

Pinning Down Inclusivity: Exploring  
Barriers and Facilitators to Participation  
for Muslim and Sikh Women in Wrestling

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## **1. Abstract**

This thesis critically examines wrestling coaches' perspectives of barriers encountered by Muslim and Sikh women in participating in wrestling, a sport characterised by male dominance. Exploring the intersection of cultural, religious, and structural impediments that limit the participation of women from these communities, the study encompasses one participant observation visit and six semi-structured interviews. The research analyses the role of cultural norms, gender expectations, and governance structures in shaping women's access to the sport. The discussion is centred around four key findings that highlight significant obstacles: a shortage of sporting opportunities, lack of representation in wrestling, the power of parental influence, and restrictive governance practices. Goffman's seminal work on the concept of dramaturgy was used to theorise the key findings, to make sociological connections between interviewees and their thoughts of wrestling. This study contributes to the discourse on sports inclusivity, offering evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at fostering greater participation of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling.

## **2. Introduction**

The reach of sport is one not to be underestimated, as globalisation has seen the World Cup and the Olympics categorised as 'mega-events' (Kilvington, 2019). The 2022 Commonwealth Games hosted in Birmingham saw one and a half million spectators buy tickets for a variety of sports spanning 11 days (DCMS, 2022a). The event drew in almost half of the UK's population, with 46% of the public admitting to watching, following online or taking part in Birmingham 2022 events (DCMS, 2022a). Furthermore, Birmingham 2022 became the first major global multi-sport event to have more women's medals than men's, and similarly to most, put emphasis on the community element that mega-events can deliver (Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, 2022a: DCMS, 2022a). The 2022 Commonwealth Games aimed to 'bring people together,' 'improve health and wellbeing,' 'help the region to grow and succeed,' 'be a catalyst for change,' and 'put us on the global stage' (Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, 2022a). To achieve these outcomes, £778million of public investment, including a further £88million of funding for legacy programmes was awarded (Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, 2022b). The Commonwealth Games, along with other international events such as the Olympics and Paralympics, display many sports that lack funding, participation, and media exposure. Wrestling is one of the world's oldest recorded sports, with a known history of 5,000 years; yet has received very little funding over the years (Mirzaei et al., 2009; Thomas and Zamanpour, 2018; Ulupinar et al., 2021). While wrestling attracts a significant number of individuals from ethnic minorities, there exists a notable gender disparity within the sport. According to the 2019-2020 annual report of British Wrestling, males overwhelmingly dominate the participation in wrestling; revealing that a mere 14% of all registered members identified as female, highlighting the underrepresentation of

women in this domain (British Wrestling, 2020). The rise in the popularity of women's sports has marked a significant global shift in recent years, with sports such as football, rugby and cricket gaining unprecedented attention through coverage by international media outlets (Adgate, 2022). This popularity surge is indicative of a broader societal transformation where women's sporting achievements are being celebrated on a global stage (Culvin and Bowes, 2023). Sports that were traditionally dominated by male athletes, such as those aforementioned, have increasingly showcased the talents and capabilities of female athletes, thereby challenging gender stereotypes and breaking down long-standing barriers within the sporting world (Culvin and Bowes, 2023). Yet still, studies indicate that Muslim and Sikh women are particularly under-represented in sport research, and intersectional approaches have been recommended for the study of this demographic (Ahmed, 2011; Culvin and Bowes, 2023). Figures from the 2021 census highlight that Birmingham's ethnic minority communities represent 51.4% of the city's population, making Birmingham one of the first 'super-diverse' cities in the UK (Census 2021, 2022; Birmingham City Council, 2022). Over the last six years, British Asian women have consistently ranked as the demographic group displaying the lowest receptiveness for engaging in physical activity; recent findings from the DCMS (2022b) highlight that a significant percentage, namely 46.6%, of British Asian women fall under the classification of being physically active. Many initiatives have been devised to combat this (e.g., England and Wales Cricket Board [ECB], 2021; Asian Sports Foundation, 2019, 2022; Sporting Equals, 2022), but the statistics still indicate further work must be done to increase sports participation for British Asian women. Historically, British Asian females have been a demographic abandoned by sporting organisations, due to their cultural and religious hinderances and restrictions; showing reluctance to address the perceived



'problematic nature' of South Asian communities (Walseth, 2006; Ratna, 2010; Abbas and Siddique, 2012; Thorpe et al., 2022). Arguments have been made that sporting organisations are covertly racist, with data from Sporting Equals in 2020 indicating that 83% of people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds have experienced some form of discrimination within the sporting sector - 8% of which felt satisfied with the response of the organisations (Ingle, 2020). Despite initiatives and reports from sporting organisation to encourage the participation of minority ethnic groups, cultural influences, insecurities about their 'underdeveloped level of skill' and feeling of inadequacy have proven barriers for British South Asian women (Pullia et al., 2022). Previous research examining the obstacles and enablers of physical activity come from a migrant population of the first-generation angle. Nevertheless, Bhatnagar et al. (2021) emphasised the necessity for qualitative research aimed at comprehending the disparities in physical activity between White British and British Asian women.

Three research questions shaped the format of this study, which were a) what are the primary socio-cultural and religious barriers that Muslim and Sikh women face when participating in wrestling, and how to these barriers influence their decision to engage or disengage from the sport b) to what extent do community support systems, including family, religious institutions and peer networks, serve as facilitators for Muslim and Sikh women in sustaining involvement in wrestling and c) how can sporting organisations implement inclusive policies and practices to address the specific challenges faced by Muslim and Sikh women in sport, and what impact do these strategies have on increasing their participation and retention rates in wrestling? The aim of this research was to critically examine the factors affecting wrestling participation rates for Muslim and Sikh females in England.

### **Context – South Asians’ migrating to UK:**

As per Brah’s (2006) recommendation, analysing the cultural formation of South Asians in Britain must be informed by understanding the colonial history. The mid-nineteenth century saw the British state formally gain control over the Indian subcontinent from the East India Company, founded by England in 1600 originally to operate as a trading body for English venders (Richards, 2006; Bhambra, 2022; Britannica, 2023). The East India Company saw an increase in political control as the corporation expanded, introducing raw materials such as tea, jute, and rubber to the UK – quickly becoming essential assets to the British economic development (Nasta et al., 2017a). The growth of Britain’s industrialisation meant that many South Asian’s were employed for jobs such as tealeaf pickers, lascar sailors, and ayahs (South Asian nannies) (Nasta et al., 2017a). These jobs were labour-intensive with long hours, harsh conditions, and extremely low wages, all of which made them an attractive work force for the British Empire; as well as leading to some workers settling in Britain due to being pushed to abandon their post or became stranded through lack of employment (Swift, 2011; Nasta et al., 2017a). These workers became the earliest working-class South Asians in Britain. Following World War Two, a new group of working-class Asians arrived in the country, living in destitute areas speaking little English, and making money through peddling (Betts, 1981; Nasta et al., 2017b). These early settlers began to set up clubs, societies, and religious places of worship, such as mosques, gurdwaras, and temples; integrating themselves into the local communities (Nasta et al., 2017b). This integration saw the rise of inter-racial marriages and families and despite their official British citizen status, this was seen as a ‘social’ problem – although mixed-race relationships, families and people had been

documented in the sixteenth century (Habib, 2008; Nubia, 2013; Kaufmann, 2017; Nazra et al., 2017b; Caballero, 2019).

### **3. Literature Review**

This literature review delves into three interconnected themes: sport participation, wrestling, and intersectionality. By scrutinising existing studies and their outcomes, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the landscape surrounding sport participation, wrestling, and the intersectionality of factors influencing these dynamics. Through this exploration, the review seeks to illuminate key insights that will inform the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the empirical findings in the context of the current research. The first theme, sport participation, will focus critically on diasporic families in sport, the importance of role models/representation on the sporting stage, policies and organisations looking to increase sports participation for British Asian women, and the impact of digital media on getting individuals involved in sport. The second theme, wrestling, will provide historical and religious context to one of the oldest recorded sports, then proceed to cover the relationship between women and wrestling. The final theme, intersectionality, will demonstrate the complex nature of people, through realising the multiple identities individuals have. Muslim women specifically have, for many years, been weaponised by Western media; framing them as ‘voiceless victims’ of their ‘backwards’ cultures and consequently in need of ‘saving’ from ‘dangerous third world men’, by the enlightened West (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mirza, 2013; Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020). These negative representations of Muslims have heightened fears and apprehension of hate crimes (Haque et al., 2019; Rehman and Hanley, 2023). Furthermore, mass media has arguably played a leading role in constructing and fuelling the anti-Muslim rhetoric (Cole, 2007; Saeed, 2007; McQueeney, 2014, El Maohub et al., 2023), which will be unpacked further within this literature review. To

conclude the literature review, a discussion on the dominance of a white male presence in sport will be had.

### **3.1. Wrestling**

This study has been developed with the aims to unravel the intricate factors influencing the decisions of British Asian Muslim and Sikh women when contemplating participation in wrestling. The research questions for this project are intricately tied to the role of wrestling as a catalyst for broader social benefits. Wrestling, an esteemed combat sport steeped in tradition, involves the intense one-on-one competition of two athletes, each bound by a set of established rules. Beyond its competitive nature, wrestling has transcended mere physicality, earning recognition for its role in fostering virtues such as strength, agility, resilience, and a strong-willed character (Bahodirovich, 2022). Wrestling, strategically utilised in this project, emerges as a compelling means to not only showcase the prowess of its practitioners but also to encourage engagement within the British Asian Muslim and Sikh communities. The significance of this exploration lies in the sport's profound connection to both the religious and regional facets of these communities. As the lens focuses on British Asian Muslim and Sikh women, this research strategically positions wrestling as a transformative avenue. Beyond its physical demands, wrestling's close alignment with religious and regional values within these communities forms the backdrop for a nuanced exploration. Particularly pertinent is the temporal context, with the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games presenting a unique opportunity for a lasting legacy. The study envisages that fostering the involvement of women and girls in wrestling, in harmony with the cultural and religious intricacies, could yield promisingly positive outcomes in terms of heightened

participation rates and enriched representation. This exploration not only aims to understand the dynamics of wrestling but also aspires to contribute to the broader narrative of inclusivity, empowerment, and cultural resonance within the realm of sports. The forthcoming review will commence with a concise historical contextualisation of wrestling, tracing its evolution and adaptation across numerous centuries. Subsequently, the focus will shift to an exploration of women in wrestling, delving into their historical presence and current perceptions within the media.

### **3.1.1. The History of Wrestling**

The historical background of wrestling holds great depth, as one of the oldest recorded sports known to man; the art of the sport has been recognised across the world for around 5000 years (Leng et al., 2012; Bahodirovich, 2022; United World Wrestling, no date). In addition to its status as one of the oldest sports in Hellenic history, wrestling holds a unique position as it was not only featured in the Ancient Olympic program but also stood among the inaugural sports of the Modern Olympic Games (Gutmann, 2002; Molnár et al., 2022). This dual historical significance highlights wrestling's enduring legacy and its integral role in the evolution of athletic competitions across different eras. As wrestling has progressed through the centuries, many changes and adaptations have been made, with the development of regional styles (Devon and Cornwall) and professional wrestling (i.e., World of Sport and WWE) (British Wrestling, no date). The end of the 20th century witnessed a surge in the popularity of wrestling, notably through these aforementioned adaptations of the sport, such as professional wrestling. This phenomenon not only marked a shift in society's perception of wrestling but also contributed to a transformative era in the concept of the sport (British Wrestling, no date; Leng et al., 2012). The rise of professional wrestling introduced

new dimensions, capturing the imagination of audiences and reshaping the cultural landscape surrounding this age-old athletic pursuit. However, questions have since arisen following professional wrestling's popularity rise, namely, whether wrestling can be labelled as a sport (Leng et al., 2012).

### ***History of Wrestling in Islam***

The history of wrestling in Islamic culture is deeply intertwined with the broader social, spiritual, and military traditions of the Islamic world. From the earliest days of Islam, wrestling was both a popular sport and a means of physical training, with strong links to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, who is said to have engaged in the sport himself (Nasir Jangda, 2020). Stories from hadiths recount how the Prophet famously wrestled and defeated a renowned champion, Rukanah, which exemplified the sport's importance in early Islamic culture (Bakhrevskiy, 2019). Wrestlers were often revered not only for their physical prowess but also for their adherence to ethical conduct, embodying ideals such as discipline, humility, and respect, qualities valued in Islamic teachings (Halstead, 2007). Islamic wrestling traditions, particularly influenced by Persian and Central Asian cultures, have evolved through the centuries, becoming integrated into religious and cultural rituals, and leaving a lasting impact on the development of martial arts within the Muslim world (Ubaidulloev, 2015; Bakhrevskiy, 2019). Exploring this history reveals the sport's significance not only as a form of entertainment but also as a reflection of Islamic values, social hierarchy, and regional identities.

Muslim women's participation in wrestling has been historically marked by systemic discrimination, largely stemming from culturally insensitive regulations governing attire. Despite being permitted to compete, these athletes frequently encounter

barriers that inhibit their full inclusion in the sport. A notable case in 2023 involved Zainab Ibrahim, an 18-year-old American Muslim wrestler, who was compelled to withdraw from the National Championships. The competition's dress code required athletes to wear singlets, which leave both the arms and legs exposed, conflicting with her religious beliefs regarding modesty in dress (Hashmi & Lawson, 2024). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, a wrestling club in Birmingham garnered media attention when its female Muslim wrestlers were unable to participate in international competitions due to their adherence to religious dress codes, which prohibit the exposure of such areas (Hashmi & Lawson, 2024). The singlet, the standard attire in wrestling, is specifically designed to optimise athletic performance, reduce the risk of injury and to assist referees in making decisions, but it also imposes significant challenges for Muslim women athletes (Eavenson, 2022). For Muslim women adhering to Islamic principles of modesty, which dictate the covering of the arms and legs, this requirement becomes a direct obstacle to participation (Sheen et al., 2018; Hashmi & Lawson, 2024). While wrestling regulations seemingly promote fairness and safety, they simultaneously marginalise Muslim women by failing to accommodate religious diversity. The resulting exclusionary practices underscore a broader tension between sport regulations and the principles of inclusivity and cultural sensitivity that are essential for the equitable participation of athletes from diverse backgrounds.

### ***History of Wrestling in Sikhism***

In Sikhism, wrestling holds deep cultural and religious significance, deeply rooted in tradition and the wider Sikh community. From the inception of the religion, wrestling has been an essential element of Sikh culture. The founders of Sikhism, including the Gurus, actively practiced, and promoted wrestling as a means of fostering physical



health, discipline, and mental well-being. Beyond its role in promoting wellness, wrestling also had practical applications in hand-to-hand combat. Throughout Sikh history, it has been a tool for resistance, as Sikhs used their combat skills to challenge oppressive rulers, defend against invaders in India, and participate in grand wrestling tournaments. This intertwining of sport, religion, and community underscores the role of wrestling in shaping Sikh identity, symbolising both physical strength and spiritual discipline (Van City Buzz, 2016).

The north Indian state of Haryana, home to approximately 1.2 million Sikhs, comprising 4.9% of the state's population (Haryana Census, 2011), offers an intriguing case study on gender and athletic success. Recent research highlights that girls in Haryana only receive familial and state support when they achieve success in wrestling (Oza, 2019). Despite this, even the most prominent athletes encounter challenges related to unfulfilled promises and financial difficulties. A notable example is Haryana-native Geeta Phogat, who became the first Indian woman to win a gold medal at the 2010 Commonwealth Games. Her victory earned her an appointment as Deputy Superintendent of Police in 2016, a prestigious role (Oza, 2019). However, this recognition came after a six-year battle, during which Phogat was promised financial rewards from the Haryana Government, which she did not receive for four to five years, despite her achievements in the Commonwealth and Asian Games (The Quint, 2016). In an interview with The Quint (2016:2min 54), Phogat voiced her frustration, questioning: 'We think, what kind of government is this?... What kind of sports policy is this?... If international athletes like us have to run around for our rewards, then what will happen to state and national level athletes?' While this issue is primarily situated within the Indian context, its impact likely extends to the Indian Sikh diaspora in the

UK. According to the British Sikh Report (2017), 15% of Sikhs in the UK were born in India, and many remain connected to the socio-political issues in Punjab and India through strong ancestral ties (British Sikh Report 2017; 2023). Significantly, the most recent British Sikh Report (2023) revealed that 25% of respondents believed Sikh representation in sport needed improvement, second only to politics (37%). These findings underscore how underrepresentation in sport is a pressing concern within the Sikh community, which may be influenced by experiences like those of athletes such as Phogat. This connection between diaspora identity and the politics of recognition in sport reflects broader trends in the transnational Sikh experience, particularly around the negotiation of cultural and political affiliations across borders.

In the same year that Geeta Phogat was appointed as Deputy Superintendent of Police (2016), Indo-Canadian wrestler Arjan Bhullar, who also won gold at the 2010 Commonwealth Games, offered a revealing commentary on the cultural and gender dynamics surrounding wrestling in India. In an interview with Van City Buzz (2016), Bhullar stated, 'There are no legends of champion wrestlers being women in India,' despite Phogat's extraordinary achievement. As of 2024, Phogat has a grand following of one million on Instagram, indicating her legendary status as a female wrestler. Furthermore, Phogat's sister, Vinesh Phogat, is considered India's most successful woman wrestler with three consecutive gold medals at the Commonwealth Games who again, is an influential role model for young girls in wrestling (Sharma, 2024). However, Bhullar's remark highlights the deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes within Indian sports, particularly wrestling. Historically, wrestling in India - and especially within Sikh and North Indian communities - has been dominated by men, celebrated

as a masculine endeavour linked to physical prowess, martial traditions, and resistance against oppression.

### **3.1.2. Women in Wrestling**

The participation of girls in sports has long been identified as a complex issue in sports literature (Nawaz et al., 2023). Historically, wrestling has been predominantly viewed as a male-dominated sport, characterised by strong masculine associations that may discourage female participation (Leng et al., 2012; Robles, 2019). 2012; Rivera Robles, 2019). The national governing body for wrestling in Great Britain, British Wrestling, identified that not only are there very few women participating in the sport, but also that for the last six years, British Asian women are least likely to participate in sport nationally (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2022).

#### ***History of Women's Wrestling***

Throughout wrestling's long-spanning history, the development of modern women's wrestling has been dramatic (Brake, 2013; Curby et al., 2023). In the span of approximately one generation, the number of women participating in wrestling has experienced a remarkable surge. What was once a handful of young girls competing in select countries has evolved into a global phenomenon, with women from over 100 countries now aspiring for Olympic glory (Curby and Jomand, 2015). Curby and Jomand's (2015) study acknowledged the difficulty of quantifying the growth of women in wrestling. Despite this challenge, their research revealed a significant expansion; the first wrestling world championship in 1987 featured participants from eight countries, a number that grew substantially to 62 countries by 2011 (Curby and Jomand, 2015). This quantitative progression demonstrates the widespread global

acceptance and burgeoning participation of women in wrestling over the last four decades. When dissecting these statistics further, since the inception of the women's wrestling world championships, a total of 85 countries have been represented. Among these, 39 countries have had athletes securing medals, and 21 countries have celebrated the achievement of a world champion (Curby and Jomand, 2015). Table 1, created by Curby and Jomand (2015), records all countries that have has a woman representative participating in the world championships, as well as a record of whether medals were won, and indicator of achievement.

Nevertheless, navigating the world of wrestling as a woman has proven to be a formidable challenge over the years. Until relatively recently, literature often highlighted the masculine benefits that wrestling purportedly offered to young boys, a perspective that permeated various works related to the sport (Brake, 2013; Curby and Jomand, 2015). Wrestling has been labelled a sport 'rife with gender tensions and contradictions' (Brake, 2013). Despite its quintessentially contact-based nature and strong associations to masculinity, the stability of this masculine identity within the sport is precarious (Halloran, 2008; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009; Brake, 2013). For example, wrestling often draws in boys who may be deemed too short or lightweight to compete competitively in sports traditionally associated with strong connections to masculinity, such as football or basketball (Brake, 2013). The categorisation of wrestlers based on weight mitigates the limitations posed by body types, allowing smaller and lighter boys to actively engage in the sport without being hindered by physical stereotypes (Stevens, 2021). Wrestling, in this context, serves as an inclusive platform that challenges conventional notions of size and stature in athletic pursuits. The surge of women and girls joining the ranks of wrestling has

intensified the existing gender conflicts within the sport. Despite a notable rise in global participation among women and girls in wrestling in recent years, they often find themselves in a challenging position, as they rarely have dedicated teams and are compelled to compete against male counterparts (Curby et al., 2023). Many wrestlers and supporters of wrestling have reacted, however, strongly and negatively to the increasing participation of girls and women in the sport (Brake, 2013).

Table 1 – Participation in Women’s World Wrestling Championships by Country  
(Curby and Jomand, 2015)

Country	1987	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014		
Algeria																			P									
Argentina			M																		P	P	P			P	P	
Armenia																			P	P							P	
Australia				P	P	P		P	P	P	P	P		P	P	P			P	P	P							
Austria					P	C	C	C	M	P	C	P	C		P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P			P		
Azerbaijan								P	P										P	M	C	M	M	P	M	M	M	
Belarus														P	P	P		M	M	P	M	P	M	C	P	M	M	
Belgium	C																											
Brazil												P		P					P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	M	
Bulgaria							M	P	M	P	P	P	P	P	P	P		C	C	C	M	C	C	M	M	M	M	
Cambodia																			P									
Cameroon																				P	P	P	P	P		P	P	
Canada						M	C	P	C	C	C	M	C	C	P	M	M	M	M	M	C	C	C	M	C	M	M	
Central African Republic																								P				
China				C	C	C	P	M	C	C	P	M		C	M	M	C	C	C	M	C	M	C	C	C	C	M	
Colombia																			P	P					P	P	P	
Congo, Dem Republic																					P							
Cuba																						P	P				P	
Czech Republic					M	P	M	P	P	P	P		P	P	P	P				P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Denmark	M		P						P																			
Dominican Republic																						P						
Ecuador																				P			P	P			P	
Egypt																				P	P	P				P	P	
El Salvador													P							P			P				P	
Estonia																								P	P	P	P	
Finland	P											P	P	P					P	P	P						P	
France	C	C	C	C	M	C	M	C	C	C	M	C	P	P	M	P	M	P	C	M	P	M	P	P	P	P	P	
Georgia																				P								
Germany		P	P		P	P	P	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	C	P	M	M	M			P	P	M	P	C		
Great Britain																				P	P	P					P	
Greece		P	M	P	P	P	P	P		P	P	P	P	P	C	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	M	P	P	
Guam																												
Guatemala																				P							P	
Guinea																					P							
Guinea-Bissau																					P	P					P	
Hungary															P	P	M	P	P	P	M	P	M			C	P	
India																				P	P	P	P	P	M	P	P	
Israel																								P	P		P	
Italy					P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	M	P	P	P		M	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Ivory Coast																											P	
Japan	M	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	
Kazakhstan						P	P	P												P	P	M	M	M	M	M	M	P
Korea, People's Republic								M	P											P							M	M
Korea, Republic of				M										P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Kyrgyzstan																											P	
Latvia					P	P		P			P	P															P	
Lithuania																											P	
Luxemburg							P																					
Madagascar																												
Mauritius																												
Mexico														P						P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	
Moldova																											P	
Mongolia															P	P	P	M	P	M	M	M	C	C	M	M	C	
Montenegro																												
Morocco																					P							
Netherlands	M	P	P	P	P																						P	
New Zealand															P												P	
Nicaragua																											P	
Nigeria																												
Norway	C	C	C	M	C	C	C	M	M	M	C	M	P	M	M	P	M	P	P			M	M	P				
Peru																											P	
Philippines																												
Poland																												
Portugal																											P	
Puerto Rico																												
Romania																												
Russian Federation					M	M	M	C	C	P	M	M	M	M	C	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	C		M	M	
Senegal																												
Singapore																												
Slovak Republic																												
South Africa																											P	
Soviet Union				M																								
Spain																											P	
Sweden	P	P	C	P	P	P	M	C	C	M	M	M	M	P	M	P	P	P	M	M			C	M	M	C	M	M
Switzerland		M																										
Taipei		C	M	P	M	M	P	P	M	P																	P	
Tajikistan																												
Thailand																												
Tunisia																											P	
Turkey																											P	
Ukraine					P	P	M	P	P	P	P	P	C	C	C	C	M	M	M	M	M	C	C	P	C	C	C	
United States		M	M	M	C	M	M	M	C	M	C	C	C	M	M	C	C	M	M	C	P	M	M	C	M	C	C	
Uzbekistan																											P	
Venezuela		P	M	C	C	M		M		P		P	P	P	P	P	P	P	M	P	P	P	P	P	M	P	P	
Vietnam																											P	
# Countries-Participants Only	2	5	3	5	11	11	8	13	8	11	11	12	15	18	22	33	31	33	40	28	36	39	49	14	34	32		
# Countries-Win Silver or Bronze	3	2	5	4	4	5	7	6	5	4	5	6	4	5	7	4	9	11	10	9	11	8	7	7	10	12		
# Countries w/a Champion	3	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	7	5	5	3	5	5	5	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	6	4	5		
#Total Countries Participating	8	11	12	13	20	21	19	24	20	20	21	21	24	28	34	40	43	47	54	41	52	52	62	27	48	49		
# of Weight Classes	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	8		

Note. C = country with champion; M = country with silver or bronze; P = participants only.

Since earlier research examined views toward gender-appropriate sports, there has been a dramatic increase in both participation in and media attention to action sports (Hardin and Greer, 2009). Almost all sports are practised by women and girls, including those that represent the pinnacle of hegemonic masculinity which the media is gradually beginning to spotlight (Hardin and Greer, 2009). Wrestling is argued to be classified as one of these sports, due to its physical nature and lack of female representation (Eaton, 2022). Historically, the media has found the negative aspects of wrestling the most 'newsworthy' – reporting on the severity of the sports' violence, only further strengthening the perception that wrestling is a violent sport (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008; Leng et al., 2012). Furthermore, the media often focus on the physical aspects of female wrestlers, rather than their athletic achievements (Leng et al., 2012). Typically, exercise programmes designed for women promote a 'slim, sexy body', rather than a 'muscular, toned body', meaning it is less 'acceptable' for female participation in wrestling, and that press coverage of women in the sport is due to their 'abnormal' body shape (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008; Leng et al., 2012). Previous research indicates that the uniforms used to wrestle are too revealing for women, making it 'inappropriate to have boys and girls wrestle each other' (Agrell, 2008). In Agrell's (2008) study, male coaches had the biggest issue with the revealing nature of women's wrestling uniforms. Joe Sullivan, an early advocate for wrestling in Canada, would say to these coaches, 'I kept telling them, when some girls' ripping your head off, you don't feel particularly sexy in that moment' (Agrell, 2008).

### ***Women Wrestling the Patriarchy: A Darker Side to the Mat***

Patriarchy is a concept developed by feminists following institutionalised systemic sexism, where Western societies power differentials favour men, with women likely to be disadvantaged or subservient; whether this be through political or economic power, or through dominating social discourse (Millett, 1970; Walby, 1990; Hasan et al., 2022). Power differentials relate to social categories, including race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation and religious practices (Penelope, 1994; Wind et al., 2019). Furthermore, physical acts inflicted by men on women to mentally reaffirm their power differentials can take the form of violence and sexual abuse. Documentation of the prevalence of such acts, examination of the laws and institutions of society, has clearly demonstrated that violence against women was socially structured and played a role in upholding differences between women and men (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1981; Sinha et al., 2017). Johan Galtung introduced the concept of structural violence in 1969 to describe a form of violence where social structures or institutions cause harm by preventing individuals from fulfilling their basic needs (Sinha et al., 2017). Structural violence is defined as the preventable impairment of basic human requirements, as opposed to direct physical injury (Galtung, 1969). In Galtung's (1969:171) seminal piece, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Studies', he states 'when one husband beats his wife, there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance, there is structural violence.' This concept can be applied to patriarchal systems that limit women's participation in various sectors, such as politics, education, or sports. In sports such as wrestling, structural violence can manifest through the exclusion of women from decision-making roles, the absence of female coaches, or the perpetuation of cultural norms that discourage women, particularly from minority groups such as Muslim and Sikh women, from participating



(Montesanti and Thurston, 2015). This creates an environment where women are systematically denied opportunities to thrive and succeed, not through overt violence, but through the subtle maintenance of societal structures that favour male dominance.

Similarly to many women's sports, female wrestlers have historically faced and continue to endure significant challenges, often stemming from systemic gender inequality and mistreatment at the hands of men (Oza, 2019; Armstrong, 2023; Sharma, 2024). In the male-dominated world of sports, female athletes frequently encounter situations where they are subjected to exploitation, harassment, or neglect, both on and off the pitch/court/mat. Wrestling, a traditionally male sport, is no exception. Many women wrestlers around the world have reported experiencing discrimination (Agrell, 2008; Brake, 2013) and limited financial and institutional support compared to their male counterparts (The Quint, 2016; Fernández Ibáñez, 2024).

These difficulties are compounded by more severe issues, such as harassment or abuse by male coaches, officials, or peers, which further marginalises women in the sport. Female wrestlers often face pressure to conform to inequitable standards, endure physical and verbal abuse, or remain silent about the injustices they experience in order to preserve their careers. This dynamic is not isolated but rather symptomatic of broader patriarchal structures that persist in sports. A particularly prominent example of this systemic abuse emerged in India, where Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the president of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) and a prominent politician, was accused by multiple young female wrestlers of abusing his position of power (Mishra, 2024; Sharma, 2024). The courts charged Singh for sexual harassment, intimidation and outraging the modesty of women, despite the former WFI president pleading not guilty (Mishra, 2024). Priyanka Rajpoot, the Additional Chief

Metropolitan Magistrate (ACMM) presiding over the case, observed that Singh had exploited his position as the president of the WFI to manipulate the victims, using career-related threats as a form of intimidation (Mishra, 2024). This high-profile case underscores the power imbalances that many female athletes face, where influential men within sports governance exploit their positions to manipulate or abuse athletes, with limited avenues for recourse. The allegations against Singh reflect not only individual wrongdoing but also highlight the institutional failure to protect female wrestlers from such abuses, reinforcing the broader struggles women in sport face in securing safety, dignity, and equality. This case, while specific to India, resonates globally, as it exemplifies how gendered power structures in sports continue to suppress and exploit female athletes, often forcing them to choose between their careers and their personal safety.

Understanding power imbalances is crucial for comprehending the social factors at play in real-life interactions between different groups (Sachdev and Bourhis, 1985). Both Muslim and Sikh communities are diverse, with members hailing from various ethnic and racial backgrounds. The intersection of ethnicity and race with gender can result in different experiences for women in wrestling. Discrimination, stereotypes, and biases related to race and ethnicity can compound the challenges faces by Muslim and Sikh women, reflecting the broader societal power differentials tied to these categories (Brewer et al., 2024). Their male counterparts, for decades, have been encouraged to participate in combat sports. Appearance is essential for the Sikh religion, where the demonstration of physical strength through participation of sports such as wrestling or Kabaddi, or wearing a turban and having a beard, are considered 'complete men' (Garha, 2020).

This reality reflects broader societal issues where women, in many sectors, are forced to navigate systems designed to undermine their efforts, while male-dominated power structures persist. For female wrestlers, breaking into the sport and achieving recognition often requires overcoming not only physical challenges but also institutionalised sexism, bias, and exploitation. The prominence of figures like Geeta and Vinesh Phogat highlights the progress made in advancing women's representation in wrestling, yet it also draws attention to the deep-seated inequalities that still persist. The path to gender equality in wrestling, as in many sports, is ongoing and fraught with obstacles that extend beyond the mat.

### **3.2. Sport Participation**

In the realm of sport participation among British Asian women, the focus has traditionally gravitated towards more established sports like football, cricket, or physical activity generally (Ratna, 2011; Ahmad et al., 2020; Bhatnagar et al., 2021; Sporting Equals, 2022). However, as this literature review embarks on a pioneering exploration of a relatively novel domain, it necessitates drawing upon comparable sporting contexts to unravel the multifaceted landscape of sport involvement among British Asian women. Although the existing literature predominantly addresses sports other than wrestling, it forms a critical foundation for comprehending the intricacies surrounding the participation of British Asian women in wrestling. Firstly, this literature review will cover sport as the powerful tool for fostering integration within diasporic families, then proceed to evaluate the presence of sporting role models, followed by policies designed to increase British Asian women's participation in sport, then concluding with the power digital media has on promoting participation. This synthesis

of prevailing knowledge serves as a crucial backdrop against which the unique experiences, barriers, and facilitators of this British Asian women will be explored and contextualised within this review.

### **3.2.1. Using Sport to Integrate Diasporic Families**

Research suggests that sport is an effective means of maintaining some form of stability for those in Muslim and Sikh sporting communities (Carrington and McDonald, 2001; Mackintosh and Dempsey, 2016). These communities tend to suffer instability stemming from the intricate intersection of political and social challenges attributing to their immigrant status (Mackintosh and Dempsey, 2016). To clarify, the 'immigrant' status may not be suitable for certain individuals as they may be the second or third generation in their family and have always lived in Britain (Mackintosh and Dempsey, 2016). This observation suggests that the dynamics of stability within these communities transcend mere immigrant status and encompass a complex interplay of socio-political factors. Therefore, a nuanced analysis is required to understand the multifaceted implications of sports participation in maintaining stability among members of the Muslim and Sikh communities. Furthermore, the importance of acknowledging the diverse experiences within these communities is underscored, as some individuals may have deep-rooted connections to the host country, challenging conventional conceptions of immigrant status (Kim and Chepyator-Thomson, 2022; Trafford and Hughes, 2022). A study by Kim and Chepyator-Thomson (2022) found that participants in a group of second-generation students experienced the mediation of identity crisis after a governing body provided a space especially intended to build a sense of belonging and personal growth. However, diaspora, referring to 'communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration,

immigration or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion,' can cause numerous kinds of economic, social, and racial hostility towards such diasporic groups, and has been a societal issue for decades (Brazier and Mannur, 2003: 4; Clayton, 2005; Chacko, 2010; Sheth, 2014). This hostility can be displayed within complex inter- and intra-groups, as although individuals may have common interests in terms of the intersections of race, class, and gender, they may also have interests perceived as divergent or disparate from another's, like citizenship, ethnicity, migrant/residency status, or a combination of those<sup>1</sup> (Sheth, 2014). These intricacies become more pronounced based on individuals' self-identification and their personal self-interests. This occurs following a lack of consideration for the external influences that shape them at various moments or how it may affect different groups differently at the same time (Sheth, 2014). For British Muslim and Sikh women, these disparities may take form in a concept that Ratna (2011) coins as degrees of 'Asianness' or lack of Asianness, specifically regarding their roles as women in a critical manner. The concept of Asianness links closely to Robinson's (2000) elucidation of racial capitalism, which homed in on the idea of 'Blackness' as an ontological totality. Ontological totality refers to a manner of working that emerged from the terms following 500 years of Western domination and exploitation, yet additionally eludes these, making its own terms of history (Cheng, 2013; Moten, 2013). In Robinson's (2000) work, ontological totality of Blackness is written as a revolutionary consciousness that has never been destroyed or incorporated by world systems dominated by imperialism and capitalism (Cheng, 2013). Although there are White British Muslims residing in the UK, statistics from 2017 suggest 67% of British Muslims are of Asian or Asian-British ethnicity, primarily descending from the Indian sub-

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a definite list of interests.

continent (Office for National Statistics, 2015). In the 2021 census, 77,000 people identified their ethnic group to be Sikh, however 23,000 people further identified their ethnic group as Sikh within the high-level “Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh” category: representing the subjective and multi-dimensional nature of ethnicity (Office for National Statistics, 2022). As 82% of people in England and Wales are white, and 18% identify as black, Asian, mixed or another ethnic group, British Asian Muslim and Sikhs are considered an ethnic and religious minority in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2022). This marginalised status underscores the importance of ontological totality, as discussed by Robinson (2000). Robinson’s articulation of the resilience of Blackness as an ontological totality has broader implications for understanding the dynamics of racial identity, racial capitalism, and the development of oppositional consciousness (Robinson, 2000; Cheng, 2013; Moten, 2013). The idea of ontological totality suggests that the experiences, identities, and struggles of marginalised groups, such as British Asian Muslim and Sikh women, are interconnected and should not be analysed in isolation. Their experiences are part of a broader narrative of minority identities in the UK and understanding this interconnectedness can provide valuable insights into the complexities of racial identities and the challenges these communities face. While academic research has primarily focused on other ethnic and racial groups, such as Black, Caribbean, east Asian populations, the application of the concept of ontological totality to British Asian Muslims and Sikhs can expand our understanding of their experiences and resilience within the UK’s diverse social landscape (Robinson, 2000; Cheng, 2013; Moten, 2013). This interdisciplinary approach can help to bridge the gap in research and shed light on the multifaceted nature of racial and ethnic identities in the UK.

The sense of 'otherness' experienced by these groups results in social segregation within the broader society, leading to a lack of social support, increased social isolation, and feelings of loneliness (Health and Places Initiative [HAPI], 2014; Alhusban et al., 2019). Scholars have acknowledged that sport can serve as a valuable tool for engaging and integrating minority communities, including Muslim and Sikh British Asians, into society (Agergaard, 2011; Agergaard, 2016; Spaaij, 2015; Mackintosh and Dempsey, 2016). Muslims establish a substantial proportion of the globe's population, as Islam is the second largest religion of the world (Lipka, 2017; Rehman and Hanley, 2023). However, Islamophobia across the Western world has exponentially risen since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, post 9/11, with discrimination and racism amplifying the anti-Islamic rhetoric (Rippy and Newman, 2006; Akbarzadeh, 2016; Rehman and Hanley, 2023). Defined by Kanji (2020), Islamophobia is the 'unfounded or disproportionate fear and/or hatred of Islam or Muslims (or people perceived to be Muslim), leading to violence [such as the murder of Ekram Haque and the 2017 Beckton acid attack], and systemic discrimination.' Many previous studies have identified a shift in the perception of Muslims since the 9/11 attack and war on terror, with discrimination coming from more than just physical and verbal violence (Rippy and Newman, 2006; Rehman and Hanley, 2023). More implicit methods of Islamophobia are shown through numerous racist immigration policies, the forbidding of religious practices and ethnic profiling of Muslims (Naderi, 2018; Rehman and Hanley, 2023). Islamophobia has also infiltrated the education system. Muslim students at school face bullying and harassment from classmates, teachers, and administrators (Hossain, 2017). The implications of Islamophobia on Muslims in the United Kingdom have been incredibly detrimental to their psychological health and social wellbeing (Samari et al., 2018). Many Sikhs have faced discrimination post

9/11, with some having been physically attacked after being mistaken for Muslims (Gupta, 2016). Due to Western perceptions, Islam and Sikhism have been considered racialised religions, with discrimination directed to the elements that are attributed to both (hijabs, veils, turbans) (Dunn et al., 2007). However, Alhusban et al. (2019) argue that more efforts are needed to ensure that ethnically diverse communities feel comfortable breaking away from societal norms, highlighting the significance of physical meeting spaces. Religious institutions, such as mosques or temples, hold symbolic importance for Islamic and Sikh communities, making them valuable assets when designing lifestyle interventions and physical activity programmes (Banerjee et al., 2017; Hamdonah, 2022).

### **3.2.2. The Importance of Representation, Where to See is to Be**

International research on women's wrestling indicates that success and representation make a vital difference when encouraging girls to explore the sport (Agrell, 2008). In Canada, the provincial director of the Ontario Amateur Wrestling Association, Tim MaGarrey, acknowledged that the perception of female wrestlers being 'butch or big and scary,' is the biggest hinderance to women enrolment in wrestling (Agrell, 2008). The argument that wrestling is a 'masculine sport' is historic – due to the sports' perceived violence and aggression (Agrell, 2008; Leng et al., 2012). The increased popularity of professional wrestling has only heightened perceptions that Olympic-style wrestling is a 'mindless and violent' sport, with a pure focus on entertainment and brute strength (Workman, 1977; Atkinson, 2002; Leng et al., 2012). Academics have contended that professional wrestling has damaged the respectability of wrestling as a sport, due to generally being the image that comes to mind when mentioning the sport (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008; Leng et al., 2012).



Typically, sport is sacrificed by girls once they reach adolescence, due to the competitive demands that follow (Drummond et al., 2020; Bevan et al., 2021). A method of maintaining and growing participation rates is the use of role models in the sport. The concept of role models is one that is ambiguous, in terms of definitions in available literature (see MacCallum and Beltman, 2002). Within this study, a role model will be considered as someone an individual would like to imitate or be like; a person perceived as exemplary and worthy (Yancey, 1998; Vescio et al., 2005). Research indicates that the use of role models and elite athletes can inspire adolescent girls to maintain participation (Vescio et al., 2005). Role models have also been said to influence learning (Cordes, 2009), socialisation (Moschis and Churchill Gilbert, 1978) and the behaviour of consumers (Latif et al., 2011; Mutter and Pawlowski, 2014). For example, the film 'Bend it like Beckham' stars Jesminder, a young Sikh girl who was inspired by David Beckham to become a football player; despite her not fitting the somatic norm of the sport (Puwar, 2004; Vescio et al., 2005; Ratna, 2011). Almost twenty years following the release of the film, The FA developed an Asian Inclusion Strategy to enhance participation in football from Asian ethnicities (The FA, 2021). Yet, although Asian girls were inspired to play football due to the popularity of the film, women's football was not a professional sport and football teams were incredibly hard to come by (Hall, 2022). This lack of accessibility, not due to a lack of inspiration, resulted in a slow progression for the women's game, and that role models for British Asian women within sport are considerably lacking, in comparison to White and Black women (Hall, 2022).

While professional representation in sports is undoubtedly influential in inspiring women to engage in physical activity, a potentially successful solution to boosting participation rates may lie in looking closer to home (Stronach et al., 2023; Mann and Hacker, 2024). This perspective suggests that local and community-level initiatives, personal role models, and grassroots efforts can play a significant role in encouraging women to participate in physical activities. By emphasising the impact of relatable and accessible sources of inspiration within one's immediate environment, the notion proposes that cultivating support and representation at a community level can be just as impactful, if not more so, in promoting women's involvement in sports and physical pursuits (Spaaij et al., 2020).

### **3.3. Sport Development**

'Sport development' as a term carries great subjectivity to practitioners across the world. Mackintosh (2021:4), however, defines sport development as the 'provision, delivery and planning of policy and practice of community sport'; its goal to create an environment of which people are encouraged to participate in sport and physical activities, regardless of age, gender, or ability. The establishment of sports clubs and facilities, the delivery of training and coaching programmes, and the development of strategies/policies that promote sports participation are all examples of the application of sport development (HM Government, 2015). This study is inherently rooted in sport development, with a specific emphasis on sport-for-development. The overarching aim of the project is to conduct a critical examination of the factors influencing wrestling participation rates for Muslim and Sikh females in England. The particular focus lies in utilising wrestling as a strategic tool to enhance activity levels within this specific demographic. Given the broad-ranging benefits that sport offers to individuals, this

review will delve into key concepts within sport development. It will critically reflect on initiatives and policies that have been formulated with the goal of enhancing sporting participation among women and girls from British Asian, Muslim, and Sikh backgrounds.

### **3.3.1. Sport-for-Development**

Sport-for-development has been argued to be a relatively new concept within sporting academia, reaching its 'formative stage' in 2009, with Woodcock et al. (2012: 370) stating there is an 'evidence gap' (Kay, 2009: 1177). The proliferation of sport-for-development programmes in the Global South over the last two decades has risen drastically, with UNICEF (2019: 7) defining the concept as 'the use of sport, or any form of physical activity, to provide both children and adults with the opportunity to achieve their full potential through initiatives that promote personal and social development'. In 2013, fewer than 500 organisations were registered on the International Platform on Sport and Development: at the time of writing in 2023, there are over 1000 organisations (Kwauk, 2014; Kwauk, 2022; International Platform on Sport and Development, 2023). Kwauk (2022) distinguishes two basic 'assumptions' that form the basis of sport-for-development: 1) the belief that sports are an effective means of imparting life skills that are necessary for young people to participate in social, economic, and political settings; and 2) the view that the abilities developed in sports can be easily transferred to non-sport environments like the workplace, home, or school. Within an ideological and policy level, sport-for-development possesses characteristics of which indicates an emerging, if still disparate, new 'movement' (Darnell, 2007; Kidd, 2008; Giulianotti, 2011; Coalter, 2013). Despite this, Coalter (2013) argued that at the implementation and practice level, claims of this being a

novel approach can be contested. For decades, sport has been deemed useful for 'character-building'; not only capable of developing certain personal and social skills, but also moral personality traits such as discipline, honesty, integrity, generosity, and trustworthiness (Kleiber and Roberts, 1981; President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport, 2006; Coalter, 2013; Ghildiyal, 2015). Furthermore, the government has consistently promoted the use of sport to schools and youth centres as a method of contributing to the cohesion of groups (Kao, 2019), reducing levels of antisocial behaviour (Nichols, 2007; Jugl et al., 2023), and to improve individuals' personal development to allow for a more successful application of job opportunities, for example (Chappelet, 2008; Holt et al., 2020). In the discourse of sport-for-development, assertions about the nature and impact of sport draw heavily from well-established traditional claims regarding the role and significance of sports (Coalter, 2013).

The ambiguity of the terms 'sport' and 'development' is advantageous politically and ideologically, permitting therefore to several interpretations and becoming the answer to the problems faced by a variety of funders (Coalter, 2013). With this, however, comes mythopoetic concepts, based off the ambiguity and lack of concern with robust evidence from many sport-for-development proponents (Coalter, 2007; Coalter, 2013). Mythopoeic concepts are those whose differentiation criteria are not specific but based on popular and idealistic ideas that are produced largely outside sociological analysis and which 'isolate a particular relationship between variables to the exclusion of others and without a sound basis' (Glasner, 1977: 2-3; Coalter, 2013). These myths may contain an element of truth, as certain sports programmes inevitably yield positive outcomes (Coalter, 2013). However, the challenge arises when these elements

become reified, meaning they are treated as concrete and objective representations rather than accurate reflections of reality. In this context, these myths come to 'represent' supposed impacts and processes without thorough examination or validation (Coalter, 2013). This distinction is crucial in the realm of sport development, especially when addressing the nuanced and specific considerations surrounding the participation of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling, highlighting the need for a critical and nuanced understanding of the actual impacts and dynamics within this sporting context.

Sport-for-development initiatives and organisations have focused on promoting girls' empowerment and advancing gender equality since the emergence of sport-for-development emerged as a social movement during the United Nations Millennium Development Goals era (Kidd, 2008; Kwauk, 2022). Signed in September 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration established eight Millennium Development Goals. In this landmark commitment, world leaders pledged to address challenges such as poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environment degradation, and committing to combatting poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women (World Health Organisation, 2018). The Goals were addressed in 2015, to monitor progress from those of the 1990s (World Health Organisation, 2018). Previous research failed to take into account the dual nature of focusing on girl's empowerment (Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011). Scholars also failed to recognise how such a focus could both foster a transformative approach aimed at challenging detrimental gender stereotypes and power dynamics, while also being deeply entrenched in the dominant logics of neoliberalism (Chawansky and Hayhurst, 2015).

### **3.3.2. Policies and Organisations Attempting to Increase Sport Participation**

To ensure the needs and interests of the community are being met by sporting organisations, sport development officers (SDOs) are employed. SDOs are crucial for promoting sport participation within their communities, through building partnerships with other organisations, planning sporting programmes, and evaluating the effectiveness of these programmes (Houlihan and White, 2002; Houlihan, 2014; Thompson et al., 2021).

This section will focus specifically on outlining the current policies and strategies designed by leading organisations in England, and the direct impact it has on Muslim and Sikh women and girls.

In the United Kingdom, a government agency, UK Sport, is responsible for funding Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes, investing around £100 million each year in high performance sport. UK Sport is directly sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; a department of the UK's government, responsible for culture and sport in England (UK Sport, no date). In England, community and school sport is supervised by Sport England, an organisation responsible for the development of grassroots sports and increasing levels of physical activity across the country (Sport England, no date). All three aforementioned organisations have produced strategic plans to fit their long-term sporting objectives. Sport England, focusing on community sport and the foundation/participation stages of the sports development continuum, released their ten-year strategy in 2021, titled 'Uniting the Movement' (Sport England, 2021b). The implementation of academic recommendations in the field of sport for

development has been evident through these various sporting policies and initiatives. Such efforts have been designed in order to promote inclusion, diversity, and unbiased opportunities within sport. A demonstrative example is Sport England's 'Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan,' introduced in 2021 and set to be in effect until 2024. This plan branches from Sport England's national initiative 'Uniting the Movement,' and emphasises the commitment to address societal disparities by highlighting the transformative potential of sports (Sport England, 2021a, 2021b).

Breaking Boundaries was a programme run by Sporting Equals between 2018-2022, funded by the Spirit of 2012, with the aim to connect young people, their families, and the community together, through regularly engaging in cricket, be it playing, spectating, or volunteering (Sporting Equals, 2022). The project operates in five diverse locations across the United Kingdom, specifically Bradford, Birmingham, Barking and Dagenham, Manchester, and Slough. Breaking Boundaries has identified social cohesion and personal wellbeing enhancements, as well as the endeavour to challenge and transform restrictive perceptions, as central objectives for their project (Sporting Equals, 2022). These objectives align with the aims pursued by the present undertaking, so implementing Breaking Boundaries' findings and recommendations will make for a more specialised study. Specifically, Breaking Boundaries highlighted staff retention for their programme as a challenge, naming prompt recruitment and working directly with all partners on shared aims and agendas as recommendation for future projects (Wavehill, 2022). Furthermore, spending more time engaging with the local community in Birmingham was also a weakness flagged up in Breaking Boundaries' report, as 'some community groups remain suspicious of larger organisations approaching them' (Wavehill, 2022).

### **3.4. Intersectionality**

Around 50% of the British South Asian population is born in the United Kingdom, and this percentage is on the rise as the second-generation are also having children (Bhatnagar et al., 2021). For the last six years, British Asian women have had the lowest participation rates in the country (Department of Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2022). This primarily arises from the intricacies of their multifaceted identities and how these identities intersect with their engagement in sport. The complex individualities of British Asian women encompass a diverse array of cultural, ethnic and gender dynamics, and these women often navigate between the expectations and values of their British, Asian, and female identities, creating a unique set of challenges when it comes to sport participation. Although many sporting organisations and government policies have attempted to address this issue, as discussed in section 3.3.2., the sporting participation of British Asian Muslim and Sikh women remains extremely low.

Pioneering civil rights scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991; 1994) introduced the concept of intersectionality in her seminal works. This powerful framework serves as a lens through which we can illuminate the intricate and interwoven nature of social identities and systems of oppression. Intersectionality highlights the interconnectedness of various aspects such as race, gender, class, and other social categories, recognising that individuals experience a unique combination of these factors that shape their experiences and vulnerabilities in society (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw's framework encourages a more comprehensive understanding of complex intersections that influence individuals' lives, providing a nuanced perspective essential for addressing



inequality and promoting social justice (Coaston, 2019). Amidst a significant period of social transformation in the twentieth century, the concept of intersectionality emerged. This emergence coincided with pivotal events such as the rise of the global women's movement, civil rights movements in multicultural democracies, the conclusion of the Cold War, and the defeat of apartheid in South Africa (Collins, 2019). These events marked the end of enduring forms of domination (Collins, 2019). Despite the acknowledgment that social inequalities wouldn't dissipate instantaneously, a new perspective emerged, emphasising the potential for utilising social disparities as a catalyst for social change (Collins, 2019). The foundational principles of intersectionality, recognising the interconnectedness of individuals and societal issues, became integral to this recognised form of critical inquiry (Collins, 2019). Utilising the concept of intersectionality to examine the experiences of Muslim and Sikh women enables a comprehensive exploration of the myriad identities within this demographic; where insight is provided into how Western institutions, including media, sporting bodies, and academia, contribute to the marginalisation of their identities (Hamdonah, 2022). Moreover, Tariq and Syed (2017) conducted a qualitative research study focused on Muslim women with South Asian heritage. In this study, the researchers applied an intersectional framework and discovered that while these women encounter a myriad of challenges, they navigate these issues by employing both individual strategies and leveraging support from local networks. This research underscores the significance of considering intersectionality in understanding and addressing the complexities faced by Muslim women of South Asian descent. A crucial research question for this project is to understand the extent of which community support systems, including family, religious institutions, and peer networks, serve as facilitators for Muslim and Sikh women in sustaining involvement in wrestling.

Essentially, the aim of this research question is to discern whether this realm could be leveraged by Sport England, British Wrestling, and other sport organisations to promote and encourage the participation of Muslim and Sikh women.

#### **3.4.1. A Multifaceted Identity: 'The Personal is Political'**

The phrase 'the personal is political' was first devised during the early stages of the women's liberation movement in the United States, in the late 1960s (Hanisch, 1971; Freeman, 1975; Moane, 2011). The expression developed out of the realisation that experiences thought to be purely personal, were instead shaped by society's social and political influences (Moane, 2011). These once considered 'personal' experiences include sexuality, emotions, and relationships. What appeared to be a personal problem, instead has a social cause and a political solution; therefore, social structures and attitudes have moulded women from birth, limiting their opportunities (Freeman, 1975). Following the social structures engrained into their minds as youth, women develop prejudices against themselves and other women (Freeman, 1975). Through consciously conversing about their experiences, women extended the insight that their own, personal experiences was shared by other women (Moane, 2011). This, essentially, is an identification of oppression deeply rooted to society's conditioning; important, as women acknowledge the cruciality of building self-esteem, fostering solidarity with each other, and recognising that political and social change is 'essential for personal change' (Moane, 2011: 4). In the early history of Islam, Mohammed denounced female infanticide and proclaimed that men and women were equal in all essential rights and duties (Benn et al., 2010; Benstead, 2017).

Research has long demonstrated that gender and gender-role differences are socially constructed, not biologically determined, as many believe (Bandura, 1986; Messner, 2002; Hardin and Greer, 2009). Although the argument that gender is a social construct is ever-present, concepts linking to sex roles have been criticised for being too general. Generalisations stem when assuming that sex roles are operated similarly across different societal groups and fails to link the concept with 'broader economic and cultural forces' (Moane, 2011). Crenshaw (1994), a 'pioneer in the theory of intersectionality', identified the intersectional spaces to which ethnically diverse women occupy as a reason why they become vulnerable to gendered violence (Hamdonah, 2022). This ultimately means that individual experiences of systemic disempowerment can drive racialised women away from certain spaces (Crenshaw, 1994; Hamdonah, 2022). In her seminal intersectionality study, Crenshaw (1994) pursued to understand the fundamental and contextual sets of power that subjugate racialised women through the exploration and navigation of their occupied spaces. Muslim women in particular are oppressed by their gender, religious practices, ethnicity and class. However, this is not too dissimilar from ethnically diverse women in general (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Chacko, 2010; Hamdonah, 2022). Muslims and Sikhs should not be considered homogenous, due to the intersectionality of identity and geopolitical contextual differences (Hamdonah, 2022). The relationship between gender and religion is imperious when understanding the experiences of Muslim and Sikh women (Hamdonah, 2022). When discussing intersectionality amongst this group in this section, the emphasis will be on gender, religion, and sport participation.

The practice of culture and societal norms configure the identity of ethnically diverse women, which in turn, shapes their sporting identities, and relationship with sport (Agergaard, 2016; Hamdonah, 2022). Arguably a factor as to why participation is lowest for British Asian women, and has been for six consecutive years, is due to the blurred line that separates cultural practices from religious practices (Walseth and Strandbu, 2014; Agergaard, 2016; Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2022; Hamdonah, 2022; Sport England, 2022). Furthermore, most adolescent girls drop out of sport at around 14-15 years-old, for fear of being labelled 'manly' or a 'lesbian' (Bevan et al., 2021). Sport rationales historical ideological about racialised and gendered bodies, traditionally listing what women can and cannot do, and what they are able to achieve (Ratna, 2017).

### **3.4.2. Male Faces, White Spaces**

#### ***Male Faces***

Wrestling has long been dominated by male athletes, coaches, and administrators, creating an environment where male figures are the most visible and influential (Cecchine and Mireles-Rios, 2020; Fasczewski et al., 2022). This dominance has not only established certain cultural norms within the sport but has also contributed to the perception of wrestling as an inherently masculine activity (Cecchine and Mireles-Rios, 2020). These norms can pose significant barriers for women, especially those from conservative communities such as Muslim and Sikh backgrounds, where cultural expectations around modesty, physical contact, and gender roles may be more pronounced (Guba and Lincoln, 1990; Dieronitou, 2014). In the context of wrestling, the visibility of male role models and leaders has shaped expectations around who can excel in the sport, leading to a lack of female representation at various levels -

from grassroots participation to professional arenas (Agrell, 2008). For Muslim and Sikh women, entering a space so strongly associated with male dominance can be intimidating, as they may not see their cultural or gender identities reflected in leadership or peer groups (Ratna, 2024). Additionally, the predominance of male coaches and the lack of female mentorship can further discourage women from pursuing wrestling (El-Ghazaly, 2020). Addressing this imbalance requires a conscious effort to challenge the male-centric structures within wrestling, promoting greater inclusivity and representation. This can involve recruiting and supporting more female coaches, creating safe and welcoming environments for women, and actively engaging with communities to dispel the notion that wrestling is only for men. Encouraging the participation of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling will require not only breaking down these structural barriers but also addressing the cultural and religious considerations that affect their involvement in the sport.

Women wrestlers, due to the sport being categorised as 'masculine', are labelled as tomboys through societal reaction (Leng et al., 2012). Furthermore, and in India, wrestling has been highlighted as an 'inappropriate' sport for women to participate in, with girls participating in sport being referred to as 'boys' (Singh and Singh, 2022). This not only reflects the deeply ingrained gender biases but also highlights the urgent need for challenging and dismantling such prejudiced notions in women's sports. Although academics continue to stress this, and national sporting governing bodies continue to develop strategies and initiatives to create equal opportunities, focusing on addressing outdated and detrimental gendered stereotypes and norms is crucial to support social and cultural change in sport (Stewart et al., 2021). Centred on challenging traditional notions of masculinities, gender-transformative programmes

and interventions strive to cultivate attitudes and behaviours that promote gender equity (Gupta, 2000; Barker et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2021).

In attempts to tackle issues such as social justice, gender equality and intergroup hostility, the discipline of social marketing has been developed. This process aims to influence behaviours for social good and is particularly effective in reaching a significant amount of people through apposite messages and value propositions; ultimately resulting in long-lasting behavioural shifts, purging prejudices, and amassing social inclusion (Corrigan, 2011; Campbell and Brauer, 2020; El Maohub et al., 2023). The newly devised method has been praised by some academics, portraying a new way to 'advance diversity, equity, and inclusion through the promotion of inclusivity and reduction of discriminatory behaviour' (Brauer et al., 2021:1).

### ***White Spaces***

Racism and sexism create an "Othered" experience for women of colour (WoC) in sport (Carter-Francique and Olushola, 2016). Since WoC are held to greater standards than their White and male counterparts and because their work ethic and accomplishments are not valued, the term "Othered" carries significant value (Collins, 2000; Carter-Francique and Olushola, 2016). Sport has been recognised as an 'important site of cultural and institutional racism' (Millward, 2008; Cleland, 2014; Mackintosh and Dempsey, 2016).

Research indicates that serious health problems can arise through lack of physical activity (Sallis and Owen, 1998; Bhatnagar et al., 2015). South Asians residing in the

United Kingdom suffer from higher rates of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases; these groups, more specifically women within these groups, are also known to perform less physical activity than the White British population (Gholap et al., 2011; William et al., 2011; Bhatnagar et al., 2015). South Asian women are more likely to be inactive (36.4%) in comparison to Asian men (28.2%) (Sport England, 2018).

Discrimination is a multifaceted social issue that involves many actors, alongside political and social influences (Churchman, 1967; Yassim, 2019; El Maohub et al., 2023). Thus, discrimination is considered a 'wicked' social issue (Duffy et al., 2017; El Maohub et al., 2023). A wicked problem is defined as 'complex social issues that involve networks of actors and entities that reflect commonly held beliefs or norms that result in ineffective, inefficient, unequitable, or unfair social marketing systems' (Duffy et al., 2017). Furthermore, wicked problems are 'dynamic, resilient against intervention, influenced by the associated strategic action field' and 'driven by social mechanisms' (Duffy et al., 2017). These issues come with consequences, 'singularly or simultaneously at the micro, meso, or macro level of the system' (Duffy et al., 2017).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter provides context to why the qualitative research approach was implemented into this study. Embedded within this rationale is the researcher's epistemological and ontological standpoint, which will be expanded upon. Additionally, the structure of the research is delineated, providing clarity on the advantages and challenges inherent in the selected data collection methods and the research process overall. The chapter also articulates the encountered challenges within the project and elucidates how the study has evolved over the course of its duration. Reflections from the researcher will be implemented to build upon this, narrowing into how the research process flowed over the period of study. The preceding chapter outlined an overview of relevant academic literature directly related to the study's aim of understanding in the context of the fieldwork stages.

### **4.2. Qualitative Research Design**

Research is an embodied activity that engages an entire physical being, together with all its inevitable identities (Crang and Cook, 2007). The concept of qualitative research can be likened to a tapestry, where diverse threads of experiences and perspectives are intricately woven together to create a comprehensive understanding of the subjects under study. Defining qualitative research historically has proven challenging, due to the many differentiating features the method possesses. Bryman (2008: 366) defines qualitative research as 'a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data', whereas Sandelowski's (2004: 893) definition is as follows: 'Qualitative research is an umbrella term for an array of attitudes towards and strategies for conducting inquiry that are



aimed at discovering how human beings understand, experience, interpret, and produce the social world.' All aforementioned definitions provide accurate accounts of the features of qualitative research, however, are distinctly different, making it difficult to briefly summarise the method (Hammersley, 2013). Given this consideration, the study chose to follow a qualitative methodology, with a qualitative research design that aligned with the study's research questions, supported by the recommendations of Blaikie (2010). Qualitative research was employed due to recognising its capacity to investigate the nuanced details of phenomena that may prove challenging to capture through quantitative methods (Strauss and Corbin, 2008; Kehoe, 2020). Furthermore, through the embrace of a qualitative research design, this project was better positioned to capture and delve into the intricate dynamics experienced by Muslim and Sikh women in British society.

While Blaikie (2010) contends that qualitative research embodies a holistic process rather than a series of isolated choices regarding methods of data collection, interpretation, and representation, Morse and Chung (2003) present an opposing perspective. They argue that qualitative methods, despite aiming for holistic understanding, are inherently non-holistic. According to Morse and Chung (2003), these methods carry assumptions and perspectives that subtly partition reality, introducing biases that may inadvertently exclude certain aspects as focus intensifies during the course of the inquiry. This line of argument suggests that, even though qualitative inquiry may commence with a holistic intent, it gradually narrows its focus as it progresses, becoming more targeted on the specific phenomena of interest (Morse and Chung, 2003). Considering this perspective and recognising the researcher's identity as a White, Western, agnostic woman, reflexive practice and

positionality became imperative to understand to minimise bias and potential misunderstandings within the results section. This is expanded in section 4.8.

In crafting the qualitative research component of the project, Tracy's (2010) eight 'Big-Tent' criteria served as a guiding framework. These criteria were instrumental in shaping a cohesive and comprehensive approach to the methods section of the thesis. Tracy's framework provides a structured and inclusive foundation, ensuring that the qualitative research design aligns with rigorous standards and captures the multifaceted nature of the study's objectives. The application of Tracy's (2010) framework proved invaluable in facilitating the complex process of qualitative research, particularly for a novice researcher. The structured criteria, complete with easy-to-follow rules and guidelines, served as a navigational tool, ensuring that the project remained on a well-defined track. Tracy's framework provided clarity and support, aiding the novice researcher in maintaining methodological rigor and coherence throughout the qualitative research process.

The application of Tracy's (2010) framework involved adherence to eight essential criteria meticulously woven throughout the methods section of the project. These criteria can be elucidated as follows:

- a) Worthy Topic: Ensuring the topic chosen was not only relevant but holds significance within the broader scholarly and societal landscape. This involves selecting a subject matter that warrants investigation and contributes meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge. The uniqueness of this project lies in its novel content, as it not only directs attention to an underrepresented

demographic but also sheds light on a sport that has received limited sociological exploration within British academia. By centring on a marginalised group and an underexplored sporting context, the project breaks new ground in sociological research, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of both the experiences of the studied demographic and the dynamics within the chosen sport. This novel approach enhances the project's significance, paving the way for fresh insights and potential avenues for future research in the intersection of sociology, sports, and underrepresented communities.

- b) Rich Rigor: The project's success hinged on the careful selection and application of theoretical frameworks that align with its aims and research questions, as well as the acquisition of ample data to address those inquiries. Robust research methods are needed for success with this criterion, in order to capture the intricacies of the topic. On reflection, a more extensive investment of time in the field, particularly in the collection of data from local wrestling clubs, would have significantly enhanced the study's data rigor.
  
- c) Sincerity: The study had to reflect authenticity and earnestness in the heart of the research process. This emphasis on sincerity was especially critical given the nature of conveying the stories and experiences of an underrepresented and historically marginalised group. The researcher's genuine commitment to comprehending and exploring the topic proved to be vital in fostering sincerity within the project. This approach aimed not only to produce credible and respectful research but also to honour the narratives and experiences of the individuals within the studied group, ensuring their voices were authentically

represented in the research findings. Additionally, acknowledging the researcher's positionality within the project exemplifies a clear and authentic approach to how the study was to be presented. This recognition of the researcher's own standpoint, biases, and potential influences on the research process adds transparency and authenticity to the study, stressing a commitment to integrity and a nuanced understanding of the project's context.

d) **Credibility:** The credibility of this study was derived from the responses of interviewees and the application of 'thick description' (Tracy, 2010). Thick description involves providing a detailed account that illustrates culturally situated meanings (Geertz, 1973), incorporating abundant concrete detail (Bochner, 2000). This approach accounts for the complex specificity and circumstantiality of the data, ensuring a rich and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences (Geertz, 1973). This commitment to thick description is manifested in the results section, where interview transcriptions are compared with each other, referenced against academic literature, and conceptually framed within theoretical frameworks. This rigorous analytical process enhances the study's credibility by triangulating data from multiple sources and perspectives. As a final step in ensuring transparency and participant involvement, all interviewees were given a transcript of their respective interviews. This provided them with an opportunity to review the content and express any preferences regarding information exclusion or areas requiring further clarification in the project. This practice not only upholds ethical standards but also empowers participants by giving them agency in shaping how their narratives are represented.

- e) Resonance: The significance of resonance lay in the study's commitment to capturing and authentically representing the intricate and personal narratives of the participants. By delving into the lived experiences of individuals engaged in wrestling, the study sought to establish a profound connection with the subject matter, ensuring that the research outcomes resonated with the genuine stories and perspectives of those involved. This emphasis on resonance enriched the study's qualitative depth and contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted aspects of wrestling participation for the researched demographic.
  
- f) Significant Contribution: As previously highlighted, this study is contributing to a limited body of research within this specific space. While existing literature delves into the intersectionality of British Asian women and explores the barriers and facilitators they encounter in sports, there is a notable gap in British academia when it comes to specifically examining the barriers and facilitators faced by British Asian Muslim and Sikh women in their decision to participate in wrestling. This research addresses this void by providing a focused exploration of the unique challenges and support systems encountered by this particular demographic in the context of wrestling participation, thereby expanding the understanding of the intersectionality within lesser participated in sports.
  
- g) Ethics: This study underwent a thorough ethical review process before any data collection commenced. Following the approval from Manchester Metropolitan

University's ethical board, strict adherence to the established ethical guidelines became imperative. A pivotal aspect of this commitment was twofold: safeguarding the rights and well-being of participants and conducting the research with unwavering integrity. This ethical framework served as a guiding compass throughout the study, ensuring that ethical considerations were prioritised at every stage and that the research was conducted with the utmost respect, transparency, and diligence.

- h) **Meaningful Coherence:** The trajectory of this study was firmly guided by its predefined aims and research questions, established in the project's initial phases. Consequently, all components contributing to this study were carefully aligned with and relevant to these overarching objectives. The research aim and questions were formulated with a deliberate focus on their potential meaningful impact. By steadfastly adhering to the influence of these aims and questions, the project maintained a meaningful coherence throughout. This intentional alignment ensured that each facet of the study played a significant role in contributing to the overarching objectives, fostering a cohesive and purposeful narrative.

Tracy's (2010) 'Big-Tent' framework, incorporating these eight criteria, served as the cornerstone for the qualitative research methodology employed in this project. By embracing this comprehensive framework, the study established a robust foundation that ensured methodological rigor, ethical conduct, and the generation of meaningful insights in the exploration of barriers and facilitators in wrestling participation for Muslim and Sikh women.

### **4.3. Research Paradigms and Approach**

Hammersley (2011) introduces the term 'methodology-as-philosophy', where research design decisions are considered paradigmatic. This implies that researchers often take for granted the influence of the research project's underlying theory on various aspects of the research process (Hammersley, 2011; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). The research paradigm significantly shapes every facet of the research study, from selecting the project's design and methods, to deliberating on validity criteria, negotiating ethical considerations, and presenting the results (Wolgemuth et al., 2015). Many graduate-level students are encouraged to epistemologically both about their personal 'ways of knowing' and the epistemological orientations of their research, due to the paradigm-driven approach to qualitative research being reflected in the curriculum (Paul and Marfo, 2001; Wolgemuth et al., 2015).

The epistemological and ontological positions within social research methods have been argued for many years (Atkinson, 2012). Epistemology refers to the belief in how knowledge is obtained and justified, while ontology addresses the worldview concerning the nature of existence, truth, and reality (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018; Urcia, 2021). This research study aligns with the perspective of social constructionism, reflecting a theoretical framework that emphasises the active role individuals play in shaping their social realities. The approach assumes that reality is not fixed or objective but is shaped by cultural, social, and institutional contexts (Kang et al., 2017). In this study, the focus is on understanding the nature of the social realities that shape the participation (or lack thereof) of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. This approach gives the opportunity to challenge the social constructs that

prove as barriers to these women, rather than critique their innate characteristics. In this research the ontological positions that would rationalise the research design included:

- Experiences with wrestling will differ between individuals, so multiple perspectives are crucial to the research.
- Barriers and social norms can evolve, suggesting that the exclusion of Muslim and Sikh women from wrestling is not a permanent condition but one shaped by historical, cultural, and social forces.
- The world of wrestling participation in Britain goes beyond the researcher's personal knowledge and experiences.
- Muslim and Sikh women may choose to avoid this study based on the researcher's positionality as a white woman with an anglicised name.

A pragmatic and subjective perspective allows the researcher to move beyond their preconceived ideas about the nature of reality and suitable research methods, fostering an understanding that individuals respond differently (Urcia, 2021). From an ontological perspective, this project acknowledges that the concept of 'value' is shaped by the diverse perspectives and realities of Muslim and Sikh women, coaches, and other stakeholders involved in wrestling. By recognising the multiple realities that each participant brings to the table, this approach allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural, religious, and personal experiences influence their engagement with the sport (Vogl et al., 2019). Furthermore, this position accepts that these realities are not static and may evolve as individuals become more involved in wrestling, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of social constructs such as gender roles, cultural expectations, and participation in sports (Guba and Lincoln, 1990; Dieronitou, 2014).



In accordance with the views of Denscombe (2003), the researcher adopts a view that diverges from the notion of individuals merely fitting into predetermined social structures. Instead, it embraces the idea that individuals are active architects of the social order within which they operate. This perspective contends that knowledge is not an entity waiting to be discovered but, rather, is actively constructed by individuals within their social contexts (Kehoe, 2022). Social constructionism, as the guiding epistemology of this study, posits that individuals co-construct meanings, interpretations, and understandings of the world through their social interactions and engagements (Subramaniam, 2010; Hammersley, 2013). This theoretical perspective rejects the notion of an objective reality that exists independently of human perception and contends that knowledge is contingent upon the dynamic interplay of social actors within specific cultural, historical, and contextual frameworks (Hammersley, 2013). Social constructionism focuses on the ways in which cultural categories, such as 'women', 'men', 'black' and 'white', are concepts in which have been created, changed, and reproduced over time within social institutions and cultural frameworks (Kang et al., 2017). This perspective emphasises the meaning attributed to these categories is contingent upon diverse perspectives and is intricately tied to the act of defining and categorising groups of people, experiences, and realities within specific cultural contexts (Kang et al., 2017). Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory is grounded in a constructivist lens that provides for the degree of influence the interaction between an individual and their environment(s) has across time and space. Very little research on sport participation and sporting environments has been carried out in through the Structuration Theory lens, despite the presence of sport research framed in constructivist paradigm; common in investigations designed around exploring or interpreting the meaning ascribed to sport experiences (Flaherty and Sagas, 2021).

#### **4.4. Participants**

This study interviewed two senior BWA staff, three BWA coaches and one parent of young female participants. The criteria for eligible individuals were a) second-generation British Asian women aged 13 or over, b) women involved in wrestling sessions (coach, participant, parent or official), c) member of BWA staff. For the purpose of this study, a second-generation British Asian was defined those of South Asian heritage born in the UK or had moved to the UK before the age of 11, where secondary schooling begins. This criterion has previously been used by researchers exploring generational differences in British South Asians (Smith et al., 2011; Bhatnagar et al., 2023). Coaches were classified as eligible so long as they possessed a level one wrestling qualification or higher. All participants had worked the target population group in varying capacities. For example, some participants ran sessions purely for women, others had worked with them in less-specified sessions. Despite the project's broad criteria, many suitable potential participants were hesitant to engage. This is further explored in the Limitations section. Ultimately, the project had to make a slight shift in focus, concentrating on coaches' perspectives regarding the barriers and facilitators that Muslim and Sikh women encounter in wrestling. Table 2 shows the anonymised name, gender, and religion of interviewed participants. All interviewed participants were over the age of 18. Due to BWA being the gatekeeper to the project's participant sample pool, purposive sampling via a criterion was used. This method is

widely used in qualitative research, in which participants are deliberately selected based on a specific criterion relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2014; Gray, 2018). Prior to starting the data collection process, meetings between the research team and BWA were carried out to identify which BWA affiliated clubs/sessions will be the subjects of this project. Out of 54 British Wrestling affiliated clubs, four were highlighted as suitable for the study. Three clubs were based in the Midlands (two in Coventry, one in Birmingham) and one based in Salford, at the British Wrestling headquarters.

Following ethical approval from the University board, the process of participant recruitment began. Initial meetings with BWA staff and the research team were had to establish the most suitable participants to approach. Subsequently, emails were sent to a number of eligible participants who were presented with an information sheet outlining the project's aims, methods, ethical arrangements, and the extent of participant involvement. Should participants express continued interest in the study, a consent was sent either directly to them or to a guardian, contingent upon whether the participant was above the age of 18.

*Table 2 – Table of Participants*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Method of Data Collection</b>
Staff 1	Male	None specified	35-45	Interview
Staff 2	Female	Muslim	35-45	Interview/Observation
Coach 1	Male	Sikh	55-64	Interview

Coach 2	Male	Sikh	45-54	Interview
Coach 3	Female	None specified	25-34	Interview
Parent 1	Female	Muslim	35-45	Observation/Short interview

#### **4.5. Data Collection**

The data collection process for this study was designed to gather comprehensive insights into the experiences of coaches and staff involved in BWA, specifically in relation to the inclusion of Muslim and Sikh women. A qualitative approach was adopted to allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection, as they offer the flexibility to explore predetermined themes while allowing participants the freedom to express their views and experiences in detail. The researcher also attended one event during the data collection process and utilised field notes to conduct participant observation. However, this served as a secondary method of data collection. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and extract key themes and discussion points for the findings section. This section also addresses the limitations encountered during data collection, outlining the challenges faced throughout the process.

##### **4.5.1. Interviews**

This project used semi-structured interviews as the chosen method of data collection, aiming to precisely capture the responses of the interviewees while facilitating an in-depth exploration of their roles and beliefs. Due to time restraints, Microsoft Teams

interviews were scheduled with participants. The semi-structured format provided flexibility in the sequencing of questions, affording participants the opportunity to express themselves more freely and the researcher to ask follow-up questions, ensuring a richer range of responses. The semi-structured interview method was deemed appropriate for this project because the principal researcher was academically familiar with the topic under study, meaning pre-determined questions were well-suited to the project and the anticipated answers would aim to achieve the research questions (Ahlin, 2019). Additionally, recognising the researcher's novice status, the adoption of semi-structured interviews was advised. Opting for an unstructured interview technique was deemed potentially risky, as in accordance with the views of Robson (2002), recognising that the lack of structure in this approach may lead to little relevant information needed for the project (Mueller and Segal, 2015). The questions developed for the interviewees were informed by the literature review.

According to Hammersley (2008), the underlying motivation behind interviewees' responses is their strong focus on preserving their own roles and values. Simultaneously, they engage in a deliberate effort to persuade and influence others through their expressions during the interview. The respondents prioritise defending their roles and beliefs over presenting factual information, considering the latter a secondary concern (Hammersley, 2008). In the majority of interviews, there was a point at which the researcher controlled the conversation's direction and topic, aided by the semi-structured nature of the procedure. Interviewers are widely regarded as an imperative component of the conversational trajectory, employing significant power in the interview process (Rapley, 2012: 541). Kvale (2007) and Tanggaard (2007) emphasise the pivotal role that interviewers play in shaping interview; they bear the

responsibility of formulating the majority of questions and determining what qualifies as pertinent and satisfactory responses Wang (2006). Fielding and Thomas (2001) describe this process as interviewer influence. Most of the time, due to the researcher's intention to explore a wide variety of themes and issues, this occurred. Subconscious and explicit bias on the part of the researcher may cause issues, particularly when using an unstructured interviewing technique due to its absence of adaptability (Kehoe, 2020). According to Fielding and Thomas (2001), when an interviewee is questioned excessively on a certain subject, they start to acknowledge the interviewer's particular ideas. Inevitably, this dynamic can influence the interviewee to align their responses with the perspectives of the interviewer. Fortunately, however, this did not occur during the interview process.

The interviews for this project were conducted by the principal researcher; taking place at times that suited participants and over Microsoft Teams, to ensure interviewees were comfortable in their surroundings (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Gale et al., 2019). Each participant was interviewed once, with a collective interview data size of approximately six hours. The interviews focused around four main themes: barriers of wrestling participation, facilitators to wrestling participation, the impact and effect of local and national governance, and intersectionality. In total, Throughout the duration of the interviews, "probing questions" were integrated to enhance the quality of the data produced for the project (Seale, 2018: 180; Gale et al., 2019). Examples of the probing questions used include: 'Can you elaborate on that' or 'How did you feel when that occurred?' By offering these questions within an interview, points raised by participants can be delved further into, unpacking the situation to gain thoughts, feelings and experiences in more detail (Merriam, 2014; Patton, 2015; Waller et al.,

2018; Gale et al., 2019). Furthermore, probing questions can unleash nuances, complexities, and underlying motivations that shape the group's behaviour and beliefs can be uncovered (Rutledge and Hogg, 2020). Following the interviews, the participants were provided with a copy of the transcript, so that they can confirm the accuracy in terms of words spoken, the information shared, and the meanings that they attached to their respective accounts (Forbat and Henderson, 2005; Gale et al., 2019). Gerard Forsey (2010) further highlights the value of research interviews, emphasising their potential to elicit perceptive insights that are rarely attained through surveys, observational studies, or everyday conversations with others. By actively incorporating research interviews as a crucial data collection method, this study sought to gather the valuable insights and diverse perspectives of participants, aiming to develop a comprehensive understanding of the cultural context being investigated. In-depth interview questions are vital in this context, allowing the gain of deeper insights into the cultural dynamics at play. Through an exploration of both the social and spatial dimensions, a comprehensive understanding of the demographic can be obtained. This approach enables the capture of individuals' lived experiences, allowing for a more nuanced depiction and deeper comprehension of the cultural context being examined (Knott et al., 2022). Using concepts within the theoretical frameworks allows data to be hypothesised to a closer detail.

#### **4.5.2. Field Notes**

Participant observation is regarded as a foundational method in qualitative research, offering researchers the ability to immerse themselves in the daily lives and practices of their subjects to gain a deep, nuanced understanding of their worldviews and lived experiences (Crang and Cook, 2012; Musante, 2015). As Crang and Cook (2012)

highlight, this method allows researchers to engage directly with the social, cultural, and physical contexts in which people's everyday activities unfold. By actively participating in the environment and interacting with individuals in their natural settings, qualitative researchers can access insights that might remain hidden through more detached observational techniques (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). This approach enables researchers to capture the intricacies of social interactions, behaviours, and the meanings that participants attach to their actions and surroundings (Kawulich, 2005). It also bridges the gap between external observation and internal experience, providing a more holistic view of how individuals navigate their worlds (Simpson, 2007). In doing so, participant observation moves beyond simply recording actions to interpreting how people construct their realities and how their worldviews are shaped by their cultural and social contexts. The depth of understanding afforded by participant observation is especially crucial when studying complex phenomena such as power dynamics, cultural practices, and social norms, which are often embedded in subtle, everyday behaviours. The capacity of the researcher to watch, record, and analyse the data is necessary for participant observation to be effective (Schensul et al., 1999; Kawulich, 2005). According to Schensul et al. (1999), it is critical to take accurate field notes based on observations, refrain from imposing predetermined categories from the researcher's theoretical framework, and let the categories naturally arise from the society under study. Field notes have long been recommended by qualitative research scholars as an essential tool for documenting contextual information (Tessier, 2012; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). Recent arguments suggest that integrating field notes with interviews in a combined narrative can enhance the depth and quality of qualitative data (Tessier, 2012). Maxwell (2012) further contends that observation allows researchers to draw inferences about participants'



perspectives that may not emerge through interviews alone. Thus, understanding the significance of field notes is critical for interpreting phenomena under investigation and providing the necessary context for analysing interview data (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018).

Due to time constraints, only one observation was conducted - a public event in which a local wrestling club hosted an open mat session in Centenary Square, Birmingham. The event was designed to engage the local community, offering participants of all ages and skill levels the opportunity to experience wrestling first-hand in celebration of the first anniversary of the 2022 Commonwealth Games held in Birmingham. This public, informal setting allowed for the observation of interactions between club members, coaches, and participants, providing valuable insight into how the sport is introduced to new audiences. The observation also highlighted how wrestling culture is communicated in a community-oriented environment, offering a unique context for understanding the dynamics of the sport beyond the formal club setting. Although the observation occurred only once during the study, the field notes from the event provided valuable insights for the project. This should be regarded as a secondary method of data collection, conducted after the interview process and, therefore, did not influence the development of any interview questions.

#### **4.5.3. Data Analysis**

To analyse the data collected in this study, thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis is a means of organising data that identifies, analyses, and presents patterns (or 'themes') in the data that has been obtained (Braun and Clark, 2006; Braun et al., 2016). Thematic analysis is widely used as a tool to analyse

qualitative data across a range of disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, due to its accessible and useful nature (Swain, 2018; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis can be applied across different epistemological and ontological positions, providing a great deal of flexibility to the researcher. Due to the project adopting an interpretivist approach, a thematic network analysis (Attride-Sterling, 2001) was created to interpret the main themes found during the data collection phase. Although presented in a different way to the model developed by Attride-Sterling (2001), the process of producing the thematic networks remained the same. Thematic networks offer a systemic approach to extracting information from the text. Firstly, Basic Themes are identified, which are classified as the lowest-order premises (Attride-Sterling, 2001; Kehoe, 2020). These Basic Themes are then organised into more abstract principles, entitled Organising Themes (Attride-Sterling, 2001; Kehoe, 2020). The process concludes by encapsulating the overarching metaphors in the entire text through superior themes, known as Global Themes (Attride-Sterling, 2001; Kehoe, 2020). The relationship between the data was made clear through colour coordination, clearly demonstrating how the themes interlinked. Themes were inserted into a spreadsheet, created to easily observe the information collected. The four Global Themes in this study were Lack of Opportunities, Representation, Parents Influences on Children, and Governance. A total of three Organising Themes were highlighted, namely Sport Participation, Social Factors, and Governance. Finally, 25 basic themes were identified across the three Organising Themes. Each piece of data that entered the spreadsheet was categorised into their respective subtheme, where conceptual connections could be made easier. This process is known as analytical coding (Richards, 2005; Elliot, 2018; Gale et al., 2019). Nine overarching codes were derived

from the analysis of the six interviews. Text segments from these interviews were then applied to their respective themes within the spreadsheet. The final spreadsheet contained 176 pieces of data across the three Global Themes. Following the creation of the thematic network with all relevant data inputted the researcher presented each network within the findings chapter, discussing the themes with supporting text segments. Thus, the reader can employ the thematic network as a valuable tool alongside the researcher, gaining a clearer understanding of the researcher's interpretation through the summary presented by the network (Kehoe, 2020).

#### **4.6. Researcher Positionality Theory and Limitations of Data Collection**

For decades, discussions have been had regarding objectivity and positionality when conducting qualitative research (Merton, 1972; Collins, 1986; Beoku-Betts, 1994; Flores, 2018). Positionality refers to both an individual's worldview and the stance they take concerning a research task, including its social and political context (Foote and Bartell, 2011; Rowe, 2014, Holmes, 2020). Moreover, positionality refers to the perspective that a researcher chooses to take when conducting a particular study, which influences not only the methods and findings of the research but also its direction (Savin-Baden and Major Howell, 2013; Rowe, 2014; Holmes, 2020). Some aspects of positionality are culturally ascribed or generally regarded as being fixed, for example, gender, race, skin-colour, nationality. Others, such as political views, personal life history, and experiences, are more fluid, subjective, and shaped by context (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). These fluid dimensions of positionality can significantly impact how researchers are perceived by participants, especially when working with marginalised groups. The ability to establish trust becomes crucial, as participants' willingness to engage often depends on their comfort with the researcher's

positionality. The data collection period of the project presented several challenges, among which the lack of willing participants stood out prominently. This stemmed from a variety of factors, creating a complex interplay that hindered the recruitment of participants for interviews. One key challenge was the persistent halting of communication by many prospective interviewees after initial contact. In all qualitative research studies about minority groups, trust between researcher and participant is key (Cope, 2014; Connelly, 2016). As a White, Western woman undertaking research regarding the experiences of marginalised ethnically diverse women, being ethically engaged with the participants was crucial to the authenticity of the study (Manning, 2018). The researcher's role in this study is to accurately (re)present the experiences and knowledge of British Asian Muslim and Sikh women; combining Lugones' (2010) theory of decolonial feminism and a critical qualitative approach allows for a better engagement in the field, providing a space that can fully engage with the voices, perspectives, and narratives of this underrepresented group (Manning, 2018). This allows a change in positionality, in which I *become* a decolonial feminist researcher as opposed to just *completing* a qualitative study (Manning, 2018). However, this proposed method did not work as well as initially anticipated. In the context of this research, the researcher's European identity may have inadvertently contributed to a sense of discomfort or hesitancy among potential participants, particularly if they perceived me to be an outsider to their community. The prevalence of Islamophobia in England, often originating from Caucasian English individuals, is so widespread that incidents are reported in mainstream media almost daily. The media has unfairly stigmatised Muslim individuals, perpetuating negative stereotypes that often incite hostility from Western populations. According to a recent survey, Muslims are the least-liked group in the UK, with 25.9% of British people holding negative views and

9.9% holding very negative views (University of Birmingham, 2022). Given this context, it is understandable that potential participants may have felt hesitant to engage with the researcher. In hindsight, a better relationship should have been built between wrestling clubs and the researcher, in order to build trust.

In addition to the dramaturgical theoretical framework that will guide the discussion of the findings, a Decolonial Feminist approach was employed to conceptualise the positionality of the qualitative researcher (Lugones, 2010; Manning, 2018). Decolonial theory has its roots in Latin American modernity/coloniality, with academics such as Escobar (2007, 2010), Mignolo (2007, 2009, 2011) and Lugones (2010) all prominent theorists in the area; criticising Eurocentric hegemonic patterns of knowledge and claims of universality (Manning, 2018). Modernity and coloniality are inter-reliant: coloniality is constitutive of modernity, meaning there is no modernity without coloniality (Restrepo and Escobar, 2005; Mignolo, 2011; Manning, 2018). The West present modernity as a narrative of salvation to disguise coloniality (Escobar, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). Decolonial theorists perpetuate the notion that modernity and coloniality of knowledge coerce the practices and discourse of the West onto those in the non-West; therefore, the Western way of thinking dictates what should be studied and practised (Imas and Weston, 2012; Manning, 2018). Ultimately, the Global South (otherwise labelled as the 'third world' - specifically low-income households and culturally marginalised areas in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania), become detached from 'their capacity for autonomous thought' (Ibarra-Colado, 2006; Manning, 2018). By recognising the validity of the participant's knowledge and experiences about their gender, identity, and work, decolonial feminist theory upends established frameworks that have marginalised the agency of women

from the Global South (Manning, 2021). Hence, through the acceptance of gendered colonial differences, there is an acknowledgment of the agency held by women from the Global South. This approach fosters a paradigm that encourages theorising *with* these women, rather than merely discussing or theorising *about* them (Manning, 2021). The method was first applied after considering Kincheloe et al.'s (2015: 171) question: 'How can researchers respect the perspective of "the Other" and invite "the Other" to speak?'. The reason for conducting such research is to provide a voice to a demographic that are very underrepresented in academic literature. Despite positive intentions, Kincheloe et al. (2015) and Manning (2018) warn that this may not be an easy task following their experiences in the field. As a researcher heading into an ethnically diverse occupied space, configuring an approach that encourages the acceptance of the participants' cultural practices and experiences, without imposing a 'Western ontology of modernity', engaging without 'perpetuating their Otherness' (Manning, 2018). Although as time progressed, the study increasingly focused on prioritising interviews with coaches who had significant experience working with Muslim and Sikh women. However, one interview was conducted with a Muslim woman, where this theory was applied. It was essential to ensure that this participant, as the only ethnic minority Muslim woman, felt that her knowledge and experiences were recognised as legitimate and valuable. Using a decolonial feminist theoretical perspective facilitates meaningful engagement with women from ethnic minority groups, centring their unique realities (Manning, 2021). This self-awareness of positionality is an essential aspect of ethical and reflexive research practice (Harding, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

On reflection, the absence of any substantial fieldwork has limited the impact of this study. In the initial phases of the project, the research team reached a consensus that an ethnography would be the most suitable method for collecting data. However, external factors, such as a delay in obtaining ethical approval beyond the initial anticipation, along with personal challenges encountered by the researcher, posed constraints on the ability to access wrestling clubs in the West Midlands. Another significant issue linking to this, as well as initial interviews, was the researcher's lack of confidence. Reflecting on the early interviews, it could be inferred that the collected data might not have been as rigorous as it should have been. To combat this, a pilot interview with members of the research team should have been conducted. This would have allowed the principal, novice researcher to practice the flow of interviews, including the use of probing questions and initiating comforting small talk to establish better trust with the respondents. This practice period has been recommended by a number of qualitative research academics (Bartels and Wagenaar, 2018; Kalman, 2019). Additionally, a proactive effort to involve more interviewees could have enhanced this process. Ersoy (2015) emphasised how graduate students discovered their identities as qualitative researchers through hands-on experience, encouraging an open-minded approach, a focus on understanding phenomena, and patience throughout the research process. Despite this, probing questions and confidence in interviews grew considerably as the project progressed.

To address similar challenges that arise in future studies, great consideration to use more reflexive practices in the approach will be adopted. Explicitly acknowledging my positionality in initial communication, offering a deeper explanation of my research goals and the decolonial feminist framework, and demonstrating a commitment to

ethical research that respects the perspectives and concerns of potential participants may have changed the way potential interviewees perceived the researcher (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007).

#### **4.7. Theoretical Framework**

Building on the seminal contributions of Erving Goffman in 1959 and 1969, the theoretical framework of dramaturgy and impression management has been applied in numerous sociological studies pertaining to sports (e.g., Zurcher, 1982; Gale et al., 2019; Potrac et al., 2022; Claydon, 2022; Hartmann et al., 2023). Dramaturgy has evolved into sociological studies from the performing arts; encompassing the complex procedures by which performers meticulously construct and modify their performances to successfully convey a particular artistic production to the audience (Goffman, 1959; Shulman, 2017; Potrac et al., 2022). When referring to sociological dramaturgy, the concept shifts to how individuals 'stage performances in real life' (Shulman, 2017: 5; Gale et al., 2019; Potrac et al., 2022). Within this overarching framework, Goffman highlighted different forms of impression people use when interacting with a certain audience; known as 'regions of performances', comprising 'front' and 'back' regions (Goffman, 1959: 109; Potrac et al., 2022: 215). The 'front' region refers to the setting in which we perform for a scrutinising audience (Goffman, 1959). When applying the front region to a sporting context, this could be whenever 'we are face-to-face with those who are the recipients of our performance' (Potrac et al., 2022: 215). When in the front region, 'actors' seek to present an idealised version of themselves to others while carefully concealing any aspects that may compromise the desired impression they aim to create (Goffman, 1959; Jones et al., 2011; Gale et al., 2019; Potrac et al., 2022). The back region is a label for a designated space or situation where individuals



have the autonomy to be themselves, without the need to maintain a specific image or uphold the facade that they present in the front region (Goffman, 1959; Scott, 2015; Gale et al., 2019; Potrac et al., 2022). Applying the front 'stage' and back 'stage' concept is relatively novel given the nature of this project. Understanding the barriers and facilitators to participation through the analytical lens of Goffman can provide an explanation to why Muslim and Sikh women's sport participation levels are minimal. Many sporting studies have used Goffman's dramaturgical thinking to critically examine the trustworthiness within a sporting setting, trustworthiness itself a proposed barrier for participants within this project.

Only one article could be found that references dramaturgy and South Asian women in sport, making this a novel approach to encouraging sports participation amongst this demographic (e.g., Samie, 2013). Although not an immediately apparent link, several factors involving dramaturgy may influence individuals' engagement in sport. Sport coaching studies have effectively utilised Goffman's theories to understand the dynamics of self-presentation and interaction between coaches and participants (Britton et al., 2024). Goffman's framework emphasises how individuals manage their identities and impressions in social situations, and this has profound implications in the realm of sports coaching (Potrac et al., 2022; Britton et al., 2024). Coaches often engage in strategic interactions to create an environment that fosters participation, motivation, and achievement of role-related goals (Britton et al., 2024). Building on this foundation, this study will apply Goffman's theory to investigate how self-presentation - both by coaches and participants - affects levels of engagement in sports activities and influences retention rates. Applying these theories in this context allows for an exploration of whether and how self-presentation influences participants' willingness

to engage in sports and shapes their overall experience. For example, participants may feel more motivated to attend wrestling sessions if they perceive these activities as opportunities to present themselves confidently to their peers. This motivation can stem from a desire to create a positive impression, which may encourage individuals to showcase their physical abilities, teamwork skills, and competitive spirit (Goffman, 1959; Myers et al., 2004). In this way, the sport becomes not just a physical activity but a stage for social interaction, where individuals strive to project an ideal self to others. On the contrary, the pressure to perform well can lead some individuals to shy away from participation altogether (Potrac et al., 2022). Many British Asian women, for instance, may choose not to engage in sports due to the fear of failure and the embarrassment that might come with trying something new in a public setting. This fear can be exacerbated by cultural expectations and societal norms, which may place a higher value on perceived competence and success (Norris, 2011). As a result, the potential for a negative self-presentation can deter them from participating, further highlighting the complex relationship between self-image, societal expectations, and sports involvement (Kolić et al., 2023). By exploring these dynamics, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how self-presentation and the role of coaches influence participation and retention in sports. It will contribute to the broader discourse on inclusivity in sports, particularly regarding underrepresented groups.

#### **4.8. Ethical Considerations**

As part of the ethical considerations this study has made, although all will be anonymised, participants will not be given a pseudonym. Ratna (2011) outlined that the complexities of using ethic-based pseudonyms incorrectly may cause offence if randomly applied. Furthermore, some participants are second or third-generation

British Asians, where their parents may have chosen Anglicised names to reduce the teasing of their 'unusual' names at school (Ratna, 2011). However, choosing 'English'-sounding pseudonyms present further issues, as these may negotiate access to an area that British Asians have historically been excluded from (Ratna, 2011). With this considered, I have chosen to refer to participants as, depending on their role and gender, *Coach 1 - M*, *Staff 1 - F*, or *Participant 1 - F*. Participants within the data collection section refers to participants of British Wrestling sessions.

This study has followed all ethical regulations and protocols required by the Ethics Board at Manchester Metropolitan University. All participants have provided written consent to take part in this research, with parents and guardians providing consent for participants aged under 18.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

The data analysis derived from interviews and participant observation revealed five categories that influenced the participation of Muslim and Sikh women. Lack of opportunities, representation and role models, parents influence on children, stereotypes and beauty standards, and governance are topics that every participant within the data collection phase mentioned. However, some categories have varying answers as to whether the topics would be a barrier or facilitator to wrestling participation.

### **5.1. Lack of Opportunities**

This study has outlined that wrestling is an under participated sport in the UK, with only 52 affiliated BWA clubs spanning the country. As a result, the majority of the general public may be unfamiliar with wrestling including how to get involved and the sport's rules and regulations. They may also have a preconceived idea of wrestling based on professional wrestling that has been broadcast for decades. However, to mark the one-year anniversary of the 2022 Commonwealth Games, which were held in Birmingham - the largest sporting event ever hosted in the West Midlands - local sports clubs were invited to organise open sessions in Birmingham City Centre, offering the public an opportunity to try new sports. A local wrestling club participated by setting up a mat and organising games for people to experience wrestling first-hand. Although all participants in the study were already involved in wrestling, they unanimously agreed that there is a significant lack of opportunities within the sport, particularly for women - a finding that aligns with numerous studies on gender disparities in sports (Carson et al., 2018; Forsyth et al., 2019; Elliott et al., 2023). The

following fieldnote reflects the perspective of the researcher, who attended the anniversary event with minimal prior wrestling experience.

I had no idea what to expect from this open mat opportunity. As someone who had never had a particular interest in wrestling with no friends who participated in the sport before, I expected very little attention from the public. But after about 10 minutes of being around the mat, I was proved unexplainably wrong. Families of all different backgrounds, of varying ages, swamped around the mat. The best part? Every single person was smiling, enjoying the activities on show. The striking part of it all was how the persona of children would change. Shy children who were reluctant to get involved would watch, or take part with a parent, then would not want to let anyone else have a go!

(Field note extract from Birmingham Fest event)

This field note extract aligns with the concept of dramaturgy in a fascinating manner. The extract begins with the researcher admitting having no prior experience with wrestling, and limited expectations about the open mat event. This initial expectation reflects the researcher's backstage self – harbouring a private, internalised perspective shaped by their lack of familiarity around wrestling. This backstage self was not yet performing for an audience, and thus, was not concerned with managing any public image or impression regarding the event. The researcher's anticipation of low engagement from public highlights a form of mental preparation that aligns with Goffman's (1959) idea of backstage space being where people rehearse or form expectations before stepping into the social spotlight (Ramsey et al., 2023). When the researcher entered the front stage – the public setting of the wrestling mat – they were

confronted with a reality that contradicted their backstage assumptions. The large crowd, enthusiastic participation and positive energy forced the researcher to shift into a more engaged front-stage role, where they had to adjust their perception and their own behaviour based on this unexpected audience. This transition from the private preparatory self (backstage) to a socially engaged, performative self (front stage) is a critical aspect of Goffman's theory (Goffman, 1959; Gale et al., 2019). Additionally, it emphasises how individuals are always alternating between these two domains, altering how they show themselves depending on the situation and the people they are interacting with. Ultimately, the researcher's initial backstage expectation of low public interest reflects a form of mental rehearsal, but fluidly shifting to front stage as social settings influence the performance of identity (Fawkes, 2015).

The transformation in the children's behaviour, particularly the shift from shyness to enthusiasm and control over the mat, directly illustrates Goffman's concept of performance and impression management (Goffman, 1969). According to Goffman, individuals perform different roles in social interactions, adjusting their behaviour based on the social norms and expectations of the situation (Grimshaw, 1983; Smith, 1989; Inglis and Thorpe, 2023). Initially, the children's hesitance reflects a more reserved, cautious performance, indicating uncertainty about the expectations of this new environment. They were in what Goffman would describe as a tentative front stage performance, where they tested the waters of social interaction, unsure of how to act (Goffman, 1956). As the children observed others participating, they adapted their front stage behaviour to align with the unfolding social script, echoing Goffman's assertion that social interactions are shaped by situational cues and audience feedback (Scott et al., 2013). This shift from passive observers to active participants

mirrors Goffman's concept of impression management, where individuals continuously adjust their self-presentation based on the social context and expectations of those around them (Potrac et al., 2022). The children's transformation from reluctance to enthusiasm illustrates the fluid nature of identity in social settings, as they modified their behaviour to fit into the communal performance, responding to both verbal and non-verbal cues from their audience, such as smiles and encouragement (Goffman, 1959; Scott et al., 2013; Schultze and Brooks, 2018). This supports Goffman's argument that identity is not static but is negotiated in real-time to meet audience expectations (Goffman, 1959; Gale et al., 2019), with the children managing their presentation to align with the positive feedback they received from the crowd.

After observing this first-hand, a lack of accessible opportunities became evident; potentially a significant factor in why British wrestling clubs struggle to attract women participants (Hall, 2022). This observation was reinforced during interviews, where coaches and staff consistently highlighted the limited opportunities available for people to get involved in wrestling. Many noted that simply raising awareness and creating entry points for participation could play a crucial role in increasing engagement.

They've got to know about it where it's happening. What's happening and when. Then I think once they're in and involved in sessions, there's a retention rate and the parents are kind of like, as long as the kid likes and enjoys it, then great.

(Coach 2 - M)

I can't promise and guarantee you that you'd be able to compete in a female only environment or with female wrestlers and to me personally, I don't like that.

We need to change that because I feel like everybody should be given that opportunity.

(Staff 2 - F)

The participants are reflecting Goffman's concept of impression management and the dynamics of social interaction within structured environments (Goffman, 1959; Potrac et al., 2022). Coach 2 emphasises the need for clear, accessible opportunities for individuals to step into the front stage participation: "They've got to know about it—where it's happening, what's happening and when." Goffman (1956; 1959) explains that individuals must first be aware of the social script before they can engage and perform within it (Scott et al., 2013). Coach 2 suggests that once participants are informed and involved, retention increases as long as they enjoy the space (Yancey et al., 2006). This reinforces the idea that wrestling clubs must manage their front stage – how the sport is presented, communicated, and structured – to ensure that individuals feel confident enough to step into the role of a participant (Potrac et al., 2019). Successful retention then becomes a matter of aligning the experience with expectations and satisfaction of participants and their families (Levitz et al., 1999), reflecting Goffman's notion that individuals continue performing roles that meet audience approval (Jones et al., 2011), in this case, the parents and participants themselves. Staff 2's comments, although remaining in the realm of performance, focuses deeper issues related to Goffman's notion of role conflict (Kivisto and Pittman, 2007). A section of her quote reflects the issues related to accessibility and inclusivity of the wrestling environment: 'I can't promise and guarantee you that you'd be able to compete in a female-only environment or with female wrestlers... We need to change that.' Here, the staff member highlights the absence of supportive spaces in which women can fulfil their desired roles within the sport (Rasmussen et al., 2021). Goffman



(1959) theorises that individuals experience role conflict when the expectations of different roles clash, leading to discomfort or an inability to perform effectively (Kivisto and Pittman, 2007; Britton et al., 2024). In this context, the lack of a female-only competition environment creates a disconnect between the roles that female participants aspire to embody and the existing structures of the wrestling landscape (Rasmussen et al., 2021; Liu, 2024). Women may wish to perform as confident, capable athletes, yet the absence of appropriate spaces can hinder their ability to express this identity fully (Rasmussen et al., 2021). Staff 2's call for change reflects Goffman's (1959; 1969) emphasis on the importance of self-presentation in social settings. By advocating for a female-only environment, the staff member recognises the necessity of creating spaces where women can manage their self-presentation effectively, free from the discomfort that comes with competing in a mixed-gender context (Brooks Gardner, 1989). This change is vital for enabling female wrestlers to step into the front stage with confidence, allowing them to perform their roles in alignment with their expectations and comfort levels.

The acknowledgment of the need for greater opportunities and accessible clubs by a male senior member of British Wrestling further underscores the structural challenges faced by women in the sport.

We don't have that many clubs or that many opportunities anyway. So, when you start to take some of those out, you start to really limit the opportunity to find something near you that's convenient and worthwhile and which is again is one of the reasons that we've tried to invest in providing more of those opportunities.

(Staff 1 - M)

Staff 1's statement further reinforces the connection to Goffman's (1959; 1969) theories on self-presentation and role conflict. His assertion, 'We don't have that many clubs or that many opportunities anyway... when you start to take some of those out, you start to really limit the opportunity to find something near you that's convenient and worthwhile,' highlights how the structural limitations within the sport hinder individuals' ability to engage in desired roles effectively (Sakalidis, 2023). When opportunities to participate are scarce, as noted by Staff 1, potential wrestlers – particularly women – may find it challenging to locate environments that support their participation (Bailey et al., 2013). This scarcity can lead to role conflict, where individuals are unable to fulfil their desired identities due to insufficient resources and opportunities. The statement illustrates that when accessible clubs and sessions are limited, individuals not only struggle to find suitable places to participate but also face the risk of being unable to express their athletic identity, which can lead to feelings of exclusion or inadequacy (Bailey et al., 2013; Edison et al., 2021).

A lack of opportunities and awareness of the available opportunities within communities has historically led to low participation rates in sport. For various factors, British South Asian people are less likely to engage in physical activity in comparison to the general population. This has resulted in certain subgroups, particularly British Pakistani women, experiencing disproportionately higher rates of obesity (Liu et al., 2010; Ludwig et al., 2011; Garcia et al., 2017; Iqbal et al., 2022). BWA currently have 54 affiliated clubs across Great Britain, which can be compared to other sports such

as football (with 40,000 clubs registered in 2006), netball (almost 3000 clubs in England) and fencing (around 400 clubs in the UK) (England Netball, no date; FIFA, 2007; Williams, 2016). The lack of clubs affiliated to BWA can be explained for a number of reasons, one of which being funding. A senior member of the BWA stated that the organisation is '80-90% dependent on government funding,' making it one of the lowest-funded sports in the UK. Furthermore, BWA require at least one level two coach at a club before granting affiliation. Expanding opportunities not only facilitates participation but also allows individuals, especially women, to enter the front stage of wrestling confidently, perform their roles as athletes, and navigate the social expectations of the sport. By aligning structural improvements with Goffman's insights into self-presentation and role management, BWA can create an environment where participants feel empowered to engage and thrive.

## **5.2. Representation and Role Models**

The importance of representation and role models in sports cannot be understated, particularly in underrepresented fields such as wrestling. The presence of visible, relatable figures can significantly influence participation rates, especially among marginalised groups like women and ethnic minorities (Vescio et al., 2005; Ratna, 2011). In alignment with Goffman's theory of self-presentation, individuals are more likely to engage in activities when they can identify with role models who embody the roles they aspire to perform (Schulman, 2017). Role models not only provide a template for success but also validate the experiences of those navigating spaces where they are underrepresented, helping to mitigate feelings of role conflict and exclusion (Atkins et al., 2020). For women in wrestling, the lack of visible role models

may limit their ability to envision themselves within the sport, further reinforcing barriers to participation and retention.

A parent with three children came to the mat, as his two sons wanted to wrestle each other. The coach asked the daughter whether she would like to have a turn, to which she shook her head and hid behind her dad's leg. After her brothers had finished their turn, the coach's two ethnically diverse daughters were practicing their wrestling on the mat, laughing and joking with each other. Almost instantly, the little girl reappeared from behind her dad's leg, and began to take her shoes off to have a go. She asked one of the wrestling girls whether she could have a go with them, to which they wholeheartedly accepted. The little girl proceeded to take on each of her brothers, and another of the coach's daughters, all of whom she 'beat'. She did not want to leave the mat.

(Field note extract from Birmingham Fest event)

Emotion management is playing an integral role in this extract. Hochschild (1983) expanded Goffman's (1959) analysis on impression management, by demonstrating how the concept has a fundamental emotional element (Ives et al., 2022). The performance of emotion management occurs when individuals make conscious efforts to modify or regulate their own or others' emotional encounters (Hochschild, 1983; Ives et al., 2022). This is effort is made with the intention of adhering to societal expectations regarding emotions, seeking social acceptance and various incentives, and evading potential repercussions (Hochschild, 1983; Charmaz et al., 2019; Ives et al., 2022). In this scenario, emotion management is evident in how the little girl's emotions evolve and adapt based on the interactions and influences around her. Her

initial discomfort turns into curiosity and interest, which then transforms into empowerment and confidence. The two girls wrestling demonstrate a degree of 'surface acting' throughout the scenario, simulating feelings at 'a surface level for the benefit of the audience' as they practice on the mat (Hochschild, 1983; Ives et al., 2022: 230). Through their laughter and joking about, and willingness to allow the little girl to succeed, they regulate their peripheral emotional presentation, employing control over the impressions others form about their internal emotions (Ives et al., 2022). Surface acting does not inherently revolve around deception, and genuine emotions, such as enjoyment in this context, are merely amplified expressions of the girls' authentic sentiments, driven by their consciousness to the audience present (Charmaz et al., 2019). Should the two girls had been sitting on the side of the mat uninterested, the little girl may have perceived this as an unreceptive environment, in which she was not welcomed to participate in: known as emotional deviance (Thoits, 1990). Emotional deviance is evident when a person fails to conform to an explicit or implicit emotional norm (Ives et al., 2022). However, the transformation of the young participant's emotions from hesitation to curiosity and interest stemmed wholly from witnessing ethnically diverse girls, like herself, taking part in wrestling and portraying the emotion of enjoyment. This extract highlights the crucial requirement for positive role models, particularly those who represent diverse ethnic backgrounds and female leadership, within the realm of wrestling (Vescio et al., 2005; Ratna, 2011).

The narratives and experiences shared by individuals from various religious communities shed light on the nuanced ways in which representation influences perceptions, aspirations, and engagement. The following extracts, though rooted in different religious contexts, offer contrasting perspectives on the power of role models

within wrestling. While both extracts refer to the significance of representation, they emphasise distinct dimensions of empowerment and participation based on the diverse religious backgrounds they reflect.

There's no Sikh role models in female wrestling, and I can't say many have taken up the sport because of somebody else's involvement in the sport.

(Coach 2 - M)

I went to the Commonwealth Games and I saw my first ever hijab wearing referee. So, she was there controlling that mat, you know, refereeing grown men and not being phased by what they were doing, how they were dressed. She was there to do a job. She was fully covered. Her representation was just so inspiring. Not that I wanna become a referee, but it was purely because she's standing there wearing a scarf and here we are hearing all these sort of stereotypes and all, you know, females can't do this and females can't do that. But yes, we can. We can still be Muslim women and we can still do certain jobs.

(Staff 2 – F)

Coach 2 and Staff 2's comments can arguably be linked to Goffman's concepts of impression management, social scripts and the power of front stage performances to challenge dominant narratives (Goffman, 1959, 1969; Potrac et al., 2022). Coach 2's observation about the absence of Sikh female role models in wrestling supports Toyoki and Brown's (2013) findings, which highlight how impression management is constrained when marginalised identities are missing from public visibility. Although Coach 2's position argues that Sikh women do not need role models in order to join

wrestling, many studies, alongside Goffman's theories, indicate that this may be a reason why there is not more Sikh women involved in his classes. Goffman (1959; 1969) suggests that individuals perform roles based on societal expectations and available exemplars. The absence of role models reinforces the dominant, exclusionary norms of who is 'supposed' to engage in wrestling, limiting how Sikh women can negotiate their public identities in this space (Batth, 1998; Ratna, 2024). In contrast, Staff 2's experience with a hijab-wearing referee at the Commonwealth Games illustrates how a disruptive front stage performance can challenge and rewrite these social scripts (Benford and Hunt, 1992). According to Goffman (1959), front stage behaviour is designed to meet societal expectations, but the referee's presence subverts stereotypes about Muslim women's limitations in professional and male-dominated spaces (van Es, 2016). Her performance not only challenges existing interaction rituals, which typically marginalise women of certain backgrounds, but also redefines what it means to be both a Muslim woman and a professional in sport (Goffman, 1981; Hausmann et al., 2011; Ratna, 2024). This act of visible resistance reshapes the interaction order, showing that marginalised identities can reclaim and expand their roles (Goffman, 1981; Case and Hunter, 2012). Critically, this demonstrates how impression management, when enacted by those breaking stereotypes, can actively challenge and transform societal expectations, creating new pathways for others to perform their identities in ways previously denied to them (Scott, 2015; Shulman, 2016; Potrac et al., 2022).

Although there is an increased representation of British Asian women at the highest level in sport generally, wrestling differs greatly. In March 2023, Sky Sports and Sporting Equals produced the first-ever timeline displaying the history of South Asian

heritage female football players in the modern English game, with names like Sam Kerr and Safia Middleton-Patel celebrated at the event (Sky Sports, 2023). Furthermore, Nouhaila Benzina of Morocco become the first female player to wear an Islamic headscarf at a senior FIFA Women's World Cup in 2023. This example was brought up by a Muslim female member of British Wrestling, who expressed her pride at watching Benzina break those barriers.

Even like the World Cup now, we've got the first Muslim referee, we've got a first Muslim... Was she from Morocco? The Moroccan football player in the Women's World Cup like, imagine how many girls she is inspiring right now. You know what? I literally get goosebumps over it.

(Staff 2 - F)

The presence of the first Muslim referee and a prominent Moroccan football player in the Women's World Cup highlights the transformative potential of front stage performances in challenging dominant societal scripts (Benford and Hunt, 1992; Scott et al., 2013; Potrac et al., 2022). According to Goffman, individuals perform roles based on the expectations of their social environments, but these expectations are shaped by the visibility of certain identities in public spaces (Shulman, 2016). The lack of Muslim women in sports has traditionally constrained how Muslim girls perceive their potential roles (Walseth, 2006), limiting the scope of their impression management within such spaces (Knez et al., 2012). The introduction of these visible figures in prominent roles actively challenges stereotypical gendered and cultural assumptions that historically excluded Muslim women from sports. By participating on a global stage, these women redefine the interaction rituals associated with both Islam



and women in sport, signalling to others - especially younger girls - that their identities are not incompatible with success in such spaces (Nakamura, 2002; Walseth, 2006). The emotional response of 'goosebumps' described by Staff 2 underscores Goffman's concept of the performative power of role models, which can reshape the way marginalised individuals see themselves and negotiate their identities in public (Rogers, 1980; Birrell and Donnelly, 2004; Ratna, 2011). The Moroccan football player and Muslim referee, through their front stage performances, create new frameworks for impression management that allow Muslim girls to imagine and enact broader, more empowered versions of their public selves (Shulman, 2016; Nesvadba, 2017). This redefinition of social roles exemplifies how front stage behaviour can challenge and expand the possibilities for underrepresented identities, reshaping the collective social script and inspiring new ways of being (Potrac et al., 2022; Ratna, 2024).

### **5.3. Parents Influence on Children**

Family has long been understood to be the most proximal subsystem regarding athlete behaviour, attitudes, experiences, and outcomes, especially in the initial stages of sport participation, known to display long-lasting impacts (Côté, 1999; Dixon et al., 2008, Dorsch et al., 2022). More specifically, parents and siblings have the biggest influence on athletes in youth sport (Dorsch et al., 2022). Research indicates that parents' roles in youth sport tend to be accelerated by the changing characteristics of the athlete (e.g., age, gender, ability), the organisational or community context (e.g., initiatives and support), and the societies in which the athletes participate (e.g., resources and policy) (Côté, 1999; Côté and Vierimaa, 2014; Dorsch et al., 2022).

The influence that parents have on children when participating in sport was an area within this project that was initially underrated; however, every interviewee mentioned the impact of parents in varying capacities. Almost all participants were first introduced to the sport of wrestling by their parents, usually their fathers. Participants with children themselves also followed the tradition set by their parents, encouraging their children within the sport.

I used to hear stories from my father. He was talked about wrestling matches in India and that's why I got interested and I thought to myself, I wanted to investigate, I wanted to find out what it was, the skill of wrestling. My father used to speak about it very highly.

(Coach 1 - M)

My father was a wrestler - I'm from a Sikh background. Strength sports are, you know, we thrive off that... You almost have to wrestle... If the father was active, normally they know what they got out of the sport and how sport was part of their youth, as young child and through adulthood.

(Coach 2 - M)

The quotes from Coaches 1 and 2 highlight how their involvement in wrestling was heavily shaped by their fathers' influence and cultural traditions, which can be critically examined through Goffman's theories of impression management, social scripts, and identity transmission. Goffman's notion of impression management reveals how the coaches' interest in wrestling was driven by a desire to align with the culturally approved male identity their fathers modelled (Goffman, 1959; Marsiglio and Cohan,

2000; Scott, 2016). For Coach 1, his father's admiration for wrestling inspired a personal investigation into the sport, while for Coach 2, wrestling became an almost obligatory pursuit within his Sikh cultural background, where strength sports are valorised as a key part of masculine identity (Kukreja, 2023). These examples illustrate how social scripts passed down through family narratives shaped the coaches' public performances, positioning wrestling as a key aspect of their masculine self-presentation (Snyder, 2012; Potrac et al., 2022). However, the same cultural and familial scripts that encouraged the sons' participation in wrestling may have simultaneously, yet unwittingly, excluded their daughters (Evans, 2006; Wheeler, 2012). Goffman's (1979) theory suggests that the transmission of social roles is often deeply gendered, and the emphasis on wrestling as a male-dominated, strength-oriented activity likely reinforced traditional gender expectations, making it harder for their daughters to envision themselves in the sport (Hockin-Boyers, 2021). The absence of wrestling as part of their gendered script reflects the restrictive nature of identity formation when cultural narratives exclude marginalised or underrepresented groups from public visibility, as in the case of these daughters (Boyd, 2023; Hamilton 2023). Thus, the daughters' disengagement from wrestling highlights how entrenched gendered social scripts can limit opportunities for impression management that diverge from societal norms.

The male coaches seemed to have sons that hold a great interest in the sport and compete at high levels. They also both have daughters, where one has competed internationally, and another had no interest in the sport. The coaches appeared to follow the upbringing they had, by encouraging their children to wrestle.

If the parents are from a sporting background, it certainly helps the generation as they're coming up. So, I used to wrestle from 84 to 93. I've got a son and a daughter, and I took my son to wrestling at 6. So, he's been wrestling 21 years... I took my daughter to hockey, tennis, she played football and won a trophy. I encouraged her enormously in sport, but she never took to wrestling, she didn't like it. For why? That's her story.

(Coach 1 - M)

My son's going to America. He's 15. He's just got into a school in America, so he should be wrestling full time now... My daughter wrestles as well. So, she's a great role model for the Leicester club and she has represented Great Britain.

(Coach 2 – M)

Coach 1's experience of introducing both his son and daughter to different sports but seeing only his son pursue wrestling reflects Goffman's notion of gendered social scripts and front stage performances (Goffman, 1979; Snyder, 2012; Potrac et al., 2022). While his son embraced wrestling, his daughter rejected it, highlighting how societal norms shape gendered performances. Despite his encouragement, the daughter's reluctance to engage in wrestling suggests that wrestling, as a sport traditionally aligned with masculinity, may have been incompatible with the social script of femininity that she was expected to perform (Krane et al., 2004; Hamilton, 2023). Goffman's theory of social interaction (1969) and theoretical construct of gender display (1976) suggests that her refusal may have been driven by an internalised understanding that wrestling did not fit the culturally accepted ways of presenting

herself, illustrating the tension between familial expectations and socially accepted gender roles (Hamilton, 2023). In contrast, Coach 2's daughter's engagement with wrestling demonstrates how impression management can shift when new role models emerge within a family or community, especially as a woman (Rister, 2016). His daughter became a role model herself, representing Great Britain and serving as an example for other girls at the Leicester club, which suggests that front stage performances of femininity in wrestling can be renegotiated when barriers are broken (Rister, 2016). This supports the idea that while wrestling is culturally framed as a male pursuit, individuals can challenge these scripts and redefine what it means to engage in the sport (Kivisto and Pittman, 2007; Oppliger, 2015). However, the fact that fathers are more likely than mothers to introduce their children to wrestling reinforces the idea that the sport remains tied to traditional constructions of masculinity, and participation may still be driven by a desire to gain parental approval and conform to expectations around gender roles (Goffman, 1976; Oppliger, 2015; Dorsch et al., 2022). The daughters, implicitly or explicitly, may have learned that wrestling is not part of the prescribed front stage performance of femininity, making it less likely that they would pursue the sport.

As demonstrated by the interviewees, research indicates that parents are integral to the facilitation of children's engagement in sport (Dorsch et al., 2022). Parents have been shown to draw on the professional and interpersonal knowledge of coaches to begin to understand the needs of their children and the technical aspects of the sport (Knight and Holt, 2014; Dorsch et al., 2022). An Islamic-practising parent of both girls and boys, with no coaching or sporting background, spoke about ensuring she channels the values of her daughters' wrestling sessions into everyday life.

I have never been massively sporty, but my daughter loves every sport. She's great at football, gymnastics, anything competitive and active, she wants to do. I never realised how much more wrestling brings than just physical growth. It's all about discipline, respect and I've noticed that difference in her since she started wrestling. I'm trying to encourage those values in the house too.

(Parent 1 – F)

This quote from Parent 1 links to Goffman's (1959; 1969) theory of impression management and role performance, particularly in how social roles and values are transmitted and reinforced through family and sport (Haycock and Smith, 2011). Goffman's concept of front stage behaviour suggests that individuals perform specific roles based on societal and contextual expectations (Goffman, 1959). In this case, the mother acknowledges that while she herself is not 'massively sporty,' her daughter is deeply engaged in sports and has found wrestling to offer more than just physical development - emphasising discipline and respect as core values the daughter has adopted. From Goffman's perspective, this recognition points to a shift in impression management within the family. The daughter's engagement in wrestling provides her with a new set of social skills and values that she then brings into her everyday performances at home, reshaping the family dynamics (Goffman 1959; 1969; Collett and Childs, 2009). The mother's attempt to integrate these wrestling-derived values of discipline and respect into the household reflects Goffman's idea of how individuals manage impressions and roles across different social contexts (Goffman, 1959; 1969).

A female member of British Wrestling staff who runs her own wrestling club had not only seen the parents influence on children, but also a child's participation in wrestling encouraging the parent to get involved. One female-only event run by her club had seen a large number of mothers and daughters in attendance. The coaching staff at the club have been successful in getting parents involved whilst waiting around for their children.

The [female-only programme], we get majority mothers and daughters coming. And that's only purely because the girls have shown an interest and then the mothers have come along as well. So, you know, and we've kind of encouraged them, 'come on, you guys can get on the mats' and things, so yeah.

(Staff 2 - F)

The concept of dramaturgy can be applied to Staff 2's quote, viewing social life as a series of performances where individuals play different roles depending on the social context (Goffman, 1959; Tseëlon, 1992). In the context of the female-only wrestling programme, the dynamics of mothers and daughters attending and participating can be seen as a significant rehearsal of social roles within these stages (Goffman, 1959; 1979). Initially, the mothers attend the programme as audience members - supporting their daughters' performances, which align with the daughters' interests in sports like wrestling. Here, the front stage performance for the mothers likely adheres to more traditional social scripts of femininity, where they occupy passive, nurturing roles as observers of their children's activities (Lockford, 2004; Ratna, 2024). This reflects their expected societal role of support, rather than active engagement in a male-dominated sport like wrestling (Rankin et al., 1985). However, as the daughters' enthusiasm for

wrestling grows and the programme staff encourages mothers to 'get on the mats,' this invitation shifts the mothers from audience to performers in a new role (Chriss, 2002; Collett and Childs, 2009). By stepping onto the mat, they begin to engage in a front stage performance that diverges from their usual role, potentially challenging the normative gender expectations that define what kinds of physical activities are deemed appropriate for women (Goffman, 1959; Wilde, 2007; Schull and Kihl, 2019). Wrestling demands a performance that includes physical strength and competitiveness, qualities not traditionally associated with the conventional female roles these mothers may be accustomed to performing (Grappendorf and Burton, 2017; Leberman and Hurst, 2022). The female-only nature of the programme can be viewed as a backstage setting in Goffman's dramaturgical terms, providing a safer and more private environment for these mothers to rehearse and experiment with new roles (Goffman, 1959; 1969; 1979). In this space, they can explore their capabilities outside the traditional gaze of a male-dominated society, where they might feel pressured to conform to typical performances of femininity (Humberstone, 2001). The programme allows the mothers to try on a new script - that of an active participant in a sport like wrestling - without the immediate social judgment they might experience in a mixed-gender or public setting.

Furthermore, the mothers' gradual involvement reflects a re-negotiation of their front stage personas, where their identities shift from passive observers to active participants (Goffman, 1959; Potrac et al., 2022). The encouragement from staff to 'get on the mats' fosters a transition in their social roles, which Goffman (1979) would see as a reworking of the performance to fit a new situation, where women are allowed and encouraged to take on roles traditionally reserved for men (Eagly and Steffen, 1984). This shift also reflects the evolving social scripts around gender, wherein



mothers are given the opportunity to rehearse new identities alongside their daughters, showing how dramaturgy helps us understand how social behaviours and identities can change based on the context and audience (Goffman, 1950; 1969; Gale et al., 2019; Potrac et al., 2022).

#### **5.4. Stereotypes and Beauty Standards**

Stereotypes can create a narrow and distorted view of what individuals can achieve, often discouraging them from pursuing certain paths or roles (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; van Es, 2016). Interestingly, there was varying opinions between male interviewees when asked about stereotypes surrounding wrestling. Some emphasise the conclusion of gender differences, while others explore the multifaceted nature of sport beyond its combative aspects.

When I talk about here, the Sikh community, I would say in this current day and age, there is no stereotypes, no barriers. Boys and girls are equal terms and just like, our community is the boys and girls. There's no difference anymore.

(Coach 2 - M)

We probably haven't tried to debunk them because I think some of them are quite beneficial in other areas of the sport, but within, if we take this program, for example, I mentioned wrestle fit as a as a sort of a communication tool in terms of trying to identify that not everything has to be about the combative, full contact, conflicted type approach to the sport.

(Staff 1 - M)

However, the perspectives of the female interviewees demonstrated differentiating responses. Although both reflecting on the role of gender stereotypes in the context of wrestling, they offer contrasting viewpoints on the sport's appeal to women. Staff 2 offers a feminine empowerment perspective, whereas Coach 3 focuses on gender stereotypes and barriers.

I guess I try and debunk it in a way to say where things like a full body workout, you know, women obviously wanna stay fit. They wanna look fit, right? And what wrestling provides is you know you get a good level of conditioning, you get a good level of flexibility, you get a good level of agility, you know, imagine having something that ticks all those boxes. And it's not about looking masculine with those with those sorts of skills.

(Staff 2 - F)

When you wrestle, number one, you're not wearing makeup, you're not wearing nails. Number two, you're not wearing eyelashes. Number three, you have to sweat. Girls don't wanna sweat. 'I wanna wear makeup', and that's what stopped them be athletes, because they're like, 'oh, I'm gonna sweat'.

(Coach 3 - F)

These quotes from Staff 2 and Coach 3 illustrate the tension between societal expectations of femininity and women's participation in wrestling, demonstrating Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management. Coach 3 highlights how traditional markers of femininity - such as wearing makeup, avoiding sweat, and

maintaining polished appearances - act as front stage performances that women feel pressured to maintain, even in contexts that challenge these norms, like wrestling. Wrestling demands a different, more physical performance that conflicts with conventional beauty standards. This perspective challenges the societal notion that athleticism is inherently tied to masculinity, aligning with feminist-based academic research that critiques patriarchal views in sports (e.g., Adams et al., 2005; Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Body image and societal beauty standards are multidimensional constructs including cognitions, affect, perceptions and behaviours, as well as sociocultural experiences of embodiment (Cash and Smolak, 2011; Sabiston et al., 2020). Coach 3's comments link closely to 'traditional' gender norms, in which the physical sport of wrestling stereotypically violates (Wilde, 2007). When this violation occurs, labels are commonly given (e.g., lesbian), questions are asked ('Are you sure that is not a boy on the mat?'), and people are ridiculed ('A girl wrestling – what a butch') (Wilde, 2007; Fraser and Kochanek, 2023). Female athletes, over the last twenty years, have begun to establish themselves in a sporting context, while challenging sexist barriers and restrictive notions about women's physical appearance, athletic ability, and participation in sports (Wilde, 2007). Staff 2's effort to reframe wrestling as a sport that promotes fitness and agility without compromising femininity represents an attempt to re-negotiate the social script, demonstrating that women can engage in wrestling while still maintaining their feminine identity (Goffman, 1959; 1979). This shift challenges the traditional gendered front stage performance, encouraging women to redefine their identities within the sport, but societal pressures around appearance remain a significant barrier (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Metcalfe, 2018).

## **5.4. Governance**

### **Programmes to Combat Inactivity of Muslim and Sikh Women**

In the contemporary sporting landscape, efforts aimed at addressing issues of inactivity and gender disparities within sports, particularly within marginalised communities, have garnered increasing attention (Stonewall, 2023; Sporting Equals, 2024; Women in Sport, 2024). British Wrestling's effort to combat the inactivity of Muslim and Sikh women through the establishment of a women's-only programme, based in their Manchester headquarters every Wednesday and led by a female coach. This governance initiative represents a multifaceted approach to fostering inclusivity, gender equity, and cultural sensitivity within the domain of wrestling, a sport traditionally dominated by men. The programme embodies a strategic response to the challenges faced by women in accessing and participating in wrestling. As a result, wrestling clubs across the UK are beginning to employ a women's only programme. Coach 1 has highlighted his desire to start delivering sessions to women exclusively, but in line with statistics across the DCMS, Sport England and previous academic research, sourcing participants has proven a challenge. Staff 2 has had less of an issue with recruiting for her sessions and has used the connection between wrestling and Islam to allow participants to feel closer to their religion.

We're trying to start a women's programme, women only. We don't have enough candidates at present. There's only two or three or three or four, sometimes five - and they're all under 12. They're young girls, but the parents are very eager to get them into wrestling and you know, doing forward rolls backward, rolls, cartwheels, etcetera, etcetera.

(Coach 1 - M)

We've obviously facilitating and provided funding to train females within the club. And then we try and sort of provide support - if they need to do 1-to-1 sessions with certain female coaches, so they can run their own sessions within that community and that club. I think there's already an attachment with the Muslim community, with wrestling being one of the Sunnah sports, basically one of the prophetic sports that you're supposed to be participating in anyway.

(Staff 2 – F)

These statements from Coach 1 and Staff 2 reflect Goffman's concepts of impression management and the negotiation of social scripts in gendered contexts (Goffman, 1959; 1969; 1979). Coach 1's observation about the low participation of young girls in wrestling highlights how traditional gender norms shape the front stage performance of femininity, which typically excludes aggressive, physical sports like wrestling. Parents' eagerness to involve their daughters suggests a desire to challenge these norms, but the low numbers indicate broader societal resistance (Cooky, 2009; Mulvey and Killen, 2014). Staff 2's reference to wrestling as a Sunnah sport within the Muslim community introduces a cultural dimension that legitimises women's participation, providing a backstage environment, such as women-only programmes and female coaching, where women can safely build confidence in a traditionally male sport (Goffman, 1959; El-Ghazaly, 2020). These efforts represent a re-negotiation of gender scripts, allowing women to redefine their roles within wrestling while navigating cultural and religious expectations (Goffman, 1979; Brake, 2013).

Coach 2's opinion on the implementation of women's only sessions differed from all other participants. He argues that employing a women's only programme in his club would create a segregation between genders and therefore is not interested in the concept.

We don't believe in segregation. So, there's this other campaign where female-only classes, but I won't get involved in that because that's not us. Why should I put on a female-only class when all girls and boys are mixed together?

(Coach 2 - M)

Coach 2's rejection of female-only classes can be critically linked to Goffman's theories of impression management and the performance of social roles (Goffman, 1959; 1979). By insisting on mixed-gender classes, Coach 2 challenges the idea that gender should dictate different social spaces or front stage performances in sports like wrestling (Goffman, 1959; Gale et al., 2019). Goffman's (1959) theory suggests that individuals manage their public roles according to societal expectations, and traditionally, women have been steered towards segregated spaces to conform to feminine ideals of modesty and decorum (Jenner, 2020). However, by opposing this segregation, Coach 2 resists reinforcing these social scripts, advocating instead for a shared, non-gendered space where girls and boys can perform equally (Goffman, 1979; Stiebling, 1999). This perspective disrupts conventional gender roles and pressures girls to conform to typically male-dominated physicality in a mixed front stage, potentially forcing them to navigate a more demanding space where societal expectations of femininity and masculinity collide (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; van Es,

2016). Yet, Goffman (1959; 1979) would also highlight the potential tension this creates for girls, who may feel pressure to manage their gender performance in a space not traditionally welcoming to female physicality (Brickell, 2022). This mixed environment could challenge girls to redefine their public identities within the wrestling arena but may also limit their ability to express alternative forms of femininity that a female-only space might afford (Goffman, 1979; Stiebling, 1999).

A study conducted by Miles and Benn (2016) identified the inclination of some Muslim women to emphasise the preservation of their privacy and the avoidance of the male observation, a predisposition that may not align harmoniously with the prevailing and standard gender dynamics prevalent in many western sports communities (Lenneis et al., 2022). As a Sikh male, Coach 2 may lack this perspective. The exclusionary stance of his club's identity to be mixed-gendered session by saying: 'that's not us. Why should I put on a female-only class?...' has been proven by studies outside of the UK to impede participation. In the Netherlands, gender-segregated kickboxing sessions were proven significant for religious reasons as well as creating a calm atmosphere without men, providing extra comfort for participants (Rana, 2017; Lenneis et al., 2022). This has also been seen in the UK, with Muslim community leaders in Britain continuing to initiate various projects including creating women's only spaces to promote Muslim women's sport in the country (Kariapper and Hoodfar, 2015). As most sports coaches tend to be male (Kariapper and Hoodfar, 2015; UK Coaching, 2017), academics have emphasised the struggles of building the calibre of Muslim women's teams to compete internationally, as they are uncomfortable with being trained by/alongside men (Malik and Rea, 2023).

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the conclusion and the project's key contributions to knowledge. The research questions are the crucial indicators of this, to which they will be individually explored in correlation to the results collected. Particularly, the impact of the practical implications of the study will be considered, as well as its limitations, to provide a realistic evaluation of the findings and research process. The purpose of this study was to place a large contribution to the minimal literature base examining women and girls in wrestling, through critically exploring the factors affecting wrestling participation rates for Muslim and Sikh women in England. As British Asian women with Muslim or Sikh faith remain as an under-targeted population group in UK sport policy, this research project was crucial to understand the barriers and facilitators in the perspectives of the coaches that run wrestling sessions. Using qualitative research practices, interviews and field-notes were collected and analysed to provide the data for this study. The existence of the researcher as a white, agnostic female and therefore by nature an 'outsider' to the target population group, although accepting of their positionality of traditional privilege, may have negatively impacted this study.

### **6.2. Research Findings**

The aim of this study was to critically examine the factors affecting wrestling participation rates for Muslim and Sikh females in England. To achieve this, three research questions were asked:



- 1) *What are the primary socio-cultural and religious barriers that Muslim and Sikh women face when participating in wrestling and how do these barriers influence their decision to engage or disengage from the sport?*
- 2) *To what extent do community support systems, including family, religious institutions and peer networks serve as facilitators for Muslim and Sikh women in sustaining involvement in wrestling?*
- 3) *How can sporting organisations implement inclusive policies and practices to address the specific challenges faced by Muslim and Sikh women in sport, and what impact do these strategies have on increasing their participation and retention rates in wrestling?*

Through conducting this study, the barriers and facilitators although clear to see, held complex backgrounds. Following its completion, four findings were ascertained. For reader clarity, the findings are separated, however remain interconnected.

- 1) The lack of accessibility in wrestling often results in a low retention rate, as many individuals who initially try the sport do not continue due to various barriers such as limited access to training facilities or inclusive environments. Female-only sessions play a crucial role in addressing these challenges by creating a supportive, safe space that encourages women to feel more comfortable, empowered, and confident in pursuing the sport long-term (El-Ghazaly, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2021).
- 2) Some male figures within the sport tend to understate the significance of female grassroots representation, focusing more on recruiting women for competitive

purposes rather than fostering broad participation at the community level (Jeanes and Magee, 2014). This approach overlooks the vital role of grassroots activity in building a sustainable and inclusive foundation for women's wrestling, which is essential for long-term growth and engagement.

- 3) Parental influence can be a double-edged sword in wrestling, either facilitating or hindering a child's engagement in the sport depending on the parent's perspective and involvement. Offering opportunities for both mothers and daughters to participate in sessions together not only strengthens their confidence but also helps alleviate the sense of intimidation, creating a more welcoming environment for family-based engagement in wrestling.
- 4) Many women still hold preconceived, negative perceptions around physicality in sport, which can deter them from trying activities like wrestling. By promoting wrestling sessions as women's-only self-defence classes or as a 'full body workout,' the sport can be reframed in a more approachable and appealing way, helping to increase participation by emphasising personal empowerment and fitness rather than competition.

To assess these in further detail in relation to how these findings answer the research questions, each question will be assessed separately. This approach will allow for a focused examination of the key themes that emerged from the data, providing deeper insights into the factors influencing accessibility, participation, and gender-specific experiences in wrestling.

### **6.2.1. Research Question One**

*RQ1 - What are the primary socio-cultural and religious barriers that Muslim and Sikh women face when participating in wrestling and how do these barriers influence their decision to engage or disengage from the sport?*

These findings critically illuminate the socio-cultural and religious barriers that Muslim and Sikh women encounter in wrestling, demonstrating how these barriers significantly shape their decisions to engage or disengage from the sport. Firstly, the identified lack of accessibility is particularly salient, as the limited availability of inclusive training environments and gender-segregated sessions often deters participation among these women (Cortis, 2016). Many Muslim and Sikh women prioritise modesty and cultural values, which necessitate safe, female-only spaces for physical activity (Sheen et al., 2018; Hashmi & Lawson, 2024). By emphasising the role of female-only sessions in fostering a supportive atmosphere, the findings underscore how such initiatives can counteract existing barriers, thereby enhancing confidence and long-term engagement in wrestling (Baker and McKay, 2001). Moreover, the tendency of some male figures within the sport to prioritise competitive recruitment over grassroots participation reflects a broader systemic issue within wrestling culture that undermines the importance of fostering community-level engagement (Rosso and McGrath, 2017; Rowe et al., 2018). This focus not only neglects the unique needs of female wrestlers but also perpetuates a cycle of exclusion, particularly affecting those from marginalised backgrounds (Cecchine, 2019). A critical examination of this dynamic reveals the need for a paradigm shift toward prioritising grassroots initiatives that nurture a sustainable and inclusive environment for women.

Parental influence emerges as a complex factor that can either facilitate or hinder engagement, reflecting broader socio-cultural expectations and religious norms (Côté, 1999; Dixon et al., 2008, Dorsch et al., 2022). The findings highlight the potential of creating opportunities for mothers and daughters to participate together, which not only helps mitigate feelings of intimidation but also strengthens familial support networks that are crucial for sustained participation (Trost et al., 2003). This approach aligns with cultural values, further reinforcing the significance of community in shaping individual decisions to engage in sport. Finally, the persistent negative perceptions surrounding physicality in sport reveal a significant barrier that disproportionately affects Muslim and Sikh women (Hamdonah, 2022). By reframing wrestling sessions as women's-only self-defence classes or full-body workouts, the sport can be presented in a more culturally sensitive manner that emphasises empowerment rather than competition. This reframing is crucial for challenging existing stereotypes and creating a more inviting atmosphere for participation (Eagly and Steffen, 1984; Mulvey and Killen, 2014). In summary, these findings illustrate the intricate interplay between socio-cultural and religious factors that influence the participation of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises accessibility, grassroots engagement, parental involvement, and positive reframing of the sport to create an inclusive and empowering environment.

### **6.2.2. Research Question Two**

*RQ2 - To what extent do community support systems, including family, religious institutions and peer networks serve as facilitators for Muslim and Sikh women in sustaining involvement in wrestling?*

These findings directly link to the research question by highlighting the crucial role of community support systems in facilitating the sustained involvement of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. Firstly, the observation that some male figures in the sport underestimate the importance of female grassroots representation speaks to a broader systemic issue that can undermine community engagement (Oxford and McLachlan, 2018). This neglect of grassroots activities limits opportunities for women to participate in wrestling at a foundational level, where community support systems, such as peer networks and local organisations, play a pivotal role in nurturing involvement (Khor, 1999; Misener and Doherty, 2012). Without an emphasis on grassroots initiatives, women may lack access to a supportive environment that encourages their long-term engagement, particularly in cultures where modesty and gender segregation are significant considerations (Stiebling, 1999; Baker and McKay, 2001; Sheen et al., 2018; Hashmi & Lawson, 2024). Moreover, the findings regarding parental influence illustrate how family dynamics can either facilitate or hinder a child's involvement in wrestling. When opportunities for both mothers and daughters to participate together are created, it fosters a sense of familial support that is essential for sustained engagement (Goffman, 1959; 1969; 1979; Grappendorf and Burton, 2017; Leberman and Hurst, 2022). This aligns with the research question by emphasising that family involvement can serve as a key facilitator, helping to alleviate intimidation and build confidence among young female wrestlers. Such dynamics not only promote participation but also enhance the sense of community among Muslim and Sikh women, as they navigate their involvement in a sport that may otherwise feel foreign or intimidating (Ratna, 2024). Together, these findings underscore the importance of recognising and enhancing community support systems - whether through family involvement or grassroots initiatives - as essential facilitators for Muslim

and Sikh women in sustaining their participation in wrestling. They highlight that fostering an inclusive and supportive community environment is critical to overcoming the barriers that may otherwise discourage women from engaging in the sport long-term.

### **6.2.3. Research Question Three**

*RQ3 - How can sporting organisations implement inclusive policies and practices to address the specific challenges faced by Muslim and Sikh women in sport, and what impact do these strategies have on increasing their participation and retention rates in wrestling?*

These findings effectively address the research question by illustrating specific strategies that sporting organisations can implement to create inclusive policies and practices aimed at increasing the participation and retention rates of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. The promotion of wrestling sessions as women's-only self-defence classes or full-body workouts serves as a vital strategy for reframing the sport in a manner that resonates with the values and concerns of these women (Channon and Matthews, 2016). By emphasising personal empowerment and fitness rather than competition, organisations can alleviate preconceived negative perceptions about physicality in sport (Ives et al., 2021). This shift not only makes wrestling more approachable but also aligns it with the preferences of many Muslim and Sikh women, who may be more inclined to participate in a context that prioritises self-improvement and personal safety (Franceschelli, 2016). Such an inclusive approach directly responds to the need for tailored marketing and programming that considers cultural sensitivities, thus enhancing the appeal of wrestling for these communities.

Secondly, the finding regarding the lack of accessibility and its correlation with low retention rates highlights the necessity for organisations to establish female-only sessions that provide a supportive and safe environment (Bean et al., 2014; Gatenby, 2019). These dedicated spaces are crucial in addressing the barriers faced by Muslim and Sikh women, such as modesty concerns and the need for gender-segregated activities. By implementing policies that prioritise these sessions, sporting organisations can create an inclusive atmosphere that fosters confidence and long-term engagement, ultimately leading to improved retention rates (Skinner et al., 2008). In summary, these findings suggest that by adopting inclusive strategies - such as reframing the sport's image and enhancing accessibility through female-only sessions - sporting organisations can effectively address the unique challenges faced by Muslim and Sikh women. These practices not only facilitate increased participation but also create a sustainable framework that promotes long-term retention in wrestling, ultimately contributing to a more diverse and inclusive sporting environment.

## **7. Significance**

This thesis is significant to wider research for several reasons. First, it represents a novel study in an area that is extremely underexamined in academia, specifically focusing on the experiences of Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. For six consecutive years, British Asian women have been the least likely demographic to participate in sport in the UK (DCMS, 2022), yet most studies have concentrated on mainstream sports, such as football (Ratna, 2014), or approached the topic from a general physical activity perspective (Hill and Azzarito, 2012; Nanayakkara, 2012). By highlighting the unique challenges and barriers faced by these women, the thesis contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of encouraging further diversity in sports. Additionally, it adds to the field of sport sociology by examining the intersection of culture, gender, and religion in sports participation, enriching existing literature and offering insights into how various social factors influence engagement in physical activities. The strategies identified in this research can inform sporting organisations and policymakers about effective approaches to fostering inclusivity in sports. By providing actionable recommendations, the study serves as a guide for creating more equitable sporting environments, which is relevant for broader discussions on access and representation in athletics. Moreover, the focus on female participation supports ongoing conversations about gender equity in sports (Jeanes et al., 2021). By demonstrating how tailored initiatives can enhance the involvement of women, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, the thesis contributes to efforts aimed at promoting equality in sports at all levels. The emphasis on community support systems also underscores the importance of social networks and grassroots initiatives in sustaining participation, making the research applicable to various contexts and populations interested in community engagement



in sports. Overall, this thesis is significant as it deepens our understanding of diversity and inclusion in sports, informs policy and practice, promotes gender equity, and highlights the role of community engagement - all critical to advancing the field of sport studies and fostering a more inclusive sporting culture.

## **8. Recommendations for Sporting Organisations and Future Policy**

Upon the conclusion of this study, a set of recommendations for has been developed based on the data collected. These recommendations aim to address the key challenges identified in the findings and provide a framework for fostering a more inclusive and accessible environment for Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. Grounded in insights from participant narratives, observations, and theoretical frameworks, these recommendations seek to advance policies, practices, and initiatives that promote equality, cultural sensitivity, and diversity within the wrestling community.

### **8.1. Awareness of Opportunities**

Firstly, tackling the issue of limited opportunities and awareness surrounding wrestling is imperative. The study emphasises that, without familial or social connections to the sport, individuals are less likely to engage. To counter this, a proactive approach to promotion is essential. Initiatives such as hosting after-school events at local schools can serve as effective entry points, encouraging pupils to experience wrestling first-hand. The dissemination of information through tangible materials like leaflets or posters, coupled with a strategic and expanded use of social media, can significantly amplify awareness within the target audience. By leveraging digital platforms, coaches can reach a broader audience, broadcasting information about the benefits and inclusivity of wrestling. Despite the potential benefits of wrestling, the limited number of affiliated clubs – only 52 – presents a notable barrier for women and girls seeking to participate in the sport. This scarcity can be addressed by implementing outreach programmes. For instance, representatives from BWA could visit local schools to conduct wrestling sessions for young girls. This direct engagement not only introduces

the sport to potential participants, but also works to cultivate interest from a young age, overcoming the barriers of limited opportunities. To further enhance accessibility, overcoming obstacles such as insufficient funding, a shortage of qualified level two coaches, and prevalent stereotypes associated with women in wrestling is vital. The BWA can play a pivotal role by actively seeking and securing funding, investing further in coach training programmes, and challenging these stereotypes by promoting diversity through targeted awareness campaigns. By doing so, the BWA can pave the way for a more conducive environment that encourages women and girls to participate without apprehension. Additionally, social media can be harnessed as a powerful tool for marketing and breaking down stereotypes. The BWA should strategically utilise multiple platforms to showcase the diversity of women already engaged in wrestling. By featuring their stories and accomplishments, the organisation can create positive role models, dispelling misconceptions and illustrating the inclusivity of the sport.

## **8.2. Like Mother Like Daughter**

The second overarching recommendation is a crucial avenue for fostering increased participation among Muslim and Sikh women in wrestling. Implementing opportunities where mother and daughter can take part in the same session appeared to positively impact their sporting experience. The research findings underscore the pivotal role of parents, particularly mothers, in influencing the participation of women and girls in sports. Creating dedicated sessions for mothers and daughters not only acknowledges the significant influence of familial support but also serves as a strategic approach to boosting confidence and involvement. The research identified that parents play a vital role in shaping the decision-making process of their daughters when considering participating in sport. Introducing specialised sessions that cater to the unique

dynamics of mother-daughter relationships can be a powerful strategy to capitalise on this influence. Mothers, being key decision-makers and influencers in their daughters' early lives, are likely to feel more confident and motivated to engage in wrestling if they can do so alongside their daughters. Conversely, daughters may also find a sense of encouragement and comfort in participating alongside their mothers. These dedicated sessions can serve multiple purposes. Firstly, they create a supportive and inclusive environment where both mothers and daughters can feel comfortable exploring a new sporting activity together. This shared experience not only strengthens their bond but also fosters a sense of community among participants. Secondly, these sessions can act as a platform for mothers to actively engage in physical activity, potentially breaking down any preconceived notions or stereotypes they may hold about wrestling. This first-hand experience can be transformative, challenging misconceptions and promoting a positive perception of the sport. To implement this recommendation effectively, the BWA could collaborate with affiliated clubs to design and promote specific mother and daughter sessions. These sessions should be structured to accommodate participants of varying skill levels, ensuring accessibility for both beginners and those with prior wrestling experience. Outreach efforts should accentuate the benefits of joint participation, emphasising the potential for increased confidence, improved health, and well-being, and strengthened familial relationships. The introduction of mother and daughter specific wrestling sessions represents a strategic step towards fostering increased participation among Muslim and Sikh women. By recognising and capitalising on the influential role of familial relationships, this recommendation seeks to create an inclusive and supporting environment that not only addresses participation barriers but also enhances the overall experience for women and girls in wrestling.

### **8.3. A Little Less Competition**

For the final recommendation, addressing the desire for competition expressed by coaches in this study is imperative. While competition is a significant aspect of wrestling, it may prove too intense for newcomers to the sport. Therefore, a key recommendation is to diversify the offerings by incorporating more fun and grassroots-style sessions. Providing opportunities for individuals to engage in more relaxed and enjoyable activities can serve as a gateway to the sport, making it more accessible to a broader audience. The creation of fun and basic-level sessions is essential in catering to individuals who may be intimidated by the intensity of competitive wrestling. Offering these sessions allows newcomers to 'play' and experience authentic enjoyment, fostering a positive introduction to the sport. The emphasis here is on creating an environment that is not only physically engaging but also socially enjoyable, encouraging participants to return for the sheer enjoyment of the experience. To implement this recommendation effectively, a co-production approach is suggested for the development of future policies and initiatives. This involves actively engaging with potential audiences for BWA sessions, seeking their input on the types of opportunities they would like to see. This collaborative process involves asking communities about their preferences in terms of what, how, when, and where these opportunities should be provided. Co-production aligns with the growing interest in qualitative research within the sport and exercise discipline, emphasising the importance of working with participants to shape initiatives and policies. The concept of co-production is gaining momentum with researchers in the sport sociology domain, such as Golob and Giles (2018), who advocate for a participatory approach. This approach contrasts with traditional methods of developing policies for participants, highlighting the significance of involving the target audience in the decision-making

process. While calls for further research on co-production have been made by academics in recent years, its application in the sports context, particularly in addressing barriers faced by specific communities, remains a promising avenue for future exploration (e.g. Nobles et al., 2020; Luguetti et al., 2021; van de Ven et al., 2021).

This study not only identifies barriers but also lays the groundwork for future research and initiatives aimed at promoting inclusivity and diversity within the realm of sports, particularly wrestling. By adopting a co-production approach, British Wrestling could begin to create a more welcoming and equitable environment for Muslim and Sikh women. The goal is to enable these women to fully embrace the opportunities and benefits that participation in wrestling and other sports can offer, fostering a sense of community and empowerment.

## 9. Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### ***Background***

- 1) What is your role at British Wrestling?
- 2) How long have you been in your role?
- 3) Did you have a background in wrestling, prior to this role?
  - a. If so, in what capacity? (For example, a coach, an athlete, an official)
- 4) What about this role appealed to you?

#### ***Sports Participation***

- 5) Can you talk to me about the impact of British Asian women's involvement in wrestling as a whole?
  - a. How, if at all, has the involvement of British Asian women shaped the landscape of wrestling in terms of diversity and representation?
- 6) The document mentions an aim to facilitate female participation. Can you expand on what enabling female participation looks like?
  - a. How can female participation be made easier?
- 7) **\*COACHES\*** Why do you think that British Asian women are least likely to participate in sport?
- 8) What initiatives or programmes does British Wrestling have in place to promote and empower British Asian women to get involved in wrestling?
- 9) Since first becoming involved in wrestling, have you seen many changes in participation rates? (More/less people than before you started, or stayed similar)

- 10) In your experience, and referring to males and females, how have new wrestling participants reacted to sessions? (Positively/negatively)
- a. Is there a common denominator for why they react that way? (e.g. like/dislike the sport, social aspects etc).
- 11) Are you more likely to retain the attendance of males or females?
- a. Are you aware of why this is?
- 12) Since running your Women's Only sessions, how, if at all, has participation changed for females?
- a. What do you believe has got females through the door and into wrestling sessions? (e.g, the opportunity to participate, accessibility, the women's only rule etc).
  - b. What more could British Wrestling do to get more females onto the mat?
- 13) To what extent do you think children are more likely to participate in sport if their parents are active?
- a. On the other hand, have you seen situations where children's participation in sport encourages a parent to participate?
- 14) To what extent do you believe negative stereotypes and societal norms has on the participation of British Asian females?
- a. What role do you believe education and awareness play in combating these negative stereotypes and societal norms and promoting inclusivity in sports for British Asian females?
- 15) How much do you think the limited opportunities for participation contribute to being a barrier for British Asian women interested in participating in sport?
- 16) Are there any challenges or barriers that British Asian women might face in the wrestling community?



- a. How is BW addressing these obstacles to ensure a supportive environment for all participants?
- 17) Have you had British Asian women/girls show an interest in wanting to compete at high levels in wrestling?
- a. Are there many elite British Asian women wrestlers?

***Governance and policies relating to British Asian women in sport***

- 18) Are there any specific policies or initiatives that you believe have been successful in promoting diversity and inclusion for British Asian women in sport?
- a. Expand on examples // Wrestling examples and those from other NGB's.
- 19) In your opinion, what more can be done at the governance level to ensure equal opportunities and support for British Asian women in sport?
- 20) Have you seen any situations where sporting policies or initiatives have unintentionally reinforced stereotypes or biases against British Asian women?
- a. If so, how do you believe these issues can be addressed moving forward?

***Intersectionality***

- 21) What has been the reaction to those women's only events from participants?
- a. How can British Wrestling better accommodate the diverse needs and experiences of British Asian women to ensure their participation and inclusion in the sport?
- 22) How big of a role do you think representation plays when considering participating in sport?

- 23) There are many masculine-based stereotypes in wrestling, due to the physical nature of the sport. How have you approached trying to debunk these stereotypes, if at all?
- 24) How do you believe the combination of race, gender, and cultural background influences the barriers faced by British Asian women in participating in sports?

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