, then I continued to wrestle...I just continued to get better and better and better. And I, and another athlete from our province, both won nationals in different age categories, and then we both won the most outstanding wrestler award. So, I think like that experience of being at the highest level in Canada, made me want to be the best.

Participant 2 said she was excited when she won the world championship and she described how that achievement encouraged her to want to do more and achieve even more, commenting:

After I won a world medal and right afterwards, they took a video of me, and I was like, I'm going to win everything now. [I'm going to] do anything in the world. And it's that high you get when you realize you can do anything. Even the hardest thing in the world – I can do anything.

Participant 5 talked about how loss and injuries shaped her growth and development, stating:

Loss and injuries have helped me grow. First, when things aren't going well, it challenges you to look deeper and say 'okay, do I really want this? Is this really important to me because this is hard.' And then digging deep and moving forward like, that is where the biggest growth has happened.

Of all the interviewees, Participant's 5 response (see above) and her reflection on winning and losing signified how her leadership development happened on the mat.



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### 5.3 Overcoming Judgment

The third sub-theme found within the Development theme was Overcoming Judgment. Several participants described being judged by their family and by outsiders. Interviewees discussed how others bullied them because of their bodies or talked down to them because they participated in what was perceived to be a male-dominated sport. Participant 2 shared:

That is an everyday experience. How accomplished you could be nationally, provincially, and internationally, I feel like we still get looked down on. And it's just like you have no right to look down [us]. We are all equal in this room. There is not a woman, there is no man. We are all wrestlers in this room, and you still have the audacity to just look down and it's like, it's something that I'll never understand but it's something that we both know that you just have to power through anyway. And it can get me as amped up, as it wants to, but it's just like a fire that gets built underneath you and like that's just, you take everything that happens to you, and you make it make you work harder. And that's what I do with it. As funny as my answer is going to be, in the reality, like I know that I know that we're never going to be looked at the same and everything that we do is going to be like that was good for a woman.

Participant 8 shared her similar experiences, talking about her body transformation, which she noted was used by others to discourage her, though she never allowed that to get to her:

Where I come from, people will just walk to you and say, you look like a man look at your muscles, or please go and wear something to cover up your muscles. And sometimes you, your girlfriends will just, walk to you and say 'you are looking like, a man. Why don't you stop training for a while?' I gave a deaf ear to those words, I walk away,

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sometimes I cut off some friends. I do what I want to do. And that has helped me never to mind what people say about me.

Similarly, Participant 9 shared her experience about how she was judged because of her body:

I've been called, the typical, you know, you're a butch, you look like a man or then I get the opposite side is that, well you're too pretty to be a wrestler. And I'm like, what does that mean? Everybody is allowed, everybody is allowed to wrestle. It doesn't take one body type. It doesn't take on anything. It's one of the most diverse I've seen, like, you know, you can have tall, you have like the heavyweights, and the small people and we have every race and religion and I know and all that in there. So, I don't understand why being a woman in this sport is what throws you off. Or because I have blonde hair and blue eyes. You're not worth my time. and I know it's not always the same for other girls, so I do really try to encourage a really positive atmosphere with the other girls in the wrestling room because people are going to be mean to them outside of the mat too.

### **5.4 Role Models**

The fourth sub-theme found within the Development theme was Role Models. Some participants were drawn to wrestling because of someone they admired or thought of as a role model. For several participants, that role model was their wrestling coach. For example, Participant 6 talked about her senior wrestlers and her wrestling coach, and how the coach instilled leadership attributes in her senior wrestlers who inspired her. Participant 6 shared how she was determined to be like them, commenting:

What influenced me to pursue high-performance wrestling is that one, I had some, one of my seniors, I saw their kind of lifestyle. The way they live, the kind of way they moved. I saw that they travel often. The recognition they're given...the fame [and] the popularity

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and everything. The way the coach trained them, the way he was leading them. So, I saw the way he carried them along the way. He showed them the way, you know, the characteristics he showed and everything. I was like, okay, I can also be a leader.

Participant 7 also talked about her coach, suggesting his character is worthy of emulation, where:

Like for leadership, like coach...is worthy of emulation [because] he works so hard. He's humbled and I take everything in that he says like a sponge, because you can see how passionate he is about it. I feel like that's a big thing. The more passionate someone is, the more you buy into it, for sure.

Participant 9 also talked about how her seniors (i.e., experienced teammates) could make her work hard and not see less of herself, even when she did, stating:

So, both had like, had it out with me. If I wasn't working hard enough, they were like, [that's] unacceptable. You're not here, are you just here to waste your time? Or are you here to get better? So, both had said things like that to me, but also at the same time when I was having a rough time, my seniors were the ones who picked me up off the ground whenever I'm down and encouraged me to keep going. And then, I reminded myself that I can do this for me, not for the coaches, not for my parents, but do it for myself because I love it [wrestling]. I had really great examples and I think that shaped me into being a more considerate, understanding person, but also somebody who works really hard because they didn't accept less than that from me. They knew when I was dogging it, when I was taking it easy in practice and not pushing myself. They knew it and they called me on it for sure and I think as much as I didn't want to hear it, I'm glad they did.

In sum, participants described how they were developing their authentic leadership skills and abilities through mostly informal leadership development experiences; like winning and

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losing and overcoming judgement. Surprisingly, participants did not mention any formal leadership training or development opportunities that were offered through the national sport organization/federation. Rather, participants indicated their authentic leadership knowledge and skills were honed on the mat and in/around the sport of wrestling. Participants described how their winning moments were positive triggers for further growth and development and wanting even more, while hardships and losses on the mat propelled participants to work harder. For example, Participant 11 shared “So, I was eliminated from the world championships, but that kind of propelled me into the next stage of my career”. Though participants were judged and bullied because of their physical appearance, and their choice of sport, these experiences – negative trigger events – bolstered their decision to become role models and guardians (i.e., authentic leaders) for the next generation of high-performance women wrestlers.

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### CHAPTER V

#### DISCUSSION

This chapter is presented in six sections. The first five sections are organized and reflect on the major themes that were uncovered and presented in the previous chapter, including: (1) Background Influences, (2) Authentic Traits, (3) Organizational Context, (4) Self-Leadership, and (5) Development. The sixth and final section in this chapter includes a reflection on high-performance women wrestlers in leadership. Connections to the extant authentic leadership development research and related literature are made throughout this chapter.

#### **Background Influences**

Regarding Background Influences, the interviewees' answers revealed three interesting insights relating to Luthans & Avolio's (2003) ALD model. First was the importance of family – and of the athletes' parents in particular – to their ALD. Second was the significance of the coach-athlete relationship to participants' ALD. Third was the importance of teammates to support the high-performance women wrestlers' ALD.

The importance of family – and of parents in particular – is supportive of the Lifespan Approach to ALD (Avolio, 2003), in which *trigger events* (i.e., reading a profound book that changes one's worldview; meeting new and inspiring people) guides the development of an internal moral code within the authentic leader (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). In this study, parents were found to be significant contributors to the ALD of girls and women who would go on to become high-performance wrestlers in Canada and Nigeria – as both positive/inspirational forces – and sometimes as challenges to overcome. Whereas Luthans and Avolio's (2003) ALD model indicates “trigger events” tend to occur at work and in professional organizational settings, participants suggested that “trigger events” for them often occurred in and around the childhood

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home. Interviewees shared how their backgrounds played a significant role in their career decisions and impacted on their level of achievement in sport. Participants also shared how their families (their parents) supported them developing leadership qualities. Participants from Canada and Nigeria emphasized their families, their backgrounds, and their upbringing positively impacted their ALD – while noting that support from teammates was also important to their leadership development and career progression.

These findings offer further support to research on parental influence on children's involvement with and development through physical activity (Côté, 1999; Colley et al., 1992). Indeed, according to Côté (1999), parents play a significant role in helping young athletes to persevere through setbacks that can hinder their training. Parents have also been shown to provide less encouragement regarding physical activity and offer fewer sport opportunities for their daughters than for their sons and to perceive their sons as having a higher sport competence (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). In this research, athletes who spoke about facing opposition and/or resistance from their families (i.e., to compete in a male dominated sport), would have had to demonstrate their resilience. And while that parental resistance, combined with participants' demonstrated resilience, would prove to be useful to them later in life – it is also possible (and perhaps likely) that many more athletes who did not reach the high-performance level (i.e., who did not overcome those familial obstacles) may have exited the sport early or perhaps never entered because they lacked the necessary foundational family support.

A second notable finding from the current research was the particular importance of the wrestling coach-athlete relationship to the athletes themselves. Participants shared how the coach-athlete bond helped them keep their focus on important goals (both on and off the mat). Participants indicated that it was important to them to develop positive relationships with their

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coaches so that they could be reached out to for emotional support and guidance, and/or for specific instruction on the technical aspects of wrestling. These findings echo Lawrence et al.'s (1989) suggestions that one demonstrates great strength by reaching out for help – and, when coaches and teammates provide athletes with social support, each makes a unique contribution to the athletes' social support network. For example, according to Participant 9,

My coach from high school encourages me and he talks to me about the improvement of my technique. Right from the beginning of my wrestling, I had a big goal of going to the Olympics because my coach didn't let me make little goals. I also had fantastic women in my wrestling gym – strong women – who influenced me to be a better leader.

Participant 9's comment also relates to the third point within Background Influences that several participants shared, regarding the importance of teammates and peer-support networks to their ALD. According to the athletes themselves, these bonds were special and important. Participants shared how supportive teammates were reliable sources of strength, that when coupled with necessary foundational support from their families, coaches, and key sport administrators, contributed to their ALD. Participants also described benefiting from seeking support (i.e., advice, motivation, etc.) from their friends, senior teammates, coaches, and their supportive extended family members. The impact of these reported supportive networks aligns with Bass and Avolio's (1994) notion of the *transformational culture*, characterized by leaders who care for the development of others, and who oversee transparent, energizing, intellectually stimulating, and supportive environments (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

### **Authentic Traits**

The Authentic Traits theme includes four subthemes (Confidence, Optimism, Hope, and Resilience) and captures how participants developed the positive emotional states necessary to

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become authentic leaders. Importantly, and in this context, participants described how their experiences on and off the mat impacted their ALD. In this section, three notable aspects from within the Authentic Traits theme are discussed. First is the importance of wrestling to the athletes' ALD. Second is the importance of resilience and grit on and off the mat. Third is the unique challenge(s) associated with motherhood while wrestling.

Surprisingly, all participants indicated that the NSO/NSF offered no formal leadership training opportunities (i.e., education; workshops; etc.); and that their leadership development was entirely informal. According to Luthans and Avolio (2003), authentic leadership “draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context” (p. 243). Yet, in this study, participants described how they were developing their authentic traits within the sport and *because of the sport* of wrestling.

Arguably wrestling is one of the toughest sports in the world because of the extensive physical conditioning it requires of athletes, the mental preparation and complex nature of the matches, and the intense nature of the one-on-one competition. Wrestling requires athletes to maintain physical strength, speed, quickness, mental processing skills, and their preparation. Characteristics of high-performance wrestlers include passion, courage, resilience, vision, and confidence. Indeed, in this current study, participants shared how they used to shy away from leadership roles and how they experienced communication challenges (i.e., difficulties speaking in front of large groups and speaking with new people in general). Yet, due to their participation and involvement with wrestling, interviewees shared they were no longer timid and shy. Rather, they reported they had become strong and confident women who were now ready and eager to assume formal leadership roles (Burton & Leberman, 2017). For example, Participant 11 said she wanted to be a wrestling coach in her home province or work with a national sport organization



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and Participant 6 shared how she wanted to change the way things were done at her NSO and lead the next generation.

Further, Participant 6 indicated how the status quo was not working for her and for women wrestlers in general; and specifically noted where she experienced not getting what she needed from the NSO. Participants 6 and 11 shared their experiences developing what is sometimes called a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016; Nichols et al., 2019); that is, a belief that one's circumstances can change with persistent effort and determination. In this current study, participants shared that they developed their growth mindset both on and off the mat and following wins and losses in particular. In the current study, all participants shared stories of developing their resilience and 'not giving up' when faced with adversity. Notably, participants shared their experiences overcoming challenges that their male teammates simply didn't have to think about (i.e., subtle, and overt discrimination, pregnancy, and motherhood to name a few). In one memorable example from the interviews, a wrestler who decided to marry and have children recognized that other wrestlers' expectations of her was that *she's not coming back* (to the sport). This participant did return to competition however, and she would defend her championship titles and represent her country, despite others' expectations of her. This is just one example of the unique challenge(s) facing high performance women wrestlers who compete in a male dominated sport (Krane, 2001; Levi et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2020).

### **Organizational Context**

This section addresses the different ways that the organizational context of the participants' associated NSOs/NSFs either helped or hindered their ALD. Overwhelmingly, participants expressed their gratitude to their NSO/NSF for sponsoring multiple competitions which supported athletes' individual growth and the development of women's wrestling in

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general. Indeed, scholars (Armeli et al., 1998; Kurtessis et al., 2017) have suggested that positive sport environments characteristically provide high levels of support to athletes. Both in and outside sport, highly supportive organizational environments are important because when employees feel supported, they feel a reciprocal obligation to help the organization reach their goals (Naz et al., 2020). Conversely, if/when support is lacking in the workplace (or, is perceived to be lacking from the NSO/NSF organization or from coaches or team members in this study), negative attitudes and behaviours (i.e., performance, and intention to leave, etc.) may result (Slitter et al., 2012). In this current study, ten of the 11 participants expressed their satisfaction with the NSO/NSF for sponsoring them in competitions, providing them with scholarship funding and sometimes paying them a monthly salary or stipend. However, the fact that the participants indicated they were mostly satisfied with their national organization's level of support does not mean issues were non-existent. Indeed, participants described experiencing frustration because of a lack of organizational support regarding formal leadership training.

These findings reveal how NSOs/NSFs can both facilitate and challenge or negatively impact leadership development. With respect to the facilitation of ALD, interviewees reported being satisfied with the NSOs/NSFs providing funding for travel and allowances, the opportunity to represent their country, and providing opportunities to meet new/interesting people. However, there were reports of challenges with the existing programs that were in place. Perhaps most notably was the lack of formal programs, as well as the lack of networking opportunities beyond the competition schedule, and a lack of [leadership] conference opportunities. Participants noted that the experience of lacking leadership training was impacting their ability to lead in the future. For example, Participant 11 expressed her desire that the NSO would have provided her with formal leadership training. Yet, while some participants could not access leadership training,

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others took it upon themselves to find and take leadership courses external to the NSO. For example, Participant 11 studied a related course in sport in university, while others took online courses, and few had opportunities to attend other women's leadership programs at their own expense. Indeed, where organizational support was non-existent or insufficient, with respect to leadership training and development, participants took it upon themselves to develop as leaders.

### **Self-Leadership**

In this section, we discuss how participants expressed their *desire to lead*, despite the male-dominated nature of the sport of wrestling. Participants had accumulated years of experience in an environment that was at different times both harsh but inspiring and demotivating and even outright discriminatory. In conversations regarding the former, participants shared how participating in a male-dominated sport made them who they are and inspired them to develop themselves to become the best version of themselves. In reflecting on conversations regarding the latter realities however, participants had difficulty making sense of or glorifying their experiences. For example, Participant 9 recalled how some of her male teammates bullied and body-shamed her, saying “in male dominated sports you know, how weight and muscles are to men...huge arms or muscles are unattractive on a woman's [body]. I disagree, and I've seen how it's affected younger girls”. Participants described how they anticipated encountering toxic perspectives and attitudes and that they were prepared to live with its occurrences and thrive despite all of it. According to Luthans and Avolio (2003), such experiences may be considered “trigger events” – *negative trigger events* – that, once reframed as a core value to guide the authentic leader, can serve a useful purpose (George et al., 2007). However, that such negative trigger events are near-ubiquitous for women wrestlers is, indeed, a *wicked problem* (Churchman, 1967) that demands action.

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Self-Leadership, which includes elements of self-awareness and self-regulation, was found from the analyzed data. For authentic leaders especially, self-awareness is important, because understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses is a first step towards improving one's interpersonal skills and other positive qualities necessary to lead authentically (George et al., 2007). Indeed, according to Avolio and Gardner (2005), authentic leaders must reflect on their personal history to become such authentic leaders who know themselves and behave as themselves. In this study, participants shared how becoming a high-performance athlete was instrumental to their development as people and as leaders. For example, Participant 2 shared how creating time to develop herself had a great impact on her career and that the more time she spent training, the better she felt and the more self-esteem she possessed. Conversely, individuals who lack self-awareness are found to be incapable of leading effectively or authentically. According to George et al. (2007), becoming aware of one's weaknesses as a leader (i.e., understanding one's attention to detail; communication; holding people accountable) is critical to effective leadership.

According to Zimmerman (2000), self-regulation encompasses "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (p. 14). In the current study, Participant 10 shared how she self-regulated, by controlling her excitement whenever she won or lost at a major competition, while other participants shared how they started familiarizing themselves with these authentic leadership principles at a young age (i.e., staying in control and not letting their emotions get too high or too low during and after competitions). Such conversations reflected Rego et al.'s (2012) view, that authentic leadership cannot simply be decided upon or suddenly adopted. Rather, one's development as an authentic leader occurs over time.

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According to Shamir and Eliam (2005), the development of an authentic leader begins with an examination and interpretation of life experiences and trigger events that leads to self-development. In this study, interviewees shared how different experiences had impacted on their development over time, as they grew into adults and became high performance athletes. These findings align with Regos et al.'s (2012) position that leaders learn to be authentic over time through periods of learning and implementation (i.e., trial and error). Findings revealed participants aspired to become the best wrestlers they could be, while simultaneously imagining a future in leadership. Despite the widespread understanding that women are underrepresented in top leadership roles and particularly so in sport (organizations), all participants in this current research expressed their desire to lead. Interviewees described how they wanted to lead (i.e., both in and outside the male dominated sport of wrestling), despite their knowledge and anticipation that they would incur challenges in doing so.

### **Development**

According to Kent (1982), development refers to the capacity to identify, analyze, and solve one's own problems. In this current study, participants described identifying, analyzing, and then solving problems relating to the lack of formal leadership training, the varied forms of judgement they encountered as women wrestlers, and the highs and lows from winning and losing at the highest level. Regarding said judgement, participants shared that while they experienced judgement, and specifically gender discrimination (i.e., most often regarding their body image and muscularity) however unfairly and unfortunately, they still developed their confidence to lead. Interviewees reflected on how they overcame and repurposed these negative trigger events, channeling their frustrations into developing resilience, determination, and mental toughness by participating in informal leadership activities (sometimes at their own expense),

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experiencing winning and losing, and receiving help from role models (i.e. coaches and senior teammates).

### **Reflections on HP Women Wrestlers in Leadership**

An ongoing debate exists regarding why so few significant changes have occurred with respect to the issue of women's underrepresentation in top leadership positions. Perhaps the underrepresentation issue reflects Anderson's (2009) views that "sport actively constructs boys and men to exhibit, value, and reproduce traditional notions of masculinity" (p. 4) and that "competitive sport serves as a social institution principally organized around defining certain forms of masculinity as acceptable while denigrating others" (p. 4). Perhaps it is because sport operates as a space to define and reproduce hegemonic masculinity, in which one form of masculinity (i.e., heterosexual, physical dominance) remains dominant by suppressing all other forms of masculinity and by subordinating women (Connell, 1995). Perhaps it is because of the self-limiting behaviours of women themselves. Indeed, according to Sartore and Cunningham (2007) "ideological gender beliefs may serve to inhibit women within sports organizations through internal identity comparison processes that may subsequently result in the unconscious manifestation of self-limiting behaviours" (p. 259). Perhaps it is because of some combination of all the reasons listed above. Whatever the reasons, a major inspiration for this research was to act on the call for research on women's representation and lived experiences in pursuit of sport leadership roles, while simultaneously influencing and supporting necessary changes regarding the number of women in sports leadership and the specific experience of women wrestlers.

Researchers have found that when the right conditions are met, sport can be a valuable context for leadership development for women (Elley & Kirk, 2002; Garber, 1996). To the best of the author's knowledge however, prior to this current study, no research had been conducted

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on either the authentic LD experiences of high-performance athletes in general, or on the LD/ALD of high-performance wrestlers, specifically. Thus, Canadian and Nigerian high-performance wrestlers were recruited to participate in this research to address this gap in the extant literature. Ultimately, participants suggested they were, indeed, developing authentic leadership qualities due to their participation in wrestling. Remarkably, all 11 participants indicated they wanted to become leaders, where some described wanting to occupy leadership roles in sport, while others described aspiring to become leaders off the mat. For example, Participant 7 commented: “My leadership goal is that I want more women to wrestle. I want more women to coach. I want more women to feel so powerful [because] in wrestling, women have that opportunity to feel so powerful”.

Participant 7’s comment here highlights values shared by many other participants. In the context of authentic leadership, such values and principles are necessary drivers or motivators for authentic leaders. Indeed, according to George (2007), if one sees themselves as a victim, it can lead them to being more passive, but if one learns lessons from experience, one can use those lessons to inspire others. As participants revealed such true sentiments in this current study, their reflections on and positive interpretations about their life stories ultimately helped them build their hope, optimism, resilience, and confidence to lead in the future.

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### CHAPTER VI

#### CONCLUSION

This final chapter includes three sections. In the first section, I reflect on the process of conducting this research, while noting the associated delimitations and limitations. In the second section, each of the study's three research questions that guided this study are addressed, including: (1) What are the authentic leadership development experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers? (2) What are the formal and informal authentic leadership development experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers who participate in a male-dominated sport? And (3) What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of formal and informal authentic leadership development training among Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers? In the third and final section, I humbly offer future research directions and ideas to build on these research findings.

#### **Limitations and Delimitations**

As it true with any research study, there were limitations and delimitations with this project that should be acknowledged. There are limitations with respect to the research sample and the qualitative methods used. Regarding the sample, a limited number of individuals agreed to participate in the interview, which impacts on the generalizability of the findings. That 11 participants contributed to this qualitative study means these results are confined to the sample and they should not be generalized. However, to the extent that the shared experiences of the athletes resonate and/or align with the experiences of others (i.e., national team coaches and sport administrators around the world), the findings may still be useful and impact the development of policies and/or programs that can improve the sport experiences for many more athletes than those 11 who provided consent to participate in this research project.



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Another limitation of this research is its reliance on the athletes subjective/qualitative account of their own leadership. Given the exploratory nature of the research, finding (and then interviewing) followers to confirm and/or refute the athletes' self-assessed leadership skills and abilities would have been challenging (if not impossible), but such 360-degree perspectives are ideal/preferred. Quantitative instruments (e.g., the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire) might also have been useful and/or interesting to future researchers. In this study however, I chose to follow Welty Peachey et al.'s (2015) call for more qualitative research in sport leadership.

Some practical issues (e.g., network connections that impacted on international communications and the interviews that were conducted on Zoom/MS Teams) were minor limitations. For example, there were a few instances when calls were dropped, and connections had to be reestablished to continue with the interviews. Such technical issues are not apparent in the interviewees' quotes (and/or the themes and sub-themes in the findings) but it is possible they may have negatively impacted the interviewees.

Regarding delimitations, several decisions were made at the outset of this research that impacted on data collection and subsequent analysis. The decision to research only senior high-performance athletes excluded all athletes at the U18, U16, and U14 age categories from the sample pool and also may have impacted our understandings of any leadership programs that do exist (e.g., if any being offered at those levels). The researcher also delimited the study to women athletes and so the experiences of male high-performance wrestlers, which may have been an interesting comparison are absent. The researcher also made the decision not to include recently retired Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers, some of whom indicated they were otherwise interested in participating. Including their perspectives may have provided other – and perhaps more unique insights – because of being freed from the social pressure to

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champion their coaches and/or the NSO/NSF. In future, these national team alumni wrestlers may be an interesting sample to question how the national team facilitated and/or impacted their careers/leadership progression.

The researcher also delimited the study such that NSO/NSF administrators or other sport administrators were not included as sample participants. Again, this was a deliberate decision as the purpose of the study was to capture the athletes' experiences and not the sport organizations/administrators' experiences. However, administrators' knowledge of the intent of the programs and/or the limitations and barriers to including formal programs would have been interesting to include in this study. As well, some discussion regarding the NSO/NSFs administrators' experiences with such programs in the past (if there were ever such programs) could have been valuable insights used to frame the current study.

### **Research Questions Answered**

With respect to research question one (1) (What are the ALD experiences of Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers?), it should be noted that, surprisingly, the experiences of women wrestlers in Canada and Nigeria were very similar to one another, despite significant geographic differences between the countries and cultural/ethnic differences between the athletes themselves. At the outset of this research study, it was anticipated that Canadian and Nigerian wrestlers would offer greater contrasts than consistencies, but that was not the finding. Perhaps the experience of high-performance women wrestlers is more universal than initially imagined. Perhaps that was because the Canadian and Nigerian national team programs are unusually similar (recall, the President of the Nigerian NSF, Mr. Daniel Igali, is also a former Olympic champion for Canada). However, because this research study did not set out to compare the athletes from Canada and Nigeria, the data collected and the sample size from this study does

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not allow us to make definitive claims as to why the ALD experiences of Canadian and Nigerian wrestlers were so similar. Perhaps sport management researchers will explore these issues (i.e., similarities and differences among international teams' [A]LD) in future.

Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers' authentic leadership development experiences similarly began at a young age. In this research study, the importance of families (and of parents in particular) to the ALD of the athletes was notable and extends Luthans and Avolio's ALD model (2003). Athletes reported feeling supported by their NSO/NSF but lacked formal support/opportunities to develop their authentic leadership skills, again, extending Luthans and Avolio's ALD model (2003) to include push and pull factors (or, facilitation and resistance) regarding organizational support. Still, athletes reported developing their authentic traits both on and off the mat (i.e., through winning and losing in competitions and taking on informal leadership roles on the team). Participants from this study reported taking charge of their own leadership development (i.e., sometimes attending workshops at their own expense and taking related courses in university). In this study, participants reported their wrestling coach(es) was/were their key role model(s), affirming that credit for their leadership growth should be given to their coaches because they encouraged them and pushed them until they became successful. Given all participants reported their wrestling coaches were almost always men, future researchers should seek to gather insights from athletes coached by women. Perhaps such research (that focuses on women wrestling coaches/leaders) will indeed be possible when this next generation of authentic leaders (the study's participants) arrive to the leadership roles to which they now aspire.

Regarding research question two (2) (What are the formal and informal authentic leadership development experiences of women who participate in a male-dominated sport?),

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again, participants surprisingly responded that they had experienced almost no formal leadership training/development experiences. Some participants described being a part of formal leadership programs in high school, and at national ID camps, but at the national level, participants described no specific initiatives in their respective interviews. Participants did share several informal ALD experiences (e.g., leading workouts and trainings, speaking to large groups (i.e., media/teammates), mentoring younger athletes, setting ambitious goals, learning about themselves through competition (i.e., winning and losing) etc.). However, unfortunately, those informal ALD experiences were often impacted on by the male-dominated wrestling culture in general and high-performance wrestling culture in particular.

Participants described experiencing and overcoming challenges from their male colleagues and others who were close to them (e.g., unsupportive ‘friends’ and even family members). In wrestling in general (based on the interviewees recollections from their early wrestling careers) and in high-performance wrestling in particular, this study uncovered the experience of being body-shamed and belittled was near universal among the participants. Because wrestling is perceived to be a masculine sport (i.e., physical, combative, etc.), women who compete at the highest level are often questioned by outsiders, ‘friends’, and their families regarding their interest in the sport. Still, participants shared they were becoming more authentic and possessed the potential to become authentic leaders, because of their efforts, and also the efforts (i.e., role modelling) of their coaches, and the support of their family, senior teammates, and a particular kind of support from their NSO/NSF. Participants were found to be developing their resilience, confidence, optimism, hope, self-awareness, and their ability to self-regulate in becoming authentic leaders despite all the barriers they experienced competing and leading in the male-dominated sport.

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With respect to research question three (3) (What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of formal and informal authentic leadership development training among Canadian and Nigerian high-performance women wrestlers?), again, participants noted there were no formal leadership development programs offered by the NSO/NSF. However, participants did share several strengths (and some weaknesses) with respect to the informal ALD training they received. In terms of strengths, several participants shared they were initially timid when they first engaged in wrestling, yet through their participation in the sport, they developed not just communication skills, but also a desire to lead and the desire to develop/support others. Participants shared that (despite their successes in the sport) they found wrestling to be challenging and that they kept learning and developing each day, despite lacking formal programs/supports in leadership. Such findings further support Ingram's (2020) notion that through sport participation, girls can grow to be confident, and that sport can support them in rising to leadership roles in business. Despite lacking formal leadership support/training from the NSO/NSF, athletes shared they were developing their authentic traits, their self-awareness, their ability to self-regulate, and their ambition/desire to lead on and off the mat. So much so in fact that, despite athletes reporting their dissatisfaction with lacking formal ALD opportunities, it is unclear whether such formal programs would have been more impactful to the athletes' ALD than the impact of the present informal status quo was found to be on participants in this study.

In terms of weaknesses, the informal nature of the ALD experiences shared by participants (though they were mostly perceived to be positive) relied on the specific people (i.e., the coaches, senior teammates/role models, and junior teammates/mentees) who are currently (or, who were) involved with the Canadian and Nigerian national teams. Had it been presently or in future the case, on national teams, that the head coach does not offer the same informal

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opportunities, and/or that the seniors are not interested in supporting the juniors to the same extent found in this current study, lacking formal ALD systems may become an issue. However, given that athletes in this current study reported being (mostly) satisfied with the informal nature of the ALD opportunities, it is worth considering the existing framework as a guide to create a more formal ALD system – one that includes deliberate head coach support to each athlete and an awareness of their leadership goals/ambitions, formal role modelling on teams, and processes to ensure the experience of leading trainings/practices is shared (if not evenly, than at least occasionally) among the athletes on the team so that all may benefit as these participants once did. The same could be said for media availabilities and other public/PR/CSR initiatives with which the team is involved. Finally, it should be important to both acknowledge the challenges that high-performance women wrestlers go through (i.e., overt discrimination and body-shaming) and then work to eliminate them altogether (e.g., through education and monitoring).

### **Future Research**

Given participants reflected more so about trigger events and to the precursors to ALD *off the mat* and outside the purview of the NSO/NSFs, future researchers are invited to spend more time focused on these areas, as well as further exploring the role of athletes' families on ALD. Findings from this current study suggested that Canadian and Nigerian high performance women wrestlers were developing AL traits through and because of the sport of wrestling. That said, the researcher did not question participants as to whether they already possessed leadership abilities and/or philosophies prior to entering the sport. Exploring factors outside the sport, and in comparison to learnings from the sport, might provide some interesting insights or ideas that can be useful to coaches and sport administrators. For example, future sport managers may focus

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more time on investigating how parental involvement (or lack thereof) during the childhood/foundational years impacts athletes' ALD.

In this study, all the participants agreed that high-performance wrestling brought out their best in them, in terms of their leadership, attitude, mental toughness, confidence, and other positive qualities. Future researchers might further explore (or invite discussion on/around) the darker sides of leadership (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). The researcher is still interested to know, for example, whether participants' core values and ethical considerations may be in constant connection to and/or dissonance with authentic leadership qualities learned in high-performance wrestling, such that this may be a personal challenge participants need to overcome (Howell & Avolio, 1995). Perhaps it may be important and/or challenging for participants to balance their personal values, beliefs, and ethics with the demands of authentic leadership.

Future researchers may also conduct longitudinal research with a greater sample size of participants who are from other countries and/or from varied age categories in one NSO/NSF. It would be interesting to know, whether athletes are experiencing formal leadership programs at the youth age categories (as some participants described participating in leadership development programs during high school) versus at the high-performance level, and if so, why the decision was made to stop offering these programs at the U18/U23 age categories.

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APPENDICES

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

**Appendix A****Letter of Invitation [EMAIL #1]****Email subject line:**

Invitation to participate in a research study titled *An Exploration of Canadian and Nigerian High-Performance Women Wrestlers' Authentic Leadership Development Experiences in a Male-Dominated Sport*

**Email LOI sent from:** [aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca) CC: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca)

**Email content:**

**An Exploration of Canadian and Nigerian High-Performance Women Wrestlers' Authentic Leadership Development Experiences in a Male-Dominated Sport**

**Principal Student Investigator:** Aminat Adeniyi, (MA Candidate), Department of Sport Management at Brock University, Canada (e: [aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca))

**Faculty Supervisor:** Ryan Clutterbuck, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Sport Management at Brock University, Canada (e: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca))

Hello and thank you for your consideration to participate!

My name is Aminat Adeniyi, and I am a graduate student at Brock University (Department of Sport Management) working alongside my supervisor Dr. Ryan Clutterbuck (Department of Sport Management at Brock University, Canada).

Dr. Clutterbuck and I are thrilled to invite you to participate in this research project titled *An Exploration of Canadian and Nigerian High-Performance Women Wrestlers' Authentic Leadership Development Experiences in a Male-Dominated Sport*.

**If you would like to participate in this research project, please reply to this email stating that is your intention and Aminat will follow-up with you shortly.**

The purpose of this project is to explore and uncover the authentic leadership development experiences of women who compete at a high-performance level (e.g., athletes who represent their senior/elite national team, have competed at Olympic Games/Commonwealth Games).

It's common knowledge that women are underrepresented in top leadership roles in sport administration. And despite significant progress in terms of participation and opportunities in sport and sport leadership, still more needs to be done.

Thus, a goal of this project is to explore whether and to what extent high performing women wrestlers in Canada and Nigeria are being trained to become *authentic leaders*. In this study,

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*authentic leaders* are leaders who are themselves, know themselves, and are hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and have a morally informed future orientation that guides them.

Findings from this research are expected to benefit sport teams/organizations who are interested in supporting the development of women leaders. Individuals who participate in this research may also benefit from reflecting on their experiences as a high-performance wrestler and considering how that unique experience may be useful in a future leadership role.

Findings from this work will be disseminated via academic conference proceedings and written journal/popular press articles by the Principal Student Investigator and Faculty Supervisor. A summary report will also be sent (via email) to everyone who agrees to participate.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview (scheduled at a time and place or online/virtual platform that is most convenient for you) with the Principal Student Investigator, Aminat Adeniyi.

**If you would like to participate in this research project, please reply to this email stating that is your intention and Aminat will follow-up with you shortly.**

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality for interviewees during and after this research (e.g., the interview audio recordings will be destroyed once they are transcribed and only the Principal Student Investigator and Faculty Supervisor will have access to them).

Names and other identifying information will be removed from the transcripts (e.g., “Olympic/Commonwealth Games” will be replaced with “Major Competitions” and all names/identifying features will be changed to ensure confidentiality for all interviewees).

The interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes (maximum). Participants will also have the opportunity to review a summary report from their interview and the verbatim transcript (note: this is an optional process that can take an additional 15 to 75 minutes to complete).

If you have any questions about this research project, your rights as a research participant, or anything else relating to this research study, please contact the Principal Student Investigator (e: [aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca)), Faculty Supervisor (e: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca)) and/or the Brock University Office of Research Ethics (e: [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca) t: 905-688-5550 x. 3035).

Again, thank you for your time and consideration.

Aminat Adeniyi  
Graduate Student, Brock University, Canada e:  
[aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca)

Ryan Clutterbuck, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Brock University,  
Canada e: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca) t: 905-  
688-5550 x. 3112

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**Appendix B****Consent Form [EMAIL #2]****[INSERT DATE HERE]**

**Project Title:** An Exploration of Canadian and Nigerian High-Performance Women Wrestlers' Authentic Leadership Development Experiences in a Male-Dominated Sport

**Principal Student Investigator:** Aminat Adeniyi, Graduate Student (MA Candidate), Department of Sport Management at Brock University, Canada (e: [aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca))

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Ryan Clutterbuck, Assistant Professor, Department of Sport Management at Brock University, Canada (e: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca); t: 905-688-5550 x. 3112)

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research.

In order to participate in this research study, you must be a member of the Senior/elite Canadian women's national wrestling team OR the Senior/elite Nigerian women's national wrestling team. Wrestlers from the men's teams and wrestlers from the junior age categories are not eligible.

**WHAT IS INVOLVED**

You will be asked to participate in an interview with Aminat Adeniyi (the Principal Student Investigator) that will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes (maximum). You will be asked to reflect on your experiences as a high-performance wrestler and your experiences leading and learning to lead. Because the interviews are semi-structured (conversational), you will have an opportunity to expand on events/experiences/issues that are most important to you.

Interviews will be scheduled at a time and place that is most convenient for you and may be online (MS Teams/Zoom) or in-person (in a private room on campus at Brock University).

If you are interested in the online interview format, please take a moment to review the privacy statements for MS Teams: <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/microsoftteams/teams-privacy> and Zoom: <https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/>.

After the interview, you will also have the opportunity to review a summary report from your interview and the verbatim transcript (note: this is an optional process that can take an additional 15 to 75 minutes). You will have two weeks to respond with any requested changes. If we do not hear from you after two weeks, we must assume that you are comfortable with your responses.

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### RESEARCH PURPOSE (THE GOAL)

The purpose of this project is to explore and uncover the authentic leadership experiences of women who compete at a high-performance level (e.g., athletes who represent their senior/elite national team, have competed at Olympic Games/Commonwealth Games, etc.).

It's common knowledge that women are underrepresented in top leadership roles in sport administration. And despite significant progress in terms of participation and opportunities in sport and sport leadership, still more needs to be done.

Thus, one of the goals of this project is to explore whether and to what extent high performing women wrestlers in Canada and Nigeria are being trained to become *authentic leaders*.

### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

Aminat and Dr. Clutterbuck want to acknowledge that because there may be an existing relationship between you and Aminat (e.g., perhaps as friends or competitors), there may be a sense of obligation to participate in this research. While we both appreciate your consideration, **there is no obligation to participate.** Your decision to participate or not is yours to make.

With your right to not participate in mind, you will receive only two email communications from Aminat regarding this study ([1] the letter of invitation email and [2] a reminder email two weeks later). You will not be communicated to via telephone/text regarding this research study.

**Further, no information will be shared with Wrestling Canada/Nigeria and your participation or non-participation will not affect your standing with Wrestling Canada/Nigeria.**

During the interview, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any part of the interview process for any reason whatsoever. You may decide to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason (note: you will never be asked to provide a reason for your withdrawal). Further, there are no penalties for withdrawing. For example, if you wish to withdraw from the study but would still like a copy of the summary report that will be provided to you.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Benefits from participation may include a sense a gratification from having contributed to research that is intended to inform more and better leadership development opportunities for women and girls who are wrestlers.

You may also benefit from the reflective process (e.g., thinking about and discussing ways that your unique experiences have prepared you to lead).

You will also be provided with a summary report of key findings.

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

### POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no significant (or, unreasonable) risks to participating in this research.

As is true with any conversation (or, in this case, semi structured interview), it's possible that topics and issues may arise that make you or the interviewer uncomfortable (e.g., discussing leaders who may have been controlling or even abusive).

While this is not *the point* of this research project, it's important to acknowledge that it is possible that you (and/or the interviewer) may experience some distress if you recall or are asked to recall or expand on a traumatic experience that is shared during the interview.

To ensure such moments of discomfort do not lead to distress or deeper psychological harm, Aminat is prepared to manage these moments if/when they arise.

Please know that the purpose of the study is not to make you uncomfortable and if there are topics that arise that make you uncomfortable, please let Aminat know as soon as possible, so that those topics can be avoided. Aminat will also be looking for signs/symptoms of stress (e.g., mood changes/sweating) and will stop the interview if/when those signs/symptoms present.

### CONFIDENTIALITY & SECURITY

Your confidentiality is very important to us.

All information that is provided before, during, and after the interview is considered confidential. With that, all names and identifying characteristics (e.g., hometowns, schools attended, specific competitions, medals won, etc.) will be removed from the interview transcripts as soon as is possible and will not appear in any subsequent report (e.g., academic conference proceedings, journal articles, etc.).

During the interview itself, you may choose to turn off your camera at any time (if on MS Teams/Zoom) and ask the Principal Student Investigator not to use an audio recording device.

Data that is collected during this research will be stored in a secured location on the campus of Brock University for one year from the date Aminat completes her MA thesis defence (until approximately April 30, 2024), and on password protected computers that are accessible only by the Principal Student Investigator (Aminat) and Faculty Supervisor (Dr. Ryan Clutterbuck).

All data collected during this research will be destroyed (e.g., permanently deleted and/or shredded) one year after the date of Aminat's MA thesis defence.

### PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results from this study may be published in professional academic journals and presented at academic conferences (e.g., the North American Society for Sport Management Conference).



## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Results from this study will become part of the Principal Student Investigator's MA thesis and accessible through the Brock University Library. A summary report of the key findings will also be made available to all study participants.

If you are interested to receive the summary report (or, a copy of Aminat's thesis), please contact Aminat (e: [aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca)) or Dr. Clutterbuck (e: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca)).

## CONTACT INFORMATION & ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Aminat (e: [aadeniyi@brocku.ca](mailto:aadeniyi@brocku.ca)) or Dr. Clutterbuck (e: [rclutterbuck@brocku.ca](mailto:rclutterbuck@brocku.ca)).

This study has been reviewed at received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [INSERT FILE NUMBER HERE]. If you have comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at 905-688-5550 x. 3035 or via email at [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

## CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your assistance with this project.**

**Please keep a copy of this form for your records.**

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

**Appendix C****The Interview Guide**

Hello, and THANK YOU for agreeing to participate in this study, An Exploration of Canadian and Nigerian High-Performance Women Wrestlers ' Authentic Leadership Development Experiences in a Male-Dominated Sport!

Through this interview (or, conversation), I would like to gain a better understanding of how high-performance wrestling contributes to or develops *authentic leaders*. I would like to know more about your experience as a high performer and your career progression...

And, so you know, there are no right or wrong responses.

0. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

- **OBTAIN SIGNED CONSENT FORM AT THIS TIME**
- **CONFIRM INTERVIEWEE IS COMFORTABLE BEING AUDIO RECORDED**
- **START AUDIO RECORDING DEVICE(S)**

Okay, let's begin.

[DO NOT READ] ALDM Component: LIFE EXPERIENCES

1. Tell me about your background and wrestling career [in Canada OR in Nigeria].
  - a. PROBE: Can you tell me about your upbringing?
  - b. PROBE: How did you enter the sport of wrestling? And,
  - c. PROBE: What influenced your decision to pursue HP wrestling?

Now, I would like to define what authentic leadership is, so we're on the same page. According to Luthans and Avolio, authentic leaders "own their personal experiences (thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, "the real me inside") and act in accordance with their true self" (2003, p. 242).

"The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future oriented, and gives priority to developing [others] to be leaders" (p. 243).

I'm curious ...

2. Do you consider yourself to be a LEADER in wrestling? Or in other areas of your life?

[DO NOT READ] ALDM Component: TRIGGER EVENTS/CHALLENGES

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- a. ANS YES: *[Tell me more]* ...Can you recall a person/experience/or key event that influenced your decision to become a leader? *Please tell me about that.*
- b. ANS NO: Have you always felt that way? Was there a person/experience/or key event that influenced your decision NOT to become a leader? *Please tell me about that.*

## [DO NOT READ] ALDM Component: POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPACITIES

3. ANS YES: What are your LEADERSHIP GOALS in high performance women's wrestling? (Or in other areas of your life)?

## [DO NOT READ] ALDM Component: SELF AWARENESS/REGULATION

- a. PROBE: And, from your perspective, how important are CONFIDENCE, HOPE, OPTIMISM, and RESILIENCE to leaders in high-performance women's wrestling?
- b. PROBE: Do you consider these to be areas of strength or areas for improvement?

## [DO NOT READ] ALDM Component: SELF AWARENESS/REGULATION

4. ANS NO: What are your GOALS in high performance women's wrestling?
  - a. PROBE: And, from your perspective, how important are CONFIDENCE, HOPE, OPTIMISM, and RESILIENCE to athletes in high-performance women's wrestling?
  - b. PROBE: Do you consider these to be areas of strength or areas for improvement?

Thank you. Now ...

## [DO NOT READ] ALDM Component: POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

5. Can you please describe the impact (can be positive or negative) that the National Sport Organization (or National Sport Federation) has had on your wrestling career?

Now, I would like to discuss *leadership development*. And just so we're on the same page, *leadership development* can be formal or informal and typically involves learning about oneself as a leader and/or how to effectively lead others in sport and/or other contexts. I'm curious ...

6. Can you please reflect on the impact (can be positive or negative) that the National Sport Organization (or National Sport Federation) has had on your leadership development?
7. Can you please reflect on any FORMAL leadership development training you've received or experienced as a high-performance wrestler [in Canada OR Nigeria]?

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- a. Probe: ...with the national team/elsewhere?
  - b. Probe: ...what did you learn from those formal trainings?
  - c. Probe: ...do you feel those experiences have prepared you to lead in the future?
8. Can you please reflect on any INFORMAL leadership development training you've experienced as a high-performance wrestler? (e.g., mentorship; coaching opportunities)
- a. Probe: ...with the national team/elsewhere?
  - b. Probe: ...what did you learn from those informal experiences?
  - c. Probe: ...do you feel those experiences have prepared you to lead in the future?
9. In what ways has the sport of wrestling helped or hindered your leadership development?
- a. Probe: ...are there experiences you believe were most useful/impactful?
  - b. Probe: ...are there experiences you wish would have been provided to you?
10. Can you please describe your experience competing in a male-dominated sport?
- a. Probe: ...is there anything else you would like to add/comment on?
11. Do you have any advice for your younger self/aspiring women wrestlers?

### **In Conclusion**

- Do you have any questions for me?
- Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

In terms of next steps, you will receive an email from me (soon) that includes a [1] Summary Report from our interview and the [2] verbatim transcript from this interview. If you would like to see any changes made to your responses, please let me know and I'll be happy to do that.

Again,

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses.

If you have other questions/comments/or concerns, please contact me anytime.

Bye for now.

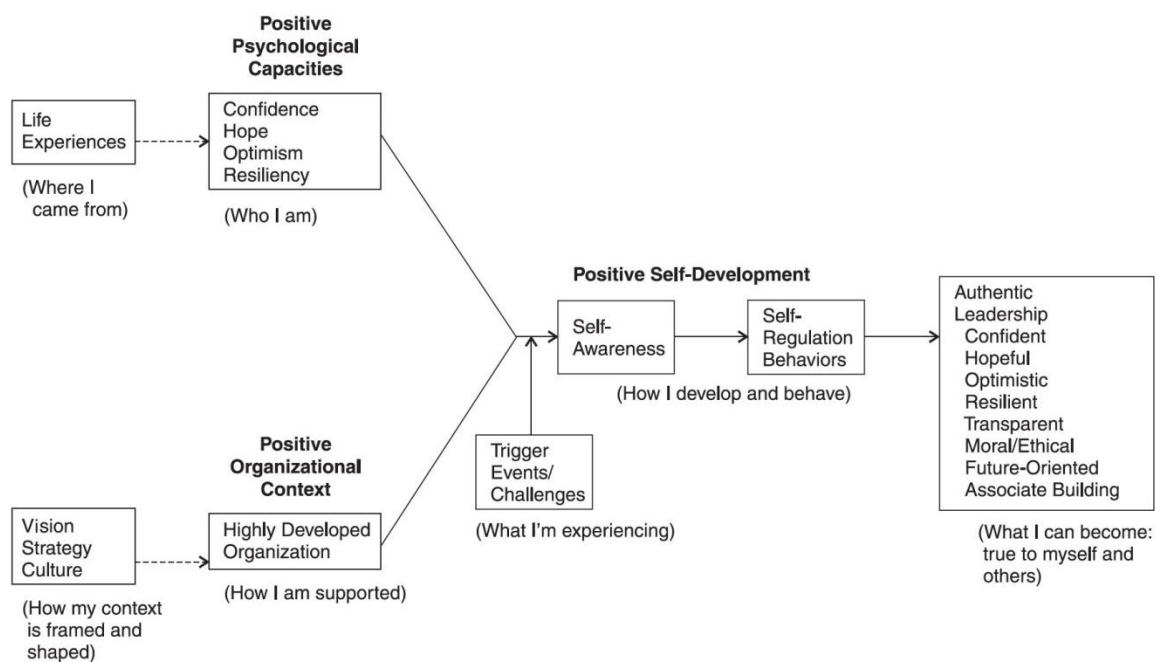
**END**

## AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

## Appendix D

Figure 1

*Luthans and Avolio's (2003) Authentic Leadership Development Model*



*Note.* From Luthans, F., & Avolio, B. (2003). Authentic leadership development. In K. S. Cameron & J. E. Dutton. *Positive organizational scholarship*: 241-254. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.