

**PLAYING THE CREATIVE ADVANTAGE:
CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY OF FEMALE LEADERS
IN SPORTS MEDIA MARKETING**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Julie Koonce Morris

May 2025

Acknowledgments

This dissertation represents more than the culmination of research toward earning a doctorate degree; it embodies perseverance, personal growth, love, support from a team of relentless encouragers, and a deep-rooted commitment to lifelong learning and discovery.

Before I ever conjured up the idea of pursuing a Ph.D., I was blessed with the steadfast support of my parents, Roger and JoAnn Koonce, who instilled in me, through their actions and words, the belief that I could do anything I set my mind to. My mother was one of the hardest working people that I ever knew. Her tireless work ethic and insatiable thirst for learning follow me through life as well. My father, a leader in production and media, lit the spark of my passion for storytelling and was always my biggest cheerleader. When the journey seemed insurmountable and my courage to press on waned, I would imagine him saying “Julie Bug, it is time to pull yourself by the bootstraps,” and the fear or anxiety passed leading me to take “next bite of this big elephant.” Both of my parents have been gone for some years now, but their presence and impact are woven into the fiber of everything that I attempt or accomplish. I have shared this journey with them every step of the way.

To my mother-in-law, JoAn Morris (Gigi), and my late father-in-law, Max Morris (Poppa), your love and confidence in me over the past few years have been a profound source of strength. Gigi, your motherly belief, and encouragement has been a steady light in this journey. Poppa, I wish I could have finished in time to celebrate this accomplishment with you—you were always one of my greatest champions and I will be forever grateful for the months we had together during this journey listening to your childhood stories, laughing together, and taking in your sage advice and encouragement. “Jesus loves you and so do I” rings true in my mind daily.

To my committee members: Guy, thank you for the feedback and the qualitative learning questions. Your approachable demeanor and informed perspective that challenged my lens and offered me advice on being true to myself as a researcher. Laura, your class was one of my firsts in the program and will forever be a favorite. I not only learned about theory but also about connecting with students and effective teaching. Thank you for leaving such a lasting impact on me. Sarah, your passion, and smarts have inspired me for nearly 10 years now, but it is your empathy and heart that have impacted the world (literally). I have experienced your faithful service to others again and again and am grateful to have been a part of it all in some small way. Thank you for always being there with high fives and encouragement. To Nick, my major professor and guide through both my master's and doctoral journey. You have made me better, think deeper and differently, and I am honored and humbled by your creative energy, your support, your investment in my success, and your friendship. I truly hope to continue to collaborate with and learn from you all.

To my daughter, Samantha, my best good friend, and constant source of light—your upbeat texts and calls declaring, “You’ve got this!” or “You can do it!” have been my lifeline. Seeing you walk across the stage having earned your own degree in Finance will always be a highlight of my life. What an example you modeled for your own strong girls. I see so much of you in this research—creativity and all the strengths and mindsets that support it are woven through your identity. Your resilience, empathy for others, inclusivity of people and perspective, your curiosity to understand, your ability to pivot and adapt, your positive and encouraging nature, your loyalty, and your seemingly fearless drive to advocate for what is right----these are the makings of an amazing creative leader, and I am so immensely proud to be your mother. I truly cannot imagine this experience or my daily life without you by my side.

To my longtime friend and cohort friend, Mark, starting this journey with you during Covid was scary, right? But we pressed on. Class after class and milestone after milestone, you are the person that I know “gets it” because we are in this together. I have loved having the opportunity to learn and grow beside you. You have such a sharp intellect (a remarkable brain); I leave our academic conversations curious and a bit more enlightened. To me, you have become a brilliant scholar, but you have been an even better friend and have made this journey both manageable and meaningful. I cannot wait to celebrate with you soon as well.

To my students in the Haslam College of Business, you inspire me every single day. Teaching senior-level marketing classes, as well as Human-Centered Leadership in London with the Smith Global Leadership Scholars Honors program, has been an incredible privilege. You are the next generation of marketers and leaders who will make a difference, create inclusive cultures, and demand supportive environments where creativity can flourish. Your passion, curiosity, and drive give me hope for the future of this field and the world beyond it.

I am especially grateful for the support of my dean, Steve Mangum, and my department head of marketing, Alex Zablah, in the Haslam College of Business for your encouragement, flexibility and support over the past few years. There are too many more to name, but I am also grateful for so many of my university and Haslam colleagues and friends, as well. Earning a Ph.D. in my 50s often felt like an impossible feat and there were times I could not see the end of this long tunnel, but I am forever grateful that in the moments that I faltered, you believed in me and lifted me up, even carried me a bit so that I could get back on my own feet and press on.

Finally, to Lane, my rock, my heart, my person—for more than 20 years, you have been my anchor in every academic achievement that I have pursued. The landscape of our beautiful story together has traversed into the lowest valleys and scaled the highest mountains and that is

what has made us special – our love endures through the extreme weather of life. We have done the challenging work of blending families and raising three accomplished kids. We have lost parents, mourned friends, and navigated the stress of tenure, promotion, and career shifts. We have focused our foundation on God and have been blessed with so many opportunities to encourage and prepare others, to travel and experience incredible places, to design a dream, and to build a farm that not only brought us closer but also offered sanctuary and a second chance to so many others (human, furry, or feathered). I am so grateful that we have always found a way to grow together and persevere—our love truly endures. I am grateful for your daily intentionality to focus on God’s spirit that grounds us both. I am grateful for your unwavering confidence in me and your selfless support of my dreams (Can I have a highland cow for graduation? Maybe two? This was hard). I am most grateful for the life we have built together and for the adventures yet to come. Loving you and being loved by you is one of my greatest blessings.

To my faithful friends, precious family, and everyone who stood by me, cheered for me, and walked alongside me on this crazy after-50 academic journey—thank you. If you ever questioned your own abilities or have big dreams — just relax and repeat Pat Summit, legendary Lady Vols basketball coach ’s mantra, “*Left foot, right foot, breathe.*” Just keep moving forward. Trust me, If I can do it, so can you.

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how female leaders in sports media marketing define, develop and enact their creative role identity within the organizational context of a historically male-dominated industry. Four guiding research questions offer a foundation to explore how participants define creativity as a part of their role, how creativity extends to their leadership, how their personal and professional journey shaped their leadership, and how the organizational culture and context constrain or support creativity.

One-on-one interviews with 12 female leaders in sport media marketing highlighted competencies to define creativity as a part of their role identity. Growth mindsets were also emphasized as antecedents to enacting creativity within their role identity. Leadership styles that fostered creativity included core components of both transformational and human-centered leadership and were often blended with a situational to achieve results. An emphasis on collaboration, psychological safety, and empowering others was woven into creative leadership approaches. Creative leadership was influenced by personal and professional experiences highlighted as building resilience, the positive influence of mentorship and allies, and the impact of participation in sport. Organizational cultures where authentic value was placed on collaboration and inclusivity aligned with fostering creativity while barriers linked to streamlining and lack of communication limited how leaders enacted creativity.

The findings of this research translate into practical recommendations for female leaders and aspiring female leaders seeking to strengthen and enhance creative thinking within their role identities as well as organizational recommendations to creative inclusive and supporting environments that foster creativity. The findings and practical application support the critical role the self-efficacy and enacting creativity plays in the leadership and professional success of

females in sport media marketing, expand the definition of creativity beyond roles, offer insight to enhance creative thinking and female representation in the industry, and highlight the need for organizations to be intentional about creating inclusive and safe environments where creativity can thrive.

Keywords: Creative role identity, organizational creativity, sports media marketing, female leaders, creativity, creative leadership, media marketing, organizational culture.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION	1
THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH.....	4
RESEARCH LENS	5
CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
DEFINING CREATIVITY.....	9
<i>Bounding the Definition of Creativity.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Measuring Creativity</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Levels of Creativity</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Studying Creativity.....</i>	<i>13</i>
ROLE IDENTITY AND CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY THEORY.....	15
<i>Individual/Role Identity</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Creative Role Identity</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Sensemaking Process and Identity Creation.....</i>	<i>17</i>
ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY, CULTURE & IDENTITY.....	17
<i>Historical Context.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Organizational Culture</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Organizational Identity.....</i>	<i>20</i>
NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING IN RESEARCH	21
<i>Uncovering Nuanced Experiences of Creativity and Leadership.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Using Stories to Understand Creative Identity.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Theoretical and Practical Implications of Narrative Inquiry.....</i>	<i>23</i>
WOMEN, CREATIVITY, SPORT & LEADERSHIP	24

<i>Defining Traits, Mindsets and Competencies</i>	24
<i>Gender and Traits</i>	25
<i>Gender, Competencies & Leadership Approach</i>	26
<i>Barriers to Leadership for Women</i>	28
<i>Pathways to Leadership and Creativity for Women</i>	31
<i>Developing Strong Female Leaders Through Sport</i>	33
CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY	36
A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY METHODOLOGIES.....	37
<i>Why use Qualitative Methodology</i>	37
METHODS	37
<i>One-On-One Interviews</i>	37
<i>Participants</i>	40
RESEARCH DATA & PROCESS	42
<i>Researcher Journal</i>	42
<i>Organizational Artifacts</i>	43
<i>One-on-One Zoom-Based Interviews</i>	43
<i>Transcribe Interviews</i>	44
<i>Analyze and Code</i>	44
<i>Preparing the report</i>	45
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	46
SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS.....	46
BRACKETING STATEMENT	48
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS	50

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS	50
<i>Educational and Professional Path to Sport Media Marketing</i>	50
<i>Gendered Perspective as a Female Professional in Sport Media Marketing</i>	51
RESEARCH QUESTION ONE: DEFINING CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY	52
CONTEXT MATTERS DEFINING CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY	53
<i>Creativity is Unique to Industry</i>	53
<i>Roles Often Define “Creativity”</i>	55
COMPETENCIES ARE USED TO DEFINE CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY	57
<i>Problem Solving is Creativity</i>	57
<i>Collaboration is Key to Creativity</i>	58
<i>Negotiation is Creativity</i>	59
<i>Process Improvement is Creativity</i>	61
MINDSETS ARE USED TO DEFINE CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY	62
<i>Empathy is Foundational</i>	63
<i>Curiosity Leads to Creativity</i>	64
<i>Adaptability Sparks Creative Solutions</i>	64
<i>Creative Confidence Leads to Voice</i>	66
RESEARCH QUESTION TWO: ENACTING CREATIVITY THROUGH LEADERSHIP	68
TEAM MANAGEMENT PRACTICES SUPPORT CREATIVITY	69
<i>Fostering Collaboration Inspires Creativity</i>	69
<i>Practicing Empathy Leads to Creativity</i>	71
<i>Empowering Others Leads to Creative Growth</i>	73
<i>Creating Psychological Safety Enhances Creativity</i>	74

<i>Open Communication Prepares Creative Advocates</i>	76
ENACTED LEADERSHIP STYLES CAN SUPPORT CREATIVITY	77
<i>Transformational and Human Centered Leaders Engage Creativity.....</i>	78
<i>Situational Leadership Navigates Challenges</i>	79
<i>Change Leaders Take Action</i>	80
RESEARCH QUESTION THREE: THE INTERSECTION OF LIFE AND LEADERSHIP: CREATIVE	
IDENTITY THROUGH EXPERIENCE.....	82
GENDER CAN BE AN ASSET OR A HINDERANCE	84
<i>Gender Can Offer Unique Perspective</i>	84
<i>Gender Bias Exists</i>	84
CATALYSTS FOR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH.....	86
<i>Challenges Can Develop Resilience</i>	86
<i>Mentors and Allies are Gamechangers.....</i>	87
PARTICIPATION IN SPORT DEVELOPS STRONGER FEMALE LEADERS.....	90
<i>Sports Require a Strong Work Ethic</i>	90
<i>Understanding Team Dynamics is an Advantage.....</i>	91
<i>Resilience in Sport Transfers to Life.....</i>	92
<i>Competitiveness Helps Women Navigate.....</i>	93
RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR: BRIDGES AND BARRIERS: CREATIVITY IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL	
CONTEXT	93
ORGANIZATIONS CAN SUPPORT INDIVIDUAL CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY	96
<i>A Culture of Collaboration Ignites Creativity</i>	96
<i>Inclusivity Brings New Perspectives to Creativity.....</i>	96

<i>Psychological Safety Unleashes Creativity</i>	97
ORGANIZATIONAL BARRIERS DIMINISH INDIVIDUAL CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY	99
<i>Bureaucratic Challenges Hinder Collaboration</i>	99
<i>Gender Bias Undermines the Ideas of Women</i>	100
MISSION AND VALUES ANALYSIS	101
CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION	103
INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS	103
<i>RQ1: Defining Creative Role Identity</i>	103
<i>RQ2: Enacting Creativity: Leader & Team Management</i>	107
<i>RQ3: Personal and Professional Experiences</i>	111
<i>RQ4: The Bridges and Barriers of Organizational Culture</i>	115
CONSIDERATION OF EXISTING RESEARCH.....	118
IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, LEADERS, AND ORGANIZATIONS	121
CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION	124
SUMMARY OF THE STUDY	124
KEY FINDINGS SUMMARY	125
<i>Defining Role Identity (RQ1)</i>	125
<i>Enacting Creativity through Leadership Approach and Team Management (RQ2)</i>	125
<i>Personal and Professional Experiences (RQ3)</i>	126
<i>Organizational Culture and Identity (RQ4)</i>	126
THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS.....	126
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS	128
<i>For Female Leaders in Sports Media</i>	128

<i>For Women Aspiring to Enter Sports Media</i>	129
<i>For Sports Media Organizations</i>	130
LIMITATIONS OF STUDY	131
SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	131
FINAL REFLECTIONS	132
REFERENCES	135
APPENDICES	149
APPENDIX A: COMPLETE INTERVIEW GUIDE	149
APPENDIX B: APPROVED IRB EMAIL FOR PARTICIPANTS	150
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT AND APPROVAL TO RECORD (IRB APPROVED SCRIPT)	151
APPENDIX D: LIST OF THEMES/CONCEPTS AND CODES	152
APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL LETTER	157
APPENDIX F: ANONYMIZED PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS.....	158
VITA	159

List of Tables

<i>Table 1:</i> barriers to leadership for women.....	30
<i>Table 2:</i> research questions aligned with interview questions.....	39
<i>Table 3:</i> organizational artifact analysis.....	102

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1:</i> thematic map for Research Question 1	54
<i>Figure 2:</i> thematic map for Research Question 2	70
<i>Figure 3:</i> thematic map for Research Question 3	83
<i>Figure 4:</i> thematic map for Research Question 4	95

Chapter I. Introduction

Creativity is one of the most sought-after competencies in business today (Forrester, 2014). Within the media industry, organizational creativity and leadership are crucial to ensure that these organizations remain competitive in this rapidly changing and constantly evolving business landscape (Sadi & Al-Dubaisi, 2008). According to Lee et al. (2020), organizational growth depends on the ability to generate new or novel ideas (creativity) and then bringing the most promising ideas to successful implementation (innovation). These connected concepts are pivotal to the future success of media organizations (Acar et al., 2019; Dwyer, 2016; Malmelin & Nivari-Lindström, 2017).

For media organizations to grow their creative capacities, they must first gain a better understanding of creativity, how it exists as a part of their organization's identity and culture, how the leaders charged with creative output define creativity within their roles, how that impacts the creation of their own identity, and how leadership styles and strengths support creativity. Understanding how creativity is enacted and perceived within roles and organizations can better position media organizations' ability to innovate, differentiate, and remain competitive in an increasingly cluttered and fragmented marketplace.

In marketing, creativity is crucial to differentiate brands, products, experiences, and services. Creative content is more likely to capture the attention of potential customers and is rooted in the motivations of the target audience. Creativity is a driver of audience engagement, unique branding, and differentiation (McIntyre, 1993; Oliver & Ashley, 2012). Creativity in marketing can elevate a business and its products (Knox, 1990; Ramocki, 1994). It can affect people on an emotional level (Yang & Smith, 2009). It can turn challenges and constraints into opportunities. Further, in a world full of clutter, creative marketing is more likely to be

remembered by customers (Reinartz & Saffert, 2013). Within media marketing, the competition is fierce, and the field is cluttered with entertainment options across numerous platforms (e.g., television, live event streaming, web content, apps, etc.) (Caser & Oelkers, 2022). Creativity is no longer a luxury but a necessity for media organizations to succeed (Clegg & Burdon, 2019; Dwyer, 2016; Malmelin & Virta, 2020).

Female Leaders, Sports Industry, and Sports Media

This study focuses on female marketing leaders within the sports media industry and is situated around the construct of creativity. The sports media industry is predicted to expand from \$26.2 billion in 2021 to \$30.8 billion by 2027 (Mobility Foresights, 2022). Leaders in this industry will significantly impact the content covered, how the athletes are portrayed, the perspectives considered, the sports experiences for viewers, and how sports brands are perceived. The decisions that are left in their hands will impact as much as 70% (i.e., 231 million) sports fans in the United States (Levy, 2020). The stakes are high, and women remain underrepresented in sports media leadership roles, making up less than 20% of the workforce (Mobility Foresights, 2022).

Sports media marketing is a niche area of marketing and refers to the tactics and strategies used to promote sport-focused content as well as sport brands, teams, and even athletes through a myriad of media channels including television, social media, print, digital platforms and sponsorships (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Professionals in sports media marketing are integral to the commercial strategy and narratives of sports media. These critical niche marketing roles create strategies and campaigns that drive brands; align brands with media outlets to maximize revenue, enlist digital outlets, social media, and streaming platforms to engage and expand audiences for sport programming; and oversee how content is formed and marketed and even

how it is delivered. These marketing roles are pivotal in understanding the media consumption trends in sport audiences and innovating to ensure the success of sport media organizations.

The underrepresentation of women in sports media extends to leadership roles and creative contributions. While the rise in interest in women's sports is documented, including 66% of the population interested in at least one women's sport and 84% of general sports fans interested in women's sports (Nielson Sports, 2018), the same excitement and representation has not been transferred to the sport-focused workplace. Research indicates that gendered differences extend beyond the journalistic coverage of sport into the decision-making leadership roles and the organizational cultures (Lapchick et al., 2021). This challenge is limiting to individuals and the potential success of media organizations.

This study examines the experiences of 12 women leaders in sports media marketing, and how they define creativity, enact it within their role identity and leadership, and how organizational dynamics affect creative identity. Limitations related to sample size and methodology will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Considering creativity from the perspective of women working in the sport media industry offers perspective and understanding into how gender, creativity, leadership, and role identities connect. Further, by exploring the influence of organizational dynamics on the formation of creative role identity, this research sheds light on actions and cultural elements that constrain or support creativity.

Creative role identity theory, as outlined by Farmer et al. (2003), provides a framework for understanding how individuals integrate creativity into their own professional identity and how organizational support shapes this process. By considering the way in which successful women in sport media marketing shape, enact, and sustain their creative role identity this

research deepens existing knowledge of creativity in this unique professional context as well as offers insights into the individual role identity, leadership, and organizational dynamics in sport media.

The Importance of this Research

The shifting landscape of the modern workforce places immense value on individual creativity. A 2018 survey of 400 executives, expressed “creative thinking” as a key strength that they sought in their employees (Accenture Skills and Employment Trends Survey: Perspectives on Training, 2018). Another survey of 1,500 CEOs went further, finding that creativity was the most critical skill for the future (Lombardo & Roddy, 2010). In a society that considers creativity to be a highly valuable form of capital, individuals deemed to possess genuinely innovative, cutting-edge ideas are likely to be increasingly rewarded (Proudfoot & Fath, 2021). Windels and Lee (2012), suggested that women are less likely than men to have their creative thinking recognized. This research not only points to a unique reason women may be passed over for corporate leadership positions but also suggests why women also remain absent from elite circles within creative industries, such as film and advertising. Understanding the nuanced ways that creativity is displayed across gender --- including cognitive styles, social context, and strategies is particularly relevant (Abraham, 2015). The social context is particularly relevant in traditionally male-dominated industries, where women’s contributions are often undervalued.

This study contributes to creativity studies, marketing, leadership, media studies, organizational theory, and the sports media industry. The following chapters will address four research questions through the voices and experiences of the female marketing leaders who participated:

RQ1: How do women in sports media and marketing define creativity as part of their professional role identity?

RQ2: How do women enact their creative role identity through their work and the management of their team?

RQ3: How do women perceive the influence of their personal and professional journey on their creative role identity?

RQ4: What role does organizational culture play in supporting or constraining the creative identities and team management of women in sports media marketing?

The key findings and insights learned through this will offer real word value to sport organizations and leaders seeking to enable creativity. Additionally, as women continue to develop and advance into leadership roles, possessing insight into how they perceive and enact their own creativity can provide professional growth and development opportunities. The participants' personal experiences of defining creativity as a part of self, how they enact creativity within roles and organizational context can offer guidance on ways to develop and support environments where creativity thrives.

Research Lens

My work explores how female leaders in sports media and marketing define and enact their creative role identities within the context of sports media organizations, a historically male dominated industry. This study applies a lens of organizational theory to garner insight and understand how creativity acts as a core component of professional identity and the social construction of it within the context of organizational life.

More specifically, my work will look at how female leaders define creativity within their roles and what it looks like as a part of their leadership practices. It also considers how the

organizational context can either suppress or support creativity. Given that the participants in this study are female leaders in a male dominated industry, this research could also be considered in the body of literature on feminist standpoint theory which asserts the unique perspectives of marginalized groups (women in a male dominated industry) is shaped through their lived experiences. In other words, the participants perspectives on creativity are likely influenced by their position as the minority of women in sports media marketing (Hekman, 1997). While I did not shy away from sharing their gendered perspective, this study was situated in organizational theory and intentionally focused on understanding creativity and role identity as socially constructed and dynamic processes.

This study is grounded in a social constructivist epistemology and utilizes both phenomenological and interpretivist approaches to emphasize the lived experiences from the participant's perspectives. Expanding on organizational theory of role identity, creative role identity theory, as outlined by Farmer et al. (2003), will be used as the conceptual framework for understanding how individuals define and actively integrate creativity into their own professional identity. This framework will use the individuals' self-perception of creativity as a lens to understand how it is perceived and practiced in a specific organizational context.

Chapter II. Literature Review

This research stems from my fascination with the way in which people identify as creative and how that is enacted within organizations and more specifically, the ways in which female leaders navigate male-dominated fields like sports media marketing. My study is centered on creativity—both as a competency and as an integral part of leadership identity—and seeks to explore how women define, enact, and sustain their creative and professional roles within organizational cultures. While power dynamics and gendered structures are important contextual elements, this work focuses instead on understanding creativity and role identity as socially constructed and dynamic processes.

I will begin by examining the foundational concept of creativity, considering the varying definitions, types of creativity, as well as highlight what it looks like within an organizational context. For this research, creativity is framed as a cognitive and organizational phenomenon. Within this unique combination of artistic, cognitive, and organizational considerations, creativity is not only expressed as art but also extends application and definitions to tackling organizational challenges and leadership. I also explore how creativity is both socially bounded and context-dependent, offering insight to industries, like sports media marketing, where new ideas and approaches that also add organizational value are critical.

Building on this foundation, I investigate theoretical frameworks of organizational theory and more specifically, role identity and creative role identity theory as well as sensemaking to understand how female leaders perceive and define themselves and their creative contributions within their professional roles. Drawing from Mead's "ideal self" and Goffman's theories on identity adaptation, I explore how women make sense of their context to construct and adapt

their identities (Goffman, 1974; Wieland, 2010). These frameworks help illuminate how women balance their creative aspirations with the demands of organizational environments.

Organizational culture is created through socially constructed realities created by the people who work there (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Drawing on humanistic perspectives, I also explore the broader system dynamics of organizational culture and identity and how they might constrain or support creative effort and identities of female leaders.

The concluding section of this literature review will focus on the unique context and experiences of women, sport, and leadership. I will expand on transformational and human-centered leadership styles often associated with women and explore the practices of empathy, collaboration, and resilience linked to these leadership styles. Further, I will connect participation in competitive sports to the formation of strong foundational leadership skills, such as teamwork, collaboration, and perseverance that carry into professional life. Lastly, this section also addresses the barriers (e.g., gender bias and organizational structures) and pathways (e.g., mentorship) to leadership for women.

This literature review provides a and understanding of how creativity, leadership, identity and organizational culture and identity intersect. By weaving this knowledge together and grounding my work in these concepts, I seek to understand how female leaders in sports media marketing define creativity in their own identity and roles as well as how they navigate their organizational context. Through a thorough understanding and study of the current body of knowledge paired with the experiences and insights of the participants of this study, this work offers valuable insights and strategies for current and future female leaders and their organizations to enable their success. Each section builds on the other, creating a layered

understanding of the complex and dynamic interplay between creativity, identity, and leadership in this unique context.

Defining Creativity

Types of Creativity

There are two types of creativity. Cognitive that is associated with critical thinking skills, idea generation, and problem solving and artistic creativity, which is a blend of creative ability and personal expression, usually seen in the arts (music, composition, acting, dance, etc.) (Abraham, 2015). My work considers cognitive creativity and is rooted in the context of business. The primary difference in this type of creativity is that it is not for the sake of being creative (artistic) but rather is creativity focused on meeting specified business goals by problem solving in novel ways. This kind of creativity can lead to new product ideas, procedures, events, spaces, experiences, etc.

Further, Kaufman and Sternberg (2010) suggest that creativity can be dissected into three categories: 1) exploratory creativity which is about generating new ideas within a given context 2) combinational creativity which builds on the ideas and knowledge that already exists (consciously or subconsciously) to evolve, combine, and adapt in order to find novel ideas and solutions, and 3) transformational creativity which involves radical thinking--throwing out the rules, knowledge and assumptions of how things work and behave in order to challenge and find new realities (e.g., ignoring the rules and knowledge of gravity to uncover new and novel things that change how we do things). Transformational creativity, however, is rare and certainly not a part of everyday business practices as it is especially risky and not remotely cost-effective (Boden, 1994). This research will primarily focus on exploratory and combinational types of cognitive creativity that is an everyday part of business and is situated within individual

identities, teams, and organizations --- this is also known as organizational creativity (Amabile, 1985).

Bounding the Definition of Creativity

Creativity is both a product and a process, something that people are and something they do, making it both a noun and a verb (Amabile, 1985). The hallmarks of creativity include ideas that are novel, original, and effective (Amabile, 1985; Plucker, 2021; Runco, 2014; Weisberg, 2015). In organizational contexts, creativity must not only be original but also add value to the organization (Amabile, 1985; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010; Mumford, 2012).

While creativity is often used interchangeably with innovation, the two are distinct with creativity as an antecedent to innovation. In other words, creativity is the messy work of idea generation and innovation is the implementation of one of those ideas. Other words associated with creativity include inventiveness, originality, inspiration, and imagination. These terms are more inherently a part of the creative process of creativity rather than synonyms (Plucker, 2021; Weisberg, 2015).

Critical to this study, creativity is a contextually and socially bound construct. What is useful and novel in one context may not be in another. It is not generalizable, what is viewed as creative are bound by the unique context (Amabile, 1998; Mumford, 2012; Plucker, 2021). Building on this, creativity is value-free and the social bounding of it would suggest that the creation of a novel and useful idea may be useful to one person or organization, and harmful to another (Ponzi schemes, undermining an enemy, etc.). In this way, the criteria of meeting “goals” or offering “value” to an organization could be focused to a positive or negative end (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Cropley et al., 2010; Weisberg, 2015). This research is interested in the social bounding of creativity and identity through the lens of female leaders within a male-

dominated industry. The way in which these women define and enact creativity as a part of their constructed identities within their organizational context is both complex and situational.

Organizational creativity, which arises from individual contributions, differs from personal creative efforts that are unrelated to work contexts (e.g., writing a novel).

Understanding the interplay between individual, team, and organizational creativity is critical for examining how creativity manifests within professional settings (Amabile, 1985a; Mumford, 2012).

Measuring Creativity

Understanding that creativity is multifaceted and context dependent in nature leads to considerable challenges in measuring. Individual creativity is often considered through self-reports, supervisor evaluations or even psychographic tools. Divergent thinking tests to get a sense of an individual's ability to "think out of the box" or generate multiple solutions to a challenge are also used to consider an individual's ability to think originally (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012). Kelley (2001) suggests that self-reports and creative identity scales offer insight into individual confidence around their creative abilities. An evaluation prepared by a supervisor lends an external perspective on an individual's creativity, but these are often influenced by the organizational context, norms and bias, and value placed on creativity (El-Murad & West, 2004).

Team creativity is measured through both processes and outcomes. Process-oriented measures examine team dynamics, such as the diversity of perspectives, collaboration, and the presence of psychological safety (Amabile, 1998; Dutcher & Rodet, 2022). Outcome-based measures evaluate the tangible results of team efforts, such as innovative products, marketing campaigns, or solutions. These outcomes are often judged by experts, customers, or market performance (Shalley & Gilson, 2004).

At the organizational level, creativity is primarily evaluated based on its contribution to performance metrics, including revenue, market share, and customer satisfaction (Forrester, 2014). Surveys are frequently used to assess the organizational climate for creativity, focusing on factors like leadership support, resource availability, and cultural attitudes toward innovation (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012).

Even with a myriad of methods and approaches to measurement, the complexity of creativity remains elusive and difficult to measure with certainty. Self-Reports and psychometric tools can offer a sense of an individual's creative ability; however, they are subjective and rely on how an individual perceives and defines creativity. This is also true for measuring team and organizational creativity which weigh outcomes heavily with little consideration for motivation or effort toward meaningful creativity. Measuring creativity must be as multidimensional as the construct itself and capturing the full picture of creative effort for individuals, teams, or organizations simply underscores the need layering of current approaches and continued research.

Levels of Creativity

Creativity functions at three interconnected levels within organizations: individual, team, and organizational. Each level is influenced by distinct antecedents, barriers, and outcomes, which together shape how creativity is perceived and enacted.

At the individual level, intrinsic motivation, psychological safety, and creative self-efficacy are critical antecedents that enable creative engagement (Amabile, 1985; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Barriers include fixed mindsets, fear of rejection, and constraints on time and resources (Dweck, 1996; Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Outcomes range from increased job

satisfaction and self-confidence to frustration and disengagement when creativity is stifled (Bharadwaj, 2000).

At the team level, cognitive diversity and collaborative leadership foster creative synergy, while poor leadership and conflict hinder it (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Dutcher & Rodet, 2022). Effective team creativity results in improved innovation and cohesion, while ineffective dynamics lead to missed opportunities (Aggarwal & Woolley, 2019).

At the organizational level, a culture that encourages experimentation and supports risk-taking enhances creativity, while rigid structures and a focus on short-term efficiency limit it (Luecke, 2003; Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Positive outcomes include increased revenue, market share, and employee satisfaction, whereas negative outcomes reflect wasted resources and diminished morale (Amabile, 1998).

Studying Creativity

There is a myriad of theories that consider creativity including creative process models (Kelley, 2001; Mumford, 2012), Sternberg's propulsion theory of creative contributions (Sternberg, 2019), and Amabile's componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 1985), but they all revolve around four key questions. These questions guide our understanding of how creativity is defined, enacted, and sustained within organizational contexts.

First, who is creative? This question considers the characteristics and paths of creative individuals. The related theories examine the skills and traits an individual possesses that are integral to creativity and focuses on the mindsets (antecedents) the jumpstart creative thinking and effort (Mumford, 2012). This research is relevant to this study because understanding who is creative can offer insight into how an individual ultimately defines themselves as creative leaders within their organizational context.

Second, how are people creative? The theories related to these questions describe the factors and processes that lead to creative outcomes. Theories, such as the creative process model and associative theory, evaluate how individuals, teams, leadership, and organizational dynamics support or hinder creativity (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010; Mumford, 2012). This lens is also especially applicable to this research as it considers the factors within the organization that help to shape the participant's definition and identity around creativity.

Third, why are people creative? Theories getting to the heart of this question consider the motivations and emotions that drive creative thinking and effort. For example, Amabile's Theory of Organizational Creativity suggests three essential ingredients for creative output: an individual's knowledge, their creative thinking skills, and motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) (Amabile, 1985). This theoretical approach informs how we define creative identity but also how it is affected by internal motivation and organizational support.

Finally, what is creative? The theories attempting to answer this question focus on the outcomes of creativity and explore the way that creativity is recognized across a myriad of contexts. One particularly relevant example is Sternberg's Propulsion Theory of Creative Contributions. This theory looks at the broad social context of creative effort including how the effort is recognized, as well as the creative effort of the individual themselves. (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010; Plucker, 2021). Considering the individual action and social recognition offers a dual focus that complements this research in its effort to gain insight into how the organizational culture and identity influence the enactment of creative leadership.

This research utilized in-depth interviews to explore creativity as a socially bounded phenomenon, focusing on how female leaders in sports media and marketing construct and enact their creative role identities. Creative Role Identity Theory (Farmer et al., 2003) serves as a

guiding framework, emphasizing the extent to which individuals define themselves as creative and integrate this into their professional roles. By examining creativity at the individual role identity, this study will engage the additional questions above as it seeks to illuminate the interplay of personal and contextual factors that shape creative practice.

Role Identity and Creative Role Identity Theory

Individual/Role Identity

Individual/Role identity is an ongoing communicative process by an individual to figure out who they are within a given context (Wieland, 2010). In Mead's (1934) social identity theory there is a “me” that is the social self and an “I” that is aware and adapts according to the knowledge and interpretation of a particular situation--an “Ideal self.” Similarly, Goffman considers how individuals adapt and evolve to be accepted within a particular context (Farmer et al., 2003; Goffman, 1974). Building off this classic research, individuals are constantly negotiating and renegotiating their identities and calling on coping mechanisms such as “the ideal self.” In the case of role identity, it is more about the job or role that you play and less about personal identity characteristics such as energetic or optimistic.

These constant complex negotiations of the social, personal, and professional often end in a fragmented institutional identity or sense of self (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). Tracy (2005) offers a unique view of an individual's organizational identity considering it a faceted crystal. In this view identity is complex, not flat or dyadic: real or fake. This metaphor resonates with me as it offers a more complex model and opportunity for the women that I am studying to see their unique facts and balance the social, professional, and personal. It suggests strength, beauty, complexity, and value. The female leaders that I will be studying live and work in these complex environments and are constantly reconciling the personal and professional with what is

socially and politically acceptable to be successful in the male dominated industries in which they work. Wieland (2010) calls these reconciliations “sites of struggle where values and interests meet” (p 504).

Creative Role Identity

Creative role identity is a more niche lens for considering role identity formation and is especially useful in my research. Farmer et al. (2003) combined Mead’s Role/Social Identity Theory and Amabile (1985) Theory of Organizational Creativity to offer creative role identity. Creative role identity is defined as the extent to which an employee considers creativity as a part of their identity within a particular context.

Individuals will move creativity up the hierarchy of their identity creation based on the value that organization and leadership places on it (Farmer et al., 2003; Petkus, 1996). Further, organizations that offer an organizational culture where creativity is safe, valued and supported will see higher creative productivity from employees (Amabile, 1998). This is because employees have made sense and interpreted that is valued and have made creativity a part of their role identity.

Creativity is at least, in part, a social process as well and can be impacted, encouraged, or hindered by leadership of an organization or from the leader (e.g., female sport marketing leaders) of a team (Koseoglu et al., 2017). Understanding the complexities of the creative role identity of the female leaders that I will be studying is critical. The level in which these female leaders identify as creative is a critical factor in how they empower and support their team in the “risk-taking behavior” that is inherent in being creative (Farmer, et al., 2003).

Sensemaking Process and Identity Creation

Sensemaking is a crucial process to acknowledge as part of the creation of identity (individual/role, creative role, and organizational identity) because a key part of forming identity includes the way in which we decipher and perceive out life experiences. Sensemaking is defined as an ongoing accomplishment of retroactively making sense of the world around you (Weick, 1995). In other words, people make sense of the world by applying to it what they already believe.

In relation to creativity and my research, creative effort is preceded by an employee's prediction of how that action will be received. If they perceive that it will be a negative response or not be valued, they will avoid creative behaviors (Farmer et al., 2003). The employee is relying on their own beliefs, history, and experiences to discern whether creative behavior, and the risks associated with it, are worth it. Female leaders are constantly making sense of the world around them to perform within a specific context—working as a leader within a male dominated industry poses even more complex and constant negotiation for these professionals—How can I juggle the demands of family and work? Can I be a mom and a professional? Will a communal leadership style be accepted, or will I be seen as weak? Do I need to adapt to a more authoritative approach to be successful in this context? Is it ok to show emotion or be transparent, or should I be more closed and stoic in this context? How do I navigate this so that my voice is heard? This constant sensemaking is inherent in the creation of all identities.

Organizational Theory, Culture & Identity

The contrast of approaches to organizational theory are important to consider in illustrating my approach and why I have chosen to anchor my research within a particular approach. There are four primary approaches to organizational theory. These include

functionalist, social constructivist, psychodynamic and a grouping of post-modern approaches. The most cited of these within organizational research are functionalist and social constructivist (He & Brown, 2013), and these approaches offer stark contrast.

The functionalist approach considers the basics of an organization. They consider what a business needs to survive (Schein, 2010). In my work, for example, organizational culture and identity would be seen solely for their role and how they impact the organization's functions. While not wholly functionalist in his approach, Schein (2010) has been a dominant voice in this approach to organizational research and theory.

In contrast, the social constructivist approach is more human-centered. It looks beyond the basics to consider a deeper why and how within organizations. The social constructivist looks at how organizations behave (not just function) and how individuals behave (not just do jobs). My work is squarely rooted in social constructivism and will delve below the surface and the basics to consider how these women have created their own creative role identities and how they enact creativity within their organizational context.

Historical Context

In the 1920's the Hawthorne Studies launched the concept of a humanistic perspective on organizations by considering social pressures/influence on employee productivity (Morrill, 2008). Did employees change their behaviors because they knew they were being watched or evaluated? This work set the stage for organizational theory that says humans are a core component of creating organizational reality.

From the 1930's to the 1950's the Chicago School became the popular school of thought for organizational studies. This approach centered around symbolic interactionism (SI). SI was based on the work of Blumer who built off Mead (ideal self) and Cooley (looking glass self).

Systems and structures are not the focus to a symbolic interactionist, rather the interactions of people, how they make sense of the world around them, and the self as constructed by the individual and others through complex and flexible interconnected relationships (Blumer, 1969). This school furthered the research that organizations were neither static nor formal and that organizational reality is socially constructed.

The meaning that individuals place on the world around them (language, signs, symbols, rituals, culture, identity) create organizational reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966) introduced the social construction of reality in the 1960's and Hatch and Schultz (2002) applied this theory to organizations. In this way, if man is socially constructed then organizations are human products. Hatch and Shults (2002) applied this to organizational theory and considered organizational identity as socially constructed. Applying it in this way suggests that the people within the organization create and recreate the organizational reality. Their complex, flexible, and dynamic relationships and how they make meaning within their organization builds the organization's identity and organizational reality. This differs from the functionalist perspective, that would assume that identity is created by leadership (Schein, 2010).

Foundationally, a social constructivist view of organizations sees them as complex and evolving interconnected symbolic relationships (van Nistelrooij & Sminia, 2010) that are neither static nor formal and that that are open to influence across a hierarchy not just from top leadership.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is defined as a set of shared and contested beliefs, assumptions, values, and knowledge that are accepted as a part of the organization (Hatch & Shults, 2002). Culture operates as an undercurrent that is not necessarily even recognized and is considered

more tacit than explicit by more organizational researchers (Hatch & Shults, 2002).

Organizational culture cannot be given or shared, it is just how things are done within an organization. (Hatch & Shults, 2002). Schein (2010) considers culture to be a tacit social order within an organization and sees it as being intricately linked with leadership. He suggests that the desires of leadership rise to the top to impress upon others their will. I do not adhere to this functionalist approach but see culture as being made up of interconnected complex social interactions across a hierarchy. In this way, it is shapeable and flexible not rigid or changed at the whim of leader. Schein (2010) himself speaks to how hard it is to change an organization's culture. If we were simply at the whim of leadership, this would not be the case. This speaks to the complexity and interconnected nature of the construct.

Organizational Identity

Similar to the creation of organizational culture, organizational identity is a complex and constantly evolving process. The identity creation process includes four facets: 1) mirroring, how the identity is mirrored in the images of other people 2) reflecting, expresses how cultural understanding are embedded with identity 3) expressing, identity claims are how culture makes itself known and 4) impressing, the impressions that expressions of identity leave on others (Hatch & Shultz, 2002). Organizational identity is defined as a set of statements that members of an organization believe to be central, enduring, and distinctive to the organization (Whetten, 2006). These are often seen as tangible items, such as a log, vision, mission, employee dress, environmental design, etc. (Kenny et al., 2011). Hatch and Shults (2002) applied Mead's theory of social identity to organizational identity and posited that organizations are socially constructed and that the people within the organization create and recreate the organizational reality. Employees use the organizational identity to make sense and interpret how they fit within the

organizational context. It is inextricably tied to how they create their own identity and self-confidence within the context of organization (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Simply put, organizational identity represents who the organization is to the people within it and to outside stakeholders.

This research considered tangible documents such as the organization's websites, mission, and culture/values statements that speak to culture and identity of sport media organizations. These narratives may offer valuable perspective and insight into the company and how creativity is supported or hindered. They may even illustrate conflict between the organizations front-facing efforts and the organizational reality for these female leaders.

The culture and identity of the sports media organizations that the female leaders live and work will be a crucial to understand through their lens. How an employee perceives their organizational identity, and culture plays a significant role in how they identify with the organization itself. Further, the organizational identity and culture impact employee self-esteem and confidence within that context (Humphrey's & Brown, 2002). These set the stage for creativity and the creation of self within the organizational context.

Narratives and Storytelling in Research

A narrative is defined as a detailed, chronological account of events, actions or experiences as told by an individual (Riessman, 2008). They are both a method and a form of data that allows a researcher to explore how a person makes sense of their experiences and constructs meaning of them through the telling of a story. As a method, narrative inquiry provides a powerful framework for exploring experiences that are nuanced and complex. This is especially useful in the context of this research where creativity, identity, and leadership intersect (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998). As a data source, narratives give individuals the opportunity to

make sense of and share their lived experiences. For the researcher, this offers a deeper understanding of how participants perceive and navigate their worlds.

Uncovering Nuanced Experiences of Creativity and Leadership

Narrative methodologies are rooted in the belief that stories provide meaning to human experiences. They allow participants to articulate their personal journeys, and reflect on the realities of their roles, including wins, losses and everyday insights. These stories allow researchers to access complex aspects of creativity and leadership that traditional quantitative methods may overlook (Clandinin, 2000).

Leadership itself is inherently storied, as it involves managing and guiding teams, navigating relationships, and fostering creativity and innovation—all of which are best understood through narrative. For female leaders in sports media marketing, narratives serve as a lens to explore how they are integrating creativity into their leadership identities. Mead's concept of the "ideal self" and Goffman's theories on identity underscore the idea that identity is adaptable and socially constructed. Narratives allow these leaders to share how they have constructed and adapted their creative identities in response to their organizational reality and culture.

Using Stories to Understand Creative Identity

The concept of creative role identity, or the extent to which individuals define themselves as creative within their professional roles, is deeply tied to the participants shared stories. Research has shown that narratives help individuals integrate their creative abilities into their identity by articulating how they perceive their own creativity and how it is enacted (Farmer et al., 2003). This is particularly significant in organizational contexts, where creativity is both sought after and constrained by cultural dynamics.

In other fields, narrative research has explored creative identity in artists, educators, and entrepreneurs, offering insight into how they sustain and enact their creative identity and navigate challenges. One such example is narratives were used to explore the importance of storytelling to successful entrepreneurs, highlighting them as central to their ability to craft a vision, garner resources, and build strong businesses (Gabriel, 2000).

Applying this methodology to women in sports media marketing provides an opportunity to extend these insights into a new context. Narratives can reveal how these women define and enact their creative identities within their professional contexts, offering a richer and nuanced understanding the evolution of their creative role identity through shared stories of their personal journey, professional experiences, and organizational dynamics.

Theoretical and Practical Implications of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals within complex systems. This approach aligns with the phenomenological perspectives within organizational theory applied in this research. The focus on personal stories highlights the socially constructed nature of creativity and leadership. This offers a better picture and deeper understanding of the lived experiences of how creativity is defined and enacted through the leadership of the women who are participating in this study.

As a practical note, narratives can inform organizational strategies (e.g., collaborative areas or workflow structures) to allow for more inclusive and supportive environments where creativity is fostered. Extending this note, the participant stories shared in this research also offer practical insights and strategies to encourage and prepare women who are interested in leadership within the sport and media industries.

Women, Creativity, Sport & Leadership

Female leadership in sports media marketing provides a compelling context for examining the interplay of traits, competencies, creativity, and professional identity. In this male-dominated field, women leaders navigate barriers while leveraging their unique strengths as leaders to support creativity. This section explores the traits, mindsets, and competencies of female leaders, the role of creativity in their leadership identities, and the pathways they navigate to succeed.

Defining Traits, Mindsets and Competencies

In discussing traits, mindsets, and competencies of female leaders, it is important to start with a clear understanding of what each of these elements of an individual's identity represent. These are defined below and add an additional situational consideration that supports the socially constructed reality of leadership.

Traits and mindsets are deeply connected constructs. A trait is defined as a characteristic or behavior that an individual possesses (Roberto, 2019). They are unique to an individual and not directly transferrable. Traits remain stable and unchanging over time and form the foundation of an individual's personality (e.g., optimism, dominant, compassionate, openness, agreeableness, empathetic, direct, etc.). Mindsets are mental attitudes and beliefs that shape how individuals perceive and respond to situations (Roberto, 2019). They determine how traits are enacted in real world scenarios and are far more flexible than traits. Mindsets can include attitudes such as empathy, optimism, or creative confidence. Mindsets and traits provide a supportive framework for driving creativity (Brown, 2009). Complementary to both traits and mindsets, are competencies. Competences are actions—the formal knowledge, skills, and abilities that an individual can develop and grow. For example, an individual developed strengths

around their ability to teach complicated concepts, motivate people, solve problems, or effectively communicate would be considered their competencies.

Traits and mindsets serve as antecedents to creativity, laying the emotional and psychological groundwork for enhancing individual creative identity as well as motivating others to engage in creative efforts (Amabile, 1985). Competencies or the knowledge, skills, and abilities that an individual develops around creativity are built on the foundation of an individual's traits and mindsets. The research around leadership traits, mindsets, and competencies is muddled with vague and overlapping definitions. (e.g., Dweck, 2007; Jaber Abdallah & Siham Jibia, 2020; Roberto, 2019; Wille et al., 2018). The concepts are often intertwined but it can be concluded that competencies are often built and developed off individual traits and mindsets (Madsen, 2017).

Within the context of this research, these constructs are especially salient because the narratives of the female participants in this study often define creativity as a part their identity by sharing stories that express their definition of creativity through the traits, mindsets, and competencies that they rely on to enact creativity within their leadership roles.

Gender and Traits

Leadership traits are often ascribed as masculine or feminine. This is not a true gender reflection as individuals are unique and can possess both masculine and feminine ascribed traits (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Common traits that are associated with femininity include: vulnerability, empathy, transparency, self-aware, dedicated, inspiring, giving, friendly, optimistic, resilient, collaborative, reliable, sincere, creative (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Chen & Shao, 2022). In contrast, traits associated with masculinity include directive, assertive, decisive, task-oriented, dominant, and diligent (Eagley & Johannesen- Schmidt, 2001).

Another crucial consideration is the context in which a female leader is operating. For example, in a male-dominated industry such as sports, agentic goal-achievement traits that are often ascribed to men can also be necessary for a female leader to be successful in a particular environment or to be perceived as a leader (e.g., decisiveness, independence, assertiveness, diligence). Women who display these traits are often seen as leadership material (Esser et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2022). However, if female leaders display agentic traits around dominance or assertiveness, they are often not perceived as promotable and appear to be penalized more strongly than male leaders who show dominance (Ma et al., 2022).

Gender, Competencies & Leadership Approach

The perceived differences between masculine and feminine leadership competencies are confirmed by the research on leadership styles, associating masculinity with task-oriented, autocratic, agentic, and directive leadership styles and femininity with relationship-oriented, communal democratic and participative leadership styles (Esser et al., 2018).

Women tend to be associated with a natural preference towards transformational or human centered leadership styles. Both approaches to leadership rely heavily on relationship building and empathy to inspire, motivate, and mobilize people into action (Morris & Morris, 2024). Human-centered leaders focus on the relational bonds (i.e., mindsets, character and cohesion), the creative tasks that require creativity, the overall goals for the organization, and healthy communication between the leader and individuals. The alignment of these bonds, tasks, goals and communication serves as the fuel to inspire creative action in people (Morris & Morris, 2024). Similarly, while not focused on creative efforts, transformational leaders create an environment where people feel psychologically safe, free to communicate openly, and where

there is a shared sense of purpose all of which are imperative for creative thinking and problem solving (Bass, 1995; Chen & Shao, 2022; Koh et al., 2019).

The contrast to these approaches is the transactional leadership style, which is traditionally ascribed to men and relies heavily on reward-based incentives (Chen & Shao, 2022). This is noteworthy in the context of female leaders and creativity because transformational or human centered leadership can promote an environment that fosters creativity and innovation by encouraging strong foundational relationships, intellectual stimulation, challenging the status quo, and providing support and resources to employees (Bass, 1995). These leaders inspire their followers to think creatively, ultimately leading to new ideas or solutions.

Although women are associated with democratic and participative leadership styles that are willing to share power and communicate in non-competitive ways (Hoyt & Simon, 2018), several studies suggest that women who rise to the highest ranks of leadership within male dominated organizations exhibit a more competitive, direct, and risk-focused leadership style that is generally associated with men (Schipani et al., 2009). Conversely, in contexts that are not male dominated, women tend to take a more communal approach to leadership (Hoyt & Simon, 2018).

Specific to this research of women in sports media marketing, women working in a male-dominated industry must develop situational leadership competencies to be successful. These necessary competencies include: the ability to listen (empathy), ability to inspire, ability to motivate in order to meet goals, business acumen, developing and mentoring others, critically review existing processes, holistic thinking, ability to adapt to indirect masculine communication while applying feminine communication strengths, ability to apply masculine leadership

behaviors, balancing self-promotion and humility, and a perseverance to reach goals (Esser et al., 2018).

Women who develop more assertive, dominant, and competitive competencies within their leadership styles are often met with harsh backlash (Ma et al., 2022; Wille et al., 2018). These findings contrast with Esser (2018) who suggests that female leaders must develop masculine leadership competencies to be successful (e.g., power-orientation, the ability to assert oneself, the ability to demonstrate dominance, extensive perseverance, a strong and balanced personality, willingness to take risks and stress resistance). Further, to be successful in a male dominated industry, female leaders must also be highly adaptable and make effective use of their femininity, display sympathy, and empathy (Ma et al., 2022; Wille et al., 2018).

There is also a school of thought that considers a feminine advantage when it comes to possessing the strongest skills and competencies for good leadership. The socialization of women encourages “feminine values” such as kindness, compassion, nurturing and sharing which are key components of consensus building, inclusiveness, interpersonal relations, mentoring, and shared power. Women are believed to have more empathy, rely more on intuition, and be sensitive to feelings and the quality of a relationship. The changing nature of leadership in organizations has increased the relevance of these skills and values and long-term may be the female advantage in moving into leadership roles in more collaborative work environments (Strine & Pacanowsky, 1985).

Barriers to Leadership for Women

The barriers that women experience in moving into leadership roles within organizations directly shapes how they define and enact creativity within their creative role identity. Societal or industry barriers might limit women’s choices or the voice that they have. These external forces

may impact how they see themselves as capable of creativity. At the organizational level, the barriers that female leaders experience ranging from being excluded from important creative conversations or the inability to move into elevated leadership roles, can directly impact how they enact and engage in creative efforts and leadership. At the individual level, female leaders can limit themselves by self-selecting out of leadership roles or creative engagement to keep their work/life balance, etc. This can certainly impact individual development into leadership roles and impact their creative role identity. This research, highlights how organizational cultures might constrain or encourage creativity and leadership development, focusing on how women define, adapt, and navigate their organizational reality.

These barriers offer repeating themes throughout literature (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2018; Ma et al., 2022; Wille et al., 2018; Yukl, 2013). They are summarized in **Table 1** categorized by the level at which the barriers appear: societal/industry (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2018), organizational (Kumra, 2018; Yukl, 2013), and individual levels (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2018; Ma et al., 2022; Schipani et al., 2009; Wille et al., 2018). (See **Table 1** below).

Another interesting barrier within the context of my research is a proposed creativity bias against women. Proudfoot and Fath (2021) found that the ability to think creatively tends to be associated with qualities that are typically ascribed to men (e.g., independence and self-direction, daring/risk-taking, etc.). Further men are ascribed to be more creative than women even when they produce identical outputs. Lebuda and Karwowski (2013) suggested that work authored using a male name was assessed as significantly more creative than work associated with a female name. In roles that distinctly require creativity, this gender perception may also be a barrier to reaching a leadership role.

Table 1
Barriers to Leadership for Women

Societal/Industry	Organizational	Individual Barriers
• Control of women voices (level that women can contribute to a conversation, seen as too opinionated, etc.) • Cultures that limit women's choices. • Societal expectations lead to assumptions. (e.g. Women are busy being moms right now...) • Leadership perceptions (men are leaders, women are not) • Gender unconsciousness (a lack of awareness of how gender plays in the workplace) • Gender stereotypes (generalized assumptions about women)	• Glass cliff is when women moved into a leadership role during crisis with a high chance of failure. • Glass Ceiling (dark or opaque) (organizational and social barrier). A common metaphor. A barrier that is so subtle that is transparent, yet strong enough to keep women out from moving up into leadership roles. • Glass elevator is specific to male-dominated industries in which men rise into roles of leadership at a much faster rate due to the organizational culture, identity, and gendered expectations. • Being excluded from informal networks • Lack of mentoring • Lack of sponsorship • Lack of support • Male gatekeeping • Male-dominated cultures (e.g., good ole boy network) • Salary inequalities • Tokenism • Unequal standards • workplace harassment • Queen bee effect (women blocking other women)	• Communication style constraints (e.g., want masculine communication traits but not too masculine) • Personalizing (i.e., accepting responsibility or blame for organizational problems out of their control) • Women are less likely to ask for promotion or initiate negotiations for them. • Psychological glass ceiling (i.e., unwilling to be assertive and lack confidence because they have internalized societal expectations) • Work/life conflicts. (i.e., rooted in the gendered nature of organizations but plays out at the individual level. Family/Child/Eldercare or career?) • Self-select themselves out of consideration (for a myriad of reasons including those listed above.)

Pathways to Leadership and Creativity for Women

Even with an impressive number of barriers to leadership, successful female leaders leverage various pathways to leadership and creativity. These pathways include combinations of individual effort, growth opportunities, and evolving organizational dynamics.

Mentoring and Allies. Schipani et al. (2009) considered pathways to organizational leadership for women and found that both informal and formal mentoring and networking were the most effective. Having a mentor (both formal or informal) can act as a buffer from overt and covert types of discrimination, lend legitimacy, provide guidance or training, and provide insider information that can assist in preparing for or navigating into a leadership role. Mentoring also increases the individual's self-confidence in their career goals.

Networking and Social Capital. Social capital is built through an individual's social network and provides opportunity for engagement with leadership and supervisors. Networking builds social capital and often leads to additional training and opportunities. Developing strong social capital can also make an individual more valuable to the organization. Building a professional network helps women to have greater visibility, collaborate on engaging projects, and create a sense of credibility within a role. Additionally, when networks are strong, they can help to facilitate access to meaningful opportunities and insider knowledge, both of which are essential to grow as a professional (Schipani et al., 2009).

Leadership Approach. As shared previously in the traits, mindsets, and competencies section of this literature review, women who adopt transformational leadership or human centered leadership styles intentionally foster environments that encourage creativity and innovation. By building strong relationships built on empathy and inspiring and empowering

their teams, these leaders position themselves as effective and visionary in male-dominated industries (Amabile, 1985; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Morris & Morris, 2024).

Additionally, the social context or expectation also plays an integral role as to the interpersonal styles that female leaders take on to be seen as “leadership material.” The expected norms and personality traits among c-suite executives are often seen as men displaying agentic traits and women being more communal. Some female leaders adapt to the social context to adopt masculine interpersonal styles as they are needed. This adaptability or situational leadership style is also perceived as a pathway to leadership within an organization (Wille et al., 2018)

Professional Development Opportunities. Training programs, leadership workshops, and cross-functional projects provide structured opportunities for women to enhance their creative and leadership capabilities. These initiatives enable women to build confidence and prepare for senior-level leadership roles (Schipani et al., 2009).

Skills Developed Through Sports. Competitive athletics equip women with resilience, adaptability, and teamwork—skills that are invaluable for navigating the complexities of leadership and driving innovation (espnW and EY, 2017). As this is a defining characteristic of the participants in this study, the pathway strengths developed through competitive sports are discussed in more depth in the following section on developing strong female leaders through sport.

Female leaders in sports media marketing navigate a complex challenges and opportunities. The integration of creativity into their leadership approaches as well as exploring pathways outlined above such as mentoring and professional development, female leaders navigate into meaningful leadership roles within their organizations. Additionally, many of the

participants in this study were competitive athletes and identified this as a meaningful part of their leadership development journey.

Developing Strong Female Leaders Through Sport

Playing competitive sports can play a crucial role in shaping how women see themselves as leaders and their role identity within sports media marketing. Sports develop a foundation for key traits and competencies, such as perseverance, teamwork, and resilience (espnW and EY, 2017; Galante & Ward, 2017). Competitive sport experiences also encourage individuals to tackle challenges with a creative and flexible mindset, both key in fostering creativity (Kelinske et al., 2001)

Since Title IX took effect in 1972, women playing college sports has increased by 545% and the increase in high school sports has increased by 990% (Schipani et al., 2009). While the growth in sports participation for women has grown in substantial numbers, the representation of women in leadership roles within the sports industry has not seen this growth. (Burton, 2015; Lapchick et al., 2021). The sport industry is complex, multi-level and full of rigid structures, and assumed norms. Because of this, these organizations often reflect an institutionalized masculinity that suggests masculine traits and competencies are required to lead in sport-focused industries (Burton, 2015).

Kelinske et al. (2001) considered gender-focused benefits of sport participation. While there seemed to be minor difference between men and women and their perceived benefit of participating in sport. The real difference came with leadership behaviors which were perceived by men to be masculine or feminine and seen as no different by women. These stereotypical assumptions about gender roles potentially extend far beyond the playing field and into organizational settings. Most interesting in relation to my work around individual identity was

that women who participated in sports indicated that they perceived themselves as having the same advantages as men in terms of fostering moral development, leadership, and socialization (Lovelin & Hanold, 2014). Their sense of self was seen as essentially on an “equal footing” to men. Further, Galante and Ward (2017) found that female athletes possessed higher self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and transformational leadership characteristics.

Ferullo (2019) directly connected the influence of sport to competencies needed to be successful leaders in the workplace. For example, the teamwork that athletes develop on the field directly supports the skills and competencies needed for team collaboration in the workplace. The drive and ambition that it takes to be competitive in a sport is further displayed in the workplace in pressing to help a team achieve goals. Competitively playing a sport builds resilience that stays with a professional through life to help them persevere through both business and personal challenges. Additionally, playing sport requires a balance of confidence and humility and the ability to compartmentalize emotions to reach goals. The parallels between sports and leadership dynamics highlight the importance of these experiences in preparing women for creative and professional success.

As support and a grounding foundation of knowledge for this research, this literature review has woven together complex the connections between organizational creativity, individual and creative role identity, organizational culture and identity, narratives as research data, and considering features and strengths of women as athletes, leaders, and creative professionals.

This study specifically considers how female leaders in sports media marketing define creativity, how creativity appears in action as a part of their professional roles, and how this is extended to their perception and construction of their own creative role identity. Creativity is

also deeply rooted in how leaders define their own strengths (traits, mindsets, and competencies) and is expressed in their leadership approach. Theories that focus on role identity consider first how the women enact and internalize creativity and extend to consider how organizations shape individual creativity by the weight and value assigned to creative contributions and effort.

Female leaders in sports and media are constantly navigating complex organizational dynamics, balancing their real self with professional expectations. This ongoing negotiation influences how they make sense of their professional world and impacts the way in which they enact their creative role identity.

Pivotal pathways supporting leadership advancement for women such as mentoring, strong social networks, and strengths developed through sport participation continue to inform how female leaders shape, define, and enact creativity within their role identity (Schipani et al., 2009). Conversely, barriers such as gender bias, or a lack of mentoring and allies can impair the advancement of women into leadership. These barriers lead to a lack of voice or confidence that extends to the formation of their creative role identity (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2018).

This research will offer insight into how female leaders in sports media marketing define enact and sustain creativity as a part of their professional role identity. This research will also explore the organizational dynamics that can support and encourage female leaders to develop and enact their creative role identity. In summary, this research seeks to answer the above research questions and through that will provide guidance to ensure success and offer a decisive advantage to the next generation of female leaders in the sports media industry.

Chapter III. Methodology

I begin this chapter with an overview of the social constructivist epistemology that informs this project's design before offering justification for using a qualitative research methodology. I utilized three primary methods in this dissertation: one-on-one interviews, organizational artifacts, and qualitative methodology aligning with the study of role identities and organizations. My work is squarely rooted in social constructivism and will delve below the surface and the basics to consider how these female leaders have created their own personal and professional identities around creativity and how this plays out in the individual's `organizational reality.

My methodological approach to this work is from a humanistic and phenomenological perspective. This approach focuses on learning from the experiences of people. It is a reductive approach that requires the researcher to suspend their own assumptions and beliefs to get beyond the expected outcomes. It also requires the researcher to imagine all sorts of variations in the phenomenon to distill what could be considered an essential aspect and what might be inconceivable (Gill, 2014). Further, I utilized an interpretive approach which is especially meaningful in organizational identity/culture and role identity because it offers rich context that includes the organizational identity and culture, symbols, rituals, identities, and numerous other facets of organizational life. It considers how an organization's members make subjective meaning and the roles that their meaning-making plays in a socially constructed workplace (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

A Humanistic Approach to Organizational Theory Methodologies

Why use Qualitative Methodology

Narratives, stories, and tales connect the person and the personal to social events, processes, and organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998). In the case of my research, these stories elicited through in-depth interviews can reveal truths about the human experience of being a female leader in sport media marketing and how they perceive, navigate, define, empower, etc. creativity personally and within their professional and organizational story.

These stories as elicited through semi-guided interview prompts offer unique perspectives and reveal truths about the human experience around the constructs that I am studying--organizational culture and identity, individual/role identity, and more niche creative role identity (Riessman, 2008).

This phenomenological and interpretive perspective that utilizes in-depth interviews and a constant comparative approach brings to life the interconnected nature of the constructs that I am considering within my research and how they create the organizational reality of these female leaders in sports media marketing. Qualitative research using in depth one-on-one interviews allows the researchers to place themselves at the interface of personas, stories, and organizations, and to place the person in emotional and organizational contexts (Schipani et al., 2009). The constant comparative approach allows the researcher to be immersed in each of the interviews and helps the stories and insights build on one another as they emerge. (Taylor, 2016)

Methods

One-On-One Interviews

I conducted 12 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female leaders in marketing that currently work or have worked within sports media in the last five years. Interviews represent

“guided question-answer conversations” (Tracy, 2005, p 131), but they are also conducted for an express purpose. Interviews help the researcher find “native conceptualizations of communication” (p. 174), including questions about their past, explanations of behavior, how knowledge and expertise is applied in certain situations, and how workplace issues are negotiated (Frey & Fontana, 1991). This study used Tracy (2013) description of “deliberative naïveté.” That is, I endeavored to take a more objective perspective to give participants ample opportunity to use their own words and perspectives to share and explain their experiences.

A set of interview questions served as a guide rather than a script and the interviews were conducted with a semi-structured approach that started with some base questions but allowed me to delve deeper with follow-up questions to learn more about experiences, perspectives, and qualify observations. The guide was developed to address theories and concepts identified in the research questions, including participant definition of creative, creative role identity and the impact of organizational dynamics on creative identity (See Appendix A for the complete interview guide). While interviews are different in journalism and qualitative research, my experience in journalism has given me a confidence and comfort with interviewing that I relied on to build connections and delve deeper into the experiences of the participants.

Interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded via Otter.ai with participants' consent. Interviews totaled 10.05 hours with an average length of 50.25 minutes. Interviews were transcribed via Otter.ai and Zoom transcription for a back-up that was later deleted. **Table 2** below shows the questions in the interview guide on how they aligned with this study's research goals.

Table 2*Research Questions and Aligned Interview Questions*

Research Question	Aligning Interview Guide Questions
RQ1: How do women in sports media and marketing define creativity as part of their professional role identity?	When you hear the word “creativity” in relation to your role, what does that mean to you? Do you consider yourself creative? How? Please share your top five competencies or skills. (If creativity is or isn’t one, why?)
RQ2: How do women enact their creative role identity through their work and manage their teams?	Can you share some examples of when you used creativity in your role? How was it received? What were the outcomes? Can you share some ways in which you support creativity within your role? Team? What does creativity look like in your team? Can you share some ways in which you support creativity within your role? Team? Can you tell me about how you have navigated/negotiated things differently than your male counterparts?
RQ3: How do women perceive the influence of their professional journey on their creative role identity?	Tell me a little about you. (Family? Education?) Can you walk me through your journey to your current role? What attracted you to this role? Why marketing? Why media? Did you play sports? Did playing sport prepare you for this role? Why/why not?
RQ4: What role does organizational culture play in supporting or constraining the creative identities and team management of women in sports media marketing?	Can you share some examples of how your organization supports or challenges creativity? How does your organization recognize or reward creativity? Does being a female in your environment change how you are creative? Example? What does creativity look like in your team?

Participants

To begin recruiting female leaders in sport marketing, one of my committee members sent an email introduction to her network of contacts in sports and media introducing me and this research project. I was able to schedule seven of my interviews through direct contacts on the provided list (See Appendix B for Participant Email). The additional interview candidates were procured through snowball (or referral) sampling—seeking referrals from informants that I interviewed to recruit other women in media marketing leadership roles. Five of the referrals agreed and made up the additional interviews in this data set. In this study, I reached saturation by the eighth interview. Participant responses began to consistently reinforce the patterns that I was already seeing through my practice of constantly comparing the interviews. To ensure rigor in my research, I continued interviewing four additional women. These interviews further supported my existing themes, reinforcing the findings of this study across the diverse experiences of the participants. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Each of the participants in this research study is currently or has recently (within the last five years) served as a mid to high-level professional in sport media marketing leadership roles at national or global media networks, sport leagues or teams, and sport focused agencies renowned for their influence in sports coverage. Of the twelve participants, six represented sport network marketing, three represented professional sport leagues or team's media marketing, and three represented sport media agencies. Additionally, six of the participants worked for organizations that focused on both male and female sports while three worked for organizations that exclusively focused on male and three on female sports. The responsibilities of their marketing roles varied but included implementing tactics and developing the strategies used to promote sport-focused content as well as sport brands, teams, and even athletes through a myriad of

media channels including television, social media, print, digital platforms and sponsorships (Raney & Bryant, 2006). These marketing roles are responsible for developing strategies and campaigns, aligning brands with media outlets to maximize revenue, maximizing digital streaming and platforms, creating content, engaging social media, and engaging and expanding the audiences for their sport brands.

The names of all participants referenced throughout this dissertation are replaced with pseudonyms and identifying organizational details have been neutralized. Below is a brief description of each of the participants, including their race or self-identified cultural identity, age range, leadership level, organization description as well as identifying characteristics that they may have offered (e.g., self-identified as LGBTQ)

- Sarah is a white, early 40's senior level marketing executive for a regional professional organization connecting sports and media. She self-identified as LGBTQ.
- Jessica is a white, early 40s senior level marketing executive for the sports media team at a leading talent and sports agency.
- Rachel is a white, mid 30's senior level marketing executive for a leading digital sports entertainment and gaming company.
- Amanda is a white, late 40's senior level marketing executive at a global network leader in sports media.
- Megan is an Asian American, late 30's mid-level marketing executive at a global network leader in sport media.
- Laura is a Hispanic, mid 40's senior level marketing and production executive at a global network leader in sports media.

- Hanna is a white, late 30's senior level creative marketing executive at a global network leader in sports media.
- Jennifer is a black, young 30's senior level media marketing executive for a professional sports team.
- Melissa is a white, mid 40's senior level media marketing executive for a premier ice hockey organization.
- Allison is a white, young 30's Senior Director of the Sport Media Marketing team at a firm globally recognized creative agency.
- Rebecca is white, early 50's was a long-time Senior-Level Executive at a global network leader in sport media.
- Ashley is a Hispanic, early 40's Senior level media marketing executive at a leading Spanish-language media company known for its vibrant sports focus. She self-identified as LGBTQ.

Research Data & Process

Researcher Journal

As support for my research, I kept a journal to record thoughts and insights during and after each interview. I recorded questions and insights that allowed me to delve below the surface and consider behaviors and events at a deeper level. Although participant interviews were conducted via Zoom, I was intentional about recording body language, silence, what was “not” being said on inferences, behaviors, actions, ah-ha moments, concerns, etc. (Saldana, 2021). Capturing insights, thoughts, and expressions along the way added a rich layer of depth and detail to the participant interview that a transcript alone would not have captured. This effort lends additional credibility to this research effort (Emerson, 2011).

Organizational Artifacts

Organizational artifacts were collected after the completion of the interviews to allow me to enter each interview with as little organizational information as possible (Tracy, 2013). This approach allowed me to more wholly focus on the insights shared by the participants rather than enter the interview with the outward facing identity that each organization expressed as a part of their websites and formal mission and value statements. Participant organization websites were researched focusing primarily on the “About our Company” or “Career Opportunity” sections which offer insight to organizational culture and identity. If available, organization mission statements as well as value and culture statements were evaluated to support this research and cross-referenced against participant interview themes to consider alignment (See **Table 3: Organizational Artifact Analysis**).

One-on-One Zoom-Based Interviews

Each interview was scheduled via email and a zoom link was attached. Each email was the same, and the participant agreed to a one-hour time slot and to be recorded for this study. At the beginning of each interview, I shared the research purpose and intent to record with each participant and received verbal approval to move forward (See Appendix C Informed Consent and Approval to Record Script).

I engaged each interview, utilizing a semi-structured research guide that allowed space for follow-up or clarification questions. The guide began with some rapport building-focused questions and evolved into more details about their definitions of creativity within their role, how they enact it as leaders and with their teams, and insight into their organizational culture (Taylor, 2016).

Transcribe Interviews

Within 24 hours of the completion of each interview, I downloaded the transcript from Otter.ai and edited it only to remove pauses, spaces, speaker overlap and fix obvious errors in transcription. I uploaded each interview into ATLAS.ti and began the constant comparative method for this research. ATLAS.ti is a software program for qualitative data analysis that allows researchers to code, analyze and visualize data from sources such as field notes, images, and interviews. As I completed each interview, I began reviewing and re-reviewing as well as coding transcripts adding to the insight with each interview. This approach puts the researcher inside the data as the research continues to evolve.

Analyze and Code

Coding is a cyclical process, and I reviewed each transcript dozens of times to uncover insights. Meaningful synthesis of these interviews takes a long time and involves a dedication to the effort. The research questions in this study focused on the goals of the learning interviews. This focus was also reflected in the questions included in the interview guide (See Appendix A for complete interview guide). As I worked through the transcripts, I began by creating initial codes for observations that I noted as well as subcodes that expressed nuances of these observations. For example, I coded for “collaboration” and created subcodes to capture observations around support for collaboration, cross-collaboration, collaboration as competency, and collaboration defining creativity. This practice and insight made way to categories and subcategories of information and eventually led me to the themes and subthemes expressed in this dissertation related to the four research questions of this study (Taylor, 2016) (See Appendix D for complete list of Themes, Concepts and Codes for this study). The lowest hanging fruit is around the frequency that something is cited or appears across the interviews but also delved

deeper beyond just frequency or repetition of words or similarity to also consider differences, sequencing, causality, and context (Saldana, 2021). The journey from raw data to theory in qualitative research begins with coding (subcodes) to categories (subcategories) revealing themes/concepts and finally creating theory. As such, I interpreted codes (and subcodes), created categories (and subcategories) within them and then distilled the final themes and concepts that serve to illuminate and express the findings of this research (Taylor, 2016).

Preparing the report

Finally, I authored this paper including narrative interpretation of the themes and concepts that have evolved through my work and findings and discussion about my interpretations. I revisited each participant interviews repeatedly to mine the responses that best illustrated the nuances of each of the findings. I began by re-visiting the literature to re-immense myself in the body of research relevant to my study as one lens of consideration in writing my interpretation of the findings of this study. Grounding myself and preparing the literature review reflecting what is already present, allowed me to see gaps and observations in the insights of my participants that might not have been as obvious. I followed with this methodology section and considered each of the details that I intentionally and thoughtfully considered as I responsibly prepared and executed this research. I organized the findings to directly respond to each research question of the study to provide clarity to the reader and offered stories and examples from the participants' stories to illuminate the themes and subthemes that I identified. To ensure a compass for quality within my research effort, I especially relied on Tracy's (2010) "big tent" criteria for quality in qualitative research and focused on ensuring that I expressed and highlighted how this work addressed the eight criteria of quality including worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, bring credible, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful

coherence. I did not openly address each of these by saying “this is sincere” or “this is coherent” Rather, I wrote and revisited my work to express these qualities by focusing on practices such as including and revisiting the importance of this study, sharing how the findings can help others and why they matter, offering rich detail and interesting examples that are relatable, seeking ways to connect and triangulate insights, and offering a transparency that expresses the sincerity of the work.

Ethical Considerations

This research project holds approval from the Internal Review Board for Research at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. (See Appendix E for IRB Approval Letter)

At the beginning of each interview, I shared and reviewed an informed consent document (See Appendix C for Informed Consent Script) that included the research purpose, promises to the participants, and notice of recording. Each participant offered verbal approval to move forward as a part of this research project.

Throughout this research, I remained sensitive to identity-related issues and took measures to ensure that safety and confidentiality of the participants. The names of all participants referenced throughout this dissertation have been replaced with pseudonyms and identifying organizational details have been neutralized (See Appendix F for Anonymized Participant List).

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on 12 female leaders in sports media marketing and explores how they define, enact, and navigate organizational dynamics in the development of their own creative role identity. This research offers unique insight into a traditionally male-dominated industry through the lens of lived experiences of female leaders.

I considered the diversity of participants as a part of the study design. Of the 12 participants, 8 identified as Caucasian, 1 as Black, 1 as Asian American, and 2 as Hispanic. All participants spoke fluent English as a part of their day-to-day professional life which allowed for easier interviewing and analysis. However, English was the second language of two of the participants in this study. The interviews were only conducted in English, this might have limited exploring the experiences of some of the women within their most natural cultural context. Further, two participants self-identified as LGBTQ and provided some interesting insights into the intersection of professional identity and personal identity through their passion for advocacy or representation. Time, however, did not permit a deeper dive focused on their unique experiences outside of the focused research goals. Even with the representation of diverse participants, the relatively small sample size of this study limits the application and generalizability of the findings to the more inclusive and broader population of female leaders in sport, media, and marketing. I have, however, developed a rich depth of understanding of the twelve women in this study and while generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, I would seek to extend this research to include the perspectives of more women in sport, media, and marketing as well as other male-dominated industries.

Qualitative approaches provide detailed and rich accounts of participant experiences. However, an appropriate limitation to consider would be the subjectivity of participant interpretations of creativity and organizational dynamics. Additionally, the in-depth interviews and narrative approach to research focuses on depth of their individual experiences rather than breadth of general knowledge about the topic. This deeper dive, combined with the small sample size, makes it harder to draw broad and applicable conclusions that would appeal to all female leaders in this field. Coding, sub-coding and thematic analysis highlighted strong patterns and

shared experiences, however, findings of this and all qualitative studies are uniquely shaped by the specific contexts and personal stories of the participants.

Future research could expand on this study by including more diversity of culture, language, and sexual orientation while adding larger sample sizes to enhance the useful application and generalizability of the findings.

Bracketing Statement

This bracketing statement represents a positioning of myself within this study. I revisited and re-bracketed myself throughout this research project to ensure that I remained as objective as possible. This practice of transparency reflecting how the researcher approaches and relates to research adds to the validity of qualitative research (Gill, 2014). Following is a personal acknowledgement of my place within the phenomenon that I am studying:

I am a Caucasian 56-year-old woman. I am a wife, a mother, and a grandmother. I have worked in both the media and sport industries. I am a seasoned marketing professional. I have held numerous high-stress leadership roles within male-dominated industries and organizations and have had to adapt within those contexts to be successful. I do not see myself at a disadvantage to men. I believe that we all navigate barriers and constraints regardless of gender. I focus on positive mindsets and adaptive approaches.

I am creative and view creativity as a strong part of my own personal and professional identity. Creativity is the messy work of idea generation that leads to innovation. It can be artistic in nature (production, design), and it also includes problem-solving, and process improvements. In an organizational context, creativity should add value and be focused on reaching organizational goals. I

have a growth mindset and see creativity as a muscle that anyone can flex and grow rather than a hard, fixed trait.

I am a lecturer and teach visual and digital marketing as well as leadership development to aspiring marketing professionals and honors students in the Haslam College of Business at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I believe that having a strong creative identity and confidence is a differentiator and a pathway to leadership for women in marketing and media.

Chapter IV: Findings

In this chapter, I will present the findings of this study. Before I explore each of the research questions, I will offer findings related to the participants self-described cultural and background information. These contextual insights offer more depth into the journey and perspectives of the participants. Following these grounding contexts, I will share key findings related to each of the research questions expressed through major themes and subthemes that were notable in this study. I will also offer stories and direct quotations from the participants to illustrate various aspects of the themes.

Background Information of Participants

It is important that the researcher, and the audience that will consider this research, understand both how participating women in sport media marketing arrived at their marketing roles as well as the lived gendered perspective of the female participants. This information improves understanding of the participants' perspective, diminishes uninformed assumptions, and helps to better understand the phenomenon explored in this study (Flick, 2013). Thus, the following sections, share the participants educational background and professional pathway that led them to sports media marketing and their perspectives on acceptance of women in the male-dominated industry of sport media marketing.

Educational and Professional Path to Sport Media Marketing

Five of the 12 participants have completed a master's degree with one participant solidly in her role and just completing her MBA within the last year. One of the participants received her master's in Sport Media and the rest were MBAs. The balance of the participants completed bachelor's degrees. Seven of the participants majored in journalism rather than marketing or advertising while the rest majored in marketing or general business administration.

The majority of participants path to sports media began by holding roles in other media or marketing agencies while they looked for opportunities to move into sports media. Two began as journalists. Four of the participants worked their way up from production assistants to leadership roles within their organizations. One participant shared that they worked in sports marketing with a sports team for free to get experience and open doors into the industry.

Gendered Perspective as a Female Professional in Sport Media Marketing

All the participants expressed that the sports industry remains male dominated but interestingly, did not always extend this to the current landscape of sports media and their marketing roles. Several participants suggested that early in their career they experienced gender bias but that they had grown beyond this barrier in their current leadership roles. These participants expressed that they did not feel that their ideas, efforts, or opportunities were slighted due to gender. One participant, however, had strong feelings about gender discrimination in the organization where she serves. Following are three illustrative examples of these expressions.

Amanda, a late 40's Caucasian senior-level marketing executive at a global sport media network shared her perspective of the evolution of sports media, expressing that while many people still thought of her organization as a "good old boys club," she did not think that reflected the reality of her experience. She further explained that the industry has certainly been that way in the past but expressed her excitement about the sports media landscape today explaining: "I do think part of the reason sports media is interesting to me is because of all the women. There's been an influx of women in the last 10 years."

Rebecca, an early 50's Caucasian senior-level executive at a global network leader in sport media, shared insight about experiencing gender bias earlier in her career but went on to

say that her comfort level and the level of respect that she garners in the room grew as she settled in her role and as the industry added more women. She shared this example, “You know, it happened all the time in meetings--either the mansplaining or...some guy just reiterating what you just raised five seconds before and then suddenly it's a great idea, right?”

In contrast, Melissa, a mid 40's Caucasian senior media marketing director of a professional team was the lone participant that shared her frustration with being a female leader in what remains a male-dominated sport organization: “[The organization] is just a lot of men and they all kind of grow up together and sometimes you just get sick of talking and not being heard.” This varying view gives some balance to the gendered perspective shared by others and illustrates an organization where women are not still plentiful nor well-represented at leadership levels and gender bias and frustration remain prevalent.

Research Question One: Defining Creative Role Identity

The key findings around research question one, “How do women in sports media and marketing define creativity as part of their professional role identity?” both supported and expanded the traditional definitions of creativity as well as what is considered creative (Mumford, 2012; Runco, 2014). While the context is also important, these findings expanded Farmer et al., (2003) creative role identity beyond the value placed on creativity by the organization to the ways in which these women defined and operationalized their own strengths as creativity in traditionally “non-creative” roles. These findings are expressed in three major themes: context matters defining creative role identity, competencies are used to define creative role identity, and mindsets are used to define creative role identity. The definitions of creativity within their own identity were often expressed as the skills and knowledge that the leaders themselves possess (competencies), their personal mindsets or traits that served as antecedents to

creativity, or within their own unique context and more specifically, in comparison to other industries or skilled roles within their organizations. In this section, I will expand on these three themes and further express various facets of them through the 10 subthemes that emerged from the data. These themes and subthemes highlight the interplay between personal definitions and dynamic demands of the industry. Below, I offer a thematic map for this question (See **Figure 1**). The voices of the participants offered unique perspectives on how creativity is defined and operationalized within their context and through competencies and mindsets that are integral to the creation of their individual creative role identity.

Context Matters Defining Creative Role Identity

The first theme, Context Matters, illustrates how roles and the challenges that are specific to the sport media industry shape the perspective of the participants in how creativity is defined within their own identity. The subthemes in this section include an industry specific context and the role specific context of the perceptions of creativity.

Creativity is Unique to Industry

Eight participants shared insights pointing to the fast pace of change and unique context in which they work. They expressed that creativity looks different within sports media as compared to other industries.

Ashley, an early 40's Hispanic senior level media marketing executive at a Spanish Language media company who self-identified as LGBTQ, shared "Creativity in my role and this industry isn't just about coming up with flashy ideas, it is about problem solving and staying ahead of trends." She expanded on the need to be able to be creative and innovate with constraints such as extremely tight budgets or inflexible formats. She offered this example:

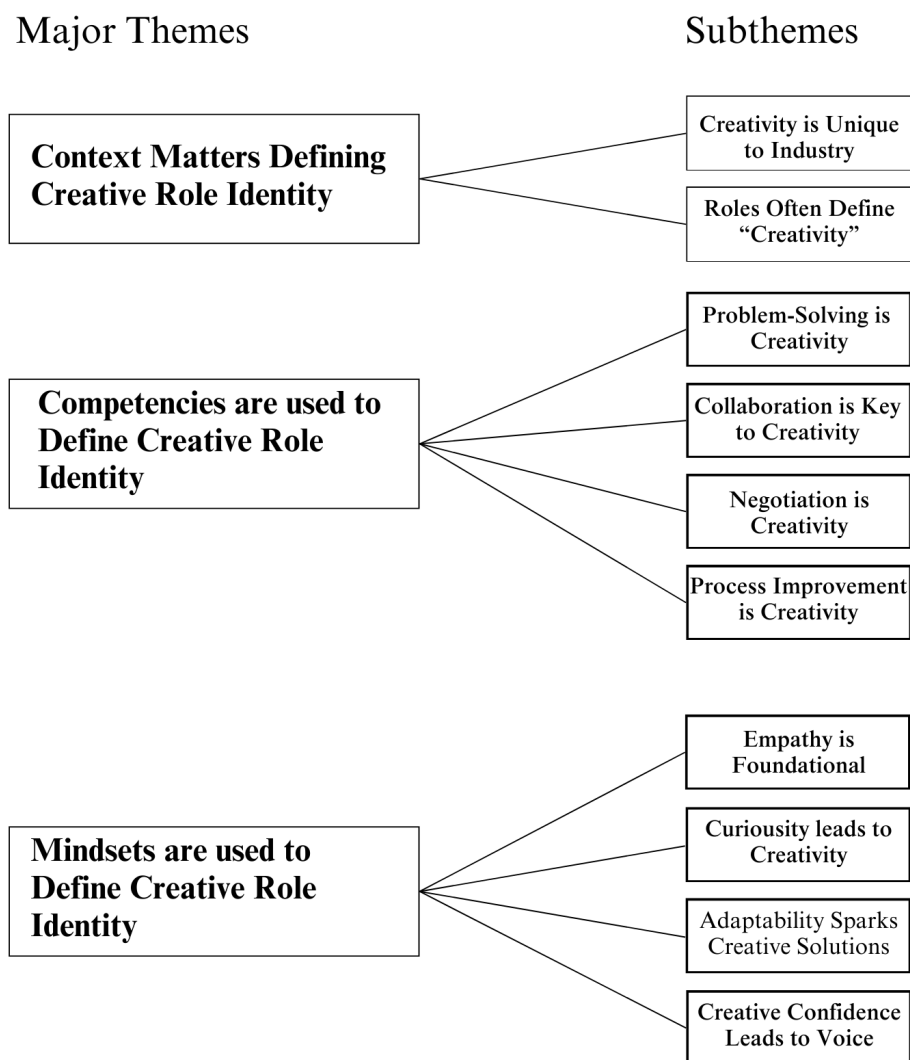


Figure 1
Thematic Map for Research Question 1

Creativity means finding ways to make our programming more engaging without overhauling an entire system. For instance, during a sporting event, we integrated second-screen experiences where fans could interact with live stats and polls. It wasn't a massive production shift, but it completely transformed the viewing experience.

Sarah, an early 40's Caucasian senior-level executive for a regional professional sport organization who self-identified as LGBTQ, echoed this sentiment and emphasized that creativity must be paired with adaptability sharing, "Sports media is constantly changing, and finding creative solutions that check all the boxes can be a challenge."

These examples are illustrative of perspective of many of the participants and were key insights into how these women connected creativity with their own role identities. I found, however, that for these participants, defining creativity as a part of their own identity was far more nuanced and often impacted by other roles and functions within their organizational context.

Roles Often Define "Creativity"

Nine participants shared that their definitions of creativity within their professional setting were often linked with specific titles, roles, or departments within their organizations. For some these roles and functions were defined by the participants and for others, it was shaped by how the organization communicated those roles to the larger organizational community. For many, this linkage became the framework for how they made sense and meaning of their own creativity and how it was expressed within the formation of their own creative role identity.

Rebecca discussed this division in how she defined "creativity" in relation to her own identity:

There are functions that are creative, right? They're the creatives creating and then there are kind of the business side. And so, there's a dividing line between those types of

functions. And so, you know, I was clearly on the business side. Not on the quote, creative.

Allison, a young 30's Caucasian senior director at a globally recognized sport-focused creative agency, further illustrated this division of labor offering that it is contextual in nature explaining: "You know if you are not [finger quotes] a creative...If you've worked in marketing and media or an agency...there are creatives and then there's the rest of us."

Ashley further explained the dividing line between roles and functions in journalism and media and the impact on the perception of creativity in her role. She expressed that if she did not have the formal title of producer, write, studio director, or creating promo sports, that her role would not be considered creative, she explained:

Even though I was not considered that [creative], there are a lot of creative elements in the roles that I've had. Even if the functions themselves weren't [finger quotes] creative... There is a dividing line between types of functions and how you are seen as far as creativity.

This delineation is further illustrated by Rachel, a mid-30's Caucasian senior-level marketing executive for a leading digital sports entertainment and gaming company who declared: "I am not creative" and did not define her more business-focused role as requiring creativity. Rather, she assigned a "creative" designation to production-focused people within her organization sharing "We work with our production teams who are largely full of very talented creative people who can take a show concept and build it from start to scratch in a way that I don't think I necessarily could." Rachel's assertion that she was not creative is an extreme but meaningful example highlighting the importance of this study and how organizational dynamics can impact how an individual makes sense of and assigns creativity to specific roles and the

impact that this can have on an individual's ability to see themselves as creative. Rachel had similar competencies and mindsets supporting creativity as the other participants. The rest of female leaders that expressed formal roles as "creative," still moved beyond that structure to identify creativity as an important part of their own role identity. These competencies are discussed in the following section.

Competencies are Used to Define Creative Role Identity

Participants identified numerous repeating competencies tied to their definitions of creativity and how these shaped their creative role identity. Problem-solving and collaboration were identified as key competencies by all or all but one of the participants. Negotiation and process improvement were also expressed by participants and offered nuanced expression of participant definition of creativity within their own roles and identities. As you will learn through the stories of the participants, these competencies are a woven tapestry of their abilities, knowledge, and skills by which define how they integrate creativity into their own identity.

Problem Solving is Creativity

All participants identified themselves as strong problem solvers. It is interesting to note that while Rachel did not identify as a creative person, she still considered problem-solving as a core strength that she possessed. The remaining 11 participants aligned this as a competency related to their own identification as creative. Problem-solving around business problems and goals requires new ideas and unique approaches. Below I offer two illustrative examples from Allison and Megan that highlight the participants perspectives on problem-solving as a valued competency for creative role identity:

Allison defined creative work as process improvement or even promotional materials or production work but cited the ability to uniquely solve problems as one of her primary creative

competencies and the essence of creativity in business. She explained: “There's so much creativity here... but if it's creativity within the bounds of business objectives, it's how are you a unique problem solver.”

Megan, a late 30's Asian American mid-level marketing leader at a global sports media company, further explained problem-solving, in her creative role identity, as the work of telling emotional, functional, and innovative stories. She said: “For me, creativity is about problem-solving and making connections...Creativity is figuring out how to tell a cohesive story that works across all of them [platforms].”

With the complexity and pace of the sport media industry, it makes sense that problem-solving is a core strength of these female leaders and heartening that, for the most part, they identify this competency as a creative effort. These examples not only express problem-solving as a creative effort but also express the critical challenge of meeting robust business goals, developing content for a myriad of platforms, and a perpetual need for cohesive and compelling story telling present in many sport media marketing leadership roles. Interestingly, these problems are often solved by bringing people and teams together to work toward a common goal. As such, the following section will discuss collaboration as a key competency in my findings.

Collaboration is Key to Creativity

Collaboration was highlighted by all but one of the participants as a cornerstone of creativity. Whether the collaboration was leading their teams internally, including numerous external stakeholders, or supporting diverse perspectives in programming, the participants saw their ability to collaborate with others as a critical ability that they possessed and as a part of the formation of their own creative identity. Hannah, a late 30's Caucasian senior-level creative executive at a global sports network leader emphasized the collaboration necessary between

internal teams: “Internally, cross-departmental collaboration is key to successful creativity. Our creative team works closely with marketing strategists to ensure that we’re aligned in voice and vision...even as we explore new formats and platforms.”

Amanda further explained in the context of internal as well as external stakeholder collaboration being key to creativity:

So, it's really a collaboration, you know, it's not supposed to be like they're the client. We're the vendor. We're partners. We're...collaborating together on a property... We bring in other stakeholders like programming and the leagues... I can't, we can't --just make something up and not show the league, you know? So, collaboration with not only your team, but all the stakeholders who have vested interest in the creative is key in creativity in more jobs.

Laura, a mid-40s Hispanic senior-level marketing and production executive at a sport media network offered the cross-cultural example expressing that authenticity and resonance in programming comes from both collaboration and diverse perspectives sharing this example:

Covering sporting events in Spanish for the first time wasn't just about translating content—it was about developing a tone and style that resonated with Latinos... We collaborated with local talent and cultural experts to craft coverage that felt authentic... The result was a deeper connection with our viewers...creativity often comes from collaboration and gathering perspectives.

As collaboration is noted in research as a key to successful creativity efforts and leading for creativity, it is not surprising that the participants in this study aligned with this competency as a part of their own role identity.

Negotiation is Creativity

Another competency that emerged in my research is negotiation skills. Though not shared by all the participants, seven of the women outlined this as creative effort. This is especially noteworthy, because negotiation skills are not highlighted in the literature on creative role identity or creativity. Identifying this competency as a part of the creativity role identity of the participants might offer unique connections between how these women make meaning of creativity in their own identity and within their organizations and strength in negotiation.

Laura offers an example illustrating a time when she negotiated differently than her male counterparts to build partnerships and preserve both content quality and jobs:

[During a budget review] International live feeds were on the chopping block. I proposed forming new partnerships with other networks so that we could share feeds and resources... My male counterparts wanted to cut the live broadcasts entirely [shakes head]... I do think my approach was creative [smiles with satisfaction]... I negotiated with networks...so many pieces and parts...and it ultimately saved jobs and kept international live feeds available for our viewers.

Ashley offered an additional example where she flexed her negotiation abilities to save community engagement programs and highlights her collaboration skills as well:

We were reviewing budgets and there was a lot of pressure in the room to cut our community engagement initiatives...we always have to cut costs...it was so disheartening. I offered to negotiate collaborations with local businesses to sponsor those programs... it worked and gave us a way to protect them without impacting budget... I was proud of that.

These examples show how the participants focused on negotiating creative solutions to budget constraints. Creativity aligned with negotiation could be considered pivotal to fostering

collaboration and rallying people around ideas to meet unique organizational challenges. These findings highlight negotiation skills as an often-overlooked competency related to the enactment of creative role identity.

Process Improvement is Creativity

Building on the importance of negotiation skills, the final competency that emerged within my research is the ability to improve processes. While only six of the participants expressed this as key to their creative identity, this competency expresses a strategic approach to creativity. The shared stories of the female leaders in this study express that not only do these women contribute creative ideas within their marketing roles, but they are also actively building, refining, and enhancing processes to drive creativity and solve challenges that the organization faces. Many of the participants felt that this competency was undervalued or harder to see, but equally valuable in their own creative identity. Jessica, an early 40's Caucasian senior level executive for sports media at a sport agency expanded on her role sharing:

I also think creativity doesn't have to be the way we always think about it, which is something you can see feel touch... You know, my creativity can be as simple as developing new processes or streamlining an old one... Most people wouldn't define that as creative... I'm *that* person at [organization].

Melissa further focused on the complexity of sports media and all the nuances that must be considered in addressing the processes:

I know sports media is not black and white. There's so much that goes into it...every fan is different, every demographic is different...every situation is different...even how we do things, the processes... I'm so good at seeing a process and where we can make it better or where it might be breaking down... I think, well, for me creativity is handling

those under the radar details or processes...but those aren't always noticed as creativity...that doesn't make the work less important.

These examples offer a glimpse into the interconnected nature of how process improvement and creativity are intertwined within these participants' creative identities. This is especially interesting in this research given that the participants expressed that this competency is often overlooked by their organizations or within their roles. There seems to be a self-dependence in defining their creative role identity related to this competency rather than relying on the value that the organization or leadership places on it. Recognizing process improvement as a competency related to creative role identity expands the lens of understanding of how the participants make meaning of creativity within their roles –emphasizing that creativity can be found in how an individual generates new ideas or even in how they approach existing processes.

The competencies identified in this study offer a dynamic picture of how women in sport media marketing demonstrate and define creativity within their roles. These competencies go beyond the expected idea generation associated with creative effort to demonstrate their strengths in navigating the daily challenges of a nuanced industry, building and fostering collaboration, negotiating for support and resources, and innovating to improve processes. These competencies are complementary to the mindsets in the next section.

Mindsets are Used to Define Creative Role Identity

Along with competencies that were integral to creativity, participants identified mindsets rooted in empathy, curiosity, adaptive, and creative confidence as reflections of their creative identity. Mindsets offer insight into the participant's deeper internalization of creativity as they serve as antecedents and drivers to how these women approach and enact creativity within their roles.

Empathy is Foundational

Empathy emerged as a key mindset of the participants and how they approached creativity in their roles. Nine participants directly connected empathy with their creative outcomes, finding that having a mindset focused connecting with others on an emotional level, listening to learn, and expressing that understanding back to them enhanced their ability to produce and lead impactful creative efforts (Anderson et al., 2025). Hannah identified the importance of empathy focused on content as a part of her creative strengths explaining, “Empathy is often overlooked...but it’s so powerful... The best creative content connects with people on an emotional level...and understanding your audience’s needs and perspectives will make your work stand out... That’s a strength of mine.”

Sarah connected empathy to her gender identity and ability to generate inclusive ideas to her creative identity. She shared:

Being a woman has allowed me to bring a level of empathy and holistic thinking to the table...[empathy] enables more inclusive and creative outcomes. When we create campaigns, it isn’t just about [an athlete’s] performance on the field...it also includes a full picture of an athlete’s life... Perspective, I think, is a huge asset.

For the participants in this research, empathy extended far beyond a trait to a critical and active mindset. The stories from these participants illustrate empathy as a creative leadership mindset that fosters creativity, builds deeper connections, leads to meaningful content, and develops more inclusive thinking. Recognizing empathy as a core component of creativity aligns with the literature (Kelley, 2001), as well as emphasizes the importance of relational awareness. While empathy allows emotional connection with others, an openness and interest to explore possibilities also emerged as an important mindset for creativity.

Curiosity Leads to Creativity

Six of the participants expressed curiosity as the fuel that propelled creative effort within their own creative identity. Jessica described the interconnected role of curiosity as a driver in the development of her creative identity:

Creativity and curiosity are baked into all three of my strengths. I think to connect with people, you've got to be curious and creative and realize that not everyone is going to want to connect with you... be curious in considering the ways that you can think differently... I think creativity comes from a lifelong learning... I push myself sometimes to find a new resource that I'm not as familiar with just to know something new.

Further, Rebecca highlighted curiosity layered with humility as way of defining creativity within her role identity. She explained, “[For creativity] I think you need curiosity and humility... in terms of knowing what you don't know and knowing when you need to ask for help and or ask questions.”

Curiosity is a key mindset in shaping creative role identity. Individuals who stop and ask questions and consider ways of doing things beyond the status quo are often the ones who invest in their own learning and professional development, think out of the box, and are accepting and adaptable to change. This curiosity helps people to make sense of the world around them and drive creative solutions (Kelley, 2001). Curiosity as a mindset associated creative role identity empowers female leaders in sports media to adapt to changing industry trends and shifts, gather insight from others, consider new ways of doing things, and seek environments to support creative thinking.

Adaptability Sparks Creative Solutions

Building on curiosity, adaptability also surfaced as an influencing mindset in the formation of creative role identity. As mentioned earlier, the fast-paced and rapid changes present in the sports and media industries require that leaders not only generate new ideas and solutions but also be able to put those ideas into play and pivot as needed. Five participants shared stories focused on the need to stay ahead of trends, figure out new technologies and how to integrate them, and evolve strategies on the fly as integral to creative success in their roles. The mindset of adaptability supports female leaders in sports media marketing to focus on growth and change within their organizational context. Hannah's example focused on the speed in which media is changing:

The media landscape is changing rapidly...leaders need to be adaptable—that is a huge part of creativity for me... What are the trends?... How can I adapt to be there?... One major trend is the shift toward more personalized and interactive content... [Audiences] want to be part of the experience, not just passive viewers. This means integrating technologies into campaigns where it makes sense... It's constant and necessary.

Sarah echoed this sharing: “You really have to stay ahead with trends and platforms... You can't rely on outdated tactics if you want to reach the current generation....You have to adapt quickly...that gets the heart of need for creativity in my role.”

Megan affirmed the need for adaptability tied to pace of change in sports media explaining: “Creativity drives everything we do, whether it's a motion graphic or an interactive app element. This must be partnered with adaptability. It is essential in a fast-moving industry like sports media.”

Adaptability as a mindset for creativity really emphasizes that organizational creativity itself is not a static practice, but a process driven by internal and external challenges and needs.

For women in sports media marketing this mindset drives them to remain competitive in their field, respond to industry and technology shifts, and translate the challenges into creative ideas and opportunities. Adaptability is an important mindset for leaders to internalize as a part of their creative role identity. It is through this flexibility that they can bring creative ideas to life within an organization.

Creative Confidence Leads to Voice

The final mindset that surfaced from the experiences of the participants is creative confidence. Creative confidence is the belief in your own creative abilities and this confidence, paired with creative thinking, helps to turn ideas into reality (Kelley & Kelley, 2013). This mindset appeared for many of the participants of this study as they navigated their organizations and grew into leadership roles. The stories of the participants reflected creative confidence beyond their technical skills, instead leaning on their abilities to collaborate effectively, lead creative projects, or advocate for ideas that they believed in. Seven of the participants offered stories and examples related to creative confidence, following are three that illustrate facets of this subtheme. Amanda's story illustrated her journey to integrating mature creative confidence into her creative role identity. She shared:

I don't have the technical acumen that I think a lot of men do at in my group, but my creative chops aren't questioned at all... When there is a project, I'm going to bring the right people in to execute... I worked with an illustrator recently. I couldn't draw what he was doing, but he explained to me how he goes about doing it... I could respect that and

then take that knowledge and speak about it when I had to sell it to my marketing partners.

Laura also offered insight into her journey possessing a creative confidence that began with an opportunity to simply observe a boss that she felt displayed “a captivating confidence” when she presented ideas. As Laura talked about this experience, she took her time and reflected on determination and desperate desire to exude this same confidence that her admired boss expressed. Laura said,

I just wanted that so badly... I still get a little nervous, you know, do I belong in this room? ...when I walk in there something comes over me and I feel the confidence because of my body of work, my creativity, and the character that I have... I belong there.

Laura’s transparency and question offers a glimpse into the sensemaking that goes on in an individual’s mind as they form their creative role identity. The process is complex and certainly not a linear path. Instead, it can be filled with moments of self-doubt that exist for all humans alongside a strong creative confidence.

Jessica offered still another nuanced perspective. Her creative confidence was tied to her ability to shake things up, share ideas and have a sense of impact and voice in her work. She exuded creative confidence sharing, “I love using my creativity to break down traditional business models at [organization name] ... I feel confident to share my ideas in most rooms...there aren't a lot of rooms that I don't feel empowered to have a voice.”

Creative confidence as a mindset for how female leaders in sports media marketing define and enact creativity as a part of their role identities enables them to push boundaries, navigate adaptive challenges, or confidently advocate within their roles. This self-efficacy,

respect, and trust in their own creative abilities sets the stage for the long-term impact of their leadership and creative efforts within their organizational context.

The collection of mindsets shared by the participants: empathy, curiosity, adaptability, and creative confidence, each play a key role in how the participant of this study define and enact their creative role identities. These mindsets are the drivers that support their ability to navigate adaptive challenges, develop and foster deeper connections, learn about the latest trends, and confidently share their creative ideas. In relation to my research, these creative antecedents offer a deeper understanding of how the participants integrate creativity into their professional identities and how creative leadership in this industry must also include adaptability. This insight also highlights the need for organizations to support environments where creative mindsets can grow and flourish. This investment can lead to effective leaders and impactful creative outcomes for the organization.

Research Question Two: Enacting Creativity through Leadership

Considering how women in sports media marketing develop and define their creative role identity requires not only considering their mindsets and competencies but also how these strengths are operationalized within their leadership roles and practices. In this section, I will describe the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data related to research question two, “How do women enact their creative role identity through their work and manage their teams?” This question shifts the focus from internal drivers that define creativity to how it plays out in their daily leadership roles and team dynamics. The findings align with research on transformational and human-centered leadership practices and approaches that support creativity (Bass, 1995; Koh et al., 2019; Morris & Morris, 2024). They also support Ma et al., (2022) situational practices and styles that women often lean on to navigate organizational contexts

successfully. An interesting diversion from literature is the commitment to leading as advocates for change (e.g., representation or bias) expressed by the participants. The findings are expressed in two major themes: team management practices unleash creativity and enacted leadership styles can support creativity. These themes were supported by eight subthemes and are offered as a thematic map for this question (See **Figure 2**). The narratives offered in support of these themes uncover a deeper understanding of how the female participants' have shaped and express their own creative role identity by exploring how it is operationalized in leadership approach and practice. Additionally, they highlight the way in which leaders navigate organizational contexts. The combination of these offers meaningful insight into creative role identity in practice.

Team Management Practices Support Creativity

Fostering Collaboration Inspires Creativity

The most prominent subtheme that emerged was fostering collaboration within teams. All 12 participants expressed their efforts to provide a supportive work environment and enhance team creativity and output. Ashley shared her perspective on creativity being intricately connected to fostering collaboration:

[Creativity] is a team sport. I'm not the kind of person who sits alone and comes up with a genius idea...creativity comes from collaboration with my team... brainstorming with colleagues, tossing ideas out, and then making them better.

Ashley continued by describing a "fan cam" that was used during halftime segments of a live game and featured the live reactions to the game from fans sitting in the comfort of their home. The idea came directly from a team brainstorming session and became one of the most popular additions to programming.

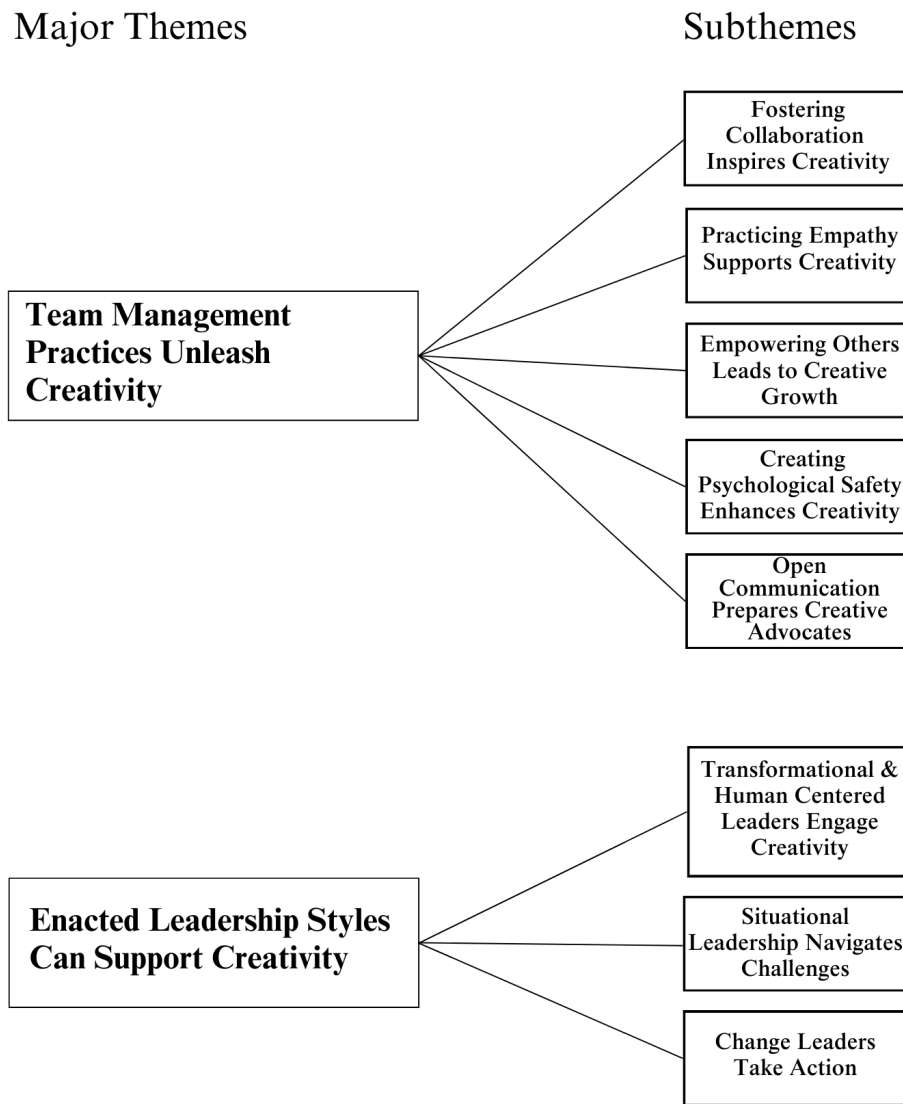


Figure 2
Thematic Map for Research Question 2

Amanda expanded on collaboration with an example of how she engages her team in sharing and engaging in conversation around creative work as a regular practice. She explained:

We share creative things that inspire us...or things that resonate with us, whether it's an Apple commercial or a social post... I'm constantly sending stuff to my team and saying things like "look how great this tagline is" and "look how this visual technique landed." They do the same... This practice makes me feel included...it inspires us to work together...everybody on my team feels really passionate about collaborating on new creative and just being in sports.

Whether it be through engaging in brainstorming and other idea generation activities or sharing the creative concepts of others to stir discussion and engagement, fostering collaboration is critical to enhancing the creative output of teams. The appearance of this sub-theme is not surprising given that collaboration is also highlighted as primary competency that the female participants in this study related as a strength. Expressing collaboration as a way of engaging and managing teams highlights what the work of fostering collaboration looks like in their daily professional roles and how they enact it as a part of their own creative role identity.

Practicing Empathy Leads to Creativity

Practicing empathy with individuals on a team also emerged as a key approach in how ten of the participants managed teams for creative output. Rachel shared insight into how she relies on empathy to lead and considers the personal and professional needs and desires of her team:

I very much believe that leading creativity starts with and empathy and so even at this level, I wouldn't ask my team to do anything that I would not also do...I'm very accessible, maybe sometimes to a fault for me personally. But I like individual

conversations [instead of email or texts]. I like making time for the team... I listen and step back to pay attention to their needs so that the team can continue to grow and elevate.

Megan offered a specific example where her team, and others within the organization, were struggling to learn all the facets of a new platform. While much of the organizational leadership was frustrated with the team, Megan explained, “I just tried to put myself in their shoes. It had to be frustrating for them, and it turns out we weren’t even given all the information that we needed... I jumped in and we tackled [their challenges] together.” Megan’s practice of leading by showing empathy, offered critical insight to her and the organizational leadership and became the impetus for leadership sharing additional relevant information and the team’s ultimate success in building a creative campaign that quickly surpassed their original revenue goals set by the organization. Another interesting observation that was echoed in other participant stories is that Megan’s empathy in action led to fostering collaboration as highlighted in the previous section suggesting the interwoven nature of these constructs for many leaders.

Although Melissa did not see herself as creative, she did express herself showing empathy as a cornerstone of her leadership and professional identity. She offered that her office door is always open and that her unofficial role is one that always listens to personal or professional issues and tries to understand. She explained, “I’ve always been very empathetic... I want to help my team and remove frustrations and roadblocks...I’ve always been ‘employee first’... That’s how I work with people, that’s how I lead, and even mentor.” While Melissa does not identify as creative, her focus on leading with empathy and her identity as a problem-solver would suggest that she is using and supporting creativity. However, as she has developed her

own role identity, these strengths have not been considered and/or validated by self or others as creative abilities or behaviors.

Like collaboration, empathy is defined by the participants as a critical individual mindset that leads to creativity. Showing empathy as a way of managing a team illustrates this mindset in action and how that is enacted within the participants' creative role identity. Collaboration and empathy are often integrated as tools to empower creative growth. The next section discusses this as a sub theme of this research.

Empowering Others Leads to Creative Growth

Empowering others also emerged as a subtheme expressing how these female leaders in sports media lead for creativity. Nine of the participants in this research spoke about empowering people to grow professionally or personally and the importance of giving people credit for their work to empower their future creative efforts. Hannah expressed a passion for empowering her team and shared about a time that she encouraged and empowered a junior producer who had wonderful ideas but held back and would not speak up, especially in large meetings. Hannah's commitment to empowering her team members was personal and hands-on. She shared:

We started having regular one-on-one sessions.... I would encourage her to share her thoughts and helped her prepare to present them to the team... I would ask her to prepare something to share for smaller meetings...over time, she gained the confidence... Fast forward a few years, and she's now leading her own team and producing some of our most innovative content. Seeing her empowered is still, well, it's awesome. She just needed some tools and the confidence.

Amanda illustrated an alternate view of what empowering others looks like in her organizational reality. She chose to position herself as a part of the team rather than an authority. This positioning allowed others the opportunity to step up. Amanda's approach also focused on offering credit and praise for creativity, she tied this to her own experiences and as a way of passing on the love and support that empowered her along her leadership journey. She explained:

As a leader, I'm also a good teammate, you know? I believe in empowering others. I give people credit for their creative work. I give people opportunities...I'm always trying to bring people in and empower them with the same sort of love and mentorship that other women have shown to me.

Empowering others to manage creativity in teams can be expressed in many ways including offering opportunities, removing barriers, lending guidance, or creating an environment where team members can flourish. I will talk more about this last one, addressing psychological safety, in the next section. The way empowering others is defined and enacted as part of a leader's creative role identity offers insight into leadership approaches and organizational cultures and contexts in which they operate.

Creating Psychological Safety Enhances Creativity

Connected to empowering others in creative efforts, is a critical need to ensure team members feel a sense of safety that is required to take on the inherently risky business of creativity. Creativity requires failure, even in small ways. Ideas can fall flat or seem too outrageous and creating an environment of psychological safety removes the fear and enables team members to step away from the expected ideas and fully engage divergent thinking. Six participants in this research expressed that creating psychological safety for their team is an integral part of managing the best creative outputs. The participant insights supported and

expressed settings where ideas are valued, there are no dumb ideas, and every team member has a voice gave individuals confidence and extra room to push boundaries to engage and explore new ideas.

As a team leader, Jennifer, a young 30s Black senior-level media marketing executive for a professional team, explained that she often hosts creative brainstorming sessions where the craziest of ideas are encouraged. She also encourages her team to look for inspiration and make connections all around them by consuming all kinds of media: documentaries, following influencers, training. She felt that this cross-pollination of ideas encouraged sharing and the comfort of her team. Another facet of creating psychological safety for her team involved affirmation and building confidence. Jennifer shared:

I also make sure we celebrate big wins and small milestones. If an idea that someone had led to a great piece of content, we highlight that in our meetings... I always want to create a space where people feel confident, seen, and motivated...to keep pushing boundaries.

Megan shared that creating psychological safety in the management of her team focused on inclusivity and empowerment. Her focus on empowering her team further illustrates the complementary and interwoven nature of how these constructs are enacted and integrated into the leader's own creative role identity. During our interview, Megan was comfortable in her office chair, leaned back a bit and relaxed, drinking coffee. She sat up straighter, set her coffee on the table in front of her, and leaned-in toward the zoom screen--her body language emphasizing to me the level of importance she placed on her next statement. Focusing to linger and put emphasis on a few words, she shared "I'm always focused on building the best team where magic happens and *everyone*, regardless of their background, feels *empowered* to contribute their ideas. I *make* that happen for my team. I *promise* it to them."

Amanda's enacting psychological safety for her team as a part of her creative role identity focused on setting the stage and empowering people at all levels to engage and understanding that good ideas can come from anywhere and are not tied to a hierarchy or title.

Amanda shared:

I provide a safe environment where, you know, any idea is entertained...let's ideate around the next season, for example. A good idea could come from a manager or a PA (production assistant), or a germ of an idea could come from anywhere...I have no problem inviting people on my team in roles lower to contribute to an idea. Everyone is welcome.

Creating an environment of psychological safety for individuals and teams is an antecedent to strong creative effort (Edmondson, 2018). The ways in which female leaders in sports media marketing enact how they manage to enhance creative output by creating a safe space where people feel valued and heard is an important expression of their creative role identity and leadership approach in action.

Open Communication Prepares Creative Advocates

An interesting insight related to how the participants managed creativity within their teams was a reliance on open communication. While only four participants in this research alluded to this, the insights were interesting and useful as an illustration of how some of the women managed in a challenging way to enhance and encourage creative output and as a way of preparing their teams to advocate for their ideas and contributions. The best illustration of this was by Allison. She shared insights about her evolution as a professional and having to work beyond her natural people pleasing approach to growing and evolving into relying on more open

and candid communication in managing her team—preparing and challenging them to do their best thoughtful work. Allison explained:

I try to listen well, actively, and ask questions... And sometimes they are pretty pointed [questions]—I poke holes in it [their ideas], which isn't always met with the best reception. If I don't ask it, it's gonna come up. You know?... You need to explain why an idea is good or what you want to do...answer tough questions... I want them to be ready and confident.

This “tough love” or open communication style was referenced by several of the participants and at times tied back to their own journey and feelings of not being prepared. Laura shared:

I ask hard questions of others...I always over prepare for meetings. I loathe being asked something that I do not know or not having solid reasoning in place for the ideas I bring to the table... This [being prepared] is the best way to advocate for my creativity and the creativity of my team.

This quote suggests a time when Laura did not feel prepared or had her ideas accepted as planned. This offers insight into one potential reason that leaders managing their teams opt for an open communication style that while direct, might also best prepare the team members to successfully advocate for their creative ideas. In this way, leaders who adopt open communication as a part of their creative identity manage their teams to prepare and empower them to their rise to their best creative efforts within their organizational context.

Enacted Leadership Styles Can Support Creativity

Approaches to leadership offer insight into how female leaders in sports media marketing define and enact their creative role identities. The participants in this study shared diverse

approaches to leadership. A complementary combination of transformational and human-centered leadership approaches was the most dominant. These approaches align with research on leadership styles that support creative effort and focus on relationships to build trust, encourage collaboration, and inspire creativity. Other leaders took on a situational leadership style in which leaders made sense of a situation and adapted to the context. If the context required more agentic (or masculine) directive leadership behaviors the leader adapted to deliver. Conversely, when nurturing team collaboration and creativity were essential, the leader would pivot to their more natural approach to service their team context. Several participants also took on change-oriented styles that highlighted their experiences and considered their leadership position as one who was responsible for advocacy to actively address bias or expand representation in programming. These leadership styles illustrate how the participants navigate their unique organizational dynamics, support creativity, and advocate creativity, inclusivity, and shape how they form and fulfill their creative role.

Transformational and Human Centered Leaders Engage Creativity

Allison offered gendered insight into empathy in her leadership approach: “I think, it seems like women tend to have more empathy than men and that empathetic point of view is the core of how I lead.” Allison’s assessment aligns with research on strength of female leaders. (Chen & Shao, 2022; Miller, 2009)

Jessica delved deeper into how she has evolved in her more human-centered leadership style rooted in empathy and that focused on building bonds and relationships to support creative goals and effort. She shared her realization about and navigation to this leadership approach.

Connecting with people and seeing them is how I lead. I think I’ve learned over the last four years to be more vulnerable. ... I came up in the work world where life was very

segmented. You know, we didn't bring our whole selves to work... I've had to learn to not be that way as much anymore because my team needed to relate to me just as much as I needed to relate to them... I have found that focusing on relationships first makes us all better.

Rachel navigated to a more transformational leadership approach focusing on mobilizing and inspiring her team to meet goals. She expressed that her leadership was rooted in empathy, but she sought to "...galvanize them [her team] in a way that allowed them to achieve desired results [KPIs]. She continued to explain that offering support and giving her team space to "build the brand and ideate" motivated them to their best creative efforts.

Ashley offered a glimpse into her engaging, energetic transformational and human-centered leadership approach and the tools and opportunities for creativity. Ashley shared:

I love my team, and they love me. Leading creativity with them is fun ...a mix of structured brainstorming and spontaneous "aha" moments... Some days, creativity is about big-picture ideas like planning a campaign... Sometimes we solve small challenges—like how can we make this 10-second promo stand out? ... My team is engaged and energized and that is never boring.

Situational Leadership Navigates Challenges

Four of the participants felt they had to adopt more situational leadership approaches to garner respect. They adapted as necessary between approaches to be directive and challenging and embracing a more nurturing, empathetic approach. This sentiment was shared from all the women from sport media marketing leaders connected to specific sport teams rather than organizations focused on producing general sport programming.

Rebecca illustrates this sentiment shared by all four of the participants when she jokingly compared her leadership style to a “Barbie Monologue” sharing that she had to be “careful not to cross the line too much.” Rebecca continued by sharing, “you can be too aggressive or by the book, or you can be too soft... so, you are always trying to find that right mix and read the situation and the people...the stakeholders, partners, rights holders, vendors...” Rebecca felt that it made it easier for her, in some cases, to earn respect at a functional level and then add softness back into her approach. This was echoed in the other participants who expressed having a situational approach to leadership.

This leadership style is in keeping with the literature on women taking on agentic leadership qualities to be seen as leadership material and to thrive in other male dominated industries (Esser et al., 2018). It offers a leadership approach that expresses the complex social construction and navigation of leadership and creative role identity.

Change Leaders Take Action

The participants also offered insights into their desire and action as leaders addressing bias and advocating not only for gender but also cultural and sexual orientation representation in programming. These are illustrated with examples below:

Addressing Bias. Rachel shared a specific example of bias that she felt within her work environment and her approach to dealing with it.

I've been more vocal in settings to call out things that I don't agree with or call out bias... And I think I've done so in a way that has, in some instances, kind of caught people on their feet a little bit... I do recall even this past six months, a meeting where it was not going well. I did not like how the conversation was going, the tone of which was being addressed to me...I called it out in that instance.

Creative Advocate. Ashley shared an example of how she advocated for a creative effort that improved content audience engagement:

One example that comes to mind is when I pushed for us to include more family-centric programming during [sports broadcast].... Some thought it was unnecessary, but I argued that a lot of our viewers watch with their families. It isn't just adults in the room.... We ended up adding player profiles that highlighted what their lives looked like off the field... The audience loved it...it brought in more sponsors too.

Sarah shared the impact of her advocacy for creative representation in sport media marketing. This advocacy was tied to her own passions but also the voice that she has developed as a leader. She felt a responsibility to use it for positive change. Sarah shared:

I pushed for incorporating representation of the gay community in our marketing efforts. There was push back... a lot of fear and hesitancy... but it is important for us...we have a responsibility to share that sports are for everyone. ...We launched a Pride Month campaign that featured stories from athletes... The response was so positive, not just from LGBTQ+ athletes but from their friends, families, allies...they felt seen and heard.

Rebecca sums this section by beautifully highlighting the differences and shift toward appreciation for female leadership strengths. She said “women have varying leadership styles, right? Maybe different leadership styles than men... I do think there is a growing appreciation for how we naturally lead.” The way in which female leaders lead for creativity is integral to the success of their teams (transformational and human centered), and acceptance of ideas (situational) as well impacts the sport content covered and shared, and the way people are received and included (change). This dance of enacted leadership is integral to forming creative role identity and is the beauty and strength of female leaders.

Research Question Three: The Intersection of Life and Leadership: Creative Identity through Experience

An individual's personal and professional journey packs the baggage, good and bad, that people carry along with them. These experiences impact how an individual makes sense of the world around them and play a significant role in the value they place on various elements in the shaping of their creative role identity (Weick, 1995). Research Question 3 takes a deeper dive into the experiences influencing the participants of this study by gathering insights around "How do women perceive the influence of their personal and professional journey on their creative role identity?" The participants' stories, primarily alluding to early career, support research on the presence and impact of gender bias in male-dominated industries (Gender and the Economy, 2017). However, the unique lens of females who have already navigated into successful leadership roles within sports media, also offer unique strengths related to gender and even developed out of experiences with gender bias. In keeping with Schipani et al. (2009), the critical role of mentors and allies on the professional growth of female professionals is also supported in this research. Unique to this group, however, is the unanimous identification as "athletes" and the impact of this experience on the formation of their identity. The narratives shared by the participants align with Ferullo (2019) and Galante and Ward (2017) research on the impact of sport on building crucial competencies as well as strengthening confidence and professional identity. Three themes and associated subthemes are offered below as a thematic map for this question. I will address each of these in the following section. (See **Figure 3**). These themes and subthemes offer insight into the participants' personal and professional experiences impacting how they build and live out their creative identity as leaders.

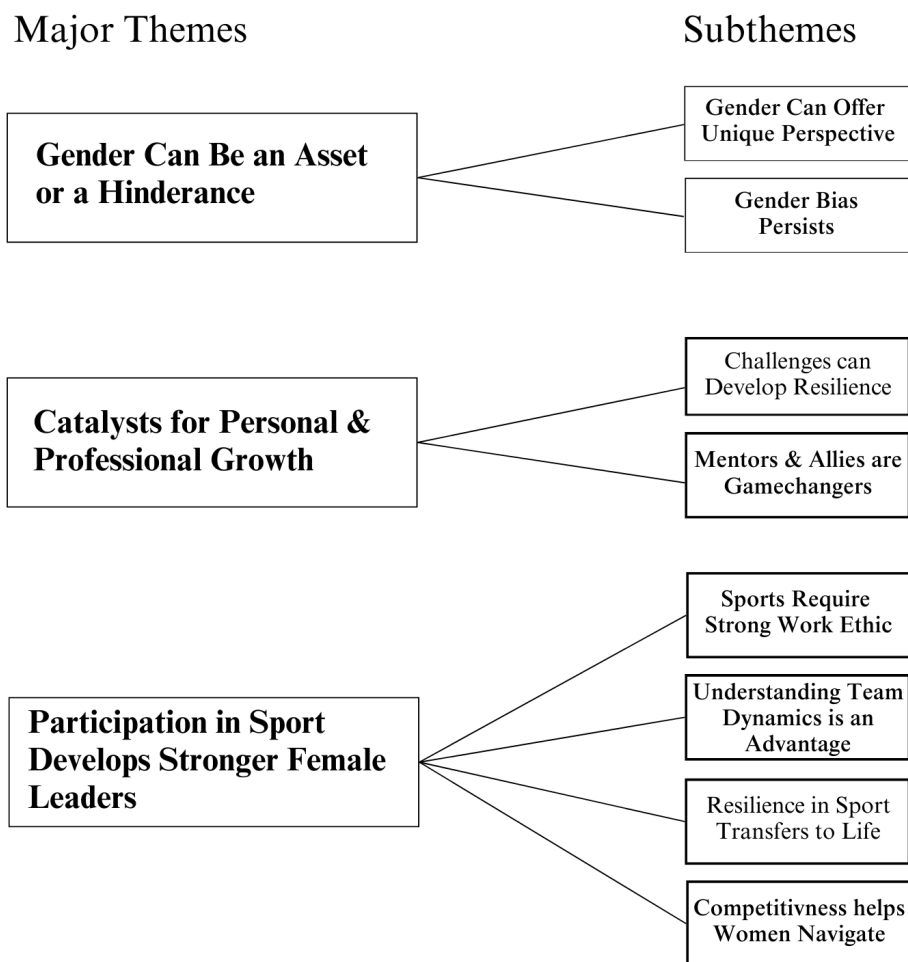


Figure 3
Thematic Map for Research Question 3

Gender Can Be an Asset or a Hinderance

The context of working in the historically male dominated field of sports media influenced the female leader's experiences and perspectives. The participants referenced the traditional lack of female representation in sports media as well as more recent efforts to support inclusivity and diversity as important elements of shaping their careers. Some participants saw gender as placing a negative impact on their career progression, while others saw their gender as positive that brought a unique lens and perspective to their roles.

Gender Can Offer Unique Perspective

Six of the female leaders in this study shared that their gendered experiences offered both strength and perspective to them in their leadership role. One example from Ashley expressed her ability to see content opportunities that might be missed by her male colleagues. She explained, "Being a woman has sometimes given me a different lens—I stop to ask questions about how we are being inclusive, or I explore ideas that no one else in the room notices."

Megan also saw her gendered perspective as an asset to her role. Megan said, "Being a woman often means I notice things others might overlook—like how we represent female athletes... or design visuals that resonate with broader audiences... My perspective can be a huge strength."

This sentiment is not exclusive to also having experienced bias, but it is a positive mindset that suggests the value and importance of the effort and impact that their presence offers. This can support both creativity and leadership confidence within an individual role identity.

Gender Bias Exists

Participant perceptions and experiences of gender bias varied ranging from subtle forms of bias such a sense that their ideas were not as valued or overlooked to overt discrimination.

When Hannah and I spoke about bias, she rolled her eyes before expressing her frustration in feeling undervalued at another organization. Hannah shared, “there were so many moments where I felt my ideas weren’t taken as seriously until they were echoed by one of my male colleagues...infuriating.” She went on to share that in her current role she felt that her ideas were valued and respected and that she did not feel the same bias and expressed excitement about her career progression into meaningful leadership roles by offering a celebratory gesture--arms in the air, palms out and bouncing them up and down—akin to a seated touchdown dance.

In contrast, Melissa expressed experiencing gender bias in her current role and did not see moving beyond it as a part of her current role and organization. Melissa shared, “...sometimes you just get sick of talking and not being heard.” Echoing the experience of others as a feeling being undervalued or not heard but also feeling stuck and unable to progress.

Building on their journey, several participants shared experiences of bias led them to finding ways to navigate workplace challenges differently than their male counterparts. Some stated that they had to be more forceful in their approach in keeping with research on taking on more agentic, or direct communication to find acceptance (Esser et al., 2018). Others emphasized their organization and preparation as their strongest tool for navigating bias. Ashley shared about this practice considering it resilience focused on creating confidence through preparation. She explained, “Early on, I often found myself as the only woman in meetings, which could be intimidating...I wasn’t always heard... I also think it made me more intentional about how I showed up. I knew I had to be prepared and confident.”

Bias, in any form, can mute voices, deter varying perspectives, and certainly shift the way individuals enact creativity as a part of their role identity. The ways in which the participants of this study internalize experiences and then implement ways to navigate them offer insight for

best practices for organizations and teams as well as offer personal development areas for other females seeking leadership roles.

Catalysts for Personal and Professional Growth

Participants also related experiences as catalysts for their personal and professional growth. Some of these were challenges that developed their ability to bounce back and take on something new with confidence, other experiences pointed to mentors that were impactful on their creative and professional journey, and still others shared their experience as competitive athletes as key leadership and growth opportunities. The impact of the participants professional journey and professional growth suggests a causal relationship between their professional journey experiences and the creation of their creative leadership approach and identity.

Challenges Can Develop Resilience

Numerous participants attributed their current success to the challenges they faced early in their careers. For instance, experiences of being dismissed or overlooked led them to be resilient and develop stronger advocacy skills and a more assertive presence in meetings. This suggests a causal relationship between early career challenges and later professional resilience and success.

Megan continued her story from the previous section highlighting her strengths as a female to also express challenges that ultimately made her better. She shared "...there have been times where I've had to push harder to have my voice heard, especially early in my career... That said, those challenges taught me to advocate for myself and others. I'm actually grateful for them."

Similarly, Rachel expressed the connection between professional growth and resilience repeated by many of the participants. Like Megan, Rachel pairs this with her current ability to advocate for others. Rachel explained:

Because I struggled early on, I also grew as a person. I feel stronger and more vocal now about advocating for myself and others, probably over the last five, six years in a bigger way than maybe I did earlier in my career... I have been very fortunate in my career. I am resilient and keep bouncing back... I think I've been rewarded, and my hard work has been recognized.

Challenges as opportunities to develop and grow may be seen in the rear-view mirror rather than in the moment, but the resilience and learning that the female participants in this research ascribed to them changed them as leaders, encouraged the development of their own voice, gave them tools to navigate the complex environment in which they work, and helped them to empower others. These negative experiences turned toward positive action and growth support the formation of their creative role identity and offer insight into developing and framing leadership development for other individuals and organizations.

Mentors and Allies are Gamechangers

All the female leaders in sports media marketing that participated in this study expressed the positive influence of having either mentors or allies on their careers and personal growth. A mentor in this context serves as a role model or guides and pushes for professional growth and direction whereas a professional ally is someone who supports and advocates for an individual in and out of their presence. These roles can be formal or can come about organically as a part of informal relationships and guidance. The outcomes of both critical roles for the female

participants were the same—they removed barriers and provided professional growth and leadership opportunities.

Mentors. In particular, the significance of mentorship, both receiving and providing it, was highlighted. Eight participants spoke directly to the impact of having mentors who supported their growth. This support ranged from seeing their mentor as a role model to emulate to being challenged to develop as professionals.

Melissa's shared about her first boss, a female who she considered an incredibly impactful mentor early in her career. She offered "She was very, very real with me and very smart... She pushed me... But watching her and her lifting me up, she included me and everything and that changed the whole trajectory for me." Melissa also mentioned that this experience was a sole one with a mentor and that she really wished that she could have had more.

Rachel also shared about a boss that she considered a mentor and related her mentoring to having the opportunity to watch, to observe and to eventually emulate qualities of her leadership approach. Rachel explained:

I had the benefit of having a boss who was a great mentor... not even understanding all that she was managing--but just recognizing that she was very diligent. She took her time. She's very thoughtful, very intentional, she invested in me... I emulate her probably more than I ever thought I would or imagined I would as a leader.

In contrast, Allison's experience with mentors was informal professional guidance given within her organization that challenged her to be better. She expressed one commonality of all of them sharing "they push pushed me out of my comfort zone...out to the front... Sometimes it

was before I thought I was ready--sometimes I was, sometimes I wasn't -- but I think it was within reasonable bounds.”

Ashley echoed the importance of mentors challenging growth and offered advice that a friend and mentor shared with her. Ashley said, “If you are the smartest person in the room, you are in the wrong room. That stuck with me and encouraged me to surround myself with people who challenge me.”

Interestingly, all the referenced mentors within this research study were expressed as females supporting females. It should be noted that this was not guided as a qualifier during their interview. Contrasting this observation is the allies expressed in this research—all four of them were noted as male. This leads to interesting questions about the definitions of mentor or ally and how those roles are applied to gender.

Allies. Four participants emphasized the importance of having male allies who advocated for them in the workplace. In each case, allies were noted as male and suggested that their support had the ability to significantly impact career progression and visibility.

Melissa’s perspective on the significance of having a strong male ally early in her career encompassed similar the experiences shared from the other participants. Melissa shared “If you have a man in the room that's supporting you and advocating for you. It is much different than when a woman is... I hate to say it, but that's true.” She went on to describe her first boss as a supportive person who “always had your back.” He became the litmus test for how Melissa measures the behavior of other men in her professional world. Further, she expressed “I wish more men would support women and advocate for them. Because it was a game changer for me.”

The crucial role of mentors and allies in supporting pathways to leadership for women are supported in the research. The personal growth opportunities for women in leadership provided by these activities or restricted in the absence of them are crucial to understanding how they develop into professionals and leaders as well as how their creative role identity is supported discouraged.

Participation in Sport Develops Stronger Female Leaders

Another area of personal growth and development as a creative leader is related to the experiences an individual has prior to their professional life and how those impact their identity's creation. Most of the participants played competitive sports in a college setting, and all identified as athletes during their high school years. This does not suggest that they were all at the highest level of competition, but rather that they had a passion for engaging in sports as a player and perceived the skills garnered through sport is integral into their leadership development journey and advancement as marketing leaders today in sports media. In this way their development as leaders through sport is also considered a part of their role identity. Four subthemes emerged from the participant stories—these are work ethic, team dynamic, resilience and competitiveness.

Sports Require a Strong Work Ethic

The most prominent subtheme that emerged was the hard work required to be successful as a part of a team and within sport and how that work ethic was woven into their own professional role identity. Six of the participants referenced this as critical to their current professional identity and leadership success. Rachel illustrated this:

I was never the best volleyball player and certainly will never be probably the smartest person in the room of so many talented people and executives in the media space. But I

think I've outworked people most of my career and same would be true of my athletic career.

Allison's experience of being a dedicated track athlete further added insight to this explaining the mental cycle and process that having a strong work ethic required and the lesson she took into her professional life. Allison shared:

I remember in high school being so angry when I lost. I ran the 800—it is just brutal... But if you just stick with it and focus...push for the next step... put in the work. ... Then, I'm getting up every single day. ...and six months from now, gosh, I did the plan and I'm actually doing it, you know? ... I think it translates so well as an adult--that things don't just come to you right away all the time you have to keep at it.

The strong work ethic required to be competitive in sport, carried into the formation of a creative role identity that would support leadership qualities such as someone who is willing to put the work in with their team, accept that change doesn't happen overnight, and is dedicated to achieving individual, team, and organizational goals.

Understanding Team Dynamics is an Advantage

Another key subtheme that emerged from this research is strength gained from the experience of being a part of a team. Five participants pointed to this as a feature of sport participation that taught them the most about navigating their professional life. Amanda played competitive sport in at a small college and shared this as key component of her own creative role identity:

Being on a team, being in a sports environment -- in the professional world is the thing that prepared me the most, you know, we perform as a team every day to pull off productions and launch a campaign. Everybody plays their role. Everybody plays, has a

need to lead in their area, and then you must collaborate with your teammates and all different personalities and especially because creativity is so subjective.

Rebecca played softball for a “not so great” team through high school. While she loved the sport, she said with a laugh, “division one aspirations were not in the cards for me.” However, she also echoed the importance of her experiences as a part of team dynamic in crucial to forming her identity as a leader in a creative area. Rebecca shared, “I learned about being a part of a team—the give and take and support. Those experiences shaped me as a leader, really as a person.”

Leaders are expected to manage teams for success and the women in this study experienced that being a part of a team lays important groundwork of respect, inclusivity, coming together to meet a goal, watching out for one another, etc. These experiences offer interesting insight into the way leaders include sport-focused strengths as a part of their creative role identity.

Resilience in Sport Transfers to Life

As discussed earlier, participants identified professional experiences that spurred and developed strengths in resilience. This is also true for five participants who identified their experience in sport as a key driver in developing resilience. Laura illustrated resilience gained through sport as pivotal to how it has shaped how she forms and fulfills her creative role. Laura explained:

In sports media, much like on the field, you need to be quick on your feet and ready for unexpected changes. ...in live broadcasting, anything can happen, and you need shift and adapt. ... Being an athlete gave me a better understanding of their perspectives and the physical and emotional toll. That absolutely shapes how I tell their stories.

Offering another perspective, Sarah tied the resilience that sports taught her to her own ability to handle pressure. I asked her if she had an example of resilience as an athlete that related to her work today. She nodded and began to expand on a challenging game in her collegiate soccer career. Sarah shared:

I remember this one game during my senior year—I was captain...we were losing two goals ...we were discouraged....but rallied and ended up winning. Those moments... leading under pressure translate directly to my work now... when I need to manage my team through a tough challenge.

Competitiveness Helps Women Navigate

Several participants also listed competitiveness a strength developed by sport that they carried into their careers. Although none of the participants gave specific examples that illustrated this, they often listed it in threes along with resilience and work ethic.

Allison offered a bit of insight on this perceived strength and tied it to how professional women navigate their environment. Allison shared, “I think women that have also been competitive in some way ... tend to navigate better. I think we approach goals differently and play to win.

The experience of playing competitive sports and the strengths developed as a part of those experiences are an interesting facet of these participants’ stories. The way in which these female leaders assimilate and enact the skills and strengths honed in the context of sport into their creative role identity offers a unique lens into the DNA of female leaders in the field of sport media marketing.

Research Question Four: Bridges and Barriers: Creativity in the Organizational Context

The findings in this section support Farmer et al. (2003) assertion that organizational culture impacts the shaping of individual creative role identity. The perceived level of

importance and value placed on creativity expressed through the environment that supports creativity or the practices that inhibit it, are expressed by the female leaders in this study. The narratives of the female leaders answer Research Question 4 “What role does organizational culture play in supporting or constraining the creative identities and team management of women in sports media marketing? The findings for this question also align with research on environments and organizational cultures where creativity thrives expressed in these findings as collaborative, inclusive and psychologically safe (Ayman & Korabik, 2010; Edmondson, 2018; Glaveanu et al., 2021). Further, the barriers to creativity for female leaders in sports media marketing highlight several of Diehl and Dzubinski (2018) identified barriers to leadership for women and supported Lebuda and Karwowski (2013) assertion of gender bias expressed as value of creative ideas being attributed to men and extends this to “knowledge of sport.”

Two major themes emerged in this research focused on organizational support for creative role identity and organizational barriers to creative role identity. Additionally, five subthemes were identified addressing key expressions of organizational culture as identified by the participants. Participants emphasized cultures that valued collaboration, inclusivity, and psychological safety as supporting strong creative effort as expressed through leaders with high creative role identities. Conversely, challenges created by broken systems and persistent gender bias were expressed as limiting to both creative expression and the assimilation of creativity as an important part of individual role identity. Below, I offer a thematic map for this question (See **Figure 4**). I will address each theme and subtheme in the following section. These themes and subthemes offer participant perspective and examples of the interplay between culture and creative identity. For comparison and further context, I will also offer an analysis of

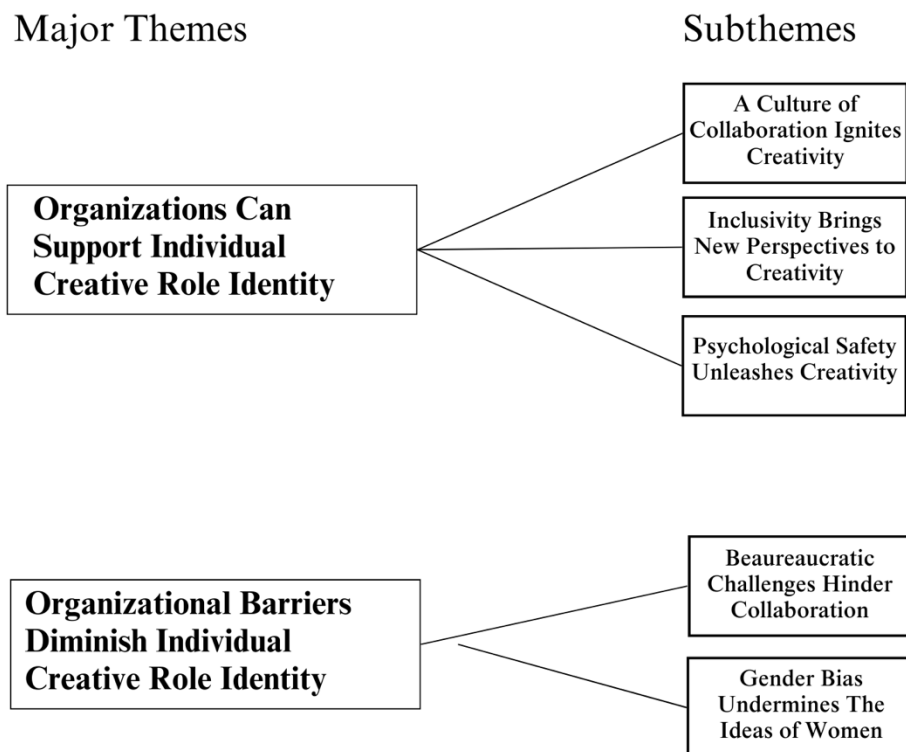


Figure 4
Thematic Map for Research Question 4

organizational artifacts created by the organizations themselves intended to reflect their culture, values, and identity.

Organizations Can Support Individual Creative Role Identity

A Culture of Collaboration Ignites Creativity

All the participants shared about collaborative approaches, environments, and teams. Several discussed it as being integral to the ethos of their organization. These examples are illustrated in research question one, where participants define creativity in their role and discuss collaboration, and in research question two as the participants described how they lead and enact creativity within their teams. Collaboration as expressed through these real-life examples expresses a cultural acceptance and even expectation of collaboration in the organizations.

Jessica expressly shared about the culture of collaboration within her organization. She was concerned that her statement didn't sound believable to me and offered this response with such sincerity and appreciation for the culture of her working environment. Jessica shared:

I know that it sounds cliché, but truly... people here live by the motto that if we take care of each other good things will happen... This collective perspective that we built... the sharing of information... the culture of collaboration...our inclusive environment... will result in the best ideas that expands out to the ecosystem.

This theme as a bridge to creative effort offers insight into cultures that support creative thinking and the methods that enhance that work and how this cultural strength supports individual creative role identity.

Inclusivity Brings New Perspectives to Creativity

As a hallmark of an organization's culture, inclusivity supports creativity by ensuring varying perspectives are heard and valued. Much like collaboration many of the participants gave

examples of a commitment to inclusivity in their creative efforts and leadership approach—from earlier examples shared of adding cultural programming, to representation of LGBTQ+ athletes in marketing, including family-friendly programming, the examples see inclusivity as a lens to enhance creativity is only fully supported when it integrated into the organizational culture.

Hannah shared an applied example of how her organization expressed their culture by expressing inclusivity through programming:

We wanted to create something that honored [Title IX] while also pushing forward the conversation about women's sports. The challenge was to make it resonate not just with women but with a broad audience. ...it was ambitious and required coordination across TV, digital, and social media. But the result was phenomenal. It [the campaign]... reaffirmed [the organization's] commitment to inclusivity. It was a great example of what happens when creativity meets purpose.

Ashley offered further insight into opportunities for growth around inclusivity within her organizational culture expressing that she is intentional about stepping up to pose questions around inclusivity. She shared: "I've been here a long time and honestly, over time, I've seen good progress in terms of inclusivity, but there's still a long way to go." Ashley's experience highlights that inclusivity (as well as the other bridges and barriers listed in this section) are not static, and while growth and change will happen at varying paces, the opportunity is present.

Psychological Safety Unleashes Creativity

Organizations that create a sense of safety for people to be curious, share ideas and feedback openly, fail in small ways, and explore ideas without repercussion are cultures where psychological safety is prioritized (Edmondson, 2018). Psychological safety in these cultures is also extended to how leaders are supported and engage in creative effort with their teams and

across departments. Participants in this study have given examples that expressed the environments they prioritize for their team and to enhance creativity and the leadership and culture that was extended to them individually.

Sarah offered insight into her culture and the presence of psychological safety. She shared, “I think that we have an environment where everyone feels empowered to share their ideas, even if they’re a bit outside the box...” She continued to explain that brainstorming sessions across teams and department within the organization “free of judgment.” Later in the conversation, Sarah expanded on this with an example that illustrates the possibilities within a culture that is safe to explore and share creativity. Sarah shared:

I remember one time a junior staffer suggested we use animated videos for a compliance campaign. At first, it seemed silly...too light for the topic... but we tried it out, and it turned out to be one of our most shared pieces of content. Sometimes the best ideas seem unlikely and come from feeling safe enough to take a risk.

Megan echoed this importance of a psychologically safe environment that supports taking a risk. Megan shared, “Everyone is encouraged to take risks... creativity can be as simple as finding a new way to visualize game stats or as involved as rethinking an entire branding package... we have a culture where people feel safe to try, fail, and try again.”

Psychological safety is key to engaging in meaningful creative work. The very essence of creativity requires thinking of new and novel approaches and these are not already accepted or known in the world and there is inherent risk in sharing and being open to trying things in new way. Organizational cultures that create a sense of safety for their employees and also pave the way for how they think about and practice creativity as a part of their role identity within their organization.

Organizational Barriers Diminish Individual Creative Role Identity

Participants also identified examples of barriers where they felt shut down or diminished in their ability to enact creativity within their role and identity. Two primary subthemes emerged as barriers including bureaucratic challenges and gender bias.

Bureaucratic Challenges Hinder Collaboration

Bureaucratic challenges related to constraining systems or reorganization that was integrated and accepted as a part of organizational culture were the primary barrier identified by the participants as negatively impacting their creative work. All the participant examples relayed frustrations about the constant pressures of streamlining for efficiencies common in media organizations, expressing that this practice often serves as a barrier to creative efforts. The participant illustrations below represent views from two different sport media organizations.

Laura shared:

We've been going we've been going through a lot of reorganization....we've merged into another larger creative entity... and it has split up the creatives from the marketing team... we've been so aligned with marketing... the creative that we develop is for marketing... and now we're we've been lumped into “creatives” and separated from the people we need to work with... It doesn't work well.

An organizational culture driven toward efficiencies to support revenue generation is also reflected in Jennifer's experience. She echoed Laura's sentiments regarding the impact of this on creative work and the separation of collaborating roles.

There is a lot of streamlining and, ugh, it is crazy. We are separating producers from technical people that develop creative collateral... they cannot really even work closely

on a project. It's so frustrating...but I also get it...we are a business and making money matters.

Revenue generation is a primary goal of every business. The practice of streamlining and considering efficiencies seems to have been applied in these contexts without regard or consultation of the human roles at play and the impact on their creative output. As a cultural element, this focus on streamlining offers insight into ways that organizations might better support creative effort.

Gender Bias Undermines the Ideas of Women

The second subtheme that emerged has also been addressed in other ways throughout this research. Gender bias as norm and accepted part of organizational culture is important as it can directly affect the female leaders in sports media marketing within their organizational contexts and as a part of how they build and live out their creative identity. As shared earlier in this research, participants often shared experiences of gender bias early in their career and described them as the impetus for them to work harder or find their own voice. Other participants shared that sport media was improving. Participants expressed one example of gender bias as a part their organizational culture is the perpetuated idea that men know more about sport than women. This was highlighted by two participants. Rebecca shared:

There's just an assumption like, you know, [Name of Female Sport Media Talent], even though she played football growing up, doesn't know as much as my [Name of male sports media talent] who never played a down at football in his life.

Melissa shared the most direct statement reflecting her a sense of embedded gender bias within her organizational culture. She wished the male leadership would allow females to do the job better. Melissa said, "They think we aren't smart or something..." She slumped a bit, took a

deep breath and expanded on her frustration. “We [the women at her organization] just can't wait for the old white men to die. It's just like, please just go away so we can do what we need to do.”

It is important to note that cultural change is slow and takes immense time and intentional dedication and affirmation (Schein, 2010). Gender bias as a historically embedded element of the sport media industry culture is a systemic issue that is expressed daily through organizational contexts. These findings highlight the critical work that needs to be done to support the voices of women in sports media. Relevant to this research on creative role identity, the way organizations value and accept creative efforts of women within sport media and marketing guides how they develop and use creativity within their roles.

Mission and Values Analysis

Organizational artifacts offer insight into both aspirational as well as realized cultures. As an added way to consider and triangulate the data on organizational cultures and insights gathered from the participants in this research, I analyzed the eight participating organization's websites. I focused specifically on the “careers” and “about us” sections that hold organizational culture and identity documents and supporting language. I also analyzed mission statements and values/culture statements for organizations that have or would share them. Within this analysis, three organizations listed creativity and innovation in their company values, four referenced inclusivity, four reference DEI, four listed collaboration, two referenced community engagement, and two referenced excellence. Only one mission statement referenced creativity as a part of their mission. The other organizations all offered a mission with a strong sports focus. Overall, the findings from this analysis would support the responses of the female participants from this study. Melissa's organization, however, did not align with the cultural environment described in our discussion. Dominate themes of DEI and inclusion were highlighted and collaboration,

creativity could also be noted as a commitment to a creative culture. **Table 3** below offers a visual depiction of this analysis. Additionally, I requested job descriptions from the participants to analyze but found that these artifacts were either unavailable or did not exist. This highlights the way that many of these leadership positions evolved over time or lacked a formal documentation.

Table 3
Organizational Artifacts Analysis

Organization	Mission Statement	Values & Culture Statement	Website Career or “About Us” Section
Organization 1	Sport Focus	Inclusion DEI Creativity Collaboration	Mirror Values Statement
Organization 2	Sport Focus	No formal values or culture statement	Inclusion
Organization 3	Sport Focus	No formal values or culture statement	Collaboration DEI
Organization 4	Sport Focus	No formal values or culture statement	Inclusion Community Engagement
Organization 5	Sport Focus	Inclusion DEI	Mirror Values Statement
Organization 6	Creativity/ Innovation	Collaboration Excellence	Mirror Culture Statement
Organization 7	Sport Focus	No formal values or culture statement	Community Engagement DEI
Organization 8	Sport Focus	Creativity/Innovation Collaboration Excellence	Mirror Values Statement

Chapter V. Discussion

This study examines the experiences of 12 women leaders in sports media marketing and garnered insight into how they define creativity, enact it within their role identity, and the impact of organizational dynamics on creative identity. Understanding creativity from the perspective of women working in the sport media industry offers crucial insight into where and how gender, creativity, and role identities connect. Further, by considering the impact of organizational culture on creative identity, this research sheds light on relevant facets that support or constrain creativity.

In this section I will delve deeper to interpret and further analyze the findings from my research, connect these findings to existing literature and theoretical frameworks related to the interwoven constructs of leadership, creativity, identity creation, and gender dynamics. I will explore each research question, distill the key takeaways, and discuss implications for the creative role identity, leadership, as well as the impact of organizational culture. I will also outline how these findings contribute to the broader understanding of the experiences of women within male-dominated industries and conclude with suggestions for future areas of meaningful research.

Interpretation of Findings

RQ1: Defining Creative Role Identity

The findings from this research highlight the multidimensional way that female leaders in sports media marketing make meaning of and enact creativity as a part of role identity. Definitions of creativity as a part of their role identity relied on competencies and growth mindsets that the participants possessed as well as the perception and comparison of self to

traditionally “creative” roles and functions within the organization. These three elements were primary drivers of how the women constructed and expressed their own creative role identity.

Context Matters. The assignment of “creative” in sports media marketing often aligns with titles and roles that focus on production or graphic design rather than the work of leadership or direct business-focused functions. These findings support the social context of creativity and emphasize that what is considered creative in one context may not be extended to a different one. (Amabile, 1985, Weisberg 2015). The participants in this study often compared their work to these organizationally constructed roles and functions, but they moved beyond the assumptions to express that the fast pace of work as well as change within the sports industry required constant creative thinking and solutions. Ashley, for example, explained that her role involved far more than generating flashy ideas and focused on problem-solving and staying ahead of trends. She also shared that finding creative solutions could be challenging because “Sports media is constantly changing.” While some of the participants held leadership responsibilities that were aligned with the organizational titles and roles of expected creativity, all but one of the female leaders who would consider themselves to hold more business functions (rather than creative), still identified creativity as a strong part of their own professional identity.

Participants often described and enacted creativity within their roles and unique environment as strategic problem solving, innovating under pressure, thinking beyond budget constraints, and improving processes. Amabile (1996) suggests that part of the equation for determining creative expression, direction, and effort is considering how it is shaped and influenced by the environment. The unique context, norms and expectations within sport media offer unique insight into how creative role identity is shaped and formed for the female leaders in this study.

Competencies. Key competencies such as problem-solving, collaboration, negotiation and process improvement were highlighted as how the participants define and express creativity in their role identity. All the female leaders identified problem solving as a core creative competency. This aligns with Mumford et al. (2012) work in organizational creativity that offers addressing complex challenges as a primary way professionals express creativity. One illustration of creative problem solving is Megan's description of being challenged to create cohesive stories relevant across many platforms. Additionally, collaboration was expressed as a key competency that supports a team dynamic and critical to creativity. This aligns with Sawyer (2012) assertions regarding the strength of group creativity, suggesting that innovation is at its best when collaboration around identifying and refining ideas exists.

Interestingly, negotiation, and process improvement were noted as critical competencies that defined creative role identity for many of the participants. These competencies are not commonly noted in literature as connected with creativity. However, they do align with the notion that creative solutions are best applied to adaptive challenges that are complex and often have more than one solution (Heifetz, 1994). Laura's example offered a complex look into her need to innovate around budget constraints by negotiating creative partnerships to maintain content quality and highlights strategic negotiation as creative effort. This insight broadens the formal definitions of creative competencies. Additionally, negotiation and process improvement expressed as creative effort by the participants offers insight into the unique context of sport media suggesting additional creative strengths required to tackle complex challenges and to advance in leadership.

Mindsets. Growth mindsets view challenges as opportunities to learn and are considered antecedents to creativity (Dweck, 2007) and offered a deeper understanding of how the

participants internalized creativity as a part of their identity. The participants identified four core mindsets of empathy, curiosity, adaptability, and creative confidence as critical in setting the stage for shaping how they engaged in and enacted creativity as a part of their role identity. For many of the participants a mindset of empathy expressed their approach to relationships with others and was a key driver of team creative effort as well as output of content that resonated with key audiences. Hannah was confident that “the best creative content connects with people on an emotional level” illustrating the importance and impact of approaching storytelling and marketing with a genuine desire to understand and to take on the perspectives of others—to “walk in their shoes.” Anderson et al. (2025) aligns with this finding suggesting empathy is foundational to successful creative leadership.

Half of the participants internalized a mindset of curiosity that fueled their creative efforts and was integral to shaping their creative identity. Jessica’s expression that creativity “comes from lifelong learning” or her pursuit of resources just to learn something new illustrates curiosity as a mindset and as part of her creative role identity. This aligns with Kashdan and Silvia (2009) assertion that curiosity leads to exploration and that this ultimately leads to creative thinking, adaptability and problem-solving. Building on this research, participants also identified adaptability as a critical mindset influencing their creative role identity. Hannah shared the importance of staying on top of trends and shifting quickly emphasizing the critical nature of this mindset within a fast-paced and dynamic industry like sports media. Megan further linked creativity and adaptability as a part of her creative role identity emphasizing that the two must be paired to be successful in sport media. Research also suggests that adaptability is especially critical within high stress and fast paced industries (Pulakos et al., 2000).

The final mindset shared by many of the participants was creative confidence in their voices, their own abilities and in the quality of their creative efforts. This mindset empowered their own voices, pushed boundaries in supporting creative work, and impacted how they integrated creativity into their own role identity. Laura's story of walking into a room and having a sense of confidence come over her because she believed in her work, her own creativity and her character really illustrated the strength of this mindset in shaping how creativity is enacted in roles and integrated into individual identity. Creative confidence enables people to move beyond the inherent risks of failure to continue to engage in creative efforts (Kelley & Kelley, 2013).

The dynamic and integrated nature of organizational contexts, competencies of skill and knowledge, and individual mindsets combine to form a dynamic framework expressing how creative role identity is defined. The examples and interplay of these elements illustrate a social constructivists view of identity formed by what the individual brings to the table (mindsets and competencies) paired with the environment (organizational context) (He & Brown, 2013).

Defining and enacting creative role identity for women in sports media marketing is guided by a balance of contextual awareness, strong competencies, and growth mindsets. Considering this understanding of how creativity is defined and integrated into the identity of women in sports media marketing, this research offers guidance to give female leaders a direct advantage in a male dominated industry and to support organizations in fostering creativity and leadership.

RQ2: Enacting Creativity: Leader & Team Management

The findings of this research build on the context, competencies, and mindsets that the female participants relied on to consider how they enacted creativity within their leadership roles and practices. These varied and intentional leadership approaches and practices give insight to

the impact leadership and team management practices have on the formation of creative role identity. The findings revealed commonalities in team management for creative effort including a commitment to fostering collaboration and ensuring environments where people felt psychologically safe and empowered to express creativity. However, the varied and overlapping leadership approaches (e.g., transformational, and situational leadership) further highlight the adaptability required from women in sports media marketing in leadership roles to meet the expectations of their role, advocate for others, garner acceptance of ideas, and meet organizational goals. This adaptability is also seen as a feminine advantage in leadership (Chen & Shao, 2022).

Collaboration, Empathy, Empowerment, and Psychological Safety. The proactive fostering of collaboration was unanimously cited by the participants as a primary way that they supported team creativity. This was enacted through many intentional efforts including hosting brainstorming sessions, sharing ideas, encouraging open dialogue, and developing cross-departmental working relationships. Ashley illustrated this with an example of her team's collaborative creative effort that focused on building on ideas that her team brought to the table and refining them to implement a "fan cam" that was wildly successful. Meaningful creative output is often the result of team rather than individual effort with collaboration being the primary driver to build on the ideas of others (Sawyer, 2012).

Participants also built on the key mindset of empathy expressed as a way of leading and connecting with their teams and to tackle challenges. When a leader builds an inclusive environment grounded in empathy, they build trust that supports and encourages both individuals and teams to think beyond norms and traditional assumptions without fear of retribution (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008). One example was Megan's story of

how leading with empathy gave her critical insight to why teams within her organization were not moving at an expected pace in adopting a new platform. She was able to identify with the teams' frustrations and needs and identify how to best move forward and support and exceed the organizational goals.

Empowerment and psychological safety were closely tied and central to the leadership strategies of female leaders in sports media marketing. Empowering teams taps into Amabile (1998) assertion that intrinsic motivation—motivation driven internally rather than from external forces — is key to sustained creative effort. In line with these findings, if competencies (knowledge, skill, and abilities) and mindsets (a way of approaching something or behaviors) are the raw materials of creativity, then intrinsic motivation supported by an environment where an individual or team feels empowered and safe is expressed in creative outcomes themselves. In the context of this study, empowerment also included instilling a sense of safety to make mistakes without fear. Psychological safety is also critical to inspire and support creative thinking and collaborative problem solving (Edmondson, 2018). The story of how Hannah's leadership empowered a quiet junior producer to develop her voice and confidence by offering a safe one-on-one as well as team environment to practice and grow is an inspiring example of the connection of concepts. This is especially illustrative because the outcome of Hannah's leadership is investment in the young producer who led to some of the most innovative content within their organization.

It should be noted that open communication was also identified in this research as a way in which some of the leaders managed to achieve creativity. For this discussion I consider it as a way in which the leaders empowered their employees through preparing them for the tough questions and helping the team to defend and express ideas that met organizational goals. This

communication approach is also indicative of the need for female leaders to balance leadership approaches for themselves as well as for the success of their team within their unique context (Ma et al., 2022).

Balancing Leadership Approaches. The female leaders in sports media marketing reflected a balance of primarily transformational, human-centered, and situational leadership approaches as well as saw their roles as change leaders. Situational leadership speaks to the need for female leads in a dynamic environment to adapt in communication styles, approaches, and organizational and team needs. Rebecca described this leadership approach as a “Barbie Monologue” in which she had to balance between traditionally feminine and masculine leadership traits (e.g., participative versus directive leadership) depending on the situation and the players. She felt that it was easier to start with the more traditional directive and functional approach and then add in her softness (more natural transformational leadership style) once she had garnered respect. This situational balancing act is reflected in the ways in which female leaders successfully navigate pathways to leadership (Ma et al., 2022; Schipani et al., 2009).

Conversely, transformational and human-centered leadership traits were woven through the ways in which the female leaders inspired, mobilized, and motivated their teams. Jessica’s story of evolving from a more segmented early career where life and work existed in separate categories to emphasizing a more connected, vulnerable, and empathy-focused transformational and human-centered leadership styles that prioritized relationships as a way of encouraging and nurturing her team illustrated the emotional components of this approach. Rachel’s approach of galvanizing her team to meet goals by giving them space to “build the brand and ideate” and celebrating their successes further illustrates these leadership traits to empower and encourage creativity within teams. Within creative industries, transformational leaders are considered most

effective in inspiring creative efforts and outcomes by empowering others as well as building the trust and respect of their teams (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

While not as prevalent, it was interesting to note the focus on the added layer of advocating for change that some of them saw as part of their leadership approach and creative role identity. Whether it was Rachel's commitment to call out bias that she was experiencing in the moment or Sarah's role as creative advocate to push for LGBTQ representation in marketing, this change leadership focused on advocating for inclusivity was heartening. Their role also expressed a sense of psychological safety as leaders were present to express and advocate for themselves and others within their organizational cultures.

The balancing act between directive and participative leadership approaches with the added layer of serving as an advocate for inclusivity expresses the complexity of leading for creativity as a woman in the sports media industry. The findings of this study suggest that creative leadership within sports media requires adaptability to enable navigating the challenges of organizational expectations and norms. Furthermore, leaders must be able to empower and inspire teams by creating an environment where creativity thrives. The following discussion will move beyond how creativity is enacted within the participant's leadership role and identity to consider the role of their personal and professional journey in shaping their identity.

RQ3: Personal and Professional Experiences

This research question focused on how the participants perceived the impact of personal and professional experiences on their creative role identity as leaders. Gender dynamics, personal growth, and sport influence emerged as themes that expressed the interwoven stories of how life experiences shaped creative leadership approaches. The insights gathered from their unique

experiences expressed how female leaders in this unique context took ownership of and harnessed their strengths, navigated challenges, and developed creative leadership identities.

Strengths and Challenges of Gender. There is a duality to gender in how it is perceived in shaping identities. For some of the participants, bringing a gendered perspective to their leadership role allowed them to bring unique insights, advocate for inclusive content and garner new opportunities for sports media. Ashley shared, “Being a woman has given me a different lens...like asking questions about inclusivity or exploring stories that no one else notices.” Ely and Thomas (2001) research on inclusive teams aligns with the participants gendered perspective of this strengths supporting the notion that teams who bring inclusive perspectives are more innovative and effective. Further, the elevated level of contextual and relational awareness that female leaders bring to their roles fosters inclusivity and creativity (Eagly, 1987). The participants that perceived their gender as a strength suggested connections between personal and professional identity and how these contribute to confidence in creativity and leadership in an organizational context.

Participants shared numerous stories expressing gender bias ranging from ideas being ignored, to feeling forced into an assertive approach to have a voice in the room. Given some research that suggests this sort of experiences might diminish creativity and effort (Lebuda & Karwowski, 2013; Proudfoot & Fath, 2021), it was encouraging to see them often reframed as learning opportunities that fostered resilience and advocacy for self and others. Ashley’s story from early in her career highlighted how she navigated a challenging context by adapting and growing into a practice of entering meetings “prepared and confident” to support being heard and garnering respect. Rachel shared that these experiences “made her stronger and more vocal,” while Megan also shared that these challenges “taught her to advocate for myself and others.”

Richtnér and Löfsten, (2014) also suggests that resilience supports a leader's ability to navigate through turbulence and challenges (including gender bias) and positively influences creativity.

The gendered experiences of the participants are not unique to many organizational contexts and highlight the need for the continued and intentional work needed to address gender bias. encourage inclusivity of thought, ensure representation, and amplify the contributions of female leaders. For female leaders, these findings suggest that a self-appreciation for their individual perspective can enhance leadership, resilience, and creative confidence within their role identity.

Impact of Mentors & Allies. Both formal and informal mentors and allies were expressed as critical to the professional development of female leaders. Melissa credited her first boss with “changing the whole trajectory of her career by giving her opportunities and supporting her. Later in our interview, Melissa also expressed the sentiment of several other participants defining allies as “a man in the room that’s supporting and advocating for you,” further expressing that it was different than having another female as a professional ally. Melissa also credited his allyship as representing “a gamechanger for me.” These findings echo research on the importance of mentors and allies as pathways to leadership for female professionals (Beilock, 2013; Schipani et al., 2009). Interestingly, all the mentor experiences referenced in this study were female supporting female, while allies were expressed as male. This raises an important question about the dynamic of these critical roles within sports media.

These findings suggest organizations invest in meaningful cross-gender mentorship and ally programs that support aspiring leaders in navigating challenges effectively. For aspiring leaders, the experiences of these successful leaders suggests that they should seek mentor and

ally support as a tool to navigate organizational challenges and as a pathway to leadership opportunities.

Influence of Sport. All the participants identified as athletes. This was surprising to me but also offered fascinating insight into the impact of sport in shaping their unique leadership and creative identity. Stories about work ethic, team dynamics, resilience, and competitiveness became the subthemes that highlighted the influence of sport.

Participating in sports developed a strong work ethic and confidence and understanding of the dynamics of successful teams. Amanda's described a direct connection to her ability to "outwork people" in her professional life just as she had to become a successful athlete. And Amanda compared her team's work on marketing campaigns to the experience of being on an athletic team where "everybody plays their role" and works together to reach a common goal. These transfer of competencies developed through participating in sport to professional leadership roles aligns with the research on the positive impact of sport and leadership competency development (Ferullo, 2019; Kelinske et al., 2001).

Further, participating in sport also developed resilience and competitiveness, qualities that served participants well in high-stress environments like sports media. Sarah shared a story about leading her competitive soccer team in a challenging game and connected that experience as strengthening her ability to lead creative teams through stressful challenges. Laura expressed that her ability to "pivot and adapt seamlessly" in the high-stress live media environment was connected to her experience as an athlete. These insights are in keeping with research suggesting that participation in sport strengthens leadership and mental resilience which are transferred into professional life (Ferullo, 2019).

The connection between sport and leadership for females in sport media builds more understanding about the impact of personal and professional experiences on creative role identity. For many of the women in sports media, the mental toolbox of skills garnered through playing sports serves as an integral part of their leadership development. Further, combining the unique experiences focused on gender, mentorship, and sport offer unique insights for supporting the creative role identity of women in sports media for both organizations and individual professional development.

RQ4: The Bridges and Barriers of Organizational Culture

Finally, this study considered how an organizations culture can support or constrain the creative role identity of female leaders in sport media marketing. Participant stories expressed organizational environments where creativity thrived: rooted in encouraging collaboration, valuing inclusivity and creating psychological safety. Other stories expressed organizational barriers to creativity, most often tied to restructuring or streamlining for efficiencies and gender bias.

Bridges. Collaboration emerged as the most prominent organizational and cultural “bridge” to supporting creative role identity. Jessica shared about the supportive culture of her company expressing that “People here live by the motto that if we take care of each other, good things will happen...This culture of collaboration and inclusivity results in the best ideas.” Edmondson and Lei (2014) research highlights collaborative cultures as a primary driver of innovation. The participants’ stories supported that organizations that value, share, and build upon each other’s ideas are more likely to create environments where creativity thrives.

Inclusivity is also a catalyst for creativity and innovation (Shore et al., 2011). The female leaders in this study aligned with research citing numerous examples of integrating the

perspectives or representation of others in their creative work or decision-making. Hannah offered an example of a successful Title IX campaign that included intense cross-departmental collaboration and “reaffirmed [the organization’s] commitment to inclusivity.” Ashley’s expression of inclusivity with her organizational culture was much improved from when she began in sports media “but there’s still a long way to go.” This perspective speaks to the time-consuming and diligent work required to incorporate inclusivity or any change into an organizational culture (Schein, 2010).

Participants also shared insight into psychological safety as a part of organizational culture. Edmondson (1999) suggests that psychological safety is a strong driver and foundation of creative effort and outcomes. Megan expressed working in a positive culture for creativity where “people feel safe to try, fail, and try again” supporting the research. Further, Sarah’s story about trying an idea suggested by a young staffer that was, at first, considered “too light” for the topic. Ultimately, the team took the risk, and the creative idea ended up becoming one of their most shared pieces of content. This is a strong example not only because of the success of the risky idea but because it came from a young staffer who felt empowered to offer an idea for consideration without fear. The work of creativity is inherently risky. Out of the box thinking is considering different approaches and moving away from how things have been done in the past. New and novel ideas require a supportive environment where people feel safe to share without fear. Psychologically safe cultures also support the integration of creativity into an individual’s role identity by placing value on it and making it safe engage in creative effort and explore new ways of doing things (Amabile, 1985; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Barriers. While organizational cultures that encourage inclusivity of perspectives, collaboration, and risk taking enhance creativity, organizational cultures where bias is present,

and rigid structures focus on short-term efficiencies limit creativity. (Luecke, 2003; Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Some female leaders expressed cultural barriers to creativity identifying bureaucratic challenges and persistent gender bias as the primary barriers. Bureaucratic challenges related to streamlining without considering the impact on creative efforts and collaboration were repeated in the participants' organizational experiences. Laura described a frustrating reorganization where her team was "lumped into "creatives" and separated from the people we need to work with. It doesn't work well." This aligns with Amabile (1998) assertion that when the practice of finding efficiencies in business is valued over innovation, creativity is often stifled (Amabile, 1998). This could also impact how an individual makes sense of and integrates creativity into their role identity by communicating indirectly about the value that the organization places on it (Farmer et al., 2003).

Persistent gender bias was also noted as a barrier to the formation of a strong creative role identity within organizational cultures. Rebecca noted the assumption that men know more about sports than women "even when we are just as qualified." This assumption is a wonderful example of the systemic nature of gender bias in a male-dominated industry such as sports and expresses the importance of an organizational culture that intentionally focuses on breaking down gender barriers and supporting the voices and perspectives of women.

To triangulate my organizational cultural findings, I analyzed organizational artifacts including mission statements, values, and cultural language from the websites of each of the eight participating organizations. This study revealed varying levels of alignment. Numerous organizations expressed inclusivity, diversity, and collaboration as a part of their core values, only three organizations referenced creativity at all. Artifacts from Melissa's organization offered the starkest detour from the experience of the participant. She felt that gender bias

permeated her system and did not perceive herself as creative at all. While one example, this extreme misalignment illustrates that the expressed values do not always translate to practice and offers insight to organizations to better integrate creativity (as well as supporting values) into their cultural fabric.

This discussion considers both the organizational bridges and barriers to creativity. Organizations can support the creative identities of female leaders by ensuring that they create environment that are psychologically safe, inclusive, and collaborative. Conversely, by placing intentional focus on the creative impact of organizational systems and efficiencies, as well as proactively addressing gender bias, organizations can be champions of support for the creative identities of female leaders. These insights offer a guide for organizational cultures to express that they value creativity and empowers female leaders to enact creativity within their own leadership role identity.

Consideration of Existing Research

This research expands the understanding of Farmer et al.'s (2003) concept of creative role identity. Creative role identity suggests individuals who identify and internalize creativity as a part of their identity are more likely to engage in creative efforts that drive and lead to successful creative outcomes. This is mirrored in how the female leaders in this study express the formation of their creative role identities and extended through their chosen definition of their identity being expressed by competencies and mindsets that they possess. Further several of the definitions shared as “creative” by the participants (e.g., process improvement and negotiation) are not generally expressed as traditional forms of creativity in the literature. While Farmer et al., (2003) places a heavy emphasis on the value placed on creativity within the organizational environment, these findings suggest that strong creative role identity is made up of a much more

complex sensemaking and negotiation. This extends the research suggesting that the forming of creative role identity is not as heavily dependent on the organization's value and support. Rather, it begins with identifying as creative, extends to the individual definition of "what is creative," is shaped by social experiences, and is then supported or diminished by the organizational context where they are expected (or not expected) to enact creative effort.

Amabile (1985) and Weisberg (2015) shared the importance of connecting creative effort and outcome to functional roles. However, this research extends the traditional definitions often assigned to roles to align creativity to leadership and other business functions. The female leaders in their research defined their roles as problem-solvers, negotiators, process improvers. They adapted to address complex challenges, motivate teams, and move beyond organizational barriers. Mumford et al. (2012) asserts that creativity in high-stress environments hinges on the ability to adapt. This research aligns with the experiences of the female participants who skillfully navigated the fast moving and complex environment of sport media to become successful creative leaders.

The findings in this study also support Dweck's (2007) work on growth mindsets, Kashdan and Silvia's (2009) research citing curiosity as a driver creativity and innovation and Anderson et al. (2025) and Kelley and Kelley (2013) work identifying empathy as foundation for leading creativity. Further, Amabile (1985) asserts that an individual's internal motivation to be creative coupled with their environment and strengths (e.g., curiosity, growth mindsets, empathy) are the supporting components of creative output in organizations. This would also align with the findings of this research and extends the consideration of mindsets to Farmer, et al. (2003) creative role identity.

Gender plays a role in the development of creative identities and leadership approaches of the leaders in sport media. This study extends research suggesting that gender bias often leads to diminished creativity and leadership opportunities for women (Lebuda & Karwowski, 2013; Proudfoot & Fath, 2021). The women in this study represent women who have already navigated into leadership roles within a male dominated industry. Many of the participants reframed gendered challenges as opportunities to grow in resilience, self-advocacy, and creative confidence. This adds a unique gendered leadership perspective from within a male dominated industry. The women in this study often leveraged their unique lens and fostered creativity to drive innovation extending gendered leadership research in male-dominated industries (Eagly, 1987; Ely & Thomas, 2001). (Bass & Avolio, 1994) research on transformational leadership is in keeping with these findings and overall interpretation of the female participants as effective creative leaders.

This research also highlights participant experiences in sport and with mentors as supporting their creative role identities. (Kelinske et al., 2001) research on the strengths developed through sport mirrors many of the participant experiences. Participation in sport strengthened resilience, instilled work ethic, sparked competitiveness, and gave them an understanding of a team dynamic. Additionally, participant experiences with mentors and allies echo (Schipani et al., 2009) work supporting the critical nature of these roles in the success and advancement of women in a male-dominated industry. These experiences highlighted professional growth, advocacy, and support. As pathways to leadership that supports creativity, these unique personal and professional experiences offer deeper understanding of the impact of experiences on the shaping of an individual's creative role identity.

Finally, this study extends Farmer et al.'s (2003) creative role identity by highlighting both bridges and barriers to creativity perceived by the participants of this study. Inclusive cultures that foster collaboration, create safe places to challenge the status quo and enable risk taking were expressed as positive creative environments. These findings support Edmondson's (1999) and Edmondson and Lei's (2014) research on psychological safety as integral to creativity. Barriers to creativity within organizations were also expressed as bureaucratic systems and gender bias echoing (Shalley & Gilson, 2004) findings that rigid structures and bias stifle creativity.

A consideration of existing research alongside this study's findings offers a deeper understanding of how this work aligns and diverges from the larger body of knowledge. This research builds on theory of creative role identity as well as theories related to "what is creative." It also offered a deeper understanding of how identity, creativity, leadership, and gender intersect in complex environments.

Implications for Theory, Leaders, and Organizations

The ways in which female leaders in sports media marketing define and enact creativity as a part of their leadership and role identity within the sport media industry offers important theoretical, leadership and organizational implications.

Theoretically, these findings expand creative role identity by garnering a deeper understanding of how female leaders define and enact creativity as a part of their role identity within the context of the sport media industry. Creative role identity suggests that how an individual identifies and internalizes creativity as a part of their identity is related to the perceived importance and value placed on creativity within an organizational context. The extension of theory in this research is offered through a deeper knowledge of how these female

leaders in sport media marketing express the importance of creativity in their identity and how their creative role identity is operationalized in their leadership roles. Creativity is defined and enacted through their competencies and mindsets, leadership and team management, personal and professional experiences, as well as the social and organizational context in which they are expected to enact creative effort.

Concerning leadership, this study offers insight into the balancing act that women in sport marketing manage between transformational and human-centered styles and situational leadership approaches. This adaptability is crucial for the nuanced organizational needs of managing existing organizational structures and personalities and drawing on their competencies and mindsets to inspire and encourage creativity and innovation. The practical insights offered from this research are intended to give female leaders a decisive advantage in finding success in sports media or other male dominated industries. Organizationally, this work also offers practical advice to strengthen leadership development for women, ensure that organizational structures and efforts consider the impact on creative effort, and focus on creating environments that encourage inclusion, creativity, and innovation.

I will offer a thorough list of practical advice that can be applied by current and aspiring female leaders as well as organizations in the following section.

While Farmer et al., (2003) places a heavy emphasis on the value placed on creativity within the organizational environment, these findings suggest that strong creative role identity is made up of a much more complex sensemaking and negotiation. This extends the research suggesting that the forming of creative role identity begins with identifying as creative, extends to the individual definition of “what is creative,” is shaped by social experiences, and is

supported or diminished by the organizational context where they are expected (or not expected) to enact creative effort and is not as heavily dependent on the organization value and support.

Chapter VI. Conclusion

Summary of the Study

Creativity isn't just a trait, title, or position. It is a muscle that can be stretched and strengthened through practice and perspective. The women in this study illustrate that creativity should not be confined to roles that are traditionally considered "creative" but should instead become a part of how we define ourselves. Creativity is a critical and essential skill that not only drives strategy and content but also supports leadership success in sports media marketing. The insights gained from this study offer value with real outcomes for organizations and leaders seeking to enable creativity in the sport industry as well as marketing. As women continue to advance into leadership roles, having insight as to how they perceive and enact creativity provides an opportunity to develop strategies that support professional growth and creativity. The participants' experiences of self-identification, role enactment, and interactions with their own organizational culture offer advice on best practices to foster supportive and encouraging environments where creativity thrives.

This study contributes to creativity studies, marketing, media studies, leadership studies, organizational theory, and the sports media industry by addressing the following questions through the voices and experiences of the female leaders that participated:

RQ1: How do women in sports media and marketing define creativity as part of their professional role identity?

RQ2: How do women enact their creative role identity through their work and manage their teams?

RQ3: How do women perceive the influence of their professional journey on their creative role identity?

RQ4: What role does organizational culture play in supporting or constraining the creative identities and team management of women in sports media marketing?

Key Findings Summary

The key findings from this study provide a deeper understanding of how female leaders in sports media marketing define, enact, and support creativity as a part of their professional role identity within the unique context of sport media. The findings are summarized as follows:

Defining Role Identity (RQ1)

Creativity in the context of sport media marketing was often perceived and compared to traditionally assigned “creative” roles and functions within organizations. Most female leaders with more business focused functions in this study still defined themselves as creative and extended it to competencies related to problem solving, process improvement, and negotiation. Definitions of creativity as a part of the female leader’s identity relied on competencies (collaboration, negotiation, problem solving, and process improvement) and growth mindsets (empathy, curiosity, adaptive, and creative confidence) that they possessed.

Enacting Creativity through Leadership Approach and Team Management (RQ2)

Key findings revealed commonalities in team management including a commitment to fostering collaboration and ensuring environments where people felt psychologically safe and empowered to express creativity. However, they expressed an overlapping or adapting within leadership approaches that included transformational and human centered leadership rooted in relationships and empathy to motivate and inspire creativity and a situational leadership approach that reflected their need to adapt to the environment and its unique players. This high adaptability is crucial in this high stress and male dominated environment. Further, many female

leaders had grown in their leadership roles and organizational comfort to become advocates for change focused on inclusivity in programming or of voice.

Personal and Professional Experiences (RQ3)

All the participants considered themselves to be athletes (high school or college) and their passion for sport led them to the sports industry. Experiences in sport developed resilience, work ethic, teamwork, and the ability to adapt and these skills carried over to their creative leadership roles and identity. Individual experiences with gender bias were often seen as opportunities to grow and develop the skills necessary to be successful—developing voice and creating advocates. Additionally, the female participants defined mentors (women) and allies (male) as “game changers” and express pathways to success in sport media.

Organizational Culture and Identity (RQ4)

Cultures that intentionally foster collaboration, psychological safety, and inclusivity also support the formation of creativity as a part of professional role identities of women in sport media marketing. Conversely, embedded gender bias and bureaucratic challenges related to media’s constant exercise of streamlining and seeking efficiencies were seen as barriers to creativity.

Theoretical Implications

The primary theoretical implication of this study is its contribution to expanding Farmer, et al. (2003) creative role identity by offering a deeper understanding of how female leaders define and enact creativity as a part of their role identity within the context of the sport media industry. Creative role identity suggests that how an individual identifies and internalizes creativity as a part of their identity is related to the perceived importance and value placed on creativity within an organizational context. The extension of theory in this research of offered

through the unique perspectives offered on the formation of creative role identity from the twelve female participants in this study who have already ascended into respected leadership roles within a historically male dominated industry of sports media marketing.

Although the environment and its impact were considered, the findings from this research expanded the definition of creative and suggested that while organizations may tie creativity to roles, leaders often find creative identity in non-traditional definitions of creativity such as negotiation or process improvement, etc.

Further, creative identity was expressed by the creative competencies and mindsets that each leader brought to the table rather than a textbook. While these definitions often cited similar competencies and mindsets, they were also unique to each leader. These nuanced definitions are unique to each leader and their leadership approach.

Finally, the findings of this research suggest a strong connection between personal and professional experiences and the formation of creative role identity. This is beyond one context or organizational cultural environments value to extend to self-efficacy and team dynamics. The way that these female leaders in sport media marketing express the importance of creativity in their identity and how their creative role identity is defined and enacted in their leadership through strength in competencies and mindsets, leadership and team management, personal and professional experiences, as well as the social and organizational context in which they are expected to enact creative effort.

While Farmer et al., (2003) places a heavy emphasis on the value placed on creativity within the organizational environment, these findings suggest that strong creative role identity is comprised of far more complex sensemaking and negotiation. Rather than weighing organizational value and support heavily, this extension of theory suggests that the forming of

creative role identity is more nuanced--beginning with identifying as creative, extending to the individual's definition of "what is creative," shaped by the individual's social experiences, and is supported or diminished by how the organizational context values and supports creative effort.

Practical Implications

The heart of this research lies in the practical implications for current and aspiring female leaders in sport media as well as for the organizations themselves. These implications were pulled from conversations with the twelve participants of this study and informed by this research effort to focus on understanding how creative role identity is shaped, enacted, and sustained. The unique perspective of the female leaders bring goes beyond gender to the experience and knowledge gained in having already successfully navigated the journey to become respected and successful leader in sports media marketing. Here are the practical implications offered as simple and practical guidance to offer female leaders a decisive advantage as leaders in sports media and to support sport media organizations in attracting, retaining, and empowering female leaders.

For Female Leaders in Sports Media

- Define yourself and your role as creative and integrate this creative confidence into your own identity. Expand your definitions of organizational creativity to include problem solving, negotiation, process improvements and idea generation. (RQ 1)
- Become a voice for assigning creativity as essential to every role within your organization and placing value on creative contributions. (RQ2)
- Be intentional about building and supporting cross-functional teams that are wildly collaborative. Activities such as regular idea sharing and brainstorming sessions focused on a particular challenge can be helpful tools. (RQ 2)

- Advocate for inclusivity of experiences and perspectives and gender within the organization and for including representation in programming and marketing. (RQ 2, RQ 3)
- Foster an environment that is psychologically safe, encourages open sharing of ideas and insight and frames failures as an opportunity to learn and grow as a team. (RQ 2, RQ 3)
- Seek mentors and extend that mentorship to other women in sports media, creating a supportive cycle of opportunity and growth to increase the number of successful women in sports media. (RQ 3)

For Women Aspiring to Enter Sports Media

- Leverage your knowledge and abilities (competencies) in meetings and interviews. Be intentional about expressing your creative identity as well as your core creative strengths in collaboration, problem-solving, adaptability. (RQ 1, RQ 3)
- Build a network of support that seeks out formal and informal mentors as well as male allies that can help you navigate into leadership roles in the sports industry. Mentors and allies support professional growth, provide valuable insight and guidance, and advocate for your success. Do not skip this step. (RQ 3)
- When you experience expressions of implicit gender bias (e.g., ideas are not valued as much or you do not know as much about sport as men), focus on building your own internal fortitude and resilience and be intentional about developing your own voice to advocate for self and others. (RQ 3)
- Develop and define your creative confidence taking ownership of ideas, preparing and presenting with determination, and learning from feedback and failures to grow in your own creative role identity. (RQ 1, RQ 3)

For Sports Media Organizations

- Make inclusivity a priority that goes beyond website language and organizational materials. Be intentional about recruiting and promoting women into creative leadership roles. (RQ 4)
- Reflect authenticity by ensuring that the organizational culture aligns with organizational artifacts (mission and vision, career and about me sections of website, etc.) Be intentional and dedicated in supporting an inclusive environment where creativity and innovation can thrive. creativity, inclusion, and innovation. This extends far beyond words to daily practices and experiences. (RQ 4)
- Support the creation of strong creative role identities by including an expectation of creativity in all your job and role descriptions. Redefine this strength as critical to every role rather than assigned to a few functional and technical creative roles within media. (RQ 1, RQ 4)
- Consider the workflow and human-impact challenges related to streamlining for efficiencies engaging key players in the creative process. Prioritize structures and process efficiencies that enhance creative efforts and allow leaders and teams to collaborate without barriers and implement ideas seamlessly. (RQ 4)
- Position psychological safety into the ethos of your organization – encouraging the sharing of ideas and engaging in creative efforts without fear of repercussions. (RQ 1, RQ 2, RQ 4)
- Develop and support formal mentorship programs that connect women in sport media with senior leaders within the organization to foster relationships, respect, growth, and visibility. (RQ 3, RQ 4)

Limitations of Study

The small size of this study (12 participants) limits the generalizability of the findings. I have, however, developed a rich depth of understanding of the twelve female leaders who participated in this study around creativity role identity. While generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research, I would love to extend this research to include the perspectives of more women in sports, media, and marketing as well as other male-dominated industries.

Further, although diversity was present (identified as English second language, Hispanic, Black, LGBTQ+) a sample this size cannot fully capture the experiences and perspectives to be applied to other organizational or cultural contexts. Further, this research focused on the niche of sports media marketing and the unique characteristics and dynamics present within the sport media industry, which could also limit how it can be applied to other industries and roles.

Narratives rely on self-reported perspectives raising an opportunity for potential bias expressed in the relay of their experiences. Finally, this study represents a snapshot of time in the organizational and professional reality of the participants. The lack of a more longitudinal opportunity to explore their creative role identity and leadership journey over time limits the ability to capture shifts and trends in organizational contexts.

These limitations also provide opportunities for future research that can expand the scope and explore the deeper complexities that are inherently a part defining, enacting, and supporting creativity within a male-dominated industry.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could extend this research and garner a deeper understanding of creative role identity. Research opportunities that were directly inspired from the participants in this study include:

1. Exploring and comparing the creative role identity of both female and male leaders to offer broader insight into gender dynamics
2. Focusing research on cross-cultural or diversity-focused participants to garner deeper insight into their unique formation of creative role identity
3. Exploring how sexuality, and other identities intersect with creative leadership and creative identity

Future research could also expand the understanding creativity and leadership in specific industries and through varied lenses:

4. Expanding this study to other male-dominated industries
5. Approaching the research through the lens of feminist standpoint theory to dive deeper into the power dynamics at play.
6. Investigating structural and cultural changes that impact creative expression and leadership development.

These opportunities can further deepen insights and understanding of creativity, identity, leadership, gender dynamics and organizational cultures to build on the foundations of this research.

Final Reflections

Reflecting on this research journey, I am in awe of these female leaders who navigated the challenging industry of sports media to ascend into impactful leadership roles. Their resilience, adaptability and creativity are nothing short of inspiring. Having the unique opportunity to share their stories of challenges and success has offered me immense professional growth but has also impacted me on a deeply personal level. The participant experiences highlighted that the journey to leadership is much like the journey through creativity –the messy

work that leads to big things. At its core, this study is about creative role identity of female leaders and or how creativity is internalized as a part of their leadership. For the women in this study creativity extended far beyond the traditional definitions of novel ideas or artistic work to defining part of their own identity. This was expressed by their competencies as problem solvers, negotiators, process innovators, and collaborators and was supported by mindsets such as empathy, curiosity, adaptive and a strong creative confidence.

This research underscores the importance of nurturing creative role identities in women. Women who identify creativity as a strong part of their own identity extend that to their leadership approach and intentionally create safe environments where curiosity and collaboration are highly valued. This psychologically safe space ensured by a creative leader is ultimately where the messy and risky magic of creativity and innovation flourish. The impact of possessing a strong creative identity as a leader is extended to shape the creative identity of those they lead (team) and permeate a culture over time.

Creativity as a part of role identity is especially salient in fast paced and constantly changing industries like sport media where shifting trends, competing distractions, and recent technologies bring unique adaptive challenges that must be addressed creatively to remain competitive. This research also underscores the need for organizations to support and encourage creativity and to intentionally cultivate conditions where it is valued and easily expressed.

I am also struck by the critical role that mentors and allies play in the professional success and the strong creative identity of female leaders. Mentors or allies were cited as key components of success and creative confidence, again, emphasizing the complex and interwoven journey to creative identity and leadership. The guidance, support, and advocacy offered from

mentors and allies support inclusivity and amplified female voices and creates a ripple effect that enhances creative confidence, effort, and identity for individuals and organizations.

Finally, this research is about empowering women to define, enact, and develop a strong identity rooted in creativity to further redefine and reshape an industry. Creativity is not a lofty expression or trending buzzword, it is the “innovation engine that could” leading to sustained growth and success in business. Far beyond the algorithms of ai and the latest technologies is the human-factor or the work of creative leadership that “inspires and mobilizes people to tackle tough challenges and do things that matter” (Morris & Morris, 2024). This is the future of leadership and empowering women in sports media marketing to lead with creativity is an essential driver of meaningful change in the industry.

References

- Abraham, A. (2015). Gender and creativity: An overview of psychological and neuroscientific literature. *Brain Imaging and Behavior*, 10(2), 609–618. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11682-015-9410-8>
- Acar, O. A., Tarakci, M., & van Knippenberg, D. (2019). Creativity and Innovation Under Constraints: A Cross-Disciplinary Integrative Review. *Journal of Management*, 45(1), 96–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206318805832>
- Accenture Skills and Employment Trends Survey: Perspectives on Training*. (2018). www.accenture.com
- Aggarwal, I., & Woolley, A. W. (2019). Team Creativity, Cognition, and Cognitive Style Diversity. *Management Science*, 65(4), 1586–1599. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2017.3001>
- Amabile, T. M. (1985a). A Model of Creativity and Innovation in Organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 10, 123–167.
- Amabile, T. M. (1985b). A Model of Creativity and Innovation in Organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 10, 123–167.
- Amabile, T. M. (1998). How to kill creativity. *Harvard Business Review*, 76(5), 76–186.
- Amabile, T. M., & Pillemer, J. (2012). Perspectives on the Social Psychology of Creativity. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 46(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.001>
- Anderson, S., Cameron, C. D., & Beaty, R. E. (2025). Creative Empathy. *Creativity Research Journal*, 37(1), 71–93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2023.2229649>
- Ayman, R., & Korabik, K. (2010). Leadership: Why Gender and Culture Matter. *The American Psychologist*, 65(3), 157–170. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018806>

- Bass, B. M. (1995). Theory of transformational leadership redux—University of Tennessee, Knoxville. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6(4), 463–478.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. SAGE.
- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). Transformational leadership, 2nd ed. *Transformational Leadership, 2nd Ed.*, xiii, 282–xiii, 282. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410617095>
- Beilock, S. (2013). *Research-Based Advice for Women Working in Male-Dominated Fields*. <https://hbr.org/2019/02/research-based-advice-for-women-working-in-male-dominated-fields>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality; a treatise in the sociology of knowledge* ([1st ed.]). Doubleday.
- Bharadwaj, S. (2000). Making innovation happen in organizations: Individual creativity mechanisms, organizational creativity mechanisms or both? *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 17, 424–434. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0737-6782\(00\)00057-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0737-6782(00)00057-6)
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism; perspective and method*. Prentice-Hall.
- Boden, M. A. (1994). *Dimensions of creativity*. MIT Press.
- Brown, T. (with Katz, B.). (2009). *Change by design: How design thinking transforms organizations and inspires innovation* (1st ed.). Harper Business.
- Burton, L. J. (2015). Underrepresentation of women in sport leadership: A review of research. *Sport Management Review*, 18(2), 155–165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.02.004>
- Caser, & Oelkers. (2022). *Sports and Entertainment Marketing* (5th ed.). Cengage. <https://www.cengage.com/c/sports-and-entertainment-marketing-44-student-edition-44-5th-edition-5e-kaser-oelkers/9780357124970/>

- Chen, S.-C., & Shao, J. (2022). Feminine traits improve transformational leadership advantage: Investigation of leaders' gender traits, sex and their joint impacts on employee contextual performance. *Gender in Management*, 37(5), 569–586. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-06-2020-0167>
- Clandinin, D. J. (with Connelly, F. M.). (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Clegg, S. R., & Burdon, S. (2019). Exploring creativity and innovation in broadcasting. *Human Relations*, 0018726719888004. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719888004>
- Cropley, D. H., Cropley, A. J., Kaufman, J. C., & Runco, M. A. (2010). *The Dark Side of Creativity*. Cambridge University Press.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utk/detail.action?docID=542765>
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1998). *A narrative approach to organization studies*. SAGE.
- Diehl, A. B., & Dzubinski, L. (2018). An overview of gender-based leadership barriers. In S. R. Madsen (Ed.), *Handbook of Research of Gender and Leadership* (pp. 271–286). Edgar Elder Publishing.
- Dutcher, G., & Rodet, C. S. (2022). Which two heads are better than one? Uncovering the positive effects of diversity in creative teams. *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jems.12482>
- Dweck, C. S. (1996). Implicit theories as organizers of goals and behavior. In *The psychology of action: Linking cognition and motivation to behavior* (pp. 69–90). The Guilford Press.
- Dweck, C. S. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Ballantine Books.
- Dwyer, P. (2016). Managing Creativity in Media Organisations. In G. F. Lowe & C. Brown (Eds.), *Managing Media Firms and Industries: What's So Special About Media*

- Management?* (pp. 343–365). Springer International Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08515-9_20
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex differences in social behavior: A social-role interpretation*. L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The Leadership Styles of Women and Men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781–797. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00241>
- Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Edmondson, A. C., & Lei, Z. (2014). Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 1(1), 23–43. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091305>
- El-Murad, J., & West, D. C. (2004). The Definition and Measurement of Creativity: What Do We Know? *Journal of Advertising Research*, 44(2), 188–201.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021849904040097>
- Ely, R., & Thomas, D. (2001). Cultural Diversity at Work: The Effects of Diversity Perspectives on Work Group Processes and Outcomes. *Administrative Science Quarterly - ADMIN SCI QUART*, 46, 229–273. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667087>
- Emerson, R. M. (with Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L.). (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). The University of Chicago Press.
- espnW and EY. (2017). *Why female athletes make winning entrepreneurs* [Corporate]. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://assets.ey.com/content/dam/ey->

sites/ey-com/en_gl/topics/entrepreneurship/ey-why-female-athletes-make-winning-entrepreneurs.pdf

- Esser, A., Kahrens, M., Mouzugh, Y., & Eomois, E. (2018). A female leadership competency framework from the perspective of male leaders. *Gender in Management*, 33(2), 138–166. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-06-2017-0077>
- Farmer, S. M., Tierney, P., & Kung-McIntyre, K. (2003). Employee Creativity in Taiwan: An Application of Role Identity Theory. *Academy of Management Journal*, 46(5), 618–630. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30040653>
- Ferullo, L. M. (2019). *Exploring Competencies of Female Leaders in the Workplace: The Influence of Athletics* [ProQuest Dissertations Publishing]. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2306548430?pq-origsite=primo>
- Flick, U. (2013). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications. <https://books.google.com/books?id=R-6GAwAAQBAJ>
- Forrester. (2014). *The Creative Dividend: How Creativity Impacts Business Results*. for AdobeUS Sports.
- Frey, J. H., & Fontana, A. (1991). The group interview in social research. *The Social Science Journal (Fort Collins)*, 28(2), 175–187. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319\(91\)90003-M](https://doi.org/10.1016/0362-3319(91)90003-M)
- Gabriel, Y. (2000). Storytelling in Organizations, Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies. In *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Vol. 47). <https://doi.org/10.2307/3094897>
- Galante, M., & Ward, R. M. (2017). Female student leaders: An examination of transformational leadership, athletics, and self-esteem. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 106, 157–162. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.017>

- Gender and the Economy. (2017, August 11). *Gender and perceived creativity*. Gender and the Economy. <https://www.gendereconomy.org/gender-and-creativity/>
- Gill, M. J. (2014). The Possibilities of Phenomenology for Organizational Research. *Organizational Research Methods*, 17(2), 118–137.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428113518348>
- Glaveanu, V. P., Ness, I. J., & Rasmussen, L. J. T. (2021). Chapter 2 - Creative success in collaboration: A sociocultural perspective. In A. S. McKay, R. Reiter-Palmon, & J. C. Kaufman (Eds.), *Creative Success in Teams* (pp. 19–32). Academic Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-819993-0.00002-3>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (pp. ix, 586). Harvard University Press.
- Goleman, D., & Boyatzis, R. (2008). Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 8.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2001). *Institutional selves: Troubled identities in a postmodern world*. Oxford University Press.
- Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2002). The Dynamics of Organizational Identity. *Human Relations (New York)*, 55(8), 989–1018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726702055008181>
- He, H., & Brown, A. D. (2013). Organizational Identity and Organizational Identification: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Future Research. *Group & Organization Management*, 38(1), 3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601112473815>
- Heifetz, R. A. (1994). *Leadership without easy answers*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Hekman, S. (1997). Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 22(2), 341–365. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495159>
- Hoyt, C., & Simon, S. (2018). Social psychological approaches to women and leadership theory. In S. R. Madsen (Ed.), *Handbook of Research of Gender and Leadership* (pp. 85–126). Edgar Elder Publishing.
- Humphreys, M., & Brown, A. D. (2002). Narratives of Organizational Identity and Identification: A Case Study of Hegemony and Resistance. *Organization Studies*, 23(3), 421–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840602233005>
- Kashdan, T., & Silvia, P. (2009). Curiosity and Interest: The Benefits of Thriving on Novelty and Challenge. In *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 367–375). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhpb/9780195187243.013.0034>
- Kaufman, J. C., & Sternberg, R. J. (2010). *The Cambridge handbook of creativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kelinske, B., Mayer, B. W., & Chen, K.-L. (2001). Perceived benefits from participation in sports: A gender study. *Women in Management Review (Bradford, West Yorkshire, England : 1992)*, 16(2), 75–84. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420110386601>
- Kelley, T., & Kelley, D. (2013). *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All*. Crown.
- Kelley, T. (with Littman, J.). (2001). *The art of innovation: Lessons in creativity from IDEO, America's leading design firm*. HarperCollinsBusiness.
- Kenny, K., Wilmott, H., & Whittle, A. (2011). *Understanding Identity in Organizations*. SAGE Publications.

- Knox, S. (1990). Creativity in marketing management—A unified approach. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 5(3), 245–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.1990.9964103>
- Koh, D., Lee, K., & Joshi, K. (2019). Transformational leadership and creativity: A meta-analytic review and identification of an integrated model. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 40(6), 625–650. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2355>
- Koseoglu, G., Liu, Y., & Shalley, C. E. (2017). Working with creative leaders: Exploring the relationship between supervisors' and subordinates' creativity. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(6), 798–811. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.03.002>
- Kumra, S. (2018). Reflections on glass: A second wave feminist theorizing in a third wave feminist age. In S. R. Madsen (Ed.), *Handbook of Research of Gender and Leadership* (pp. 49–62). Edgar Elder Publishing.
- Lapchick, R. E., Middleton, T., & Richardson, K. (2021). *The 2021 Sports Media Racial and Gender Report Card™: Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE)*.
- Lebuda, I., & Karwowski, M. (2013). Tell Me Your Name and I'll Tell You How Creative Your Work Is: Author's Name and Gender as Factors Influencing Assessment of Products' Creativity in Four Different Domains. *Creativity Research Journal*, 25(1), 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2013.752297>
- Lee, A., Legood, A., Hughes, D., Tian, A. W., Newman, A., & Knight, C. (2020). Leadership, creativity and innovation: A meta-analytic review. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 29(1), 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2019.1661837>

- Levy, D. (2020). *The American Sports Fanship Survey*. St. Bonaventure/Siena College Research Institute. <https://www.sbu.edu/news/news-items/2023/02/03/st.-bonaventure-siena-research-survey-reveals-70-of-americans-are-sports-fans-21-avid-football-clearly-king>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2019). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (Fourth). SAGE Publications Inc.
- Lombardo, B., & Roddy, D. J. (2010). *Cultivating organizational creativity in an age of complexity—Companion to the IBM Creative Leadership Study* (pp. 1–20) [Executive Report]. <https://www.creativityatwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/IBM-creative-leadershipstudy-2011.pdf>
- Lovelin, M., & Hanold, M. T. (2014). *Female Sport Leaders' Perceptions of Leadership and Management: Skills and Attitudes for Success*. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Female-Sport-Leaders'-Perceptions-of-Leadership-and-Lovelin-Hanold/ba4e184ef3a143068b813da28223a0339a560717>
- Luecke, R. (2003). *Harvard Business Essentials: Managing Creativity and Innovation*. Harvard Business Press.
- Ma, A., Rosette, A. S., & Koval, C. Z. (2022). Reconciling female agentic advantage and disadvantage with the CADDIS measure of agency. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000550>
- Madsen, S. R. (2017). *Handbook of Research on Gender and Leadership* (S. R. Madsen, Ed.). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Malmelin, N., & Nivari-Lindström, L. (2017). Rethinking creativity in journalism: Implicit theories of creativity in the Finnish magazine industry. *Journalism*, 18(3), 334–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915620272>

- Malmelin, N., & Virta, S. (2020). Critical creativity: Managing creativity as a strategic resource in media organisations. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 0(0), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/16522354.2020.1858677>
- McIntyre, R. P. (1993). An Approach to Fostering Creativity in Marketing. *Marketing Education Review*, 3(1), 33–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10528008.1993.11488394>
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago.
- Miller, M. (2009). Transformational Leadership Behaviours and Empathy with Action. *Transformation*, 26(1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378809102176>
- Mobility Foresights. (2022). *US Sports Media Market 2022-2027*.
<https://mobilityforesights.com/product/us-sports-media-market/>
- Morrill, C. (2008). Culture and Organization Theory. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 619(1), 15–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208320241>
- Morris, J. K., & Morris, M. L. (2024). Human Centered Leadership. In *The SAGE handbook of human resource development*. SAGE Publications.
- Mumford, M. D. (2012). *Handbook of organizational creativity* (1st ed.). Elsevier/Academic Press.
- Nielson Sports. (2018). *Global Interest in Women's Sports is on the Rise*. Nielson Sports.
<https://nielsenSports.com/global-interest-womens-sports-rise/>
- Oliver, J. D., & Ashley, C. (2012). Creative Leaders' Views on Managing Advertising Creativity. *Journal of Marketing and Theory Practice*, 20(3), 335–338.

Olmstead, M. (2016, September 2). *Title IX and the Rise of Female Athletes in America*.

Women's Sports Foundation. <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/education/title-ix-and-the-rise-of-female-athletes-in-america/>

Petkus, E. (1996). The creative identity: Creative behavior from the symbolic interactionist perspective. *Journal of Creative Behavior*, 30, 188–196.

Plucker, J. A. (2021). *Creativity and innovation: Theory, research, and practice*. Routledge.

Proudfoot, D., & Fath, S. (2021). Signaling Creative Genius: How Perceived Social Connectedness Influences Judgments of Creative Potential. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 47(4), 580–592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220936061>

Pulakos, E. D., Arad, S., Donovan, M. A., & Plamondon, K. E. (2000). Adaptability in the workplace: Development of a taxonomy of adaptive performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(4), 612–624. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.85.4.612>

Ramocki, S. P. (1994). It is Time to Teach Creativity throughout the Marketing Curriculum. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 16(2), 15–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/027347539401600203>

Raney, A. A., & Bryant, J. (2006). *Handbook of sports and media*. L. Erlbaum Associates.

Reinartz, W., & Saffert, P. (2013, June). Creativity in Advertising: When It Works and When It Doesn't. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2013/06/creativity-in-advertising-when-it-works-and-when-it-doesnt>

Richtnér, A., & Löfsten, H. (2014). Managing in turbulence: How the capacity for resilience influences creativity. *R&D Management*, 44(2), 137–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/radm.12050>

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications.

- Roberto, M. A. (2019). *Unlocking Creativity: How to Solve Any Problem and Make the Best Decisions by Shifting Creative Mindsets*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
- Runco, M. A. (2014). *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*. (2nd ed.). Elsevier Science & Technology.
- Sadi, M. A., & Al-Dubaisi, A. H. (2008). Barriers to organizational creativity: The marketing executives' perspective in Saudi Arabia. *The Journal of Management Development*, 27(6), 574–599. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710810877839>
- Saldana, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. SAGE.
- Sawyer, K. (2012). Extending Sociocultural Theory to Group Creativity. *Vocations and Learning*, 5(1), 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-011-9066-5>
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Schipani, C. A., Dworkin, T. M., Kwolek-Folland, A., & Maurer, V. G. (2009). Pathways for women to obtain positions of organizational leadership: The significance of mentoring and networking. *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy*, 16(1), 89-.
- Shalley, C. E., & Gilson, L. L. (2004). What leaders need to know: A review of social and contextual factors that can foster or hinder creativity. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(1), 33–53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2003.12.004>
- Shore, L. M., Randel, A. E., Chung, B. G., Dean, M. A., Holcombe Ehrhart, K., & Singh, G. (2011). Inclusion and Diversity in Work Groups: A Review and Model for Future Research. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1262–1289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310385943>
- Sternberg, R. J. (2019). Measuring Creativity: A 40+ Year Retrospective. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 53(4), 600–604. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.218>

- Strine, M. S., & Pacanowsky, M. E. (1985). How to read interpretive accounts of organizational life: Narrative bases of textural authority. *Southern Journal of Communication*, 50(3), 283–297.
- Taylor, S. J. (with Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. L.). (2016). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (Fourth edition.). Wiley.
- Tracy, S. J. (2005). Fracturing the Real-Self Fake-Self Dichotomy: Moving Toward “Crystallized” Organizational Discourses and Identities. *Communication Theory*, 15(2), 168–195. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/15.2.168>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative Quality: Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. (1st ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- van Nistelrooij, A., & Sminia, H. (2010). Organization Development: What’s Actually Happening? *Journal of Change Management*, 10(4), 407–420.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2010.516487>
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage Publications.
- Weisberg, R. W. (2015). On the Usefulness of “Value” in the Definition of Creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 27(2), 111–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2015.1030320>
- Whetten, D. A. (2006). Albert and Whetten Revisited: Strengthening the Concept of Organizational Identity. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 15(3), 219–234.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492606291200>

- Wieland, S. M. (2010). Ideal Selves as Resources for the Situated Practice of Identity. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(4), 503–528.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318910374938>
- Wille, B., Wiernik, B. M., Vergauwe, J., Vrijdags, A., & Trbovic, N. (2018). Personality characteristics of male and female executives: Distinct pathways to success? *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 106, 220–235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.02.005>
- Windels, K., & Lee, W.-N. (2012). The construction of gender and creativity in advertising creative departments. *Gender in Management*, 27(8), 502–519.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/17542411211279706>
- Yang, X., & Smith, R. E. (2009). Beyond Attention Effects: Modeling the Persuasive and Emotional Effects of Advertising Creativity. *Marketing Science*, 28(5), 935–949.
<https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1080.0460>
- Yukl, G. A. (2013). *Leadership in organizations* (8th ed.). Pearson.

Appendices

Appendix A: Complete Interview guide

Main Focus	Sample Questions
Rapport Building & Context	• Tell me a little about you. (Family? Education?) • What drew you to this role? Why marketing? Why media? • Did you play sports? Did playing sport prepare you for this role? Why/why not?
Creative Role Identity and the Female Leader	• When you hear the word “creativity” in relation to your role, what does that mean to you? • Do you consider yourself creative? How? Can you give me an example? • Does being a female in your environment change how you are creative? Example? • Please share your top 5 competencies/skills. (If creativity is/isn’t one) Why? • Can you share some examples of when you used creativity in your role? How was it received? Outcomes? Valued? • Can you share some ways in which you support creativity within your role? Team? • What does creativity look like in your team? • Can you tell me about how you have navigated/negotiated things differently than your male counterparts? • Can you share some examples of how your organization supports or challenges creativity?
Conclusion & Thank You	• If you could give one piece of advice, a nugget of gold, to other females in sports marketing, what would it be? • Would you happen to have any suggestions of another professional that might be good for me to talk to? Would you be willing to share their contact info with me?

Appendix B: Approved IRB Email for Participants

Emails for Contacts from Center for Sport, Peace, and Society

Hello CSPS Friend,

My name is Jules Morris and I am a PhD Candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Currently, I am conducting my dissertation research that explores creativity as a part of individual identities and organizations. Specifically, I am learning from women who are leaders in sports media marketing. Dr. Sarah referred me to you as a potential participant for this study. Your perspective at [insert sport media company] would be beneficial to this research. The findings of this research are designed to come from a series of interviews with women in sports media marketing that hold or have recently held leadership positions. An interview would take about an hour and happen over Zoom. All information from the interview will be kept confidential, and any excerpts used in the written research report will be made anonymous to protect the identity of you and your associated organization.

More information about this study can be found in the informed consent document attached in this email. Would you be interested in participating in this research project? If so, you can email me at julesmo@utk.edu or contact me via my mobile phone at 865-719-7072. Thank you in advance for considering the gift of your insights and time.

Best, Jules Morris

Email to Personal Media & Marketing Network

Hello marketing and media friend,

Currently, I am conducting my dissertation research that explores creativity as a part of individual identities and organizations. Specifically, I am learning from women who are leaders in sports media marketing. Your perspective at [insert sport media company] would be beneficial to this research. The findings of this research are designed to come from a series of interviews with women in sports media marketing that hold or have recently held leadership positions. An interview would take about an hour and happen over Zoom. All information from the interview will be kept confidential, and any excerpts used in the written research report will be made anonymous to protect the identity of you and your associated organization.

More information about this study can be found in the informed consent document attached in this email. Would you be interested in participating in this research project? If so, you can email me at julesmo@utk.edu or contact me via my mobile phone at 865-719-7072. Thank you in advance for considering the gift of your insights and time.

Best, Jules Morris

Appendix C: Informed Consent and Approval to Record (IRB Approved Script)

Hi [insert participant's first name]. Thank you so much for your time. To get started, could we please look at the consent form (share screen on Zoom)? Could you verbally acknowledge that you agree to participate in this study? The transcripts from the interviews that I am conducting will serve as the data for this study and will be kept anonymous. I am also asking for your permission to record our interview via Otter.ai and Zoom. Will you accept the invitation for recording by Otterai and Zoom and acknowledge that this interview is being recorded? I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, I may push ahead, and I so appreciate your help and patience.

Appendix D: List of Themes/Concepts and Codes

Theme: Context Matters Defining Creative Role Identity

Sub Theme: Industry Specific

Production is creative
 Content creation is creative
 Journalism is creative
 Marketing as creative
 Staying ahead of trends
 Adapting to new technologies
 Adapting to new platforms
 Finding ways to reach audience
 Creativity meeting business objectives
 Complex industry, complex creative needs

Sub Theme: Assigned to Roles

I'm creative by my role isn't
 I'm not creative, roles are
 Formal titles for "creative roles"
 Creatives and the "rest of us"

Theme: Competencies Defining Creative Role Identity

Definition of creativity

Sub Theme: Problem-solving is creative

Problem solving to reach goals
 Problem solving new ideas

Sub Theme: Collaboration is key

Cross-department collaboration
 Team collaboration
 Outside collaboration
 Collaboration to solve problems
 Collaboration for better content

Sub Theme: Negotiation as creative

Negotiating budget solutions

Sub Theme: Process Improvement is creative

Streamlining can be creative

Theme: Mindsets Used to Define Creative Role Identity

Sub Theme: Empathy is Foundational

Empathy content connects better

Empathy helps understand audience

Empathy focuses on people

Growth mindsets

Sub Theme: Curiosity leads to Creativity

Curiosity to learn new things

Curiosity to seek resources

Curiosity to follow trends

Curious how to do something differently

Sub Theme: Adaptability Sparks Creativity

Adaptability to pivot as needed

Adapt to integrate new ideas

Adapt to industry trends

Adapt to platforms

Sub Theme: Creative Confidence Leads to Voice

CC gained by preparation

CC gained by self-efficacy

CC inspired by others

CC of established leaders

Theme: Team Management Practices Unleash Team Creativity***Sub Theme: Fostering Collaboration Inspires Creativity***

Creativity is a “team sport”

Sharing inspiration to spark collaboration

Sub Theme: Practicing Empathy Supports Creativity

Making time for people is empathy

Putting yourself in their shoes

Sub Theme: Empowering Others Leads to Creative Growth

Empowering through guidance

Empowering through prep

Empowering Giving Credit for ideas

Celebrating wins

Giving other's opportunities

Sub Theme: Creating Psychological Safety Enhances Creativity

All ideas matter

Ideas can come from anywhere (any level)

OK to fail

Sub Theme: Open Communication Prepares Creative Advocates

Direct Communication (not always received well)

Preparing for success of creativity

Focused on growth

Agentic style?

Theme: Leadership Styles Support Creativity

Sub Theme: Transformational and Human Centered Leader Engage Creativity

Human-Centered relationship focus

Transformational qualities

Sub Theme: Situational Leadership Navigates Challenges

Barbie Monologue – not too this or that

Start functional add softness

Necessary style

Sub Theme: Change Leaders Take Action

Calling out bias

Better representation in programming

Better representation in office

Theme: Gender is an Asset and a Hinderance

Sub Theme: Gender can offer unique perspective

Gender brings new perspective

Gender has a different lens

Women are more inclusive

Women are more empathetic

Women are better leaders

Sub Theme: Gender bias persists

Ideas not as valued

Mansplaining

Women don't know as much about sport as men

Theme: Catalysts for Personal and Professional Growth

Sub Theme: Challenges can Develop Resilience

Challenges led to navigation skills

Resilience is key

Sub Theme: Mentors and Allies are Gamechangers

Mentors are women

Allies are men

Mentors challenge

Mentors support

Mentors advocate

Allies advocate

Allies support

Mentors impacted my career

Allies impacted my career

Theme: Participation in Sport Develops Strong Female Leaders

Sub Theme: Strong work ethic developed through sport

What it takes to be successful

Coming back and winning

Sub Theme: Understanding Team Dynamics is an Advantage

Everyone plays a role

Everyone wants to win

Sub Theme: Resilience transfers to professional life

Resilience bounce back

Resilience overcomes

Resilience reframes

Sub Theme: Competitiveness helps women navigate

Competitiveness leads to leadership opportunity

Competitiveness as a strength

Theme: Organizations Support Creative Role Identity

Sub Theme: Collaborative cultures ignite creativity

Collaboration breaks down barriers

Sub Theme: Inclusivity brings new perspective

Inclusivity changes the workforce

Inclusivity brings better outcomes

Sub Theme: Psychological safety unleashes creativity

Safe to fail

Safe to experiment

Safe to speak up

Theme: Organizational Barriers Diminish Creative Role Identity

Sub Theme: Bureaucratic challenges hinder collaboration

Streamlining for efficiencies is a problem

Budget constraints are frustrating

Need for human feedback in the processes

Sub Theme: Gender bias undermines ideas of women

Mansplaining

Women don't know as much about sport as men

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter



May 31, 2023

Nicholas William Geidner
UTK - College of Communication and Inf - Journalism/Electronic Media

Re: UTK IRB-23-07547-XM

Study Title: PLAYING THE CREATIVITY GAME IN SPORTS MEDIA MARKETING: CREATIVE ROLE IDENTITY OF FEMALE LEADERS IN A MALE DOMINATED INDUSTRY

Dear Nicholas William Geidner:

The Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) reviewed your application for the above referenced project and determined that your application is eligible for **exempt** review under 45 CFR 46.101. Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your application has been determined to comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval of your application (Version 1.1) as submitted, including:

Documents Stamped:

- Playing the Creativity Game Consent Form_Final version 1.0
- Morris Email Correspondence for Diss version 1.0
- Interview Protocol version 1.0
- Interview Questions version 1.0

That have been dated and stamped IRB approved. You are approved to enroll a maximum of 10 participants. Approval of this study will be valid from 05/31/2023.

Any revisions in the approved application, consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner

required by the local IRB policy.

Approval of this study is valid for three years. If a Study Update Form is not submitted in iMedRIS and approved by the IRB prior to 05/30/2026, the study will be automatically closed by the IRB and no further study activity will be permitted until a Study Update Form is received. Please be sure to also submit a Study Closure Request (Form 7) when all research activity, including data analysis, has been completed.

Sincerely,

Lora Beebe, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, FAAN
Chair

Appendix F: Anonymized Participant Descriptions

12 Participants from 8 Organizations

1. Sarah is a white, early 40's senior level marketing executive for a regional professional organization connecting sports and media. She self-identified as LGBTQ.
2. Jessica is a white, early 40s senior level marketing executive for the sports media team at a leading talent and sports agency.
3. Rachel is a white, mid 30's senior level marketing executive for a leading digital sports entertainment and gaming company.
4. Amanda is a white, late 40's senior level marketing executive at a global network leader in sport media.
5. Megan is an Asian American, late 30's mid-level marketing executive at a global network leader in sport media.
6. Laura is a Hispanic, mid 40's senior level marketing and production executive at a global network leader in sports media.
7. Hanna is a white, late 30's senior level creative marketing executive at a global network leader in sports media.
8. Jennifer is a black, young 30's senior level media marketing executive for a professional sports team.
9. Melissa is a white, mid 40's senior level media marketing executive for a premier ice hockey organization.
10. Allison is a white, young 30's Senior Director of the Sport Media Marketing team at a firm globally recognized creative agency.
11. Rebecca is white, early 50's was a long-time Senior-Level Executive at a global network leader in sport media.
12. Ashley is a Hispanic, early 40's Senior level media marketing executive at a leading Spanish-language media company known for its vibrant sports focus. She self-identified as LGBTQ.

Vita

Julie (Jules) Morris serves as a lecturer of digital and visual marketing in the Haslam College of Business. Previous experience highlights include founding and leading a Knoxville Business Journal top twenty marketing and human-centered design agency, BombDiggity, LLC, since 2011; serving as the director of marketing, promotions, and community relations for WBIR-TV; managing marketing and implementation for multiple events around the Super Bowl weekend; building B2C cause-marketing campaigns for Samsung Electronics; and facilitating human-centered innovation and design workshops across the United States. Jules has nearly thirty years of marketing and media experience, including both higher education and corporate environments. Her research, teaching, and consulting interests cut across a range of disciplines, including marketing, media, communications, management and leadership. As a lifelong learner, she is curious about how marketing leaders nurture creativity and innovation within their organizations.