

**It's Just a Kid's Game: An Ethnographic Approach Examining the Intersection of Societal,
Social, and Cultural Elements of The Midwestern Kickball League**
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Dr. Jordan Bass, Chair

ABSTRACT

For this dissertation, I conducted an interpretive ethnography of the Midwestern Kickball League (a pseudonym). The ethnography was grounded in a circuit of culture framework, and I immersed myself within the culture of the Midwestern Kickball League for the 2018 season where I attended practices, games, podcasts, charity events, social events, Game of the Weeks, and after parties. I became a participant (as) observer within the league and utilized ethnographic methods such as observations, informal and formal interviews, participant journals, a researcher diary, and material/digital products. I employed a circuit of culture model as a guide to understanding the fluid process of culture within the Midwestern Kickball League. Specifically, I analyzed culture through the production, representation, and consumption of cultural product throughout the league. I also implemented a multi-level (societal/community, organizational, and individual) examination of culture based in various academic research paradigms. A theoretical framework was formulated from literature on organizational culture, identity theory, social identity theory, sense of community, social capital, and sport participant motivation. The results are conveyed in the form of an interpretive ethnography, where I was able to provide personal accounts that contributed to the understanding of the Midwestern Kickball League context. In all, I used the six chapters that follow to provide an in-depth exploration of a captivating and complex cultural setting.

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the dissertation topic is outside your normal realm of study, I appreciate the insight you have been able to provide. Your quantitative perspective and comments helped me address potential limitations and provided me with future research ideas. To Dr. Hallman, your positivity and insight into qualitative research was valuable. The suggestion of journaling allowed me to gain more honest feedback from my participants. To Dr. Thomas, thank you for bringing your infectious personality to my dissertation study You lighten up the room and helped make the entire process less intimidating.

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To the [Midwestern Kickball League], you provided me with a community that opened my eyes, challenged my beliefs, and encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone. Thanks for letting me be a small part of an amazing organization.

When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in an eternity before and after, the little space I fill engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified. The eternal silence of those infinite spaces frightens me...

-Excerpt from Blaise Pascal

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KEY TERMS

Midwestern Kickball League (MKL): Pseudonym given to the league

Springville: Pseudonym given to the city where the Midwestern Kickball League is located

Hawks Park: Pseudonym for the semi-professional baseball stadium where Game of the Week is held

Remix: Pseudonym given to the local bar that hosts the after party after the Game of the Week has concluded

The Old Town: Pseudonym given to the local bar that hosts the weekly podcasts

Green Garden: Pseudonym given to a local bar which is frequented by Midwestern Kickball League players

State Beer: Pseudonym given to a local restaurant that sponsors a team

Water Street: Pseudonym given to a well-known street in downtown Springville- Many local businesses are located on this street

Edgewood Park: Pseudonym given to a former location where kickball games were held in the city of Springville

Davis County: Pseudonym given to a prominent affluent county located near the city of Springville

Lucky Puppy Rescue: Pseudonym given to an organization who sold food at the Game of the Week

Raunchy Redbirds: Pseudonym given to one of the teams in the bottom portion of the Midwestern Kickball League

The Penguins: Pseudonym given to one of the teams who sold food at the Game of the Week

Wild Dogs: Pseudonym given to one of the teams that was frequently mentioned in the Podcast and had a player pass away this last season

Midwest Tree Care: Pseudonym given to one of the teams at the top part of the league who regularly competes for the main championship

‘Winner Winner Chicken Dinner’: Pseudonym given to another top team who regularly competes for the main championship

Brewers: Pseudonym given to one of the teams in the bottom portion of the league

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Emma Frost: Pseudonym for a player

Kat Jensen: Pseudonym for a player and team captain

Skye Townsend: Pseudonym for a player

Mason Davidson: Pseudonym for a player and team captain

Richard Tate: Pseudonym for a former player

Nevada Dunn: Pseudonym for a player

Kensley Todd: Pseudonym for a player

Yvette Stevens: Pseudonym for a player

Kendrick Collins: Pseudonym for a player

Kelsey Berry: Pseudonym for a player and current/former board member

Donald Marrow: Pseudonym for a player and team captain

Jessi Fairbank: Pseudonym for a player and current/former board member

Chelsea Waters: Pseudonym for a spectator and fan of Midwest Tree Care

Jake Bond: Pseudonym for a player

Isiah Moss: Pseudonym for a player

Russell Wilkinson: Pseudonym for a player, business owner, and team captain

Zeb Cohen: Pseudonym for a player

Gillian Shortle: Pseudonym for a player

Kara Baxter: Pseudonym for a player

Tatum Lane: Pseudonym for a player

Tory Horton: Pseudonym for a player

Emery Carter: Pseudonym for a player and current/former board member

Dakota Snider: Pseudonym for a player and team captain

Greer Dolton: Pseudonym for a player

Jayden Knight: Pseudonym for a player

Sydney Reed: Pseudonym for a spectator and fan of the Raunchy Redbirds

Shae Wood: Pseudonym for a player and current/former board member

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, names, locations, and sponsors, affiliations have been altered using fictitious pseudonyms. Direct quotations and excerpts have additionally been altered to reflect the pseudonyms. The events, as noted and recalled by the author have not been changed.

PROEM

“And that’s the ball game. Everybody line up and shake hands”—That familiar phrase by the umpire shines light on yet another loss for my kickball team. It seems my team can’t buy a win, and the frustration continues to grow. As I walk to the dugout, I have to remind myself that this is just a child’s game, and I play every week to have fun, interact with other people, and most importantly have some laughs with friends. The post-game talk is as redundant as normal, but I applaud my captain for trying to stay positive. I agree we have improved, and it is evident everyone is trying their best. However, the frustration still exists, and I wonder what more I could have done. These thoughts continue to go through my head as I decide whether I should go home and wallow in the loss or meet up with my team and watch ‘The Game of the Week’.

Since it’s 9 o’clock on a summer Sunday night, and there really is not much else to do in this Midwestern state, I decide to go socialize and support the two teams that are playing at Hawks Park. As I drive up to the old semiprofessional baseball stadium, located in a residential neighborhood, I remember hearing parking may be an issue because the league is hosting a charity raffle during the seventh inning stretch festivities, and there is a larger than normal expected attendance.

Even though I have to park a couple streets away from the stadium, this charity raffle makes me smile and appreciate Midwestern Kickball League’s (MKL) connection to the local community. The walk to Hawks Park also lightened my mood from our loss and made me remember why ‘The Game of the Week’ was so special. Not only does ‘The Game of the Week’ feature the best matchup of the day, but the event is made into a spectacle and the entire atmosphere is one-of-a-kind. Because all of the other kickball games have concluded at this

point, roughly 150 players from other Midwestern Kickball teams gather throughout the stands to cheer on their favorite team.

As I'm sitting in the stands, the familiar sounds of 'The Game of the Week' fill my ears. Music's blaring, dogs are barking, and everyone around me is discussing the previous 17 games of the day. I take a deep breath and inhale the smells of the local food trucks that have parked around the ball field. There is also that lingering hint of pot that permeates the air and adds to the ambiance of the entire night. I look around and see clusters of people still in their dust-filled uniforms from the previous games. I notice coolers scattered and beer cans seem to be in everyone's hands. To my right, my teammates are laughing, joking, and enjoying each other's company. To my left, a pot-bellied pig named Charlotte sits next to her owner, and I cannot help but chuckle at her personalized collar and leash.

All my worries and frustrations seem to fade away as the national anthem blares on the speaker system. As the players take the field, I forget about my team's loss and, I'm mesmerized by the ballpark lights. At this point the umpire yells 'Play Ball', and the only thing left on my mind is whether I'll catch a Jell-O shot during the 7th inning stretch.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

During the summer months in a midwestern town, members of a local community gather to participate in the recreational sport known as kickball, similar to the event described above. Not surprisingly, this kickball league provides similar opportunities and benefits as other recreational and leisure programs. In particular, members of the league are able to interact with others in the local community, as well as explore broader cultural aspects of the town (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). Leisure sport literature has also discovered positive relationships emerge between local recreation contexts, self-esteem (Yu & Berryman, 1996), and positive intergroup contact situations (Allport, 1954). Other benefits cited from leisure and recreation sport programs are improved mental health, prevention of heart health issues, empowerment of individuals, and increased social connections (Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries of Australia, 2017).

Throughout the recreational sport and leisure studies literature, holistic approaches have been utilized to acknowledge the ways different elements of a society are connected. Specifically, this intersection is shown through evaluations of the leisure industry (Mikalauskas & Kaspariené, 2016), community leisure services (Murphy, 1977), and community development (Miyoshi, 2013). A commonality exists among the aforementioned holistic examinations, as the research topics are all extremely broad. The use of holism in a more specific context, such as a recreational league, might offer a more nuanced explanation of why individuals actively participate and engage in league activities over the years. It also could highlight the unique cultural and social elements of the league and its participants. Additionally, a narrower focus

may help individual towns and cities understand the importance these leagues hold for the local community.

Scholars have studied the concept known as a sense of place where individuals develop this emotional attachment to a geographical area or time (Creswell, 2004). This sense of place “is based on symbolic meanings attributed to the setting” (Stedman, 2003, p. 672). Based on the lived experience of an individual, an attachment and identification may be created with a local city or community. In terms of a local recreational league, there may be specific ties to the community that make the relationship special. Practitioners and city officials should target these unique elements that contribute to an individual’s perceived sense of space. Additionally, the shared history between a league and city should be considered in terms of community relations and culture/traditions.

Research Questions

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to provide a holistic examination of a local community adult recreational sports league. The ethnographic approach chosen for the present study will allow me to evaluate and document various aspects of the league, establish a dialogue with individual players, and observe dynamics of teams as they relate to the overall league characteristics. This analysis will provide readers with a better understanding of the cultural dynamics of local community adult recreational leagues as well as elucidate the benefits and outcomes individual players receive through participation in the league. Specified below are four research questions that will serve as the basis for this study:

RQ1: How are the cultural dynamics of the Midwestern Kickball League produced, represented, and consumed by the various members of the group?

RQ2: In what ways do the Midwestern Kickball League's cultural dynamics foster social connections among participants?

RQ3: What roles do sense of community and community identification play in the cultural dynamics of the Midwestern Kickball League?

RQ4: In what ways does Springville's unique history, traditions, and heritage impact the Midwestern Kickball League's culture?

To address these questions, I will utilize a circuit of culture model developed by Hall (1977) to inform and frame my narrative around the Midwestern Kickball League (See Figure 1). The model employed for the present dissertation not only investigates how cultural meaning is produced and embedded throughout the Midwestern Kickball League, but it also highlights the interconnections that link each cultural element together (Hall, 1997). Additionally, my ethnographic approach and personal involvement with the league will also benefit from the earlier conceptualization of the encoding/decoding model proposed by Hall (1973). In particular, these two circuit of culture frameworks (Hall 1973; Hall, 1997) allow cultural meanings and commodities to be interpreted holistically. A description of the Midwestern Kickball League and its social environment is provided below.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Midwestern Kickball League

“The most fun wins, since 2002!” As a local community recreational league, the Midwestern Kickball League is in its 17th season and the popularity continues to grow. Located in Springville, the Midwestern Kickball League currently has 36 teams, and there is a waiting list for the upcoming year. Approximately 500 individuals are considered a part of the Midwestern Kickball community and participate in games every Sunday from the middle of May through the middle of August. The players associated with the league have a variety of backgrounds and demographics which mimic the representation of Springville.

The history and background of the Midwestern Kickball League are consistently discussed in both written and spoken form among individuals associated with the league. The importance of this historical connection is portrayed in a blog post by one of its contributors:

Perhaps these history posts are a little nerdy, and seem to yearn for simpler kickball times, but remember what American poet, novelist, and literary critic Robert Penn Warren said, “The lack of a sense of history is the damnation of the modern kickball league.” I might have that quote wrong, but you know what I’m trying to get at.

While the blog uses humor to discuss the Midwestern Kickball League history lessons, the significance of former commissioners, teams, and players remain prevalent to future league decisions.

History of the league. Although the Midwestern Kickball League has over 500 individuals participating every Sunday, it did not just transpire overnight. Rather, the league was officially started as a bar league for industrial workers where participants could express their

competitiveness while enjoying a cold beer. Back in 2002 (as indicated in the organization's slogan), the first game was held between two local pizza/bar establishments. After that inaugural game, the league grew to eight teams and became a true restaurant/bar league where each team was sponsored by a local downtown Springville establishment. When asked about the initial push to join the league, an original player said, "I think the first thing everyone thought about was playing kickball on a blacktop in grade school with a giant rubber ball... only now there was alcohol! The answer was hell yes".

This league gave individuals a place to unwind after work and engage in a low stake "child's-game". It became a place specifically for blue-collar workers to interact and burn off frustration and anger, all while kicking a ball for a couple of hours. Once the games had concluded, the players would head over to one of the local bars and celebrate victory or wallow in defeat. In fact, the games were played on Sundays for this exact reason. Blue-collar workers had Mondays off, so they could shut the bars down after winners were decided and the games had ceased. As described by a long-time player, "we were cooks and bartenders, servers and managers, cashiers and doorman. Some were drinkers, some were smokers, some jocks, some rockers, some skaters, some stoners, but we were all there to try the new kickball league".

Organization of the league. Although the Midwestern Kickball League has a great relationship with the city of Springville and the Parks and Recreation Department, they are their own non-profit organization and operate with full autonomy. Each year the league selects a board made up of six individuals from teams across the league. A commissioner is also chosen to oversee the board members and serve as a point of contact if any issues arise. Board members meet regularly throughout the year to ensure the Midwestern Kickball League, and its associated events, operate in a straightforward fashion. Recently, the board has focused on league

transparency, and they have made meeting minutes, as well as financial records available for viewing via their online website. According to a former board member:

This transparency highlights the non-profit nature of the organization. We want our members to understand how our meetings operate, what is discussed, and what the board does throughout the year. We also want individuals to understand how their money is used in terms of dues, fees, and admission charges. By allowing teams to see a breakdown of expenses and revenue, they may gain a deeper understanding of the connection the league has to the city. What many people don't realize is after operating costs, almost all the money goes directly towards various specified charities.

Additionally, the board has posted the updated rules and regulations of the league, player code of conduct document, waivers, scoresheets, and schedule on their website.

Unique rules of the league. Because the Midwestern Kickball League operates as their own non-profit organization, the rules differ when compared to Springville's Parks and Recreation kickball league as well as WAKA (World Adult Kickball Association) leagues and tournaments. The most notable difference referenced by players of all three leagues, was the size of ball utilized in the Midwestern Kickball League. While Springville Parks and Recreation and WAKA use a standard 10-inch kickball (WAKA, 2018), the Midwestern Kickball League chooses to play with a smaller, 8.5-inch ball. According to a board member, the size of ball was chosen to increase the offensive side of the game. Specifically, "the smaller sized kickball travels in the air faster, is easier to place kick, and provides the offense with a greater advantage".

Another way the Midwestern Kickball League encourages the kicking aspect of the game is by nullifying the strike zone. In fact, balls and strikes are not tracked in any capacity during games. Kickers are encouraged to 'find their pitch', and they have the ability to take as many

pitches necessary without penalty. This rule limits the pitching skills needed for the league, as the kicker determines which pitch they want to kick. It also reinforces the concept that the Midwestern Kickball League is a ‘kicker’s paradise’. The absence of a strike zone thoroughly differs from the other leagues where the pitch height, number of bounces, pitch speed, and pitch spin impact the strategy of the game.

A further rule difference between the Midwestern Kickball League, WAKA, and Springville Parks and Recreation league, surrounds the officiating portion of the game. While both WAKA and Springville Parks and Recreation provide compensated authorized referees (WAKA, 2018), the Midwestern Kickball League is officiated solely by volunteers. Each team is required to provide two volunteers to referee the game before/after their own. In order to provide competent refereeing experiences, the league hosts a ‘Ref Clinic’ at the beginning of the year to help individuals learn the nuances of the game from the officials view. The board also has created an online ‘Ref Quiz’, and completion is mandatory for team captains and highly encouraged for all players associated with the league. Because the league relies on volunteer referees, the board has the ability to relocate officiating costs and contribute more to local charities.

Finally, the Midwestern Kickball League has different requirements than other leagues in terms of the number of women and men that are allowed on the playing field at the same time. The Springville Parks and Recreation Department requires an equal number, so there are always five females and five males playing each game. WAKA (2018) rules diverge depending on the specific tournament, but in general, the co-ed leagues require six men and four women. the Midwestern Kickball League has a more in-depth gender inclusive team rule where “each team must field at least three men and three women on the field at all times”. Although the

Midwestern Kickball League requires the same number of players (ten) as the Springville Parks and Recreation league and WAKA, they have four roster positions open for individuals who may not conform to heteronormative gender beliefs.

League schedule. In terms of the league schedule, the board members work with the Parks and Recreation Department and rent out the city's ball diamonds. Based on the Midwestern Kickball League's webpage information, the games are played at one of ten different locations located across Springville with 25 available fields in total. Because the Midwestern Kickball League competes with other leagues and recreational programs in the city in terms of renting out fields, the quality of the ball diamonds can drastically differ. The nicest location is located at Hawks Park, which is the old semi-professional stadium in Springville. Average locations are located at the sports complexes around the city, and the worst locations are the grass fields with no outfield fences. Although the game strategy may drastically change based on the type of field, the board uses the fields they are given by the Parks and Recreation Department because of the low-costs associated with renting the fields. In particular, a board member indicated these discounted fields directly associate with the flexibility shown by the Midwestern Kickball League. It was stated:

As a board, and quite frankly the league as a whole, we take the fields we are given and make the best of it. Besides Hawks Park, we may not know what fields we have for the week until closer to game time. That's part of the relationship we have with the Parks and Recreation Department though. Our flexibility and our willingness to roll with the punches are indicative of the inexpensive field prices we pay.

As previously stated, each Sunday the games are randomly assigned to fields across the city of Springville. The first games of the day start at 5:00pm with the next round of games

starting at 7:00pm. After these games are finished, the Game of the Week is held at Hawks Park at 9:00pm.

Game of the Week. The highlight of each week for the Midwestern Kickball League community is the Game of the Week. The Game of the Week occurs each Sunday at 9:00pm after all the other games have been concluded. Unlike the games that are held at multiple locations across the city, the Game of the Week is held at Municipal Stadium at Hawks Park. This semiprofessional stadium is one of the city's oldest ballparks dating back to 1947. In fact, over 2,500 fans turned out to watch the local semi-professional baseball game the day it was dedicated. Because of the size of the ballpark, this location serves as a great gathering point for the Game of the Week. The concrete grandstand behind home plate provides a panoramic view for spectators, and the lights at Hawks Park allow for the late-night game after the sun has disappeared.

Players from teams across the league gather to watch the featured game. Dogs are scattered throughout the stands and occasionally other domesticated pets such as cats and potbellied pigs are seen. Other common characteristics of the Game of the Week include coolers of alcohol scattered around the stands, the pungent smell of marijuana, and edibles being passed around as if they were sunflower seeds. The entire experience of the Game of the Week has social roots, and it gives players the opportunity to debrief from their personal game, discuss other games that occurred that day, and watch the highly anticipated game being played on the field.

In addition to the enjoyment that is had in the stands, the Midwestern Kickball League partners with local groups, charities, and businesses each week to sell food and beverages at the game. For example, the all-women adult travel kickball team sold tacos to help raise funds for

their trip to nationals. Another organization sold hot dogs and hamburgers to raise money for puppies that had been abandoned and needed medical care. These concessions tables not only provide hungry players with food after a grueling day in the sun, but they raise awareness and donations for local organizations and causes in the area.

Another common occurrence at the Game of the Week is the merchandise table where individuals can purchase items with the Midwestern Kickball League logo on it. The items for purchase include sweatshirts, t-shirts, coffee mugs, pint glasses, and stickers. There is also a commemorative 'I scored at Hawks Park' shirt for sale for any individuals who completed the task of crossing home plate during the Game of the Week.

Further, the seventh inning stretch festivities are a tradition the Midwestern Kickball League truly enjoys. Similar to baseball, the game is stopped in the seventh inning to give the crowd a chance to move around. 'Take me out to the ball game' is sung as individuals sway back and forth to the lyrics. After the song has concluded, the teams playing in the Game of the Week toss mini bottles of alcohol, Jell-O shots, and other obscure items into the stands. Finally, the charity raffle winner is chosen to participate in an on field promotional event. The goal is to kick the ball into large round containers. If the participant completes this task, they receive half of the money that was raised in the raffle. At the end of the season, the money generated from this event goes toward a local food bank charity.

Other Midwestern Kickball League events. Although the Midwestern Kickball League specializes in playing kickball each week, they host a wide variety of other activities and events. After each Game of the Week, a local bar called Remix, hosts an after party for players of the league. This event gives individuals an opportunity to continue to eat, drink, and interact with each other after the Game of the Week has concluded. Although there is a cover at the door, the

proceeds go back to the Midwestern Kickball League and the charities they partner with. Another weekly event hosted by the Midwestern Kickball League are the Tuesday night podcasts. Held at The Old Town bar, located in downtown Springville, a panel of four to five individuals host a weekly podcast where they discuss the previous weeks games and the upcoming matchups of the week. As a member of the Midwestern Kickball League, you are able to attend the podcasts and watch them live. They are also posted online in case members of the league are unable to attend. On Wednesdays, the league holds open practices at Hawks Park where individuals can work on certain aspects of their game and take part in a scrimmage. While these practices are open to anyone who wants to play kickball, there are certain teams that hold their own private practices as well.

Outside of weekly events, the Midwestern Kickball League hosts a wide range of clinics, fundraisers, and charity events. The most well-known event is the annual [women's kickball clinic], in which the title is a sexualized play on words. The purpose of the clinic is to promote inclusion and give women the opportunity to advance their skills. The clinic consists of players rotating through drills followed by an all-women scrimmage. The event is sponsored by local businesses, so there is always a keg, professional massages, and a bunch of food. Guys are only welcome to attend the event as support staff, which includes operating the grill.

Finally, the Midwestern Kickball League hosts a plethora of events throughout the year to raise money for local charity organizations and national causes that affect local individuals. In total, the league has raised over \$50,000 for charities across the Springville area. This past year alone, the league hosted a preseason charity tournament, end of season auction, winter fundraiser, local charity bar crawl, and league outdoor service day. As previously stated, the money raised at these events went to a variety of charities including local elementary school

book fairs, adopted families, domestic abuse shelters, food banks and upkeep on Hawks park. While a variety of charities benefit from the league, the Midwestern Kickball League also partners with one larger charity each season. This past year, the league raised \$10,000 and donated it to the local humane society to help with the costs associated with a new animal shelter being built.

City of Springville

The Midwestern Kickball League takes place in the city of Springville, which has a population of approximately 100,000 residents. Springville is known for its strong educational system, stemming from the local flagship Division I academic institution. Although the city is primarily known for the university and its respective athletics teams, Springville has a dynamic community with a variety of shopping, dining, and entertainment options. The historic downtown area is one of the ‘must see’ locations because of the locally owned businesses that offer a diverse selection of goods and services. In particular, the well-known ‘Water Street’ is located in the heart of the city and is known as one of the best streets to window shop and take a stroll. Springville has the reputation for doing things their own way and having residents who are free thinkers who are not trying to be anyone else. This concept is shown through the progressive nature of the city as well as the quirky individuals that call it home.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

This extended literature review will cover topics relating to both the initial Midwestern Kickball League participant motivation examination as well as the proposed in-depth ethnography of the league. In order to accurately encompass all aspects of the Midwestern Kickball League, a thorough conceptual framework was created. First, the overarching topic of culture was discussed, and the various cultural aspects will be evaluated through their dissemination throughout the league. Next, a review of the Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory (SIT) literature provided an indication of central concepts related to the research study. These concepts included the internal connection individuals have with the local city, league, teams, fans, and participants. Next, I detailed important concepts surrounding the overarching theory of sense of community. These social connections between players helped me further understand the relationships that exist because of the Midwestern Kickball League. Finally, social capital was discussed, and the subtopics of bonding and bridging were analyzed.

Circuit of Culture

Originally developed in 1973, Stuart Hall created a circuit of culture model, which conceptualized the way in which cultural products are produced, circulated, and consumed. Instead of the previously implied linear relationships common in communications research, this model suggested that the cultural processes occur as a circuit (Hall, 1973). To simplify matters, the process consisted of encoding/decoding where the producer of the message first created the meaning (encodes), and then the receiver consumed the encoded message (decodes) (Hall, 1973). Hall (1973) also maintained that in order to decode the message, the recipient must rely on the sender's cultural knowledge and background in which the message was produced. Ultimately, in

order to comprehend the cultural messages being exchanged, one must grasp the contextual forces involved with the encoding and decoding process (Bass, 2013).

Over the years, scholars have altered Hall's proposed model of circuit culture. Richard Johnson (1983) extended the framework for the circuit of culture model and designed a more complex version that represented the "production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products" (p. 663). He identified these three phases as key interrelated moments in the life of cultural products. Further, Leve (2012) proposed a different version where the circuit of culture acted "as a tool of analysis that opens the way for an exploration of the multiple interrelated processes involved in the construction and management of a cultural phenomenon" (p. 1).

Another conceptualization developed by Hall (1997), involved conditions acting within the circuit as a form of regulation. This circuit of culture framework also focuses on five elements that are interconnected and aid in the production and circulation of cultural meanings (Hall, 1997). These elements include: (1) representation as shown through texts/forms, (2) consumption, (3) production, (4) regulation of conditions, (5) identity and lived cultures/social relations.

First, representations can be understood as "a *process* through which *things*, and hence *meanings*, are constituted" (Leve, 2012, 6-7). While the concept is a complex phenomenon itself, it plays many roles in the understandings about phenomena including language and communication. Next, production occurs through a continuous flow with inputs and outputs. It is viewed as more of an ongoing dialogue instead of a one-way conversation. The third element, consumption, is described by Denzin (2001):

With a cultural studies framework, consumption refers to more than the acquisition, use and divestment of goods and services. Consumption represents a site where power,

ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another. Consumption involves the study of particular moments, negotiations, representational formats, and rituals in the social life of a commodity. The consumption of cultural objects by consumers can empower, demean, disenfranchise, liberate, essentialize, and stereotype. Consumers are trapped within a hegemonic marketplace. (p. 325)

Similar to production, consumption is an ongoing process, which is altered by facilities, infrastructure, customers, etc. (Leve, 2012).

Further, identification relates to the corresponding role an individual has with the production meaning and identity (Woodward, 1997). Specifically, identities serve as discursive categories that impact an individual's sense of self. Taylor (2002) explained, "Identities are scripted and imposed by others as resources for a desired performance of self" (p. 615). Finally, regulation is broken down into two forms. First, regulation can be formalized such as governmental policies and regulations. It can also have a less formal and abstract rendering of a particular pattern where the topic of interest appears 'normal'.

As illustrated through the previous paragraphs, the circuit of culture is a useful tool for evaluating the cultural construction of meanings. In particular, Hall's (1997) circuit of culture framework moved past the binary viewpoint of production/consumption and illustrated the intersection of various elements involved in the processes. Based on this information, the circuit of culture being implemented for the Midwestern Kickball League is displayed in Figure 1.

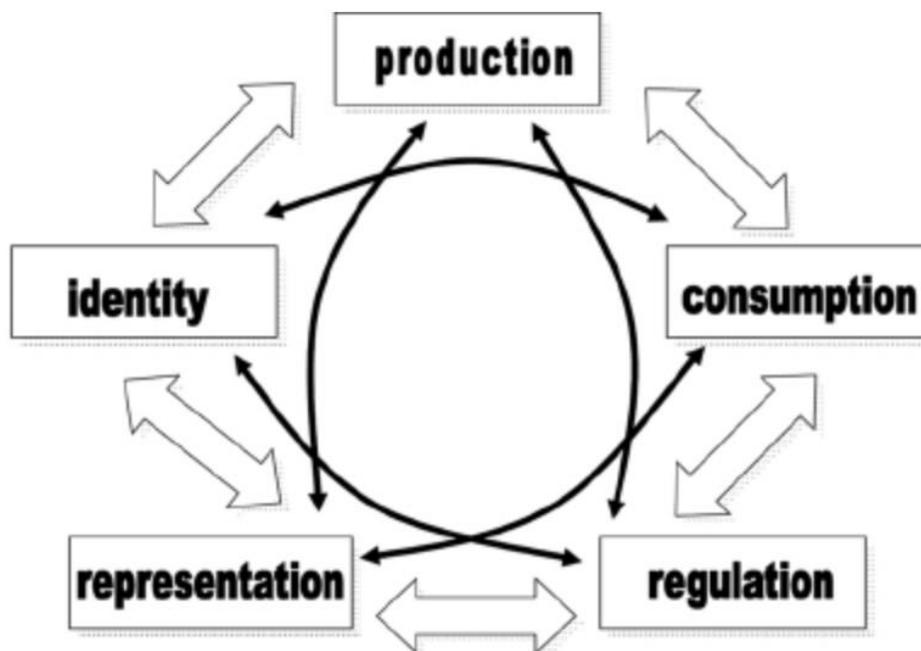


Figure 1. Circuit of Culture for the Midwestern Kickball League (Hall, 1997)

It is through the combination of these versions of the model (Hall, 1983; Hall, 1997) that I chose to examine the Midwestern Kickball League. This decision to utilize a multidimensional and multiperspective model was supported by Scherer and Jackson (2008). These scholars argued the circuit of culture models should be context specific, which ultimately led to the adaption of the adult recreational sport league setting (Scherer & Jackson, 2008).

Constructivism Paradigmatic Approach to Culture

When operating from a constructivist epistemology, knowledge is gained through the interaction of lived experience and ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Instead of seeking to operationalize and generalize the findings, constructivists aim to uncover truth as it exists in the specified domain (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Through the use of qualitative methods, researchers strive to understand the culture of an organization through rich, detailed, thorough, and comprehensive data. By incorporating a constructivist epistemological approach, the author will have depth in their analysis. This depth and breadth of information will surface through unique

social norms occurring naturally throughout a given group, which in the case of the current study, a recreational kickball league.

Schein (1985) proposed culture should be analyzed at three different levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. The surface level is titled artifacts, and it includes anything that an individual would typically see, hear, and feel when facing a new group with an unfamiliar culture. These artifacts can manifest through infrastructure, artwork, and clothing. Language, emotional displays, traditions, and observable formalities are also included as types of artifacts at the surface level (Schein, 2010). According to Schein, “the most important point to be made about this level of the culture is that it is both easy to observe and very difficult to decipher” (p. 24).

The second level of culture proposed by Schein (1985) is that of espoused beliefs and values. At the beginning, individuals typically begin with their own beliefs and values based on their cultural background and experiences. However, these beliefs become shared beliefs with other members as the culture is learned and tested over time within the confines of the organization. After the individual beliefs and values give way to shared beliefs they ultimately move further and become assumptions. The final level of culture in Schein’s (1985) model is the basic underlying assumptions. These assumptions typically guide behavior among group members, as it explains how to perceive their particular environment and contextual setting. The shared basic assumptions of a group provide each individual person with cognitive stability and “defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what is going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations” (Schein, 2010, p. 29). Additionally, Schein (2010) asserts an individual will not truly become aware of the cultural assumptions of the group or organization until they become engrained and a part of the culture.

Although Schein's conceptualization of the three levels of culture has been used throughout the literature, Hatch (1993) sought to fill in the holes by expanding the model with the addition of symbols as a fourth cultural element. Four processes were also purposed which served as a way to examine the relationships between each element (Hatch, 1993). Hatch's (1993) Cultural Dynamics Model is displayed in Figure 2 and illustrates the dynamic processes compared to the original static model developed by Schein.

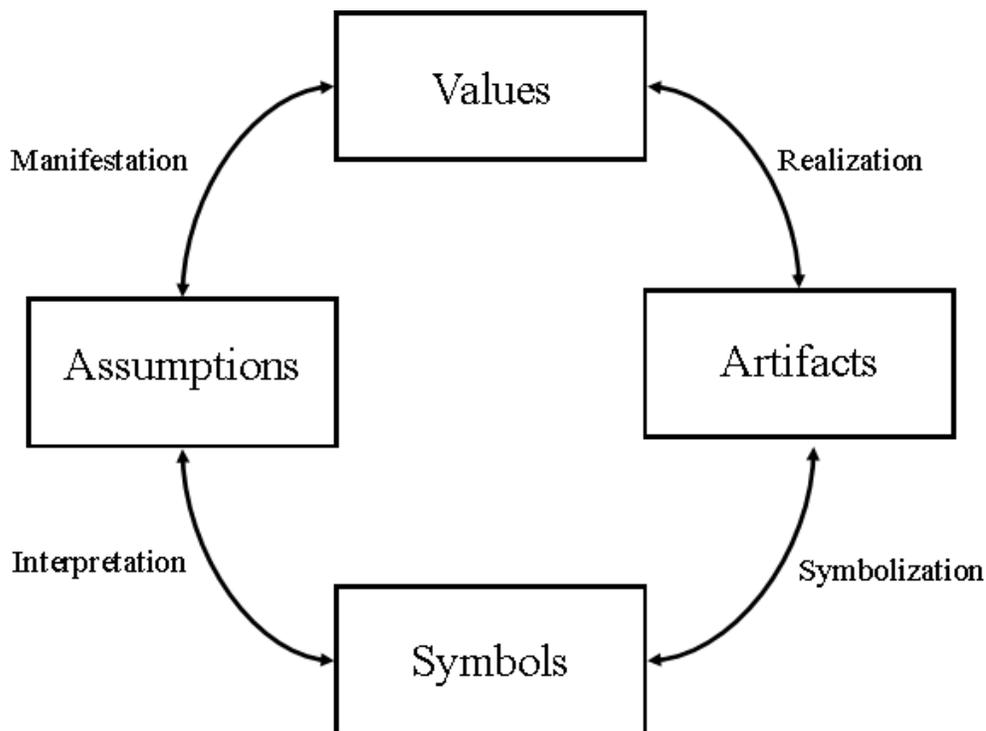


Figure 2. Hatch's (1993) Cultural Dynamics Model

As illustrated in the model, all of the processes occur and recur continuously, and none of the elements can stand on their own. Hatch (1993) proposed order does not matter in regard to the cultural elements and argued for simultaneous processes. The first, manifestation, "refers to any process by which an essence reveals itself, usually via the senses, but also through cognition and emotion" (Hatch, 1993, pp. 662-663). Manifestation occurs when intangible assumptions are translated into values and beliefs. Specifically, it provides individuals with ways to understand the organization through "certain ways of seeing, feeling, and knowing" (Hatch, 1993, p. 662).

Per the Cultural Dimensions Model, manifestation can occur in two ways: proactive manifestation and retroactive manifestation. Proactive manifestation focuses on assumptions leading to values where what members assume to be true shapes what they value (Hatch, 1993). For example, if a local kickball league assumes that success depends upon who has the most fun, arguing with the volunteer ref over a call is likely to be viewed in a negative light. Additionally, the perceptions of this argument, along with combined negative thoughts on the topic, can develop into a value for the organization. This value can then be translated into a sense of what ‘ought’ to occur during these game situations and how ‘it should be’ moving forward if another argument arises (Hatch, 1993). On the other hand, retroactive manifestation occurs when values either contribute or are harmonious with assumptions (Hatch, 1993). Within this perspective, “the alignment of assumptions and values reaffirms basic assumptions as organizational members experience an ‘all’s right with the world’ confirmation of their culture” (Hatch, 1993, p. 664). However, if a new value is introduced within the organization, and it conflicts with former assumptions, “assumptions may change to align with values that are already acknowledged within the culture” (Hatch, 1993, p. 664).

Next, the Cultural Dynamics Model discusses the process of realization which occurs between the elements of values and artifacts. Defined by Hatch (1993), cultural realization is, “the process of making values real by transforming expectations into social or material reality and by maintaining or altering existing values through the production of artifacts” (p. 666). Similar to that of manifestation, realization occurs in two ways: proactive realization and retroactive realization. Proactive realization occurs when values are transformed into artifacts. For example, a recreational kickball league may have “rites, rituals, organizational stories, humor, and various physical objects” that are unique to the organization and are based on the

underlying values of the league and local community (Hatch, 1993, p. 666). From the opposite perspective, retroactive realization addresses the relationship between artifacts, values, and expectations. According to Hatch (1993), the retroactive realization process can occur in two ways: “artifacts realized from values, and expectations maintain or reaffirm these values and expectations, [or] artifacts produced by another culture or by forces not aligned with cultural values could introduce artifacts that retroactively challenge values and expectations” (p. 667).

The third process, symbolization, illustrates the connection between symbols and artifacts. According to Hatch (1993), symbolization refers to:

Culturally contextualized meaning creation via the prospective use of objects, words, and actions. The objects words and actions are transformed into symbols, the dynamic constellation of which constitutes the symbolic field of a culture. The symbolic field then retrospectively transfigures artifacts by imbuing them with the charms of surplus meaning. (p. 673)

Although scholars have argued the distinction between the two, Ricoeur (1976) differentiated the concepts by describing a symbol to have a literal meaning and surplus meaning, while an artifact is solely an objective form with literal meaning. Through proactive symbolization “these forms arise first as artifacts, and through additional cultural processing they come to be recognized as symbolic forms by organizational members” (Hatch, 1993, p. 670). Retrospective symbolization addresses the point that not all artifacts are equal within an organization. At times, “an organization may not respond to the symbolic opportunity presented by the artifact, and the object remains in the literal realm” (Hatch, 1993, p. 671). This transformation (or lack thereof) is based on organizational members and their personal exploration of identity through socially constructed images, events, and activities.

Finally, Hatch (1993) proposed the interpretation process to connect the elements of symbols and assumptions. From the cultural dynamic's perspective, interpretation "contextualizes current symbolization experiences by evoking a broader cultural frame as a reference point for constructing an acceptable meaning" (Hatch, 1993, p. 675). Interpretation fluidly moves between assumptions (what is already known) and symbols (possibility of new understanding) (Hatch, 1993). During this process, some symbols and assumptions may be reconstructed based on new experiences of the individual or group. In terms of prospective interpretation, symbols are maintained and may challenge existing assumptions. The contrasting perspective, retrospective interpretation, "reconstructs the meaning of symbols via feedback from the same interpretive move" (Hatch, 1993, p. 675).

Cultural Heritage

In addition to understanding the basic elements and processes of culture, researchers should recognize and evaluate the heritage of an organization, community, and town. Recognized by UNESCO (2018), cultural heritage has been broadly defined as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (p. 5). These unique practices exist within communities and serve as a connection between the present and the past. It serves as a sense of identity for a community and provides an opportunity for knowledge to be passed on from one generation to the next.

Scholars Brabec and Chilton (2015), discuss three aspects of cultural heritage which should be considered when evaluating local communities:

(1) an understanding of place and place-making in the context of a cultural landscape, (2) the intangible heritage of attitudes, values, and practices that govern a culture, and (3) the history of cross-cultural relations in the region, particularly between dominant and minority communities. (p. 268)

Through this evaluation, the living practices, expressions, and knowledge that communities cherish can be preserved. Research indicates cultural heritage strongly contributes to a city's identity and has been documented across fields. Brabec and Chilton (2015) examined two island regions where cultural heritage is threatened due to climate change and environmental disasters. Their results furthered the importance of acknowledging cultural norms and values regarding both tangible and intangible heritage factors. Echoed by UNESCO (2018), "cultural heritage is not only about the buildings and monuments of the past- it is also about the rich traditions that have been passed down by generations" (p. v).

From a more local perspective, Kiner (2015), focused on the American cultural heritage and ecological issues associated with historic family ranching and managing rangeland. The article highlighted the deep knowledge associated with the lifestyle and stressed the importance of the detailed information that was passed down over time. For ranchers, "storytelling was not something that happens anywhere; stories are told near places featured in them" (Kiner, 2015, p. 86).

The previous studies illustrate the distinctive ways cultural heritage can manifest within a city and community. Typically, the elements associated with cultural heritage are not designed to be treated as such. Instead, "works, products, environments, and other artifacts are not born as cultural goods, but become so through a process of recognition based on aesthetic and historical evaluation" (Sarno, 2012, p. 459). Further, cultural heritage becomes significant when people

seek knowledge that will connect them to their families, communities, and ancestors. By serving as a vehicle of identity, cultural heritage can provide social cohesion across generations (UNESCO, 2018).

Identity Theory

Although the premise of the Midwestern Kickball League is based on components of Social Identity Theory (SIT), one must first understand the general theory of identity as well as the concept of the self (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to Jenkins (2008), identity is “the human capacity- rooted in language- to know who’s who (and hence ‘what’s what’)” (p. 5). Restated, identity is simply the answer to the question “who am I” (Van Maanen, 2010). In terms of identity theory, the overarching question of “who am I” can be found through the various meanings people ascribe to themselves within the context of a given role or situation (Burke & Stets, 2009). In essence, identities capture what it means to fill a certain societal role such as the role of an athlete, a friend, or a community member.

Essentially, the notion exists where society impacts the self, which then impacts social behavior (Brenner & Serpe, 2014; Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Based on the environmental context, certain roles are activated, which indicates that identity is a process in which individuals must go through (Jenkins, 2008). Additionally, the process of identification is reinforced through cultural aspects such as common rituals, heritage, and customs that are prominent in everyday life (Jenkins, 2008). These cultural aspects not only help reinforce an individual’s identity, but they also help an individual make sense of whom they are. Further, the process of identification assists individuals in making a distinction between oneself and another (Jenkins, 2008). For example, a person must see themselves as members of a recreational league for identification with the league to take shape.

Moreover, Jenkins (2008) explained that, “identity is never unilateral” (p. 42) and an individual’s self is based on the associations and interactions one has with other individuals. Furthering this point, James (1890; 1950) argued that persons have multiple selves and a multiplicity of identities based on the influence of contextual situations. Therefore, identities are defined as “the set of possible meanings of roles in the form of expectations of others for one or more of these possible meanings” (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, p. 232). Although these self-identities can vary based on the context of a situation, Stryker (1980) posited a hierarchical view of identity where an individual will likely choose an identity that best fits their self-view. This form of self-regulation suggests individuals have free reign to shape their own existence and identities (Burke, 1991; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Although free reign exists in regard to an individual’s ‘sense of self’, identities are prioritized based on the importance of the identity to the individual. The concepts of identity prominence and identity salience help one determine which identity best fits the situation (Burke & Stets, 2009). Identity salience has been defined by Stryker as “the probability that a given identity will be invoked in social interaction” (as cited in Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, p. 232). Restated, identity salience is associated with how often the specified identity is used. Based on identity theory, a highly salient identity is likely to be enacted in various situations (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). However, a highly salient identity may not correlate with the one an individual wishes to perform. In fact, Burke and Stets (2009) elaborated on this point and said, “The salience hierarchy represents the situational self rather than the ideal self” (p. 41). Therefore, a highly salient identity may frequently surface across social situations, but this does not mean it is the identity the individual desires to become.

In regard to identity prominence, McCall and Simmons (1978) believe the prominence hierarchy has the same function as identity salience. However, the distinction is made as individuals choose an identity that best reflects the individual's ideal self. Further, identity prominence has been defined as, "the subjective value or worth to persons of a given identity relative to that of other identities" (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014, p. 233). Therefore, with identity prominence, an individual has the choice of identity, which ultimately highlights the importance the identity has to the individual. For example, a player on a kickball team who misses family dinner because he has an early game would confirm their current identity as a member of the kickball team.

Although identity salience and identity prominence are two distinct concepts, it is important to note the selected identities are not just a given set of behaviors but are rather an ongoing process. In fact, Burke and Stets (2009) operationalized this identification process. They proposed an identity-verification process, which contains four components of identification: (1) identity standard, (2) perceptual inputs, (3) a comparator, and (4) outputs described as behavior (Burke & Stets, 2009). The identity standard refers to the internalized set of meanings and definitions attached to a specific identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, an older man participating in a recreation league may view himself as less masculine than other younger males. In this situation, the level of masculinity would be considered the identity standard. Perceptual inputs are known as the cues or perceptions of how other individuals view them in the situation (Burke & Stets, 2009). A comparator occurs when individuals compare their established identity to the current input perception (Burke & Stets, 2009). The final component, outputs or behaviors, act as the reflection of an individual balancing their identity (Burke & Stets, 2009).

This identity-verification process can be beneficial for any individual who is highly identified with their organization. Based on the example by Davis (2016), the following scenario was created for the recreational sport context. If I thought of myself as a strict team captain who demanded perfection from my players (identity standard), but then I see my players frustrated and down on themselves during a tough game, I may think they see me as a hard-ass captain with no empathy (comparator). Because of the perceptual inputs and cues of frustration, I might switch my strategy to show support and understanding toward my players. In sum, individuals enter into situations, activate identities based on identity salience or identity prominence, and work to perform these identities in order to get identity-confirming feedback (Stets & Burke, 2014).

Although individuals have the ability to choose their sense of self and activate specific roles through identity prominence and salience, they still actively seek affirmation from their peers. Specifically, individuals want to have their chosen identity confirmed by not only their own behaviors but also the behavior of others (Burke & Stets, 2009). In relation to recreational kickball leagues, individuals may purchase a new set of cleats to reinforce their identity as an athlete. Players may also purchase gear or merchandise that displays the logo of the league to reaffirm and support their identity as a member of the league. These examples support the notion that through the process of identification, individuals are willing to commit time and resources to support their desired identity and role (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Social Identity Theory

Similar to that of identity theory, Social Identity Theory (SIT) examines how an individual's identification can operate across various levels of analysis (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000). Originally introduced by Tajfel (1978), social identity was defined as the "... part

of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). Once a person reaches group membership status, an individual's perceptions, responses, and actions are all influenced by other group members. Therefore, this group membership has a direct and significant effect on an individual's self-concept.

Additionally, Tajfel (1972) created what appears to be the first multi-dimensional conceptualization of identification. This conceptualization is comprised of three key dimensions, which together form the basis of group membership: cognitive, affective, and evaluative (Tajfel, 1972). According to Tajfel (1982):

...in order to achieve "identification" two components are necessary and a third is frequently associated with the first two. One of the necessary components is cognitive, specifically, an individual must be aware of their membership. The second necessary component is described as evaluative, in the sense that the awareness is related to some value connotation. The third "associated" component of identification is described as the individual's emotional investment in the awareness and evaluations. (p. 2)

In particular, the cognitive dimension can be shown throughout the sport and recreational setting through the acknowledgement of being on a team. The evaluative component allows players in a recreational sport league to measure their worth both on and off the field. This can be shown through runs kicked in, fly balls caught, volunteering to ref, keeping score, or simple motivational support. Finally, the affective or emotional dimension can be applied to the recreational setting through the various relationships that exist because of the league. The emotional investment made by each player creates a sense of commonality and awareness between teammates.

Furthering the multi-dimensional conceptualization of identification, Ellemers (2012) supported the three key dimensions needed for group membership. However, Ellemers (2012) believed these components may not always manifest in similar ways, and an individual may have differentiating feelings toward a particular component. For example, a recreational sport player might highly value his membership with the league (evaluative) as well as exhibit strong commitment to showing up and playing hard at games (affective). However, the same player may not accept his specific team's group inclusion (cognitive). This scenario highlights Ellemers (2012) thoughts where an individual may only satisfy two of the three components. Although individuals may not always satisfy all three dimensions, Ellemers (2012) believed removing a component in its entirety would be difficult in order to continue to accurately describe group membership.

Self-categorization theory. In order to fully experience social identity theory (SIT), individuals must employ social categorization strategies to help organize and rank the social groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978). In order to achieve this task, Turner et al., (1987) created a new and separate theory: self-categorization theory (SCT). While similarities emerged between SIT and SCT, Hogg and Terry (2000) maintained the importance of SCT and defined it as:

Self-categorization theory specifies the operation of the social categorization process as the cognitive basis of group behavior. Social categorization of self and others into in-group and out-group accentuates the perceived similarity of the target to the relevant in-group or out-group prototype (cognitive representation of features that describe and prescribe attributes of the group). (p. 123)

Further, operating under self-categorization theory, an individual must first cognitively understand and willingly accept the group membership being offered.

Focusing primarily on the cognitive component of identification, Turner and colleagues (1987) developed three levels of self-categorization that were deemed relevant to an individual's self-concept: (1) human identity, (2) social identity, and (3) personal identity. First, human identity made up the superordinate category of the self as human being. Next, "the intermediate level of the self as a member of a social in-group is defined against other groups of humans" made up the social identity category (Hornsey, 2008, p. 208). Finally, the subordinate level of personal self-categorizations is based on interpersonal comparisons related to the personal identity of an individual. As shown by these categories, self-categorization is malleable and comparative evaluations are constantly changing based on the favorability of the dimensions (Turner et al., 1987). Additionally, the cognitive aspects associated with self-categorization theory emphasized a focus on depersonalization. Through this process, highly identified members learn to internalize the norms of the group and adopt similar ways to think, feel, and act (Hornsey, 2008). This internalization has been shown to lead to an implicit shared expectation of agreement among group members (Turner, 1991).

Group membership. As shown from the removal of individuality mentioned in the previous section, group membership can have several consequences. According to Tajfel (1978), four prominent consequential outcomes of group membership exist. The first negative outcome refers to the search for positive social identity obtainment. Essentially, this outcome focuses on the individual's inherent need of joining a group for a sense of satisfaction (Tajfel, 1978). The second consequence is that individuals have no problem leaving a group if they believe their overall satisfaction is diminishing and affecting their social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Next, if issues

occur during the process of leaving the group, individuals will attempt to alter their interpretation of the group. The interpretation will be altered to better fit with the individual's personal beliefs or values. Finally, the fourth outcome suggests that every individual is a member of various groups and there is a need for distinction between these group memberships (Tajfel, 1978).

Further, Tajfel (1978) argued for the importance of group differentiation and distinction. He reiterates the significance of social categorization in relation to these two concepts, as it allows an individual to make sense of the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978). In a similar sentiment, Jenkins (2008), emphasized the importance differentiation has on a group's identification. By comparing one group's membership to another groups, members are able to discover unique attributes of their own group that may in turn provide meaning to the membership.

Intergroup behavior. Based on the literature from Tajfel and Turner (1979), once group membership is solidified and group distinction is evident, intergroup behavior starts to occur. In other words, once a person acknowledges social group membership, the perceptions, responses, and actions of all members of the group are perceived as in-group compared to those outside of the group (Tajfel, 1982). For example, a person who identifies as a member of a sports team and behaves a certain way around his teammates and in a different way toward non-team members suggests in-group bias.

Additionally, these social groups and memberships undergo two processes: social comparison and social categorization. These concepts help initiate the development of the dichotomy between in-group and out-group status (Burke & Stets, 2009). As the process of identification requires distinctive groups, the notion of 'we' verse 'them' further strengthens a group's independence (Burke & Stets, 2009). Typically, these forms of group membership exist

among an organization where an individual feels stronger because they are part of a larger collective entity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Further, scholars have discussed group membership as a way for individuals to improve their own cognitive reflections and develop a stronger sense of identity.

When examining social identities in the form of group memberships, it is necessary to consider the evaluative aspect of social identity on distinct groups and self-concepts (Hogg & Terry, 2012). According to Hogg and Terry (2012):

Because social identities have these important self-evaluative consequences, groups and their members are motivated to adopt behavioral strategies for achieving or maintaining in- group/out-group comparisons that favor the in-group, and thus the course of the self.
(p. 3-4)

Additionally, as the group becomes an extension of one's self, an individual is likely to differentiate between guidelines of the in-group compared to practices of the out-group (Hogg & Terry, 2012; Tajfel, 1978; van Knippenberg & van Leeuwen, 2012).

Community identification. Even though social identity theory (SIT) is typically concerned with in-group and out-group formations within larger organizations (Tajfel, 1978), collective identification is prominent and exists between residents and the local community. In particular, Anderson and Stone (1981) were the first to acknowledge the symbolic power of sport. They viewed sport as a way for individuals to identify with other members of a specified community. Over two decades later, the symbolic power of sport is greater than ever as individuals rarely interact through traditional venues anymore (Putnam, 2000). Instead relationships are formed through less intimate channels such as sporting events, concerts, and online platforms. In regard to the less formal interactions, Heere and James (2007) furthered the

conversation and stated, “sports teams not only serve as a source for group identity but also provide a symbolic representation of other aspects of social or community life” (p. 320).

In a similar sense, community recreational sport programs are often centrally integrated into the life of a city community. These sporting events and leisure activities provide neighbors and other city residents with opportunities to interact with each other (Tonts, 2005). They also serve as a catalyst for relationship building among community members because they “provide a symbolic representation of other aspects of social or community life (e.g., geography, ethnicity, vocation, gender, etc.) (Heere & James, 2007, p. 320).

Because previous community sport research has primarily examined the idea that the local community represents a form of geographic identity (Kenyon & McPherson, 1873; Trail, Robinson, Dick & Gillentine, 2003), it is important to discover the various ways identification can be formed. Throughout the conceptual paper on external-group identities, Heere and James (2007) identified three sub dimensions related to the overarching concept of geographic identity. These sub dimensions illustrated a form of geographic identity based on a city, region, state, or nation. In particular scholars have noted a psychological connection with a sports team based on the connection between the football teams in each of the communities (Funk & James, 2001). For example, an emotional connection exists for the cities of Pittsburgh and Green Bay because of their industrial reputations. Additionally, loyalty exists with those teams because fans feel like they are a part of the larger city community the teams represent.

Further, in the context of out-of-market fans, an attachment to the local city community is prominent. Collins, Heere, Shapiro, Ridinger and Wear (2016) discovered that NFL football fans have a desire to stay connected with their team even though they moved away from their hometown. In a similar notion, when evaluating the connection between a local recreational sport

league and the city community, this attachment may exist among residents and league participants. This attachment and/or identification may surface among residents because of the hometown connection that was previously mentioned in the Collins et al. (2016) study.

Further, six identifications, including community context, were considered by Trail, Robinson, Gillentine, and Dick (2003) in their creation of the Points of Attachment Index (PAI). Since creation, the points of attachment and identification factors have been altered, but the PAI has been used to examine gender differences based on identification (Robinson & Trail, 2005). Additionally, the Points of Attachment Index was utilized by Kim and Trail (2010) to develop a model to examine any constraints and motivations sport fans may experience when attending a game.

Fan community identification. Defined by Yoshida, Gordon, Heere and James (2015), fan community identification is known as “the intrinsic connection that fan community members feel toward one another and the collective sense of difference from others not in the fan community” (p. 107). This horizontal connection to other fans has been found to have a positive impact on fan behaviors. In fact, a recent examination by Yoshida, Gordon, et al. (2015), found fan community identification was the only significant predictor of repeat attendance among fans of the Japanese professional football league. While local recreational sport leagues do not have the same sized fan base as professional and collegiate institutions, the concept of fan community identification could still apply in terms of repeat attendance. In fact, based on the atmosphere of the Game of the Week on Sunday nights, there is likely fan community identification occurring.

Because the concept of a fan community has evolved from past research on brand communities, an examination of fan behaviors is necessary. In particular, Yoshida, Gordon, et al. (2015) discovered a positive correlation between increased fan community identification and fan

community engagement, customized product use, member responsibility, and positive word-of-mouth. Because of the participant and spectator numbers involved with some recreational sport leagues, these extra role behaviors could be beneficial for the promotion of events. In sum, while fan community identification is a relatively new topic, its ties to the brand community literature have provided a strong theoretical background.

Place identification. In 1983, Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff coined the term ‘place identity’ to highlight the importance a geographical area or physical environment has on shaping the human sense of self. Cognitions in the form of memories, ideas, attitudes, emotions, and preferences stem from the physical world in which individuals live. Further, this sense of place serves as a way for individuals to facilitate maintenance of their own identity (Kaplan, 1983).

Relph (1976) posited six ways in which individuals experience place: (1) location, (2), characteristics that distinguish it from other places, (3) spatial constructs and interactions, (4) particularities within the context of a larger framework, (5) continual revision in response to change, (6) characterizations of place in the belief systems of individuals. These characteristics serve as a form of knowledge of a place and help frame a person’s self-image. Taylor (2001) explained, “place is an integral part of existence and the more powerful the memory of place, the more it shapes our notion of the world and our place in it (p. 8).

Furthering the social conception of place identification, scholars have considered the emotional and cultural connections individuals have with each other as well (Lalli, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992; Pol, 2002). Low and Altman (1992) suggested, “places can be seen as repositories and context within which interpersonal community, and cultural relationships occur, and it is to those social relationships, not just to place qua place, to which people are attached” (p. 7).

Therefore, place identification can occur through the association with the social environment as well as the physical dimensions of a place (Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto, & Breakwell, 2003).

As with most forms of identification, higher levels have been reported among individuals who spent more time in a place than others (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003). In particular, Hay (1998) discovered that place attachments formed in childhood were stronger than those experienced later in life. Regardless, Relph (1976) believes, “to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place” (p. 1).

Cultural identity and cultural identification. Despite the synonymous use, cultural identity and cultural identification are two separate concepts (Oetting, 1993). Cultural identity is formed by a person’s affiliation with a specific group, and it usually involves self-perception (Oetting, Swaim, & Chiarella, 1998). In contrast, cultural identification, is “the extent to which individuals view themselves as involved with an identifiable group along with their investment in or stake in that particular culture” (Oetting et. al., 1998, p. 131). To further that point, cultural identification is directly associated with the person’s interaction with the culture. The strength of the relationship an individual has with the culture is key to their levels of identification.

While these concepts slightly differ from each other, they both impact the way in which an individual conforms to culturally determined behaviors (Oetting, et. al., 1998). This self-understanding derives from cultural experiences that have influenced various aspects of an individual’s self (Lu & Wan, 2018). Because experience and interaction are a vital aspect to cultural identification, it is considered an ongoing process that changes based on an individual’s environment (Oetting, 1993). Specifically, reinforcements of the culture such as cultural heritage, traditions, and language are necessary because they correspond with an individual’s identification and perceived success of the culture (Oetting et. al., 1998).

Although a variety of models have been developed to assess an individual's cultural identification, the most flexible model, Orthogonal Cultural Identification, was developed by Oetting in 1993. This model focuses on the level of cultural identification, where any design of monocultural, bicultural or multicultural identification is plausible. Additionally, Oetting and colleagues (1998) discovered identification with different cultures can be measured independently. When evaluating cultural identification from this perspective, three constructs are considered: (1) identification with a specific way of life or culture, (2) perceived and expected success of that culture, (3) involvement in cultural activities and traditions (Oetting, 1998). Through these facets, a greater understanding of personal characteristics, social relationships, and collective memberships can be gained.

Athlete identity. According to Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993), an athlete's identity is defined as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (p. 237). As previously discussed in the identity theory section, this particular type of identity is based on the specific duties and responsibilities of the position (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Further, the inherent desire to compete as well as view oneself as an athlete appear to be correlated and, in some cases, intertwined. Operating from the multidimensional model proposed by Webb and colleagues (1998), it appears an athlete is composed of both public and private identities. Public identities typically relate to the perspective of individuals on the outside. These are the people who view the individual as an athlete through performed external behaviors. On the other hand, the private identity is focused on how the individual has internalized the role of an athlete as well as how the role influences their sense of self (Webb et al., 1998).

Although scholars have found age impacts an individual's identification as an athlete (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010), the opportunity to participate in competitive sport through

recreational leagues may slow the identity from fading. Additionally, as most individuals who participate in community recreational sport programs were former athletes, it is conceivable that the private athlete identity still exists among older individuals. Further, for those individuals who can no longer physically participate in competitive sport, a variety of involvement opportunities exist within the recreational sport leagues. Similar to former athletes who went into the coaching profession, staying involved with sport through a recreation program can help an individual savor their private athlete identity (Shachar, Brewer, Cornelious, & Petitpas, 2004).

Sense of Community

In 1974, Sarason coined the term sense of community (SOC), and he has since been credited with starting the community psychology discipline. Specifically, Sarason (1974) defined sense of community as:

The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure.
(p. 157)

Since the origination of the concept, SOC has been viewed as a characteristic of communities where the perception exists that an individual is a part of a larger social structure (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

In an attempt to simplify and condense the original SOC definition, McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed the following definition, “a feeling that members have a belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to that group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). In addition to the view of reciprocal relationships, a sense of community can also be shown through environmental characteristics

that lead an individual to feel a sense of belonging at the group-level (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). As a concept, sense of community can provide a variety of life quality enhancing benefits to individuals and organizations. These quality of life benefits drawn strictly from a sense of community “carry extensive implications for the domains of sport and recreation management” (Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013, p. 350).

Following McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) condensed view of SOC, a theoretical framework was created through the interaction of four elements: (1) membership, (2) needs fulfillment, (3) influence, and (4) a shared emotional connection (Legg, Wells, & Barile, 2015). The first element, membership, “is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Within membership, McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified five dimensions that play a vital role: (1) boundaries, (2) emotional safety, (3) a sense of belonging and identification, (4) personal investment, and (5) a common symbol system. Boundaries are mentioned to be the most troublesome features of membership because this means there are people who belong and people who do not (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Because the recreational sport leagues are representative of the city community, they offer its members with a strong sense of representation.

Continuing with the four elements of a sense of community, the second element is influence, which is defined as “a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). This element is seen throughout the Midwestern Kickball League because community members are willing to pay admission to kickball related events as well as provide donations for the charity-based initiatives the league is involved with. The third element of sense of community is reinforcement, which is further broken down into two parts: integration and fulfillment of needs (McMillan & Chavis,

1986). As participants in a recreational sport league, members expect their needs will be met and proper resources will be provided through their membership with the group.

Finally, the fourth element described by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is shared emotional connection. The shared emotional connection “is the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Past scholars have established how sport fans draw an emotional attachment to sport teams and how individuals use such perceived memberships to fulfill emotional needs (Cialdini et al., 1976; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Additionally, because of the historical underpinnings of the Midwestern Kickball League, participants and fans alike share an emotional connection based on the traditions, rituals, and shared experiences of the league.

Sport Specific Sense of Community

Although McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) theoretical framework has been applied to a variety of settings and situations, Hill (1996) argued the appearance of a sense of community might be altered depending on the type of community context. In order to address this concern, Warner and colleagues (Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013) used a grounded theory and phenomenological approach to investigate the mechanisms for developing sense of community within a sport specific setting. In support of Hill (1996), Warner and Dixon (2011) concluded that SOC was context specific because the community context can represent a variety of interests including geographical, societal, and relationship based (Gusfield, 1975).

This sport specific approach to sense of community argues that given the unique nature of the sport context, sense of community is manifested differently compared to other settings (Hill, 1996; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013). Therefore, this setting

required its own theoretical background, which was developed by Warner and colleagues through the formation of the Sport and Sense of Community Scale (SCS Scale). This scale examined the interplay of six factors in determining the SOC within a sport setting. These factors included (1) administrative consideration, (2) common interest, (3) competition, (4) equity in administrative decisions, (5) leadership, and (6) social spaces (Warner & Dixon, 2011; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013).

When examining the recreational sport setting, specifically the Midwestern Kickball League, several of these SCS Scale factors are particularly relevant. For example, social spaces allow for interaction amongst community members, spectators, and team members. They provide individuals with certain areas where it was appropriate to converse and linger after the game was completed. Another element, common interest, manifests through the shared love of the game of kickball. Similar to that of social spaces, common interests involving sport, united the community members and provided a mutual talking point for conversations. Next, competition emerges through the eighteen different kickball games being played every Sunday during the summer. In addition, competitive natures start to surface at the end of the season when tournament play gets underway. Finally, equity of administration is present in these recreational leagues through the requirement where at least three females must be fielding and kicking at all times (Warner & Dixon 2011; 2013; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013).

Additionally, while it is important to understand how sense of community manifests in a sport specific context, it is also vital to determine the various outcomes and benefits that are directly associated with a sense of community. Previous research has discovered positive outcomes associated with sense of community. In general, previous empirical examinations have shown a link between sense of community and a person's quality of life. Peterson and Reid

(2003) found individuals who feel a strong sense of community are more likely to engage in healthy activities such as physical activity and proper nutrition. Another positive outcome showed individuals with a strong sense of community felt increased self-confidence and emotional connections (Goodwin, et al., 2009; Peterson & Reid, 2003). Further, individuals experienced decreased feelings of alienation and negative mood swings when they felt a stronger sense of community (Roussi, Rapti, & Kiosseoglou, 2006).

Although a plethora of literature and empirical studies exist connecting sense of community to positive sport related outcomes, the existing research has not adequately addressed the social capital networks that may result from a sense of community. For example, the social trust discussed throughout the social capital literature has not been examined in connection with sense of community. Thus, the development of social capital in connection with a sense of community could provide practical information regarding the adult recreational sport setting.

Social Capital

Another well-documented topic in the literature on community development is social capital. It has been acknowledged that social capital acts as a catalyst for intellectual development and social inclusion and, therefore, civil society and city communities depend on it to survive (Jarvie, 2003). Modern literature on social capital stems from theories created by well-known sociologists such as Bourdieu, Coleman and the political scientist Putnam. Because of the historical underpinnings surrounding social capital and communities, a variety of definitions exist. For example, Bourdieu (1986) identified social capital as resources that provide access to a group of goods, and Coleman (1988) referred to the term as a combination of aspects of social structure that its participants can use in their pursuit of interests.

While those definitions are heavily cited in the literature, the current study will utilize Putnam's (1995) definition for the examination of this sport specific context. He defined social capital as, "the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that can facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 66). Notably, social capital can serve as a catalyst for not only social trust but also accumulated skills and knowledge as well as social norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000; Theeboom, Schaillee, & Nols, 2012).

Considering social capital manifests itself in a wide variety of forms in a community, it is important to describe the characteristics of these social networks, which, in turn, lead to "the emergence of social trust" (Putnam, 2000, p. 67). Community is viewed as a bundle of social relationships (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005), which are constantly changing based on the societal context. Agnitsch, Flora, and Ryan (2006) believed that these relationships among community members are valuable and even necessary resources for communities because they constitute a community's social capital. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the main idea behind social capital is that well-connected individuals are more likely to achieve desired outcomes through mobilization of other resources (Agnitsch et al., 2006). This disparity explains the nature of relationships as well as highlights the underlying motives within a specific community.

Common experiences ignite the aforementioned social relationships present in a community and consequently result in an attachment or bond among the members of a particular community (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005). Restated, community development stimulates opportunities for memberships, which, in turn, lead to satisfaction of mutual needs, shared emotional ties and support (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986). It is important to note that a sense of

emotional belonging derives from social relationships formed in a community or a social group (Delanty, 2003; Tajfel, 1981).

Prior research highlights two types of communities including a simple community and a complex community. In particular, a simple community is typically smaller in size and its members share a single dimension of everyday lives (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005).

Differently, complex communities are referred to as communities that, “contain many more groups or divisions, and typically include numerous activities in the life worlds of their members-work, family, and friendships” (Colclough & Sitaraman, 2005, p. 478).

Coleman (1988) believed that continuous relationships and the closure of social networks stimulate trust development. In contrast, Putnam (2000) believed, trust derives from the “dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” (p. 19). Research pertaining to trust, distinguishes between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ trust in social networks (Newton, 1997; Williams, 1988). To be specific, ‘thin’ trust relies on indirect secondary relations, while ‘thick’ trust exists within close-knit organizations and derives from daily contact among individuals (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005).

The nuances of trust are critical for understanding the two types of social capital: bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2000). Wuthnow (2002) identified bonding as the interpersonal solidarity present among individuals within small groups or local communities. In one of the more recent studies, bonding was defined as, “interactions between relatively homogenous social networks” (Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpries, & Cohen, 2015, p. 89). Clopton and Finch (2011) asserted that bonding is a form of social capital that members of a community utilize to “get by” in difficult times. It also emerges as a form of social capital to support members of the community

through their reliance on relationships built on thick trust (Williams, 1988). By contrast, bridging social capital encompasses connections among disconnected groups and communities (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). In this case, relationships are developed based on thin trust, which according to Newton (1997) is less personal. One of the evident benefits of bridging is its ability to “facilitate the exchange of information between distinct groups and help to expedite the flow of ideas among groups” (Kavanaugh et al., 2005, p. 120).

Sport Participant Motivation

Throughout the sport management literature, a plethora of studies have focused on the reasons individuals choose to partake in certain sporting events. Essentially, scholars have aimed to understand why we do what we do through the concept of motivation. According to Shank (2002), motivation is defined as “an internal force that directs behavior toward the fulfillment of needs” (p. 157). These needs have traditionally been described through a two-dimensional approach: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Frederick & Ryan, 1993; Iwasaki & Mannell, 1999). Extrinsic motivation occurs when an individual engages in certain behaviors as a means to an end, whereas intrinsic motivation comes from within an individual out of genuine interest for the activity at hand (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Although intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been viewed as unidimensional constructs, Vallerand and Losier (1999) proposed three subdimensions for intrinsic motivation: to know, toward accomplishment, and to experience stimulation (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). When individuals are intrinsically motivated to know, they are performing a task with the sole purpose of learning a new activity (Vallerand, 2001). For example, an individual may join a recreational league for the pure satisfaction of exploring or trying a new sport. People may also be motivated to accomplish an activity (Vallerand, 2001), such as that pure pleasure one may

experience when crossing the finish line of a race. The final category of intrinsic motivation occurs when an individual experiences stimulation. This stimulation is most likely related to constructs such as sensation seeking, top performance, fun, and excitement (Vallerand, 2001).

Similar to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation has been broken into four subdimensions: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand & Losier, 1999). When an individual is motivated by external regulation, they are likely to engage in an activity for specific external rewards such as recognition from friends and family. Introjected regulation is present when a person engages in a certain behavior out of a sense of obligation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Next, identified regulation occurs when an individual is strictly motivated by achieving personal goals (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Finally, an individual is motivated by integrated regulation when they participate in an activity to confirm their own sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Drawing from the underlying constructs of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, studies have examined the reasons individuals participate in sports. In general, motives to participate or outcomes received from participation, fell into five main categories: social affiliation, psychological condition, physical condition, competition, and escape. Tokuyama and Greenwell (2011) examined consumer motivation for playing and watching soccer and found individuals primarily participated as a way to feel affiliated with a specific social group and as a release from their daily life stress. Another study discovered escape from stress to be the primary motivating factor for a variety of sport and exercise activities (Ebben & Brudzynski, 2008).

When looking at the physical category of motivation, Guedes and Netto (2013) found the most important motives for young Brazilian athletes were skill development and fitness. Athletes with motivation for the physical aspect of sport primarily participated in the activity to improve

their skills and increase their physical condition (Guedes & Netto, 2013; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012). Competition was cited as a top motivational factor for individuals participating in outdoor adventure activities such as mountain biking or adventure racing (Fowler & Mansell, 2008; Kay & Laberge, 2002; Krien, 2007).

Specifically examining the leisure and recreation context of sport, the intellectual or psychological motive was key for participants. This motivation allowed individuals to reflect on the opportunity, learn about themselves, and stimulate mental action through learning and knowledge seeking (Beard & Ragheb, 1983). In fact, Filo, Funk, and O'Brien (2011) discovered the "more likely the participant agreed that he/she was driven to participate by intellectual motives, the more emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning a participant ascribed to the event" (p. 509). Collectively, these five categories of motivation discovered throughout the previous literature allude to potential reasons individuals choose to participate in the Midwestern Kickball League.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

As discussed throughout the first three chapters, the overarching purpose of this dissertation is to comprehensively examine the intersection of the social and cultural dynamics of the Midwestern Kickball League, drawing theoretically from the literature of cultural studies, participant motivation, identity, sense of community, and social capital. In this chapter, I will first detail the relevant paradigms and various epistemological and ontological approaches that exist in academic research. Then, I will introduce the specific epistemological belief and ethnographic approach that was used to study the kickball league phenomenon. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a description of the research strategies I utilized over the course of this research study.

Research Design

In a broad sense, a paradigm has been defined as a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). It represents a worldview where each individual understands the nature of the world and their place in it. Within the context of research, a paradigm aids the researcher by helping them interpret their feelings about the world and decide in which way it should be studied. While various interpretive frameworks (paradigms) exist, they are all comprised of three interconnected questions: (1) the ontological question, (2) the epistemological question, and (3) the methodological question (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

First, the ontological question aims to discover the nature of reality and what can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Through this inquiry, the study of existence and reality “is broader than a set of rules for research” (Henderson, 1991, p. 10). Because of this expansive view, ontology can serve to provide a rationale for a particular research approach (Henderson,

1991). Next, the purpose of the epistemological question is to discover the relationship between the knower and what is known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Alternatively defined, epistemology is the “philosophical study of how such knowledge is acquired” (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 14). Through this perspective, the interest lies in understanding how research is conducted. Finally, the methodological question addresses the ways a researcher can find out whatever he or she believes to be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This question of thought identifies specific procedures and techniques that will help the researcher gain knowledge on the topic.

By considering the different epistemological, ontological, and methodological elements, a researcher has the ability to choose a paradigm that appropriately guides their research activity. Within the social sciences, research has utilized a wide array of research paradigms including positivism, post-positivism, and constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In order to fully understand the rationale for using the constructivist paradigm in this study, the positivist and post-positivist approaches will also be discussed.

From a positivist perspective, the purpose of engaging in research is for scientific explanation (Macionis & Gerber, 2008). Within this view, an epistemological and ontological belief exists where there is one true reality that can be pursued and discovered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This truth can only be gained through tested and substantiated data. These results serve as ‘proof’ of the phenomenon they are studying, which furthers a positivist’s belief that reality can be perfectly measured. In terms of methodology, positivists operate from a quantitative perspective and develop objective measures that examine the interaction of variables and potential outcomes (Tuli, 2010). Scholars operating under this paradigm aim to get the closest approximation of reality (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2004). Additionally, positivists

design studies with the objective of generalizable results through hypothesis testing and experimental studies.

A similar paradigm, post-positivism exists as a way to examine real world problems in a more comprehensive way. While post-positivists believe in one reality, they take a more critical approach compared to positivists and acknowledge the imperfection involved with measurement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Unlike positivism, scholars operating under the post-positivist paradigm do not claim to prove anything in their results. Rather, post-positivists view findings as evidence in either support or opposition of the previously defined hypotheses (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). When examining the methodology associated with the post-positivist paradigm, quantitative methods are the most common but qualitative and mixed methods are utilized as well. However, even if a researcher uses qualitative methods, their ultimate goal is still to produce findings that can be generalized to the population.

As shown from the frequency of use in the sport management literature (Gratton & Jones, 2004), the positivist and post-positivist paradigm have key advantages compared to others. First, when conducting an experiment, the researcher has control over the measurement and variables in the study. Through the controlled manipulation of variables, the researcher is also able to suggest a cause and effect relationship. Next, surveys or questionnaires allow the researcher to reach a large sample of the study's target population in a short amount of time (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Further, because quantitative methods and numerical results allow for generalizability and replication, researchers have the ability to compare/contrast their findings across different populations and contexts. Finally, measures of reliability and validity are used to ensure the quality and accuracy of the research that is being conducted.

Although a variety of benefits are associated with the positivist and post-positivist paradigm, the present dissertation was conducted from a constructivist perspective to allow for a more inclusive approach to understanding the lived experiences of the participants. Within this paradigm, it is assumed that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and that they develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Andrew et. al, 2011, p. 10). These experiences, shown through the interaction with the local culture, people, and environment, influence an individual’s sense of the world and contribute to one’s overall knowledge (Andrew et. al, 2011).

When examining the ontological question within constructivism, it is important to note that no singular reality exists. Instead, reality is specific to the individual and is based on one’s interaction with the local culture, people, and environment. These interactions influence an individual’s sense of the world and contribute to their overall knowledge. Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) furthered this belief and stated:

...we must construct knowledge through our lived experiences and through our interactions with other members of society. As such, as researchers, we must participate in the research process with our subjects to ensure we are producing knowledge that is reflective of their reality. (p. 103)

In terms of epistemology, constructivists believe the researcher and research are intertwined, and it is not plausible for the scholar to remain objective (Andrew, et al., 2011). Further, a constructivist researcher acknowledges they will be unable to separate their own beliefs and cultural upbringing from those of their participants. As stated by Preissle (2006), “(Constructivists) are studying ourselves studying ourselves and others” (p. 691).

While limitations exist within the constructivist paradigm, I believe this approach was beneficial because I was able to capture the everyday realities of my participants. In addition, my participation with the league gave me the opportunity to represent the player's reality while also acknowledging how my experiences impact the knowledge I was constructing (Lincoln et al., 2011). Finally, the constructivist approach allowed for more informed, sophisticated, and detailed content to emerge through the use of qualitative methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The specific research strategies that were implemented are described below.

Ethnography

When engaging in an ethnographic approach, "the goal is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world" (Malinowski, 1922/1932, p. 25). In essence, the researcher is immersed in the setting in order to experience a first-hand account of a particular social or cultural phenomenon within a group (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2011). Defined by Denzin (1997), ethnography is, "a form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about ways of life of the writer and those written about" (p. xi).

At the basic level, researchers engage in this approach to understand the culture that a specific group of people shares. This cultural focus is key to ethnographic research and the findings will always be analyzed from this perspective regardless of the methodological approach (Patton, 2015). Traditionally, ethnographers have conducted fieldwork where they jot down notes about what they see, hear, and experience. While fieldwork is commonly associated with an ethnographic approach to data collection, an ethnography and fieldwork are two separate concepts. Schwandt (2001) clarified the differences:

Although many kinds of qualitative inquirers may engage in fieldwork, not all do

ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnography unites both process and product, fieldwork and written text. Fieldwork, undertaken as participant observation, is the process by which the ethnographer comes to know a culture; the ethnographic text is how culture is portrayed.

(p. 80)

This distinction is necessary when evaluating the entire ethnographic process. In terms of conducting fieldwork, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) provided four guidelines to ensure the researcher is able to truly understand the host from their own system of meanings: (1) collect a variety of information from different perspectives and different sources, (2) use observation, open interviews, and site documentation, as well as audio-visual materials such as recordings and photographs, (3), write field notes that are descriptive and rich in detail, (4) represent participants in their own terms by using quotations and short stories—make sure to capture participants' views of their own experiences in their own words. It is through these measures of fieldwork that the ethnographer truly understands the sociocultural contexts of the study (Whitehead, 2005).

Further, Whitehead (2005) explained, “the classic ethnographer believes the only way to gain a native’s view of his or her own world is to spend considerable time in that world” (p. 5). The researcher must truly embody their research in order to naturally participate and operate in the spatial context of another person’s life (Coffey, 1999). The subsequent sections continue with this notion of the ‘embodied presence of the ethnographer’ and discuss the processes involved with completing the ethnography as well as writing the ethnography.

The process (doing ethnography). The process of doing an ethnography is “inductive, holistic, and requires a long-term commitment from [the researcher]” (Sangasubana, 2011, p. 567). Because there are no set rules or specific guidelines to be followed, the procedures of the study are at the discretion of the researcher and a wide array of methods may be utilized. Typical

modes of data collection for ethnography are: observation, interviewing, and archival research (Angrosino, 2007). However, the nature of the ethnographic approach requires flexibility due to unforeseen events associated with the setting of interest (Fetterman, 2000).

Whitehead (2005) stated, “ethnography is a cyclic iterative process, wherein the ethnographer, moves back and forth between observations, interviewing, and interpretation” (p. 9). When doing the ethnography, it is important to approach observations with all five senses and take in stimuli from the surrounding cultural environment. Spradley (1980) proposed three observational categories to ensure the proper elements and phenomena were being examined: (1) descriptive, (2) focused, and (3) select. While variations occur among observational type, Whitehead presented an updated version to Spradley’s 1980 categories of phenomena.

These categories of phenomena should be considered when engaging in any of type of fieldwork or data analysis: (1) *space* the nature of the space utilized in the social setting, (2) *objects*: the material culture found in the social setting and how this material culture is organized, (3) *the individual actors* within that setting, and their specific characteristics, (4) *the social systemic context* of actors in the setting, (5) the *behaviors* that are being carried out in a socio-cultural setting (acts, activities, and events), (6) the *language* used by the actors in the space, (7) other forms of *expressive culture* found in the social setting beyond general language (e.g., music, song, dance, art, architecture, etc.), (8) *patterns of interaction* carried out by the actors within the social setting, (9) *discourse content* of the setting as reflected in the language, expressive culture, and social interactions the actors in the social setting, (10) *emotional level* of discourse, (11) *ideational elements* (beliefs, attitudes, values, and significant symbolisms) that appear to be present in a social setting, (12) *broader social systems* that might influence the actor, behaviors, and ideations found in any specific social system, (13) *physical environmental*

elements present within or surrounding a specific social setting, (14) *the goals, motivations, or agendas* of the various individual and groups of the actors within the social setting, (15) *human need* fulfillment is attempted or met within the social setting or interaction (Whitehead, 2005, p. 13)

Further, a researcher must go through the process of discovery where they experience an ethnographic breakdown where the ethnographer's world and the host culture's world do not coincide (Agar, 1996). In order for this breakdown to be resolved, researchers must take the time to truly learn and understand the environment. As expressed by Spradley (1979):

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p. 34)

By capturing the nuance of human behavior through a heightened sense of vulnerability, a meaningful relationship between the researcher and research participants can develop (Ngamvithayapong-Yanai, 2016).

The product (writing ethnography). Similar to the process of conducting an ethnography, there is not one unified presentation or writing style for ethnographic studies. Instead, researchers must evaluate which style and ethnographic genre best fits their approach for presenting the data. Typically, one of three common genres are chosen: classical ethnography, critical ethnography, and interpretive ethnography. Classical ethnography has a core epistemological view where the past has no significant impact on the present (Denzin, 1997). Moreover, Fielding reiterated the point, "if researchers want to find out about the structures of a certain group being researched, they need not look any further than the present structures" (as

cited in Mantzoukas, 2010, p. 423). Additionally, researchers operating from a classical view of ethnographies believe that cultural reality can be truthfully, objectively, and exhaustively captured (Mantzoukas, 2010).

Next, critical ethnographies aimed to examine the underlying aspects of society that actually create and influence reality (Mantzoukas, 2010). Within this perspective, the researcher tries to determine the positionality of individuals in society and provide powerless groups with their own thoughts and voices (Rolfe, 1999). Finally, the interpretive ethnographic genre aims to provide personal accounts that contribute to the understanding of a participant's world. Language is the focal point in this perspective as it is the primary tool for humans to construct the world (Plummer, 2001). Furthering this point, Rorty (1989) says, "the world does not speak. Only humans do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs" (p. 6).

The specific ethnographic genre I chose for the purposes of this dissertation was interpretive because the underlying tenants correlated with my epistemological approach of constructivism. Additionally, the narrative writing form will be utilized to bring my perspectives into the text at the beginning of each section. This narrative ethnographic style of writing has been viewed as a "hybrid form (that) was created when individuals attempted to portray accurately the subjects of biographies but also to include their own experiences in the texts" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 460). Further, Barthes (1977) describes the prevalence of a narrative in today's society:

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting (think of Carpaccio's Saint Ursula), stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, and conversations. Moreover, under this almost infinite

diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives . . . narrative is international, trans historical, transcultural: It is simply there, like life itself... (109)

As illustrated through this quote, a narrative is a common occurrence across society. Similar to the holistic approach I chose for the study, the narrative form of writing will enable me to capture the various interconnected elements involved with the Midwestern Kickball League.

Research Timeline

Although I have previously participated in the Midwestern Kickball League for four years, the 2018 season served as the time frame for my dissertation data collection. The season ran from May 20th through August 19th and included - five weeks of division play, five weeks of rank/pool play, as well as bracket play. Although the official season spans approximately three months, off season events are held throughout the year at various times and locations across the city of Springfield.

The first event I attended for the current season was the charity bar games and pub crawl in December of 2018. This event served as Midwestern Kickball League's winter fundraiser, which raised money to adopt and feed local families. Although this event was not directly related to the sport of kickball, it allowed players to get together and interact during the off-season. I particularly enjoyed the charity pub crawl because it gave me the opportunity to socialize with individuals who played on different teams within the league. I was able to develop rapport with people in an informal setting.

During the next couple of months, less organized team activities and personal interactions took place. These activities consisted of cookouts at players' houses, dog park visits, bowling

alley nights, and trips to watch our teammate play hockey. My team has its own Facebook page, which allows us to communicate regularly and be informed of these off-season events. While not everyone on the team attended every social event, these small get togethers allowed people to converse and stay up to date on what was happening in each other's lives.

Over the same time frame, I was playing in the local city kickball league every Friday night. While the players were different from those on my Midwestern Kickball League team, these games served as an opportunity to further develop relationships with other players across the league. During game breaks, my teammates would open a beer, occasionally light a joint, and we would discuss topics ranging from kickball to our travels abroad. In particular, the discussion always seemed to steer toward the upcoming Midwestern Kickball League season and everyone's individual teams. The frequency of the topic being brought up and the excitement in everyone's voices solidified the notion that the Midwestern Kickball League was something special.

As the season grew closer to starting, I attended two events in the month of May. The first was a scrimmage and cookout that was hosted by my captain and the captain of our sister team. Due to an ankle injury, I was unable to participate in the scrimmage, but I was able to observe the two teams battle it out on the field. It was clear everyone was ecstatic to be playing kickball again. After the scrimmage concluded, the cookout occurred, and everyone sat around and discussed the upcoming season. In particular, the league drama was discussed, and conversations included why teams were no longer affiliated with certain sponsors, why individuals switched teams, and relationship issues among certain players.

The second event I attended in the month of May was the spring charity tournament. The tournament featured 16 teams and the money raised went to an elementary book fair. Similar to

the scrimmage, I was unable to participate due to injury, so I solely observed the event. During the day I was able to watch multiple teams play, as well as engage in conversations during the down time. This tournament served as another opportunity for me to interact with people, observe other teams, and learn about the culture of the Midwestern Kickball League.

The week of May 20th was the official start of the Midwestern Kickball League for 2018. This meant kickball was in full swing and the Midwestern Kickball League events occurred at various points throughout the week. Each week the podcast is held on Tuesday nights at The Old Town, where individuals drink and converse about kickball. When I was unable to make it to the podcast, I made sure to listen to it when it was posted online. On Wednesday nights, a league-wide practice occurred where individuals could work on minor aspects of their game and participate in a mixed team scrimmage. These practices lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to four hours depending on the individuals who showed up. On Sundays, the actual games occurred, and teams were scattered across the city of Springville during the 5:00pm and 7:00pm time slots. After those games had concluded, the Game of the Week occurred at Hawks Park. Following the Game of the Week, an after party was hosted by the a local bar until 2:00 a.m.

Throughout the season, I played in all but one of my team's games, for a total of eleven games, including the championship for my division. Also, I went to every game preceding or following the game I played in to make observations and interact with other players in the league. I served as an umpire for six games, including two division championships. Similar to my personal game attendance, I was present at every Game of the Week but one. The championship game on August 19th served as my final data collection.

Research Strategies for this Study

According to Goodall Jr. (1994), “to understand the cultural life of an organization or community—as far as true understanding can be achieved—a scholar must listen and watch: specifically listen to stories and watch what happens when they are told” (p. xvii). In order to comprehensively examine the Midwestern Kickball League, the following methods contributed to my ethnography: observations, participation, interviews (semi-structured and informal), archival research and discourse/content analysis. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was obtained (See Appendix A).

Participant (as) observer. In a general sense, observations enable the researcher to describe specific situations and settings using their five senses. This “written photograph” details the events, behaviors, and artifacts associated with a chosen social setting (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). More specifically, participant observation is “the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 91). This process requires researchers to not only establish rapport within a community, but to do so in a way in which they blend in (Bernard, 1994).

Gold (1958) furthered the understanding of participant observation when he proposed four distinct roles that researchers can adopt: (1) the complete participant, (2) the participant as observer, (3) the observer as participant, and (4) the complete observer. A researcher who adopts the approach of a complete participant conceals their role as a researcher, which allows the researcher to have a very similar experience as the people they are studying. While this perspective is advantageous, issues can arise from the deception of the participants and lack of objectivity by the researcher (Gold, 1958). On the other end of the spectrum, the complete observer approach is used when the researcher is completely hidden from view while observing

or when those being studied are unaware of being observed (Gold, 1958). The observer as participant stance enables the researcher to participate in the group's activities but still maintain the role of the researcher. Further, the researcher can "observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 380). Finally, the participant (as) observer role is the one I assumed for my ethnographic approach. With this approach, the researcher is considered a member of the group, and the group is aware of the research being conducted (Gold, 1958).

Because of my history with the Midwestern Kickball League and my specific team, I was an active participant in games, events, and informal activities associated with the league. This ethnographic role allowed me to "hear, see, and experience reality" as my participants did (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), which gave me the opportunity to learn directly from my own experience. Additionally, this position allowed me to develop skills as an ethnographic researcher including "ascertaining the language of the participants, strengthening [my] explicit awareness, developing writing proficiency, learning how to develop rapport with participants, and becoming an effective and efficient note taker" (Andrew et al., 2011, p. 110).

Due to my participation and the nature of kickball, I did not carry around a notebook and take fieldnotes. However, my teammates were made aware of my research project as well as the overarching purpose of the study. Although I primarily acted as a participant (as) observer, there were certain public situations, such as Game of the Week, where I held a role closer to complete observer. During these large, open to the public events, I did not disclose my role as a researcher. This decision was made based on the relatively low level of risk involved in the study and the

fact that the observations occurred in open, public spaces such as ball parks and local bars.

According to the Social Research Association (2003):

there can be no reasonable guarantee of privacy in ‘public’ settings since anyone from journalists to ordinary members of the public may constitute ‘observers’ of such human behavior and any data collected thereby would remain, in any case, beyond the control of the subjects observed. (p. 33)

Research diary. Similar to the concept of a participant journal, I utilized a long-standing tool of reflection to document my thoughts during my data collection process. Specifically, I used the research diary as a way to reflect on my experiences, as well as have an inner dialogue with myself. This inner dialogue is similar to the thoughts expressed by Engin (2011):

Since these are conversations with myself trying to articulate thoughts, in fact this diary is an insight into my construction of research knowledge rather than my [participants’] knowledge. So, in fact, this diary is a scaffolding tool for my learning and development. (p. 296)

By journaling my own experiences with the Midwestern Kickball League, I had the ability to see how my knowledge was created and how my thought process changed over time. This “epistemological awareness” (Gerstl-Pepin & Patrizio, 2009, p. 300), serves as a way to document both the research process as well as the details of actions and events.

My research diary served as a way to reflect on my thoughts, feelings, and decisions I made. Although my initial intention was to document specific events, comments, and observations (Silverman, 2005), the diary ended up becoming something I could confide in. While my entries did include specific information regarding observations and conversations I had with participants, it also documented my journey through the research process. Through self-

dialogue, I was able to be honest and open regarding my experiences with the Midwestern Kickball League as both a player and a researcher. By writing down these emotional responses, I was able to articulate my thoughts and guide my thinking. To support my entries, Rapley (2007) discussed the connection between writing and the thinking process:

Writing is thinking. It is natural to believe that you need to be clear in your mind what you are trying to express first before you can write it down. However, most of the time the opposite is true. You may think you have a clear idea, but it is only when you write it down that you can be certain that you do. (p. 25)

Because of the written entries accumulated throughout the season, I was able to form my own construction of research knowledge and identity.

Interviews. In addition to observations, interviews contributed to my understanding of the cultural aspects of the Midwestern Kickball League. This particular form of data collection is common in qualitative studies and helps the researcher address the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the phenomena being studied (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Further, three types of interview formats exist: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Gratton & Jones, 2004). A structured interview consists of a standardized set of questions that are read verbatim to the participant. In addition, the researcher is not allowed to deviate from the interview guide. In contrast, unstructured (informal) interviews will contain very broad and open-ended questions based on a general idea or topic (Merriam, 2009). These interviews are more like a casual conversation where the researcher lets the interviewee guide the interview. Finally, a semi-structured interview involves a specific set of questions, however; the researcher has the freedom to ask follow-up questions or probe for deeper responses based on the responses of the participant (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

During the course of this project, I interviewed 27 individuals formally using the semi-structured interview approach. In addition, I informally interviewed approximately 20 additional participants, where I allowed the individual to control the conversation. These informal interviews primarily occurred during participant observations (at games, events, activities, etc.), and they were used to supplement various situations I had observed. Because of the ethnographic nature of the study, a variety of interview approaches were deemed appropriate to further identify relevant themes surrounding the Midwestern Kickball League.

Of the 27 individuals I interviewed using the semi-structured approach, I chose four to follow and interact with throughout the season. These individuals were chosen because of their various associations with the league. Jessi Fairbank is a former commissioner of the league, had served as a board member for four years, and has been involved with the league for 16 years. Kelsey Berry was a member and has played on multiple teams throughout her career in the Midwestern Kickball League. Kat Jensen is a current captain of a team, has had multiple sponsors of her team, and actively volunteers at every charity event/activity associated with the league. Finally, Emma Frost has been associated with the league as a player for four years. She is extremely active in both the local city community, university community, and league community.

The first interview with each of these selected individuals occurred prior to the season starting. The next interview took place approximately one-third of the way into the season, and the final interview was conducted at the end of the Midwestern Kickball League season. By interviewing these individuals at multiple points throughout the season, I was able to strive for a greater level of depth in the information I received (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Additionally,

as I had time to collect and analyze the data from the first portion of the season, I was able to refine the study's focus and create new questions for my participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In general, the individuals that were chosen for the interviews had various associations with the Midwestern Kickball League. Outside of the players, I interviewed team captains, board members, fans and spectators, player's parents and other family members, and sponsors of teams. These differing perspectives were vital in building upon my understanding of the Midwestern Kickball League culture and the social connections that exist within the league.

| Participant | Gender | ~Age | ~Years of MKL Participation | On Team Status |
|-------------------|--------|------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| Emma Frost | Female | 24 | 4 | Yes |
| Kat Jensen | Female | 36 | 6 | Yes |
| Skye Townsend | Female | 25 | 4 | Yes |
| Mason Davidson | Male | 34 | 7 | Yes |
| Richard Tate | Male | 68 | 4 | No |
| Nevada Dunn | Female | 25 | 5 | Yes |
| Kensley Todd | Male | 44 | 4 | Yes |
| Yvette Stevens | Female | 36 | 6 | Yes |
| Kendrick Collins | Male | 32 | 5 | Yes |
| Kelsey Berry | Female | 40 | 8 | Yes |
| Donald Marrow | Male | 39 | 7 | Yes |
| Jessi Fairbank | Female | 45 | 15 | Yes |
| Chelsea Waters | Female | 39 | 4 | No |
| Jake Bond | Male | 29 | 4 | Yes |
| Isaiah Moss | Female | 30 | 5 | Yes |
| Russell Wilkinson | Male | 65 | 16 | Yes |
| Zeb Cohen | Male | 22 | 2 | Yes |
| Gillian Shortle | Female | 30 | 7 | Yes |
| Kara Baxter | Female | 24 | 4 | Yes |
| Tatum Lane | Male | 30 | 1 | Yes |
| Tory Horton | Female | 29 | 1 | Yes |
| Emery Carter | Female | 33 | 9 | Yes |
| Dakota Snider | Male | 34 | 8 | Yes |
| Greer Dolton | Male | 22 | 4 | Yes |
| Jayden Knight | Male | 23 | 3 | Yes |
| Sydney Reed | Female | 35 | 1 | No |
| Shae Wood | Female | 46 | 12 | Yes |

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Prior to each semi-structured interview, oral consent IRB procedures were utilized (See Appendix B). Sample interview guide questions are listed below, and parentheses indicate questions asked of one specific subset of interviewees (e.g. spectator, player, local business representative, team captain, or board member).

1. Could you briefly describe your responsibilities as they relate to the Midwestern Kickball League?
2. How did you initially become involved with the Midwestern Kickball League?
3. Why did you initially join the Midwestern Kickball League?
4. What motivates you to be a part of this specific league?
5. Outside of playing every Sunday, how does being a part of the Midwestern Kickball League connect you to the community?
6. How do you feel city officials view the Midwestern Kickball League?
7. Tell me about the type of relationships you have with your teammates.
8. Do you have any relationships with individuals on other teams in the Midwestern Kickball League?
9. Have you ever switched teams or considered switching teams? If so, why?
10. How do you determine who you ask to be on your team (team captain)?
11. What other events do you participate in or are involved with that are associated with the Midwestern Kickball League?
12. Do you interact with the Midwestern Kickball League on their online platforms?
13. How do you determine what information gets posted on the Midwestern Kickball League's online platforms (board member)?
14. How would you describe the Midwestern Kickball League to someone who has no idea what it's about?
15. Can you paint me a picture of the "Game of the Week"?
16. Besides kickball games on Sundays, what other events are hosted by the Midwestern Kickball League?

17. How do you determine what charities you partner with throughout the year (board member and captain)?
18. Have you ever felt like there have been situations where you have been put in a tough situation because of the Midwestern Kickball League?
19. What areas would you change about the Midwestern Kickball League?
20. Can you tell me about the relationship the Midwestern Kickball League has with the city (board member)?
21. Can you explain the process that occurs when issues arise within the Midwestern Kickball League (board member)?
22. How did your team get involved with your current sponsors (team captain and board member)?
23. Why did you choose to sponsor a team within the Midwestern Kickball League (team captain, local business representative)?
24. What benefits do you gain from sponsoring a team within the Midwestern Kickball League compared to a different Parks and Recreation league (local business representative)?

Participant diaries. Although participant journals/diaries can be constructed in various forms (handwritten, blogging, vlogging), they all act as a way to capture the practices and experiences of everyday life. Surmised by Allport (1943),

The diary is the document *par excellence*, chronicling as it does the immediately contemporaneous flow of public and private events that are significant to the diarist. The word ‘contemporary’ is very crucial here, for each diary entry—unlike life histories—is sedimented into a particular moment in time: they do not emerge ‘all at once’ as reflections on the past, but day by day strive to record an ever-changing present (p. 95).

These recollections and thoughts expressed by the author are written in a natural language and provide true insight into their lives. Additionally, diaries may alleviate some of the problems

with recall or memory errors because the author records their activities, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings around the same time (Janesick, 1999).

For the present study, two individuals associated with the Midwestern Kickball League agreed to write down their thoughts, feelings, and experiences they had during the 2018 season. Although these diaries are being written for an audience (me as the researcher), I encouraged a less structured form of a diary where they essentially “just write.” This unstructured form of participant diaries has been shown to provide rich qualitative data (Elliott, 1997). It allows researchers to gain a greater understanding about how the participant perceives or understands the events that surround them (Plummer, 2001). While I did encourage an unstructured form of writing, I did provide some guidance during the process. Specifically, I advised them to try to include details involving who, what, when, where, and how. Scholars have shown this type of information “provides [the authors] with the opportunity to clarify, expand and reflect on their actions, entries, and connections” (Kenton, 2010, para. 9). Further, this information can provide context to otherwise ambiguous journal entries. Although these details can help the researcher capture a more honest view of the situation, confidentiality needs to be ensured. Therefore, I asked my participants to use pseudonyms when discussing specific people, teams, businesses etc.

Material and digital products. When evaluating the culture of an organization, it is important to consider the intersection between the products of an environment and the surrounding social worlds. Each product, whether material or digital, has a meaning and story that is part of a larger picture (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). They represent symbols with rich meanings and highlight an individual’s values and beliefs.

Of particular interest to the current study are the documents that are created and distributed within the Midwestern Kickball League. In their broadest sense, documents are forms

of textual and visual communication (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). They act as social products constructed by the authors and carry “values and ideologies, either intended or not” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 231). The documents specific to the Midwestern Kickball League I evaluated are (1) the fifteen recorded podcasts from 2018, (2) the website, (3) Facebook, (4) Twitter, (5) the Sundays in the Park blog, and (6) promotional material created by the league. I used the two analytic frames described by Saldaña and Omasta (2017) when evaluating the content: how they capture attention and how they embody the identities of their writers.

In addition to analyzing the documents produced by the Midwestern Kickball League, I evaluated the visual materials produced by the league. These visual materials are rarely random, but instead serve as a memory of a meaningful experience (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). The visual materials consisted of photographs, videos, and digital media that are produced by the league. This includes the Facebook Live video of the Midwestern Kickball League History presentation, which was a featured event in the city of Springville. Similar to the evaluation of the documents, I used the two analytic frames proposed by Saldaña and Omasta (2017): analyzing video collaboratively and analyzing what photographs evoke.

Finally, the artifacts associated with the Midwestern Kickball League were analyzed. Broadly speaking, artifacts “include any object made by humans (handmade or manufactured) or natural object that can be touched and handled” (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017, p. 73). These objects typically manifest in natural environments and have stories about how they were collected or created. Specific artifacts that were analyzed included: jerseys, koozies, Midwestern Kickball League Merchandise, and championship trophies including the Diana plate, the Mark Twain statue, and the Boot. These various artifacts were evaluated through the following four analytic

frames: analyzing how they belong, their symbolic connotations, their processes, and how they are extensions of human beings (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).

Data Analysis

The interviews, fieldnotes, textual artifacts, online materials, researcher notes, and journal entries were transferred into similar formats and coded. According to Böhm (2004), coding is known as “the *deciphering* or *interpretation* of data and includes the naming of concepts and also explaining and discussing them in more detail” (p. 270). While the concepts taken from the documents may initially seem similar, the coding process differentiates the data from one another, and abstract categories are formed. Additionally, “codes should be *valid*, that is they should accurately reflect what is being researched, they should be *mutually exclusive*, in that codes should be distinct, with no overlap, and they should be *exhaustive*, that is all relevant data should fit into a code” (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 219).

I chose to utilize both theory-driven and data-driven coding approaches, which allowed me to consider both established theory/literature as well as information from the raw data when analyzing my results (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). First, the constant comparative method was used to develop concepts from the data by coding and analyzing at the same time. This method involved four stages: “(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2), integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 105). In this format, data was not grouped based on pre-determined categories, instead categories of meaning and relationships were formed through inductive reasoning. As surmised by Taylor and Bogdan (1984), “the researcher refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent explanatory model” (p. 126).

The second coding approach I used followed Gratton and Jones' (2004) four-part coding framework. The first stage, *open coding*, occurred when "the data was carefully read, all statements relating to the research question were identified, and each was assigned a code, or category" (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 220). An electronic master coding document was initially developed for each of the interview questions and each of the interviewee responses available for open coding. As more data were added, the master document grew so open coding could be applied. The second stage involved *axial coding*, where the researcher re-read the data based on the established codes. From these established codes, I tried to refine and differentiate the concepts that were already available using a combination of inductive and deductive thinking (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

During stage three, the researcher, "should become more analytical and look for patterns and explanation in the codes" (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 220). During this stage, I used my theoretical framework (e.g. Circuit of Culture, Identity Theory, Sense of Community, and Social Capital), which initially guided the study, to discover new and emerging themes. Finally, the fourth stage of Gratton and Jones' (2004) coding framework is *selective coding*. During this stage the researcher "reads through the raw data for cases that illustrate the analysis or explain the concepts" (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 221). The essential idea in this stage is to develop a single storyline based on the main phenomenon or core category (Böhm, 2004).

In sum, the constant comparative method and four-part coding framework served as a guide for analyzing the interview, textual discourse, and other various forms of ethnographic data. As stated by Michael Quinn Patton (2002), "Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer known only

when—and if--- arrived at” (p. 432). Based on the qualitative data analysis, the findings are grouped according to both themes and subthemes. Results are collectively summarized and representative quotes from both the participants and the researcher are utilized to illustrate the findings. As expressed by Fujiura (2015), a “carefully selected quotation that serves an analytical or illustrative purpose within the network of connected ideas in the article can profoundly deepen the reader’s understanding of the importance of the participant’s voice” (p. 326).

Reliability and Validity

As documented in scholarly work (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), issues of reliability and validity are common in ethnographic research. At the basic level, Joppe (2000) defines reliability as:

... The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable (p. 1).

and validity as, “[the concept which] determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are” (p. 1).

While these definitions illustrate scientific ways researchers can obtain authentic results, they are not easily applied to qualitative inquiry and have historically received criticism. For example, establishing reliability is complicated due to the descriptive investigation and analysis of a specified phenomenon involved with an ethnography. Researchers conducting ethnographic inquiry may be unable to produce a study that can be replicated, “because unique situations cannot be reconstructed precisely, even the most exact replication of research methods may fail to produce identical results” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 35). Additionally, “no ethnographer

works just like another” (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 36), and the lived experiences of the researcher may be unable to be replicated despite detailed field notes.

In reference to validity issues within ethnographic research, similar internal validity threats are common between experimental research and ethnographic research. These threats are *history/maturation, observer effects, selection and regression, mortality, and spurious conclusions* (Cook & Campbell, 1979). In reference to all threats, Cook and Campbell (1979) state:

Estimating the internal validity of a relationship is a deductive process in which the investigator has to systematically think through how each of the internal validity threats may have influenced the data. Then the investigator has to examine the data to test which relevant threats can be ruled out. In all of this process, the researcher has to be his or her own best critic, trenchantly examining all of the threats he or she can imagine (p. 55)

When discussing threats to external validity, issues may arise based on the researchers inability to generalize the results. Because ethnographic research settings are chosen based on unique characteristics of phenomenon, bases for comparison may not exist. In particular, LeCompte and Goetz (1982) discuss four factors that may affect the comparisons: *selection effects, setting effects, history effects*, and construct effects.

Despite the commonality of reliability and validity usage within quantitative inquiry, qualitative researchers present various definitions of these concepts to illustrate a different methodological perspective. Illustrating this point, Kitto, Chesters, and Grbich (2008) suggest that, “the conventional methodological criteria of quantitative research—validity, reliability and empirical generalizability—are generally not directly applied to qualitative research because of

the different frameworks, sampling approaches, size of sample and goals of qualitative research” (p. 243).

Instead of using reliability and validity as criterion for quality, Morse and colleagues (2002) maintain these concepts have been replaced by evaluative standards which focus on the significance, relevance, and impact of the completed qualitative inquiry. Specifically, Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the criterion for qualitative paradigms as (1) credibility, (2) confirmability, (3) dependability, and (4) transferability. By establishing these terms, trustworthiness can be maximized, and researchers can increase confidence in their findings.

Trustworthiness

By refining the criteria for trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) created a parallel to the quantitative interpretation of reliability and validity. They proposed that “internal validity should be replaced by that of credibility, external validity by transferability, reliability by dependability, and objectivity by conformability” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 3-4). These different criteria were created to assess four trustworthiness concerns (and questions) purposed by Guba (1981) and one additional concern (and question) mentioned by Wallendorf and Belk (1989). The five following questions were created for any researcher to address regardless of their paradigm:

- (1) *Truth value*. How can a researcher establish confidence in his/her findings? Or how do we know if the findings presented are genuine?
- (2) *Applicability*. How do we know or determine the applicability of the findings of inquiry in other settings or with other respondents?
- (3) *Consistency*. How can one know if the findings would be repeated consistently with the similar (same) participants in the same context?
- (4) *Neutrality*. How do we know if the findings come solely from participants and the investigation was not

influenced by the bias, motivations, or interests of the researchers? (5) *Integrity*. How do we know if the findings are not false information from given by the study participants?

(as cited in Anney, 2014, pp. 275-276).

The subsequent section will detail the four trustworthiness concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in relation to the specific steps undertaken in this ethnographic analysis.

Credibility. As previous mentioned, credibility is the equivalent concept of internal validity, in which the ethnographer has confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, the researcher wants to ensure the findings are truly representative of the lived experiences that participants encounter. In order to address credibility concerns, I adopted a variety of techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In addition to the previously mentioned prolonged engagement and persistent observation, I utilized triangulation techniques to help me reduce bias and increase the credibility of the study. According to Creswell and Miller (2000) triangulation is defined as “a [sic] procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126).

Specifically, the variety of data collection methods I employed throughout my ethnographic study illustrate data triangulation/informants triangulation. The interviews, observations, field notes, participant diaries, material artifacts, and research diary elucidate similar aspects of the same phenomenon. This triangulation method helped me facilitate a deeper understanding of the cultural underpinnings of the Midwestern Kickball League, and it allowed me to discover the consistency of my findings (Denzin, 1978). I also was able to triangulate my data by interviewing participants at different points in time as well as conducting both informal

and formal interviews. This strategy allowed me to examine the consistency of responses from the Midwestern Kickball League participants over the entire season.

Transferability. Similar to that of generalizability/external validity, transferability illustrates the application of results to other contexts. In order to ensure transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1982) suggest the researcher provide sufficient contextual information about the field work. In the current study, I was able to provide a thick description of the Midwestern Kickball League in Chapter 2: Social Environment. Pandey and Patnaik (2014) affirm, “by describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail, one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people” (p. 5750).

Guba (1981) also encourages the use of a purposive sample where individuals are selected based on their knowledge of a particular situation (in this case, the Midwestern Kickball League). Because I selected specific individuals who could speak on behalf of their experiences as a player, fan, captain, board member, and business owner, I was able to “maximize the range of information uncovered” (Guba, 1981, p. 86). These explicit choices in participants allowed me to discover contextual patterns of social and cultural relationships, which may be of interest to other researchers who seek to transfer the findings to their own site.

Dependability. Similar to that of reliability, dependability refers to the “stability of findings over time” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 86). Researchers utilize techniques such as an audit trail and reflexivity that aid in replication for future work. An audit trail occurs when the researcher accounts for all decisions and choices made throughout the study (Koch, 1994). In regard to the Midwestern Kickball League, I kept records of all data including field notes, transcriptions, journals, diaries, and discourse material. These records allowed me to cross reference the data and explicitly show how the data was collected, recorded and analyzed. To support the audit

trail, I engaged in reflexivity where I kept a research journal that documented the logistics of the study, methodological decisions I made, and reflections of self. By utilizing these techniques, I ensured dependability by documenting my research process in a logical and traceable manner (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Confirmability. As purposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is similar to objectivity in positivist inquiry. Specifically, confirmability is “concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination but are clearly derived from the data” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 392). From the perspective of Guba and Lincoln (1989), confirmability can be established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved. Through the use of techniques such as an audit trail, a reflexive research diary, triangulation, and thick description of the data collection process, I was able to not only address confirmability, but also demonstrate the effort involved in order to achieve trustworthiness for this study.

Researcher Positionality

Due to my prior connection to the Midwestern Kickball League, the role of researcher positionality should be discussed. According to Misener and Doherty (2009), “researcher positionality acknowledges the impact of the researchers’ background, assumptions and relationships with... subject matter to provide a more thoughtful and critical representation of ourselves within our research” (p. 466). This acknowledgement occurs when the researcher understands how to account for one’s own background and potential biases.

My own personal history is important to discuss as it pertains to this dissertation. First, I have been a part of the league for four years, and I have had the opportunity to experience the

various cultural and social dynamics that are at play within the Midwestern Kickball League. This connection allows me to conduct research in my own setting, which includes,

The expectations of the researcher based on familiarity with the setting and the people, the transition to researcher from a more familiar role within the setting, ethical and political dilemmas, risk of uncovering potentially damaging knowledge, and struggles with closeness and closure (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 106).

For example, I have formed opinions regarding certain aspects of the league, and this ‘insider knowledge’ could impact the way I collect and interpret data. Because of this potential for bias, I need to address these established concerns and set realistic guidelines for myself.

Next, I have formed close relationships and friendships with individuals on my team and throughout the league. While a considerable amount of literature details the disadvantages associated with field-based friendships, Coffey (1999) offers a response advocating for these relationships:

Relationships we create in the field raise our awareness of the ethnographic dichotomies of, for example, involvement versus detachment, stranger versus friend, distance versus intimacy... Friendships can help to clarify the inherent tensions of the fieldwork experience and sharpen our abilities for critical reflection... They do affect the ethnographer’s gaze and it is important that that should be so. (p. 47)

My close relationship with Emma has allowed me to complete this study. She has given me the freedom to collect research in a variety of settings, provided me with contact information for key players in the league, and trusted me with insider’s knowledge that is often kept between the two of us. This relationship has truly opened doors for me throughout the league, and it is helping me gain access to the sources of data I need.

Finally, my history as an athlete and my ability to contribute to my team on the field has helped me build rapport with individuals across the league. Since my team falls toward the bottom of the standings every year, this connection as an athlete is important when reaching out to individuals who play for the more competitive teams. As expressed by Andrew and colleagues (2011), “a researcher’s self-presentation can be critical to breaking down- or erecting- barriers to data collection” (p. 93). By intentionally presenting myself in a manner that showcased my kickball abilities, I was able to connect with individuals who highly identify with being an athlete.

As previously discussed, the researcher cannot be separated from the research. Therefore, my background with the league, friendships I have developed, and experiences I have encountered are all vital elements to the ethnographic study of the Midwestern Kickball League. Moving forward the following chapters will feature both my perspective and participant perspectives regarding the community, cultural, and social phenomena associated with the Midwestern Kickball League. Each theme will begin with a narrative excerpt from my perspective before I expand upon the connections between the data analysis and existing research and theory.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

Five general themes emerged from the data analysis and are presented in this chapter. The succeeding sections are organized according to the following general themes: (1) community relations between the city of Springville and the Midwestern Kickball League, (2) social connections formed throughout the Midwestern Kickball League, (3) perspectives on gender, diversity, and discrimination within the Midwestern Kickball League, (4) psychological aspects of participating in the Midwestern Kickball League, and (5) physical aspects of participating in the Midwestern Kickball League. The goal of this chapter is to critically analyze various aspects of the Midwestern Kickball League. These themes directly contribute to the Midwestern Kickball League's culture which will be discussed in Chapter Six.

“We’re a Crazy Family of Townies That Gives Back to the Community”

When I took the 102 exit into Springville for the first time, I was a blank slate with little knowledge of the area and no support system within one hundred miles. While the choice to attend graduate school in another state was invigorating, there was still that pit in my stomach knowing I was leaving my life behind. Worry encapsulated me, as I started my program and began searching for part time jobs to support my education. Fear sat on my shoulder as I navigated this new place by myself. Nights passed, where I questioned my decision and contemplated moving home. As weeks went by, the sense of loneliness spread, and I became closer to packing up my car and heading toward normality. I not only craved genuine conversations, but also missed the familiarity of knowing people at the grocery store and the sense of acknowledgement when waving at passing cars. I yearned for my small-town farm community, despite spending my life wanting to get away from it.

I can still remember when everything changed. The exact date may have slipped my mind, but I'll never forget being hired on as a front desk assistant in the School of Engineering and meeting my boss Eric and colleague Emma. While the position had nothing to do with my future career, it gave me a purpose and connected me to the local community in ways I could have never imagined. One simple question, followed by my answer, was all it took for me to fill the hole that had emerged since I came to Springville: "Would you want to join my kickball team?" And as assumed based on this ethnography, my answer was "Yes".

One of the most seminal findings emerged regarding the Midwestern Kickball League and its ties to the local community. Specifically, six subcategories materialized within the overarching theme of identifying with the local community: (1) league represents the city, (2) identification with city not university, (3) local business support, (4) non-profit and charity events, (5) remembrance, and (6) failed attempts at community engagement.

League Represents the City

Growing up, sports have always been a central tenant to my life, which has allowed me to associate with a variety of teams across multiple levels of sport. Despite this experience, I was unprepared for what/whom stood in front of me as I walked up to my first kickball game within the Midwestern Kickball League. Warming up by my bench, was a middle-aged man wearing a kilt, knee-high socks, and the team t-shirt. Quickly I realized, the kilt was being worn in a traditional Scotsman's way without the presence of undergarments. Shocked and holding back my laughter, I mentioned the uniform choice to another teammate. Their response was, "Welcome to Springville".

It is hard to describe the nuances of the Midwestern Kickball League to someone who has never been to Springville. This is because the vibrant personalities and progressive behavior are synonymous between the league and city. Expressed through the various data collection methods, it was made abundantly clear players perceived the Midwestern Kickball League as a representation of Springville. In fact, Jake Bond, explicitly discussed the similarities when he said:

The Midwestern Kickball League is so much like Springville. You can always find your people. Like for me, I come from a very sporty background, and I love participating in activities. So, my team is perfect for me because I'm competitive and want to compete for championships. But even if you're not a sporty person, the Midwestern Kickball League is still an awesome thing to do and you can find a team that fits you. There are teams that just like to hang out and have fun. Teams where you don't have to worry about getting yelled at or anything. There's always a team for you. Just like Springville. There's a place in Springville for everyone, where people can just be themselves.

Echoing this statement, Greer Dolton, expressed the following when reflecting on his 22 years in the town:

That's what I really love about the community sports here in Springville. It's that everybody participates. It doesn't matter if you're 30 or if you're 60, there's a place for you. You can go watch baseball or youth soccer or youth football. Springville has almost every sport you can imagine. It's right here. We have a lot of participants and people who want to get involved in the community. I think that kind of helps, because Springville is a great place, and people will end up finding themselves when they come here. A lot of people end up staying here a while because they do fall in love with the town.

This sentiment of self-discovery through the league and the city was prominent through both informal and formal interviews. It was also shown on gamedays where no judgment was made if a female player buzzed her hair, a man wore a kilt with no undergarments, a dog was dressed up as a dinosaur, or a player wanted to compete barefoot. These inclusive atmospheres, where an individual can live without fear, are prominent across the city of Springville and within the Midwestern Kickball League. Yvette Stevens challenged individuals to view the similarities, “Walk down Water Street on a nice day. The vibes you get there. The people that you see. That’s Springville. In a sense, that’s what you can expect with the Midwestern Kickball League because it is basically a microcosm of Springville.”

Furthering the point, similar liberal political views and progressive behavior were shown to exist between the league and the city. Informal conversations with participants of the league strengthened this perspective and national events (e.g. building the wall and detaining children at the border) sparked heavy discussion. To illustrate this political cohesion, Shae Wood provided the following representative quote:

Like it’s a super progressive league, and it matches the city with the liberal values and views. For example: the first year of Trump’s presidency, a player walked out at the 7th inning stretch of Game of the Week holding a cake of Trump’s severed head. The crowd went wild with applause.

Another example of the liberal expression and projected hate for the current president was shown through the proposed jersey change by the Raunchy Redbirds. A t-shirt design was suggested featuring President Trump’s face with a bright red nose and the word ‘clown’ at the bottom. While the shirts were never made, support for the design existed.

Finally, the Midwestern Kickball League was shown to represent the city of Springville through its people. Jessi Fairbank highlighted this connection when she described the makeup of the league, “These are the people that work in town, and that have invested in a small business just like myself. They are the long-time townies.” Another player, Donald Marrow, expanded upon this perspective by saying, “Most people in the Midwestern Kickball League are from Springville and are definitely considered homegrown moguls.” This linkage between the city and league is extraordinary and has been described by Emma Frost as “[having] a hipster laid back vibe where everything goes, and the cops just look the other way”.

Part of this community connection and law enforcement trust stems from the notion the Midwestern Kickball League participants are long-time residents of the city with established relationships. This belief was echoed by Skye Townsend who simply stated, “What people don’t realize is that more than half the people that still play for teams are townies or Springville people. These are the people who have lived here forever and know what the town is really about.” Ultimately, this subtheme illustrates the connection between the Midwestern Kickball League and the city of Springville. Specifically, the representative quotes show how the league represents the city both through the people, inclusiveness, views, and values.

City Versus University Identification

Unlike my hometown, where the ‘townies’ are integrated in every facet of the community, I was surprised by how separate the university is from the city of Springville. Even from my perspective, very little overlap exists between my friends at the university and my friends within the Midwestern Kickball League. Personally, I enjoy this division, because they are two unique parts of my life. When I’m frustrated with my classes, professors, or colleagues, I can have a mental break from it all and surround myself with people who have their own lives, stories, and

drama. On the other side, when I'm tired of the shenanigans associated with the Midwestern Kickball League or annoyed with the local townie drama, I have the ability to interact with my program at the university.

Another subtheme that emerged throughout the various data collection methods was the clear identification with the local city community and lack of identification with the University. Interestingly, not all participants had a direct relationship to the University, but the participants that did, described how the Midwestern Kickball League has given them the opportunity to identify more with the Springville community. Emma Frost, pointed to this thought when she said:

To be honest, the Midwestern Kickball League has made me realize there is a lot more to Springville than just the University. I think a lot of times people just don't see the local community because it's easy to stay focused on the campus and just do things associated with the University. This [the league] has really showed me that there's so much more out there, and this has made me appreciate the local community and the people more.

Expressing a similar perspective, Skye Townsend stated:

I'm comfortable with it [the league] being a Springville thing. I spend so much time at the University; it's kind of nice to get out. It is nice to get away because I'm definitely learning more about the Springville community instead of just the University community. It's nice to remember that there's more to Springville than the University.

Respondents with no direct relationship to the University shared stronger views regarding their identification (or lack thereof). For example, Kat Jensen conveyed the following, "the Midwestern Kickball League is a local league. It has nothing to do with the University. It doesn't have the collegiate atmosphere—thank god. It's the real Springville." Kendrick Collins

on the other hand, blatantly avoided any follow-up questions regarding the University with the statement “Next Question”. However, when asked about the Springville community, he demonstrated genuine connection and interest. Similarly, Kat Jensen shared the following in regard to the local community:

People know how to respond to each other in this town. There is a level of serving each other and taking care of each other. I mean just seeing people from the shooting that happened like a month and a half ago downtown, there’s this huge dynamic in the community that has been built. It’s great to be a part of something this special.

Gillian Shortle repeated this level of identification and connection with the city when she said The Midwestern Kickball League makes you feel connected with the city of Springville. Oh, I’ve met a lot of people through just the whole community itself. Then you see someone out and about, and you start to connect the dots and just become more in tune with what the city has to offer.

This hostility toward the University was prevalent during informal interviews and observations as well. There were many times where comments were made toward the author regarding the University. An example is as follows, “I can’t wait for you damn college kids to be free from school and leave for the summer”. A spectator, Sydney Reed, attended games to support her friend and mentioned a sense of disdain when bringing up her graduate program. She expressed:

No one was really affiliated from the university at all. So, I realized pretty quickly, if I mentioned being a student, people had absolutely no interest in my school or what I was doing. Not that they should care because they don’t really know me, but I just found it odd because of the immediate dismissal.

Although bitterness was present when the University was mentioned in a general sense, it is important to note the overarching support the Midwestern Kickball League participants have for one highly successful sports team. In the midst of laughing, Zeb Cohen, who is a student and kickball player stated:

I mean, the people hop on (that team's) wagon like no other. I personally make fun of that because outside of cheering for the basketball team, people really are anti-university. They want it to be all about (the town) and all about townies because of the hipster philosophy. Such fucking hypocrites.

A division occurred between individuals who had a direct relationship to the University and those individuals who did not. While all participants described a strong identification and connection with the local Springville community, the same was not found for the University identification. Instead, those individuals with no connection, expressed general contempt for the University except for the aforementioned team. The responses represented the notion that the Midwestern Kickball League is truly a 'town ball' league and is happily separate from the well-known University.

Local Business Support

During year two of my tenure with the Midwestern Kickball League, my captain was on a hunt for a new sponsor after drama ended the previous year's partnership between our team and the business. Growing up, my dad's architecture firm frequently sponsored sports teams and events, so I informed my captain he may be interested in the sponsorship. In my mind, he would get publicity, and our team would not have to worry about the costs associated with league fees or team shirts. However, to my surprise (because who honestly turns down a free sponsor), my

captain was not interested. The premise of local business sponsors meant something to her, and she wanted a partnership that would directly contribute back to the Springville community.

The third subtheme discovered through the coding process was the prevalence of local business support throughout the league. Similar to other recreational leagues, local businesses sponsor teams and provide t-shirts for the games. However, the Midwestern Kickball League is different because of the direct association these local businesses have with the league. During the interview with Richard Tate, he provided the details surrounding the origin of the Midwestern Kickball League. He conveyed, “It really just started as a local town bar league where blue-collar workers wanted to go have beers and play a silly kids game. Then it just kept growing and growing and it finally got to where it is at today.” Jessi Fairbank reiterated the connection to the local businesses, but then elaborated on the landscape of the league today:

It’s always been a local bar/restaurant league, and it will always stay that way. I think that’s one of the things that the league commissioners have been really good at, is making sure that each team has some kind of a tie to a local business. And while the majority are downtown businesses, it really can be any local business. As long as your team is connected to something locally with us, we are happy because that is what we want to happen.

When speaking with a board member, Emery Carter, of the Midwestern Kickball League, it was clarified that the size of the business and type of business does not matter as long as there is a local presence. Specifically:

the majority of responses we have [about sponsors] our local and I appreciate that. But yeah, if somebody huge came in and wanted to sponsor a team, of course we would let

them. I would love if Dick's Sporting Goods wanted to come and sponsor. I'd be like 'please, dear God, give us your money'.

Although the historical underpinnings of the league sponsorships were solely based in local small businesses, current and former board members seemed to understand the monetary benefits associated with potential big-name sponsors. With a large operating budget, made possible by bigger sponsors, the Midwestern Kickball League could focus even more efforts on donating back to the local community.

Across the league, many businesses not only act as sponsors but have employees that play on the team. These social connections formed by owners, employees, and other league players may originally start on the field, but they have been shown to translate into everyday life. Tory Horton supported this notion through the following representative quote:

There are certain bars that people work at who are kick ballers, and I will go see those people at those bars and go to their events. I think that's a really unique aspect of this kickball league because people can sponsor, and people want to support the people who sponsor the league and keep the league going.

Further, respondents expressed the need to support local businesses that chose to support the Midwestern Kickball League. Nevada Dunn provided a specific example regarding this concept. She said, "I never went to Green Garden before I knew that they had a kickball team. But I want to support that business, because they support the community." Another respondent, Mason Davidson, referred to himself as a "townie" throughout the interview and portrayed the following quote relating to local businesses. He stated:

Kickball is truly the social grease in this town for me because I could go to any bar or any restaurant in this town, and I know some of their employees that play kickball. I'm going

to go to that person for a drink or that restaurant for food because I know they are associated with the league. Another example is like trees, like if I need a tree cut down, like I know tree guys in the league, I'm going to call Midwest Tree Care. If I need advice on cooking or whatever, I know plenty of chefs in the league I can call up. If I need a DJ for a party, I know a DJ in the league that can hook me up. So, it's very cohesive. We take care of each other, and like it's great to be part of that community.

Finally, Jessi Fairbank discussed how her bike is completely covered in stickers from local establishments. She said, "Most of them are of local businesses who sponsor the league or teams in the league. I think that's a big part of it, that we all support one another."

Because the reciprocal relationship is important to the Midwestern Kickball League and local businesses, the reasoning behind the sponsorships was also discovered. An article posted on the Midwestern Kickball League Facebook page provided a humorous spin to this exact topic. The article, "Bar Owner Cannot Fucking Believe He Actually Sponsored an Adult Kickball league", served as a joke within the Midwestern Kickball League, and several business owners mentioned they could relate. According to the article:

when asked what possessed him to connect his bar to a team of college-educated adults who play kickball, a game normally enjoyed by second-graders, he responded by saying that he had obviously lost his fucking mind. I guess I think it might be a good way to get the bar's name out there. Business has been tough lately, and I thought maybe I should try and get more young people in here. Huge, huge mistake.

While the article is fiction, it was enjoyed throughout the league, and provided loose connections to the rationale businesses had for sponsoring teams within the Midwestern Kickball League. Besides word-of-mouth promotion and brand awareness, local businesses have the opportunity to

engage with new consumers through the Midwestern Kickball League’s online platform. For example, a local apparel company tweeted: “Loving the jerseys we printed for @StateBeer’s kickball team! Congrats on another great season in the @MKL. Growlers! [photo of two people with jerseys and beer].”

Charity Events

One of the largest aspects of the Midwestern Kickball League that I have grown to love, is the connection they have to local non-profits and charities. In particular, I enjoy the various organizations that sell food during the Game of the Week. Not only do I get something substantial to eat after a long day of kickball, but I know the money is going to a great cause. One time in particular, the food of the game was tacos, which thinking back from a logical perspective, was an absolutely awful idea. However, at the time, tacos sounded amazing, and I purchased ten. Not only did it take over 35 minutes for me to get the tacos, they were incredibly hard to eat because the tortillas broke apart. To make matters worse, my dog decided she was hungry and devoured the remaining tacos on the plate before I noticed they were gone. As I was sitting there, still hungry, I couldn’t help but laugh at the situation, and remind myself the \$20 I spent was going directly to a litter of rescued puppies.

The fourth prevalent subtheme discovered in the analysis related to the charity events hosted by the Midwestern Kickball League. Respondents were eager to share the contributions the Midwestern Kickball League made back to the local community and non-profit businesses in the area. Jessi Fairbank spoke on behalf of the Midwestern Kickball League board and confirmed the league has given close to \$50,000 to local charities in the past decade. In addition, this past year the Midwestern Kickball League raised \$10,000 for the local Humane Society. These donations are made possible through the various charity events hosted by the Midwestern

Kickball League and individual volunteers. Kat Jensen described the Midwestern Kickball League charity event held in the fall. She said:

I really like volunteering in the community too. Like the fall the Midwestern Kickball League yard crew drive. We get auctioned off every year, and we go and work in someone's yard throughout the community. We usually volunteer for about four hours of yard work.

This past year, the yard crew volunteered at a woman's house who had just undergone surgery. She had been down on her luck and was grateful for the volunteers that were provided.

Another yearly event hosted by the Midwestern Kickball League is the pre-season charity tournament. Jake Bond explained how the charity tournament had a buy in for each individual team. He said, "This event is always a great way to get together with your teammates and unwind before the season starts. In addition, the money raised from entry fees always goes toward the selected charity for that year." Other Midwestern Kickball League charity events that are coordinated over the course of the year are 'Cans for Community', 'Bar Crawls', and the 'End-of-the Season Party'. Because of their beer company sponsor, Mason Davidson highlighted the 'Cans for Community' fundraiser they hold over the course of the season. He stated:

Well we all drink at kickball, which is obvious since my team in particular is sponsored by a beer company, so we all have cans. When we play, everything gets cleaned up and we give them to the community, and they can recycle them and get money. We just say, you guys are doing something good, and we support each other (league to town and town to league).

The 'End-of-the Season Party' celebrates the successful completion of the Midwestern Kickball League. It is typically hosted in a large event space in downtown Springville, and

consists of music, games, booze, and a silent charity auction. The ‘Bar Crawls’ occur in the off season, typically during the month of December. This charity event serves as a way to unite the league and raise money for a charity. In the past, the ‘Bar Crawl’ consists of six-eight downtown bars who each feature a game (e.g. corn hole, Jenga, beer pong). Teams of four individuals, dressed in themed-costumes, bar hop to complete each game and receive a total overall score. The event is open to spectators as well, so they can cheer on their favorite team to victory.

Although the Midwestern Kickball League hosts annual charity events, such as the ones listed above, they also find ways to raise money through small donations. Jessi Fairbank provided an example:

Like it’s from the door gate to get into the after party at Remix. It’s the small doses that can have an impact on our community over time. For instance, a \$2 cover at the door to the after party does nothing to your psyche. You don’t even realize that you had to pay a cover half the time, and the other half you don’t care because you know it’s going to charity. It’s small things like that, that add up over time, especially if you have enough people participating in the social events.

Another example of the small donations come from the food sales during the Game of the Week. After speaking with a board member, Emery Carter, it was apparent any local organization can volunteer to sell concessions during the game. Specifically, “We just wait for somebody to suggest it to us. We don’t have an official form that you fill out. If somebody comes to us and says, ‘hey this charity needs it’, and they have a good heart behind them... we normally say yes”.

An example tweet showcasing the food sales at Game of the Week is listed below:

The Penguins raised \$500 for @luckypuppyrescue selling tacos!! 100% of proceeds are going to the rescue efforts, care, and adoption support for the pups still looking for their

forever families! Please check out this rescue for other opportunities to volunteer [heart and paw print emoji] [photo of kickball and dogs].

As indicated from the relationship with the city, the charitable contributions made by the Midwestern Kickball League have not gone unnoticed in the Springville community.

Remembrance

To close an inning, I snatched the ball out of midair as if I was a starting wide receiver wearing sticky gloves. To be honest, I probably couldn't have done it again if I tried. However, this catch led to a conversation where the third base umpire inquired about me joining his team for the next season. Back and forth banter occurred, and the conversation ended with the umpire saying, "Well if you won't join my team, at least grab me a beer". While my interaction with Daniel Stille was miniscule compared to others in the league, his death, which unexpectedly occurred less than a week after this conversation, impacted me. The events that transpired following his death, reminded me there was more to kickball than the game. A memorial was held at his coffeeshop that he never got to see open for business. A tribute was made during the weekly podcast and Game of the Week. Stickers were sold featuring his initials in his honor. Money was raised for his family, so his casket could be sent home to Alaska. I didn't know Daniel. I had one brief conversation with him. However, because of the Midwestern Kickball League, I feel like I know him because of the stories that have been shared, photos that were posted, and memories that will never be forgotten.

The fifth subtheme shines light on all of the fallen members of the Midwestern Kickball League community. The conversations surrounding this topic were some of the hardest for some participants and some of the easiest for others. This is possibly due to the individualized nature in which death impacts people individually.

Although each person reacts to death differently, as a community, the Midwestern Kickball League has found ways to remember those they have lost. Money is being raised for a bench that will be located north of the scoreboard at Hawks Park to honor those who are no longer a part of the Midwestern Kickball League community. As solemnly expressed by a former board member, Jessi Fairbank, “People can have a seat and think about those individuals and about kickball”.

As shown by the proposed memorial bench, the league is no stranger to death. However, that does not make it any easier on those involved. This past summer, an active member of the Midwestern Kickball League passed away suddenly. The league held a moment of silence for Daniel Stille and his family during the Game of the Week. The moment of silence was featured on the Midwestern Kickball League Twitter page: “GOTW#4 under the lights at Hawks MTC vs. Wild Dogs and a moment of silence for our friend @DanielSP #MKLFamily #WemissyouDaniel #GOTW [photo of teams with ‘Families Together’ banner]”. The Midwestern Kickball League also held a celebration of Daniel’s life that was hosted at his coffee shop that he never got to see open. They also held a balloon release in his honor and started a GoFundMe page to help raise money for his funeral.

Another Midwestern Kickball League member passed away in 2012 after a car/train collision. A contributor of the league blog wrote a post in reference to “A Fallen Comrade”. Memorial contributions were raised in her name for a Children’s Education Fund and Scholarship Fund. The blog entry read:

We wish to offer our sincerest condolences to the family of Angie. Her tragic loss has been felt throughout the community as she was a counselor at Springville High school

and was active in multiple youth sports programs... Her absence will be noticed, and she is already sorely missed.

In addition to players of the league who have passed away, money has been raised in remembrance of other individuals as well. According to Jessi Fairbank:

One year we saw there was a kickball player who was a police officer who was killed in the line of duty at the Boston Marathon. We sent money to his kickball team in his honor to do something for his family.

Even during grueling times, the Midwestern Kickball League has found a way to unite as one in remembrance of those who are gone. As written in a blog post about “The Longing Impact of Loss”:

[we all] have experienced our share of loss—family, friends, pets. It’s never easy. It’s never expected... I’m playing for him... and while he may not be there, I know he’s there. And for all of you, loved and lost and never forgotten; I wish you were here.”

These words provide comfort for many who have experienced loss. They give a voice to those who are unable to express themselves in the face of death. Most importantly, while the post is written about one person in particular, the sentiment extends to a broader context.

Failed Attempts at Community Engagement

“God. Fucking. Damnit.” “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” These comments were spurting out of my teammates mouth during a Friday night Parks and Recreation kickball game. During an inning break, Kelsey decided to check her phone, and based on her verbal assault, what she read wasn’t good. After she calmed down, she explained the situation through the process of venting. In simplistic terms, the Midwestern Kickball League board was having to deal with an incident that occurred during the previous week. Apparently, a gun was brought by a spectator and threats

were made because of what had transpired on the field. As she finished her rant, and put out her cigarette, she goes “Why are people so God Damn Stupid”, before taking the field.

Despite the consistent efforts to positively engage with the local community, the Midwestern Kickball League has experienced some issues during their tenure as an organization. From players’ perspectives, the events can be reflected upon in a humorous light and the stories associated are ones that will be passed down throughout the league.

One event frequently mentioned over the course of the 2018 season was the infamous Englewood peeing scandal. As expressed, the next day in the blog:

The Fees took an early four point lead in the first and held it until the cops were called on us by some jerk neighbor who wrongly accused us of pissing in her lawn—I can say with confidence that only one child urinated on their overgrown fence, the rest of us used a nearby creek. The cop gave us a friendly lecture about public urination, drinking in a public park, kicking balls into private yards, and then left us with a warning.

Even at the time, it was evident the instance was viewed in an amusing manner. Justification for the behavior was present, and the mention of the cop alluded to the situation being taken of. However, the Midwestern Kickball League board was informed of the incident and put out a league-wide statement:

As many of you probably heard, the police were called to Edgewood on Sunday. The complaint was due to urination on someone’s property, but the officer also discussed noise and open containers. As we understand it, this was one of multiple complaints they have received this season. Since it seems that some do not want us there, **The Midwestern Kickball League has decided to discontinue our use of Edgewood until further notice.** We would also ask that you not use the field for practices and

scrimmages. This is a good time to remind ourselves that our games take place in the middle of neighborhoods, so we need to behave as guests while we're there. Please avoid urinating in yards, keep the volume low on your boombox, pick up your trash and cigarette butts, drive the speed limit, and don't flaunt your beverages. The police have never shown any desire to crackdown on our league, so the ball's in our court to avoid future incidents.

While the board understood the severity of the situation and found a way to prevent future incidences from occurring at the location, players' took the news personally. This viewpoint was expressed in another blog post where the writer deflected the blame away from the league:

It is unfortunate that people from the very community the Kaw Valley Kickball league enthusiastically seeks to support and promote have turned against us, but in their defense public urination is sort of gross. As a long time, defender of grass, I feel as if I should be more upset about the end of Edgewood, but I believe the field's flaws were becoming less of a quirky addition to the game and more of a nuisance.

When speaking to Emery Carter, she continued to mention the concept of urinating in public. Although the Edgewood incident is the most remembered, there are numerous other occasions where police were called because kickball players were unable to find a public restroom. Dakota Snider expressed:

People are lazy. Nobody wanted to walk to the bathrooms because they were too far. [The bathroom at Hawks is located behind the left field fence.] People let's be honest, men, would just go across the street to pee in people's yards. Well that's illegal. It's rude, and it's a good way to get on a sex offender list.

It was then explained that the board addressed this frequent urination issue at Hawks Park by increasing the league fees so they could purchase a “porta potty.” Emery Carter conveyed, “We figured out an easy solution. It’s not a big deal to us on the board, but people were upset when fees increased.”

Another story retold by members of the Midwestern Kickball League involved the ‘Pot Tent’ that was featured during the [women’s kickball clinic]. Each year a group of individuals would set up an enclosed hippie tie-dye tent where you could go smoke or get hotboxed. This activity ended when a cop decided to drive by and circle back around the block. According to individuals witnessed the event, mass chaos ensued, and joints were being hidden everywhere. Because the officer was unable to search the property, no one was arrested, but due to the close call, the board decided the ‘Pot Tent’ would no longer be welcomed at the clinic.

At one point, the Midwestern Kickball League routinely let off fireworks during the seventh-inning stretch of Game of the Week. Jessi Fairbank joked, “We’ve done fireworks, where I put my brother in a dragon costume and he climbed the fence to light them off. By the way, we can’t do that anymore... Definitely can’t do that anymore”. An additional incident at the Game of the Week was addressed by the board in reference to glass bottles. Due to the nature of the bottles constantly being broken, anything glass is prohibited in the stands. In reference to the new rules being added, Emery Carter stated:

It’s a rule because of a specific situation. Don’t be mad that it’s a rule unless you find a way for that to never happen again. It’s no different than hair dryers. There’s warning signs on every hair dryer so people don’t put it in the bathtub. All because one person did it, there now has to be a rule/warning about it.

As shown through the responsive behavior exhibited by the Midwestern Kickball League board, the relationship with the community and residents matter. If incidents occur, the board is quick to assess the situation and create procedures to prevent a similar incident in the future. In general, the Midwestern Kickball League participants hold each other accountable for their actions. While not every incident is severe enough to require a rule change, the consistent reminder of proper behavior is relevant. To illustrate this point, this past year the board sent out a league-wide message to ‘Be Better’ on all of their social media sites. The post read:

Hello kickball family. I’d like to take a moment and request that we all Be Better. Every Sunday for the past 17 years, there are 3 months in the heat and humidity of these amazing [midwestern] summers we get to enjoy the company of teammates, friends, and family. We get to be active and play a sport we have all come to love and we do it all with the help of the Springville Parks and Recs Dept. We have been told that the fields are being left in poor condition... cigarette butts, trash, etc. being left in the dug outs, fields, stands, and in the parking lots. I know we aren’t the only ones that use the fields, there are other groups on the same field we use all week before us, but let’s continue to be better! Parks and Recs Dept. do a lot for us, and we need to show them we appreciate it by trying to make their life easier when they go to work Monday morning [old photo of Hawks Park next to new photo of Hawks Park]. Keep in mind, Municipal Stadium at Hawks Park is our unofficial kickball home and it was opened in July 1947. Our favorite park is 71 years old and needs a little extra TLC. Let’s keep our home clean for our future. MKL has always risen above and beyond expectations when it comes to cleaning the fields and that’s part of why the city allows us to do what we do. So please, take a few minutes to clean up your trash after your game on every field you play on, and take it a

step further, pick up the trash that is left behind by others. Keep your drinks and cigarettes off the field during play, remind your teammates, fans, and friends to bring cans and recycle. Love always, “kickball mom”.

As portrayed throughout the representative quotes, stories, observations, and online posts, a clear overarching theme was present regarding the Midwestern Kickball League’s connection to the local city community. Additionally, within this theme, specific aspects of the league-community relationship were discovered and analyzed.

“I’m Here to Be Social, Get Over It”

Looking back on the five years I have been a part of the Midwestern Kickball League; I can directly trace my friendships and relationships to specific games and events. I never imagined, kickball, of all things, would serve as a social hub for my life in Springville. The games and events of the Midwestern Kickball League provided a unique atmosphere, where I met individuals outside of the university. While not everyone I met will be my life-long friend, each person helped me grow and played a role in my journey.

The second main theme, social connections, was present throughout the various data collection methods. In particular, three subcategories were discovered in reference to the interpersonal behavior exhibited by Midwestern Kickball League participants: (1) relationship development, (2) in group/out group status, and (3) Game of the Week.

Relationship Development

If anyone knows me, they know I can be a hard person to crack. While I can come across as a social butterfly, very few people truly know me. In my mind, it’s easier to keep friends at an arms-length, than try to explain all the skeletons I have in my closet. And I’m not going to sit here and say the Midwestern Kickball League has changed this about me. After five years, I’m

still that person with secrets and extreme trust issues. What I can say, is this league has allowed me to form relationships with individuals who have made me comfortable with my secrets. Through conversations with people across the league, I've learned I'm not alone. The relationships I've formed have helped me accept who I am. And although I may only stay in touch with a few individuals after I move on from Springville, the honest conversations, detailed stories, and genuine advice I gained, will stay with me forever as each individual person helped me make peace with my past and focus on the future.

Similar to that of community identification, it is difficult to describe the various friendships and relationships that emerge because of the Midwestern Kickball League. Interpersonal connections are formed across age, gender, racial, and political lines. While each relationship is unique to the individuals involved, a commonality exists because of the connection to the league. Further, the dynamics of individual teams allow for a feeling of connectivity among players. This feeling was expressed by Emma Frost:

I truly feel like I've gained a lot of really good friendships because of kickball. We try to get together two to three times outside of kickball every summer, and I really look forward to these events because I get to catch up with everyone. We have a kickoff banquet before the season, and we always try to do a team get-together before game of the week. This past year we did crafts, made Jell-O-O shots, and played yard games.

As a captain of a team, Kat Jensen provided further insight into the social connections on her team. She described her role in creating the team dynamics and fostering those relationships as:

I really try to build community within our team. You know, try to get people to do things outside of games, like go watch Nevada Dunn play hockey, or go bowling, or go to the

dog park”. I really try to encourage those things, because I know how important relationships are to me, and I only assume others have a similar view.

Another captain, Mason Davidson, started tearing up when describing his interactions with his teammates. He explained,

This team has become family to me. I bet other people on my team would say the same thing. The relationships are more than just showing up and playing every Sunday during the fall. We genuinely care about each other. Like this past year, one of our players’ mom’s passed away and all but one of our team was able to make it to the visitation and funeral. I had never met her mom, but we all knew that we needed to be there and support her. These are the types of relationships that are built because of a silly children’s game, and it is something special.

This notion of friendship stemming from the Midwestern Kickball League was evident in the online platforms as well. One blog contributor wrote about his friendship with one of his teammates:

We’ve gone on to help build a championship MKL team, develop a litany of inexcusable and entirely unfunny inside jokes, forget who owes who the next drink, ND NU, and accept Mason Davidson as a friend. And in my nine years of MKL-ship—which isn’t exactly *a lot* compared to so many others—it’s easy to lose sight of ultimately the most important part of this league. I’ve written about community on here before—maybe two years ago—but when you see (or in my case hear about) a good friend going down and going to the E.R., your first thought isn’t about that team’s score or how you played that day or the upsets around the league—it’s about your friends and colleagues with whom you share an unhealthy obsession for kickball and beer. Also winning.

Yeah, sure, maybe we've all, in his words, wanted to kick his teeth in at some point or another. But we all know no one really wants that—for him or anyone—even the people we say we loathed when we met them. There are proverbs for everything. And one I will forever share is from William Blake: *The bird a nest; the spider a web; man, friendship.*

While many social connections are formed among team members, the Midwestern Kickball League provides opportunities for friendships to foster across teams. In fact, Game of the Week, podcast nights, after parties, charity events, and practices were all mentioned by respondents as avenues for expanding one's social group. Kara Baxter discussed the importance of kickball events on her social life in the following representative quote,

Honestly, without kickball and the events hosted by kickball, I wouldn't have many friends. Finding friends around this town is a lot harder than people think. Especially in today's world where people are always on their phones and don't talk to each other. It is hard to meet people. So, kickball automatically gives me a huge diverse of people where we have something in common and we see each other multiple times a week.

Chelsea Waters, a fan of the Midwestern Tree Care team, had a similar response and discussed how these events give her a place to interact with people. She said, "I like the league because I get to see people, I wouldn't usually see just because of our lives have different paths."

Finally, the honest and genuine friendships created from this league were discussed in great detail among the majority of respondents. During an emotional part of the interview, Kat Jensen shared the following,

While I was working through some really hard times personally, it was the Midwestern Kickball League community and my best friends from the league calling and saying 'Hey we know you went through a bad break up but come out of the house. Come play trivia

with us'. They truly were the ones calling and checking on me daily and making sure I was eating and taking care of myself.

Another respondent, Kelsey Berry, highlighted the key friendships she had made because of kickball. She stated,

I have a career and I have a life path outside of kickball. However, my core girls and gentlemen you see me with more often, those are the people I've known since the beginning of my kickball days. They will always be there.

Additionally, long-time player and captain, Russell Wilkinson asserted, "I've made a zillion friends from kickball. Some of them who I consider some of the best friends I've ever had. I've traveled the world during my band days, and those best friends are hard to come by." Further, a spectator of the league, Sydney Reed, described the relationship she was able to form with another fan of the team:

I was able to get to know one of the players mom really well. The conversation started with her dog, and before you know it, we were conversing about life. We'd joke that we really didn't know what was going on in the game. We knew it was similar to baseball, but the things that were different just threw us off. I'd always joke with her about how I had been the number two fan of the team until she took my place... It was one of those things where although we sat together throughout the summer, I still couldn't tell you what she did for a living. I knew more about her son than I did her, and she knew more about my friend than me.

In summation, Kat Jensen provided a quote that encapsulated the types of social connections that form within the Midwestern Kickball League. She explained,

With the Midwestern Kickball League, you really have the whole spectrum. You have those people you wave high to in the grocery store. You have those that you would go get a beer with and that you can talk lightheartedness with. You have those that you go to the Tuesday night podcast with. You also have those where you are just Facebook friends. Then it goes all the way to the people that you know everything about. You are there when they are sick. When their car breaks down, you're the first person they call. --- Honestly, that is how you differentiate the people within the league: you're Facebook friends versus your real-life friends. Those certain people where you know if the [kickball] league stopped tomorrow; you would still be friends with them. I mean there are 600 people in the league. If it disbanded tomorrow, I probably wouldn't see hundreds of them all the time. But there is a tight group of people that I would still want in my life. Those are the true friends on the spectrum I mentioned earlier.

These quotes and experiences highlighted the various relationships that were formed throughout the league. Some individuals found life-long friends, while others had mere interactions and conversations surrounding the game of kickball. Regardless of the extent of the relationship, The Midwestern Kickball League provided a space for individuals to relate to one another in a face to face setting.

In Group/Out Group Status

"Fuck my life. How'd I end up with on the team with four players from the Redbirds".

This was a statement I overheard while at one of the league-wide practices on Wednesday nights. We had just numbered off into random teams to finish the practice with a scrimmage, when the comment was made. To this day, I don't know if the guy who said it knew that the Redbirds were my team and the individuals he was referring to were my teammates. Regardless, moments like

these made me realize how divided the league can be. Yes, my team is not great. Yes, the previous season we did not win a game. Yes, we were seeded in last place out of all 36 teams. However, despite my team's lack of success, I was not expecting this comment. I especially was not expecting this comment at an optional practice where people were there trying to improve their game play. Although the comment was not made toward me in particular, it stung, and it made me wonder what other statements had been made about teams in the lower part of the league.

In accordance with relationship development, the Midwestern Kickball League provided a sense of belonging for its participants. Most groups organically occurred because of the established teams and specified players. The membership with these teams gives players an opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves. They are accepted by the group and share common ideals and expectations. This feeling of acceptance was expressed Sydney Reed:

When I first started attending games, I didn't know anybody besides my friend. And I mean, I'm legally blind, so I walk past somebody that I've known forever and don't realize it. So, the fact that everyone was so open and social and friendly, I just felt comfortable when I went to games.

She continued her explanation regarding the connection she felt toward the group:

Everybody knew everybody on the team, and people didn't even know who I was. That didn't matter though. I was accepted immediately. At one point they were going to make t-shirts for the loyal fans, and they included me. I honestly don't think we had ever spoken at that point either. I mean we were cordial, and I'd been coming to games all season, but being included in that was nice. The coach even gave me a team Koozie,

which made me feel like I was ingrained in this team, despite the fact that I actually never played.

As mentioned by Sydney, teams found ways to allow members identify with the group. Outside of the traditional jerseys, teams created banners and designed koozies to indicate a connection to the specific team. These artifacts served as a visual representation of the group and allowed participants to showcase their membership.

Although group membership can be beneficial to an individual, it can create a dichotomy between groups. Within the Midwestern Kickball League, this division can be shown through the perceptions of teams at the top of the league and perceptions of teams at the bottom. The ‘us versus them’ mentality originally surfaced because the goals of the teams drastically differed. While this contrast exists among the teams currently playing in the Midwestern Kickball League, it has been a point of discussion since 2007. According to the Midwestern Kickball League history presentation:

Back in 2007, some teams wanted to leave the league what it was, play in the grass, hanging with your friends, drinking beer at schools and at parks. You know, doing things you shouldn’t be doing. Others wanted the league to be more organized.

Despite the implementation of championship games for each division, the separation between the top half and bottom half of the league persist. The teams at the top are typically competing for the main championship and take the game very seriously. Tatum Lane conveyed, “Some teams were discussing shifts for certain players when they were up to kick. Others had strategic line-ups. It was obvious, which teams took the field to have fun and which teams treated it like business”. Through informal conversations, it was noted that certain teams started the season off with a large roster, so they could see who performs throughout the season. When

tournament play comes around, only certain players were selected to field the team and compete for the title. Individuals who play on these top teams also internalize their wins and losses.

Russell Wilkinson provides his opinion on this behavior:

Sometimes people get so uptight and scream bloody murder, and it would just drive me crazy. Then I realized that the vast majority of the people living in this glory are ones who never played team sports in their lives, and so now they are adults having success playing a child's game. You know, some of them act like really spoiled rotten brat children, where you want to go up and knock them in the head and remind them it's just fucking kickball.

In addition to the behavior exhibited on the field, negative perceptions were shown regarding teams at the bottom of the league. Not only were informal comments made to each other (e.g. author's personal excerpt), but on-air comments were made via the weekly podcasts. During one of the first weeks, during the pick em' challenge, the hosts introduced the game featuring the Raunchy Redbirds ranked number 36 vs. 'Winner Winner Chicken Dinner' ranked number 1. Banter occurred between the hosts:

(Host 1) Do we even need to pick this game?

(Host 2) If anyone picks against 'Winner Winner Chicken Dinner' they can leave.

(Host 1) laughing uncontrollably.

(Host 3) They're just terrible.

(Host 4) Well on the bright side, 'Winner Winner Chicken Dinner' will get a lot of reps.

(Host 1) Yeah, you're right, good kicking practice.

Other times, the podcast hosts made fun of specific players on the bottom teams if they had not performed well the previous week. Jokes were made and bad innings picked apart by those on

the top teams. The lack of respect for the lower ranked teams is also evident in the blog's rank play preview. The top teams' paragraphs contain positive outcomes and information regarding specific players. An example is the championship preview for the top division, #2 seed 'Winner Winner Chicken Dinner'

Reigning champions and masters of Hate Fuck Kickball™ deserve more respect than getting slotted in at #2, but that's how good MTC is. Not to be outdone by their nemesis, 'Winner Winner Chicken Dinner' also picked up a top 5 lady (Shannon Wells) this offseason, furthering the arms race that is the #1 seeds. Some of the best veteran leaders (love 'em or hate 'em) in the league play of this team and keep them laser focused, even against lesser competition, so you know they are bringing their A+ game every single week during rank play. MTC vs. 'Winner Winner Chicken Dinner' will unfortunately not be a GOTW, but damn if I'm not gonna do everything in my power to watch that finals rematch/preview. Shout out to the homie KJ, you're alllllll sick at hosting podcasts!

In comparison, the excerpts for the bottom four teams contained little to no analysis and had a hint of sarcasm written within the words. An example is the preview for the bottom division, #3 seed Brewers, "Picking the middle of the pack in the #6's is a fools errand, I have no idea how a 2-5 is going to shake out, so I gotta go with my beer brethren as the pick here. Even less impressive was the preview for the bottom division, #6 seed Redbirds, "C'mon Redbirds, get a W!

Another way the 'us vs them' mentality surfaces is through the practice of stealing players and switching teams. Some individuals even referred to this occurrence as being similar to a feeder system in baseball. Players start on the lower teams to initially get involved in the league, and then after they show they can compete, they are asked to switch teams for the next

season. Sydney Reed described this practice with the following quote, “After the games, some of the higher-level teams would come and recruit players. They’d mention how the person should think about joining the team next year, so they could make a run for the main title.”

Although some individuals have no problem with players switching teams and captains stealing players, others view the practice as unfavorable. Zeb Cohen described his views on the situation:

I mean, I’ve had other people say, ‘hey come and play with our team’. I’m just, I guess, I’m just not the type of guy that would ditch these guys. They brought me in and gave me a chance to play. I’m not going to jump ship. I don’t want to do that to my captain.

Other players and captains have echoed this sentiment and specifically discussed the frustration involved with players leaving. A captain of one of the bottom teams detailed this feeling, “It just sucks. We bring people in for a reason. Not only do they fit our team chemistry, but they make us better. It’s almost impossible to get better when you are constantly having to find new players.”

Game of the Week

Coming from a small farm town in northeast Iowa, I primarily grew up around conservative views and religious-based values. While I wasn’t a ‘goody two-shoes’ by any means, I would consider myself sheltered compared to other individuals who had a different upbringing. When I joined the Midwestern Kickball League, I knew I was going to be exposed to more progressive viewpoints, but I wasn’t prepared for the Game of the Week. If I had been prepared, or at least had a basic understanding of what the Game of the Week entailed, then I would have never invited my parents to come and watch me play. During that nine-inning game while I was playing on the field, my parents were given alcohol, were offered pot in the forms of

brownies and a standard joint, had Jell-O shots splattered on them, and saw a pot-bellied pig drink beer out of a water dish. Looking back on the conversation after the game had ended, I am thankful they chose to attend that game because the following week, a team featured a cake in the shape of a decapitated Donald Trump head.

Although the general description of the Game of the Week was provided in Chapter 2: The Social Environment, the comments and observations made by the author and participants were important to consider within the chapter of social connections. Because the Game of the Week serves as the primary meeting place for all league members on a Sunday night, the context must be further explored from various perspectives. A long-time business owner, Russell Wilkinson, provided a statement which details this event:

I think that what goes on out there on Sunday nights out at Hawks is a wonderment... It's crazy. It's hard to explain unless you've actually been there because it shows what a wonderful community, Springville is. Try pulling that off in south [Davis] County. It would never happen. Good luck. I mean we're in the middle of people's houses. People go streaking, there's farm animals, there's fireworks, there's massive amounts of pot smoking as well as public drunkenness. Yeah man, it's just crazy. It's just crazy, and it's just so much fun and it's so cool and I just love the way the cops just hang back. Like you guys, as long as you guys take care of yourselves, we're going to leave you alone.

One of the most-well known aspects of the Game of the Week is the 7th inning stretch where the entire crowd links arms and sings 'Take me out to the ball game' lead by the infamous player known as Jaguar. When the song is complete, Kelsey Berry jokes, "You never know what is going to happen". Typically, Jell-O shots are thrown over the fence for spectators to enjoy. According to Jessi Fairbank, "Some teams make them really tasty, such as the Wild Dogs

making the White Russians. Other times, it's like what just happened. It's like weird melty juice." Other items that have been thrown out to the crowd have included t-shirts, koozies, jewelry, and stuffed animals. Jessi Fairbank created a giveaway specifically aimed toward their competitor. She proclaimed, "I made a unicorn not doing something nice to a goat, because my team played the Goats." Some other giveaways included full cases of beer, bottles of liquor, and nicely wrapped chicken wings.

While giveaways occur during every 7th inning of the Game of the Week, there have been a couple specific incidences that stand out among members of the league. As described during the Midwestern Kickball League history presentation, some of the top memories of the Game of the Week include, "Streaking- we had a gentleman named [Sam] run across the field, climb the fence, and just keep running." Another featured, "two woman who ran the bases wearing nothing but furry UGG boots. They both slid into home base. That was pretty exciting." The Game of the Week also spotlighted a metal band in the back of the field. In reference to this incident, Jessi Fairbank stated, "I apologize to whoever lived out there. That probably wasn't very nice or the best idea looking back". Finally, two wedding proposals occurred during the Game of the Week, and one couple even got married at Hawks Park.

Another reason the Game of the Week is so popular is because of the illicit behavior that is deemed socially acceptable. Zeb Cohen alludes to this premise in the following quote:

One of the most fun things is to just kick back, drink, and smoke in public. In an environment where everybody's doing it where you feel safe. And you feel expected to smoke. I've never been able to go anywhere else where I can smoke pot and not have to worry that I'm going to get in trouble. You know, I've never really felt out of place there.

While this participant felt expected to participate in this behavior, other individuals described the experience as more of a temptation than obligation. Gillian Shortle shares this perspective:

There's been times where I am still hungover from going out on Saturday night, and somehow I'm still convinced to drink at kickball. Your teammate has a huge cooler of beer, you grab one, and then all of a sudden you're on your fourth. The alcohol is just there. It just gives you the opportunity. And if you're tempted easily, like myself, you give in to your temptations and get drunk for the third night in a row.

A similar experience was described by Sydney Reed:

We were offered weed Brownies, joints, and vodka-soaked gummy bears by random people walking around the stands. But, I mean, I didn't feel threatened by it. It's not like sellers on the street offering me some random crap, it was more of a generous and social thing. At least that's the feeling I got.

With a block party type feeling, the Game of the Week is known for its shenanigans. In fact, the board promotes the shenanigans. However, some participants expressed slight concerns regarding the behaviors exhibited at the games. Zeb Cohen mentioned the following regarding the downfalls of the structure of the Game of the Week:

Above all, it's on a Sunday, so you're getting really drunk at the game, then you go to the after party at the Remix until 2:30 in the morning. Then you have to be to work at like 9am, sometimes even earlier. If you think about people's productivity, they might not be as productive because they are hungover on Monday. They might even take Monday off, or call in sick, or even have a Bloody before work. I've heard some of my colleagues have done that before. What's the saying, 'you can't be hungover if you're still drunk?'

Other concerns stemmed from the use of illicit drugs and underage drinking. In her journal entry, Emma Frost mentioned how sometimes the smell of weed bothers her when she's at the Game of the Week. In general, she doesn't care people are smoking, but sometimes she avoids sitting next to certain people to avoid a headache.

In sum, the Game of the Week held at Hawks Park is considered the home of the Midwestern Kickball League. The environment, made possible because of the connections with the local community, favors progressive behavior. It allows participants of the league to socialize in an unfiltered setting where they feel safe to interact and engage in certain behaviors and activities.

“It's Time for a Ladies Takeover”

Due to my background with sports, I've come to understand that gendered discrimination exists at almost every level. While I have been fortunate and only experienced overt sexism a couple times in my life, I have frequently observed subtle sexism. Within the Midwestern Kickball League, no different than any other sport organization, sexism is present. Despite the progressive nature of the league, discrimination does occur. However, the presence of discrimination isn't what bothers me. To be frank, I'm used to it. Instead, it's frustrating to see pioneers in the league, self-proclaimed feminists, and progressive liberals not understand or care how they may be contributing to the problem. These blinders inhibit social progress and enable subtle discriminatory practices.

An additional theme that was discovered related to the gender dynamics associated with the Midwestern Kickball League. Specifically, three subthemes emerged: (1) structure of the league, (2) perceptions of players, and (3) [women's kickball clinic].

Structure of the League

When I first started playing in the Midwestern Kickball League, I thought it was strange they only required three women to be on the field and in the kicking order at all times. I knew teams struggled to find women, and so I automatically assumed the disproportionate gender ratio was based in this reasoning. In fact, one of the sole reasons I was asked to originally play was because the team needed more women.

Unlike many parks and recreation leagues, the structure of the Midwestern Kickball League serves a purpose. The Midwestern Kickball League does not just split the league in half and require the same number of male and female players. Instead, it was made evident through the examination that the structure of the league was created to reflect progressive values and perspectives. As mentioned in the Midwestern Kickball history presentation, the three women rule was developed in 2004 where three women were expected to be on the field and in the kicking line up at all times. This rule still exists to this day. A board member expressed the following regarding the rule:

It's the one rule that has never left the Midwestern Kickball League. It's been debated, it's been talked about. We've discussed if we should change it. Should we make it this, should we make it that, and to be honest, in 2019, in the world we live in, I find it impressive that all we require is three people to identify as male and three people to identify as female. That leaves space for gender fluidity. I think that it is wonderful that you don't have to pick a gender in order to play in the league.

Because only six out of ten individuals are required to identify as a specific gender, this allows individuals to participate who identify as having an overlap of gender, indefinite lines of gender, or no gender at all. This serves great importance for individuals who differ from traditional

hegemonic norms. In particular, the Midwestern Kickball League received its first-ever player registration form where a person did not declare a gender. The individual promoted this accomplishment on the Midwestern Kickball League Facebook page and expressed sincere appreciation for the ability to be honest about her non-conforming gender choice.

For those players who have been a part of the league from the beginning, the three women rule has a special place in their heart. While the Midwestern Kickball League was considered co-ed, very few women participated in the league because no requirements were in place. With the new rule, more women joined the league and it started to become what it is known for today. One of the long-time players, Jessi Fairbanks, wrote a blog post detailing her interactions with women in the league and ‘How Kickball Saved [Her] Life’:

Five summers ago, I was going through a divorce, dealing with a failed business and was very over weight. Pretty much all around one big lump of unhappy. Sure, I had my inner circle of music friends and family, but little did I know that in five year’s time my circle would be filled with dozens of strong, loving, there for you always women in my daily life. These are the women of the MKL, aka the Laideez, a crew from the Midwestern Kickball League who literally without them knowing it, saved my life... I could go on for paragraphs about all the extraordinary women in the league who do more than just show up and play. This is just a small spattering of the talent and commitment that comes from the women who play in the MKL off the field. Most teams only play with three of us each week on the field and I give mad love and thanks for all of the women who push hard at being the best three outta ten on the field each week, you’re all inspirations.

Perceptions of Players

As previously indicated throughout previous excerpts, I have a strong background in softball. I started at a young age and played through high school. I turned down the opportunity to play in college at the Division II and Division III level. I obtained my coaching license through the IGHSAU and served as the head coach for a JV high school team and an assistant coach for a varsity high school team. I understand the game of softball. And quite frankly, the rules between softball and kickball are almost identical.

Despite my history with softball and my five years playing for the Midwestern Kickball League, my knowledge and abilities were questioned this past summer. I was the scoring run on second base with one out and no force. It's simple. I wait for the ball to be kicked. If it's in the air, I tag up and read the distance of the throw before determining if I advance after the ball is caught. If it's on the ground toward third, I advance on the throw. If it's on the ground toward first, I unhook the plow and advance regardless. I know the rules of the game, and I understand the strategy of the game. However, one of the men on the team called two separate time outs to come explain what I needed to do while I was standing on second base. Then, he persisted to shout across the field "Don't forget what I told you" and "It's important you do this right."

While I understand this was a stressful and important moment in the game, I was furious with the lack of respect I was being given. He didn't take the time to consider the type of player I was. To him, I was a damsel in distress who he needed to save. To him, I was a girl who didn't have the knowledge or capability to (1) understand the situation myself and (2) remember the situation he had told me during the time out.

In general, the overall perception of the Midwestern Kickball League was women were welcomed and appreciated. Whether or not the three-women rule factored into this acceptance is

still up for question, but the general consensus was based in support. In recent years there has even been a push to recognize the women on the field and within the league. One form of acknowledgement is through the blog:

Based on some discussions that I've had this season, I thought it would be nice to finally compile some lady stats from around the league so that they can be showcased like the rock stars that they are. Many teams that I've talked to over the last several years have given lip service to the ladies. They say things like "Oh, our ladies are awesome!" or "We have the best ladies in the league!", but yet no one wanted to show any quantitative data for it... I wanted to show the league that there are excellent ladies that don't get talked about. [In reference to consistent stats] Maybe next year, we can show the true, overall value of the ladies in this league!

Following this blog post was a detailed chart highlighting the women and their personal statistics from games throughout the season. In reference to the chart, the author noted, "this is all done off of scanned score sheets (which aren't 100% legible), in the span of about eight hours of typing & mindless key tapping." Online posts such as these alluded to the importance of the women throughout the Midwestern Kickball League.

From the surface, it could be viewed that women were wanted on the field and considered equals to their male counterparts. However, even the phrase "Don't be a dick. Let the girls play!" can be considered offensive despite the intended meaning. That phrase is commonly used when men dominate the field, act selfishly, and don't let women complete any defensive plays. While the purpose of the phrase is to promote equality, the author observed it being used sarcastically by a number of male individuals. Additionally, the phrase was shouted during incorrect times, which caused confusion and lead to uncomfortable situations between team members. For

example, it was observed in one game that the left fielder charged a pop fly and caught the ball on the edge of the grass line. From a baseball perspective, he had the angle on the ball and was moving forward to catch the ball. Despite it being the correct play, spectators started shouting the phrase because a girl was playing third. You could see the embarrassment in his face, and he immediately went up to her and apologized, despite the fact that he was not in the wrong.

Another perspective, which is rooted in good intentions, was that of an older gentleman. During the interview he discussed how he's not only the leader on the team but also a protective father figure for his girls. He explains:

No squabbling my girls. I love my girls, but I have some really straight girls on my team. I mean, they're church girls and they're beautiful. I mean like, drop dead gorgeous girls who model. And I'm sorry, but I'm not having any stuff going on in the bench about my girls. Whether it be from the male players on my team or the opposing team. I won't let it happen. It's very, I won't say patriarchal, but I don't know the exact word, but yeah. I'm basically the protective dad for my girls.

Similar to the previous example about the phrase being misconstrued in a sarcastic manner, the "father figure" perspective can also be interpreted negatively. Although the captain had good intentions with the comment, traditional gender roles emerged, and a power dynamic was at play.

Finally, an adjustment was made when the three women rule was enacted, and teams had to find places for women on the field. A blog post was written about this concept:

Defensive strategy was a hot topic, and when scouting or gossiping about teams, people would always ask "where do they play their girls." Every team was lining up differently, but the most popular defense was the "fertile crescent." I credit [John] with naming this defense, but I could be wrong. This meant a female second baseman, shortstop and rover

(shallow outfield behind 2nd base). The importance of good female players was obvious, and all the top teams had girls that were athletic and experienced.

While the post was positive in nature, it showcases the traditional positions women still occupy to this day. Based on informal conversations, women were typically placed in these positions because it was assumed they couldn't throw the ball a long distance or catch a ball on the move in the outfield. In her journal entry, Emma Frost touched on this limited athletic perception as well:

Sometimes it feels like the women are viewed as the weak-link of the teams (for example, when the fielders move closer in the infield when a woman is up to kick. Though I am guilty of doing this as well).

Additionally, the blog featured disgraceful designs, which are shown below in Figure 3.

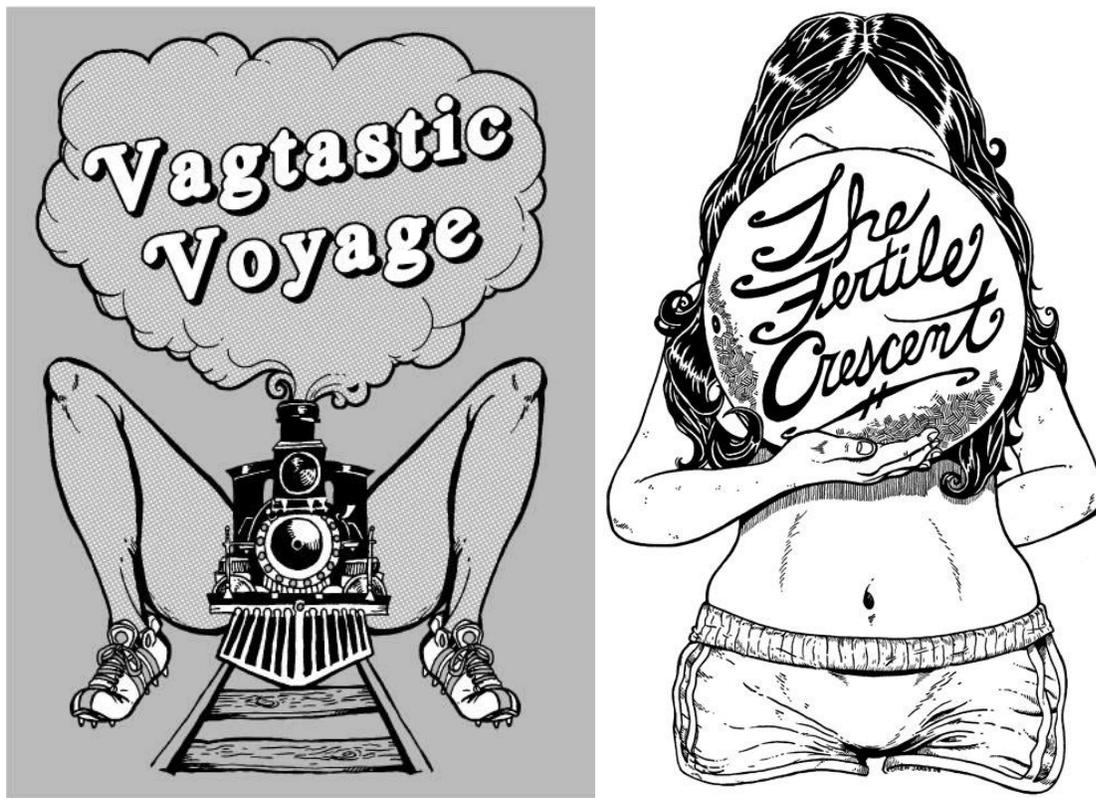


Figure 3. Artwork Designs Posted on the Blog

[Women's Kickball Clinic]

When I first heard about the [women's kickball clinic] that boasted a provocative name, I was intrigued. I immediately asked my captain for details regarding the clinic, and she enthusiastically described the event. Every year, the [women's kickball clinic] is on hosted on a Saturday in July, and it gives women the opportunity to interact and practice their skills. The first half of the clinic consists of kicking, fielding, and throwing drills, while the remaining time is spent in a friendly scrimmage. There always is free food and drinks as well as discounted massages from a local business. From the initial description of the [women's kickball clinic], it seemed like something I would be interested in attending.

However, as I started to uncover further details surrounding the event, I became hesitant. While the clinic is solely for women, and boasts a 'female power' perspective, all of the drills and stations were being run by men. As someone with a strong sports background, this dynamic was alarming. I personally didn't want to attend a [women's kickball clinic] and be 'taught' solely by men. The basic assumption, which is built from the structure of the clinic, is men have more knowledge than women, which is why they are in a coaching role.

When I shared my hesitance with individuals genuinely did not understand my view on the clinic. To them, this clinic was all about feminism, and therefore, nothing negative could be associated with it. There was no attempt to understand my perspective. I spoke with other individuals who started the clinic and were active with the clinic, and they had similar views. No one saw, or wanted to admit they saw, the underlying discrimination.

Four years passed, and four [women's kickball clinic's] went by without me attending. When people asked if I was going, I'd be honest and say I was boycotting. The entire premise of the event caused an uneasiness within me. Personally, I wasn't going to waste my time going to a

[women's kickball clinic] where I was being taught the techniques of catching a ball by one of my male teammates who dropped three pop flies the previous week.

As briefly described in Chapter 2: Social Environment and the excerpt listed above, the [women's kickball clinic] is a yearly event hosted by women for women. For many individuals in the league, the clinic is highly anticipated and one of their favorite parts of the Midwestern Kickball League season. Based on stories from the original organizers, the [women's kickball clinic] was started organically over a couple of drinks. It was detailed by Emery Carter:

Back then, our league was maybe a quarter women, and a large number of the women who joined the league had never played a team sport. They had no baseball background besides watching on TV and not really understanding what was going on. So, some of us who had grown up playing sports, put together the original clinic to get people interested in the sport.

When asked about the inappropriate choice of name for the clinic, Emery said:

I mean we chose the name as a joke to get people to notice it. Of course, we had some extreme feminists who were appalled by the name, but you can't please everyone. It's obviously a play on words, and it's generally easy to incorporate into a t-shirt logo design that people are willing to buy.

After the first [women's kickball clinic], the event began to grow as more women joined the league. The organizers started reaching out to local businesses and had them sponsor the clinic. It was noted that the businesses are carefully selected to make sure they match the overall purpose of the clinic: "empowering women and promoting equality in sports". In the past, sponsors have included a local gym tailored toward women's fitness, a locally owned massage parlor, and a recently opened local brewery.

Prior to the actual [women's kickball clinic], the women of the Midwestern Kickball League take over the weekly podcast. They go to an undisclosed location, and a selected group of individual's speak on behalf of the women in the league as well as promote the clinic. Although the female podcast is generally perceived well, some concerns were discussed through informal and formal interviews. An individual brought up the contradictory nature of having the podcast be in a secret location. She expressed concern with the following statement:

This year was the first time I've felt not included at some events, specifically the ladies' podcast. I like that they do a ladies' podcast leading up to the clinic, and that the podcast is more positive compared to the others. I just found it a little off-putting that the podcast was in a secret location and only specific ladies in the league were invited. It seems that the goal of the podcast is to make sure ladies are heard in the league, but it seemed contradictory to that goal to not make sure all the ladies were invited.

Even from a data collection perspective, the author had to be given special permission from the female board members in order to attend the podcast.

As mentioned by the individual, the content of the podcast hosted by the women in the Midwestern Kickball League is typically more inclusive and positive in nature. While jokes are made on air, there isn't the malicious intent that is present during other podcasts. However, while some enjoy the change of pace, other individuals expressed frustration and annoyance with the tone of the podcast. During an informal conversation, people were discussing how they purposefully didn't listen to the podcast because they couldn't stand the positivity. One individual mentioned how he thought the podcast served as a way for the ladies to drink margaritas and boost each other's egos because they were failing in other aspects of their life.

Despite these mumbled conversations behind the women's backs, the excitement for the [women's kickball clinic] was evident. Emma stated:

I've always really enjoyed the [women's kickball clinic]. It's a good way to meet other people in the league and get in some structured practice. I enjoy the drills and working to build upon specific skills. The event is pretty well organized even if they never actually start on time. There's a positive atmosphere that promotes building up your colleagues and encouraging constructive criticism to help players improve. Most players seem to be receptive to any tips or instructions on how to do things differently or better. I like that there's a break to eat and socialize before the scrimmage that allows people to practice the skills they've been working on throughout the afternoon. I plan to attend this event every year as long as my schedule allows.

Another participant, Sydney Reed, had similar views on the clinic. She portrayed the following, "I think the [women's kickball clinic] is a great event to teach women skills and techniques of the game. This can be a very positive experience in a non-intimidating and non-threatening place to do it."

Finally, the hypocrisy of having a [women's kickball clinic] that was instructed by men was discussed among participants. Certain players shared similar concerns as the ones the author expressed in the excerpt. Kara Baxter conveyed the notion:

I think it's strange to me that you won't let a novice male athlete come participate to learn skills, but yet men are the ones teaching the women skills. So, although this is a women's event that is built on girl power, it's like wait, where does this dynamic of men coaching come from?... It was just strange, and it sent a mixed message.

The question of inviting men to participate was brought up at the [women's kickball clinic] this past summer. A player mentioned how it would be nice to include the men in the clinic next year because there are some who could use the instruction as well. This suggestion did not go over well. The individual made it very clear that it was a women-only clinic and if guys wanted to improve their skills they could attend the league-wide practices or "put on their own God-damn clinic".

Through the observation of this interaction, and the follow-up discussion with the player who originally made the suggestion, it was clear the clinic would consist solely of female participants moving forward. However, with all the underlying emotion surrounding the gendered clinic, it still remains unclear why men are the ones coaching. Expressed through a journal entry, a player stated:

I wish we could have women leading all the stations. Though this isn't a deal breaker for me because I do understand if the women would rather participate in the clinic than lead a station. I just usually wish to learn from someone whose physical capabilities are more similar to mine and who would be playing similar positions as me. I also think some of the women in the league are far better players than some of the men leading the stations.

The previous quote acknowledges the 'fertile crescent' and uses it to justify why women would be better suited coaching each other in the clinic.

"My Mental State Depends on This Sport"

Sports have been socialized into my life since I was born. I grew up watching them, playing them, and working in them. Because sports are an integral part of who I am as a person, they play a major role in terms of my quality of life. In particular, the Midwestern Kickball League has provided me with the opportunity to improve my self-esteem, develop teamwork

skills, and grow as a leader. Being a part of the league has helped lower my stress levels by giving me an outlet for my anger and frustration. In general, I've gained a lot of mental benefits from participating in the league.

Although not as prominent as the first three themes, the psychological benefits participants gained from association with the Midwestern Kickball League were commonly mentioned throughout the data collection process. This theme was broken down into two subcategories: (1) quality of life and (2) athlete identity.

Quality of Life

It's crazy to think back and compare my goals from when I started playing in the league to where I'm at now. I went from having the goal of winning every game, to the goal of winning half the games, to the goal of winning a game. I went from expecting perfection on defense, to hoping our team doesn't make two errors in a row. While many may describe this as regressive behavior, I am proud of the adjustments I made. Instead of quitting or switching teams, I focused on different outcomes. I wanted to be the best teammate. I wanted to win the player of the game trophy. I wanted to have fun. This change in mindset not only improved my view of the Midwestern Kickball League, it also positively influenced my entire life.

In terms of psychological outcomes, the majority of interviewees mentioned how participating in the kickball league and its' associated events provided a positive increase in their mental health. Emma Frost described this through the following representative quote, "I can say that it [kickball] positively influences my life. It puts me in a good mood just thinking about the upcoming game. My stress levels significantly decrease and at times I'm like a child because of my excitement." Another respondent, Kat Jensen, had a similar sentiment about the Midwestern Kickball League. She said,

Kickball is always on my mind. I discuss it outside of kickball. In fact, my brother and sister made a drinking game out of it. Every time I'd mention kickball when I was home, they would drink. So yeah, this league is something I am very proud of. I'm proud of the community, I'm proud of how it makes me feel, and I really do brag about it a lot.

Finally, Kendrick Collins discussed how playing kickball every week helps bring him back to his baseball games which stimulates his mind. He stated, "It mentally kind of stimulates you a little bit. Similar to baseball, you have to make sure you are constantly thinking because the situations constantly change depending on the inning, runners, and score."

Other individuals expressed how the Midwestern Kickball League influenced their perspectives during the week. Zeb Cohen conveyed the following statement:

I mean this league is a big commitment. I mean it is something that I honestly look forward to every single week. Like on Monday, I'll be sitting in the office reminiscing and going over the previous day's game. Then on Tuesday I'm already focused on my next game. I might not know exactly who we are playing, but I am always looking forward to it and it really helps the week go by. Plus, the practices on Wednesdays really break the week up perfectly so I can get my kickball fix.

This quote was similar to the ideas mentioned during informal conversations with the researcher. Participants frequently mentioned how kickball got them through the week and gave them a light at the end of a long tunnel when work wasn't going well.

Other participants discussed the sanctity of the sport and how it has had such a powerful impact on their quality of life. Emery Carter expressed this thought through the following quote:

It was like love at first sight. There have been some real ups and downs in my life, and when I first played I was definitely in a low spot. I realized quickly how much I loved the

sport. Since then it's the one thing that kept me happy and motivated and like just looking forward to something when life seemed so grim. During a brutal time, kickball gave me hope.

A blog post, written in 2009, provides a reflective account regarding the sport of kickball and the prevalence it has in so many individual's lives. With the title 'Blessed are the Few', the post reads:

What is this game, this abomination? These excruciating contests. A stark reflection of our inner sanctity, perhaps? Or, merely a gauge of what condemns us along with the rest of humanity. We seek only temporal moments of fame, rather not lavishly and oft unwittingly. Mired in libation, we consider Sunday's sacrifice a well-reasoned event. Most appropriate and mostly appreciated. I am loathed to say that 'tis not a choice, but destiny that drives us forth. Yet, I believe this to be an undeniable truth. We kickballer's have a will no greater than the ways we are so naturally compelled. Neither regret nor regard serve us well in these moments while we bathe *with* the beauty of the game. This ritualistic cleansing comes at a crucial time in our days, our weeks, our months. Consider the maximum joy to be had while in labor of such contests.....NAY, love(s). Are these events not the definition of true love? Good people of this Midwestern Kickball League, I ask that you come forth with your hearts. Do not shame thyselfes! For it is this love that binds us. May fortuna basque in all our glory and we hers.

Athlete Identity

Walking off the field for the last time of my softball career was one of the hardest moments in my life. I'd prepared myself the best I could, but it's hard to move on from something that encompassed so much of my time, body, and mind. I felt like I lost a part of myself, and I wondered if I could ever fill the void. For me personally, the Midwestern Kickball League hasn't been able to replace what I lost when I retired my glove and bat. However, I know from watching other games and participating in the events, that for many players, the Midwestern Kickball League has given them their athletic identity back. They are kickball. They introduce themselves as kickball players. They seek acknowledgement for their kickball accolades. They internalize the product on the field. For these players, kickball is a part of who they are as a person, and they are proud of it.

Within the realm of psychological aspects of the Midwestern Kickball League, the concept of athlete identity surfaced. Many individuals discussed their history with sports, and the feeling of loss they experienced when their career ended. The Midwestern Kickball League served as a void for many individuals and allowed them to not only identify as an athlete but also serve as a participant again. Kensley Todd expressed this notion through the following representative quote:

I just really missed team sports. I'd played team sports my whole life, and I just thought I'll go out there and see what kickball was like. You know, then I fell in love with it. I fell in love with a game. It is stupid. It is ridiculous. It is absurd. And so many people take it to heart, and it's just pathetic. I understand that. But I can't help it though.

Another individual, Kelsey Berry, spoke on behalf of her teammates. She conveyed:

I know for a lot of people it is about having something athletic or competition based to do... When people graduate high school and don't play college sports or don't make it to

the professional level, they crave it. That athletic nature is still with them. You know. The love for the sport. The training. The team camaraderie. And the [Midwestern Kickball League] can be a great place for people to act out these roles they once had to give up.

This identification with being an athlete isn't just an internal concept. For many individuals they wear the athlete identity on their sleeve and have it at the forefront. This is evident by interactions at the Game of the Week and other Midwestern Kickball League events. Certain players would introduce themselves, followed by the name of the team they played on. Their identity was related to the team and the sport and they made it known.

While this self-concept is important to some individuals, others find it deplorable and pathetic. A player provided an honest account regarding his views on individuals with high levels of identification to the sport:

I have high hopes that my team cracks the top 10 this season. But once again, it's not my top priority in life. Not even close. I mean I have so many other things that I do, and so many other things that I like to do that. And that's what makes me different from other people. For many people [kickball] is the center of their existence, which honestly is absolutely pathetic. I mean it is. No one should be able to argue against it. And I do think it's neat that people enjoy the game and have friendships and have bought in to the league, but there's more out there. Like for me, I'd say maybe like four percent of my life revolves around kickball, not eighty or ninety percent like some of these others.

Although this player is a part of the top part of the Midwestern Kickball League, this perspective is more common among individuals who play for the lower ranked teams. Observations and informal conversations showed athlete identity being more common among players competing for the main championship.

“Have You Tried It? Kickball Really is a Workout”

Similar to that of the psychological theme, the physical benefits were not as prominent as the those relating to community, social connections, and gender, however, they still surfaced as contributing factors to participation within the Midwestern Kickball League. Through the responses, observations, and online discourse, three subcategories were formed: (1) health benefits, (2), supporting exercise, and (3) athletic ability/training.

Health Benefits

Growing up as a multi-sport athlete, you would have never heard me say kickball was strenuous. You would have never heard me say it was a workout. To me, kickball was a game I played with my brothers and cousins to settle a problem in the backyard of my grandparents’ house. It was an activity, and a means to an end.

Fast-forward to this past summer, right after I’d completed my fourth year of graduate school. My eating habits had deteriorated, and the concept of exercise was foreign. I’d burned the right fielder with a long ball over his head, and I easily secured a double. As I approached second base, my heart was pounding, my legs felt like Jell-O, and my mouth and lungs tasted like iron. I felt like I was going to die, and yet I had only run a standard home-to-second base path route. In this moment, I understood the argument. For some, including myself, kickball was a workout.

From a strictly physical activity perspective, many individuals who participate in the Midwestern Kickball League believe they gain some type of health benefit from participating in games each Sunday. In fact, the majority of players in the league wear fitness watches and track their steps during a game. It serves as a reminder the player is moving and engaging a variety of different muscle groups. For some players in the league, this movement on the kickball diamond

is the most exercise they get during the week. This sentiment was expressed by Kensley Todd, who felt kickball games served as an actual workout. He explained, “For me it’s fun, and it’s a workout. I’m 40 years old, and I get a good workout in every time I play kickball. Without kickball and running the bases, I probably wouldn’t do anything physical.” Another player, Zeb Cohen, expressed similar views regarding the intensity of the game:

It's a great way to stay in shape. Honestly it is. Like during my first game, I had a rude awakening. I was like okay, what the hell. What is this? I was not expecting the game to be competitive at all. I was embarrassed because I was winded. I was like, shit, this is actually legit.

Russell Wilkinson spoke on behalf of his observations of other players. He conveyed:

I grew up playing a tournament in softball where you played three games one day, four days the next, and three the final day to make it to the championship game. Here, with kickball, these guys play one 60-minute game and act like they just climbed Mount Everest. It’s so funny, and it just cracks me up the way these guys strut around and act like they are kings of the universe and world class athletes when they are winded after they run to first.

Another perspective surfaced among players who used kickball as a motivational factor to stay in shape. Isaiah Moss explained:

In the Midwestern Kickball League, I have an advantage because it is a bunting league. So, if you have speed, you can pretty much get on the bag at any point in time. This simple aspect of the game encourages me to stay fast and strong. I like to compete. It really gives me a reason to stay in shape.

Both these perspectives credit the Midwestern Kickball League for providing an avenue to exert physical energy. The health benefits associated with being active are expansive, and participants were quick to acknowledge them.

Supporting Exercise

Growing up with a mother who frequently participated in marathons, I understood the physical and mental toll it could take on a person. So, when my friend and kickball teammate, Emma started running marathons, I expected the same ritualistic behavior I'd experienced with my mother. I had assumed her sole focus would be on running, and her other activities, including kickball, would be placed on hold. To my surprise, Emma didn't retreat into running. Instead, she found a way to integrate kickball into her workout routine. She used kickball during her off days to help her muscles recover from the strenuous long runs. She found a way to do both.

Outside of treating the Midwestern Kickball League games as a workout in itself, other individuals used the physical activity as supporting exercise. Emma Frost explained, "I don't use kickball to 'get in shape', but I do use it as a way to keep moving. In a way it even serves as an alternative workout to my long runs". Another respondent, Jayden Knight, had a similar view of kickball and used it as a supplemental exercise to his more strenuous workouts. He stated, "I wouldn't necessarily say it [kickball] is a true workout for me because I work out a lot. But at the same time, it serves as a semi rest day."

From another viewpoint, some interviewees felt kickball acted as a precursor to a different physical activity. Gillian Shortle spoke from this perspective and said:

Once I'm up and moving for kickball, I'm more motivated to go for a run afterwards.

Sometimes I am even motivated to walk to the game depending on which field it is being played at. So yes, kickball is not technically that physical, but it gets me up and moving

and it increases my heart rate. It really does serve as a gateway for other physical exercises.

Observations were made regarding this last point made by Gillian. Participants of the Midwestern Kickball League frequently walked or biked to the games on Sunday. Sometimes individuals even biked to the sports complex located on the outskirts of Springville. The games provided participants with a reason to get off the couch and enjoy the beautiful summer weather.

Athletic Ability/Training

Outside of casually attending league-wide practices and showing up to play games, I never trained to play kickball. I've learned what I know through previous softball experience and occasional in-game coaching. To be honest, the only thing I remember being taught over the past four years that specifically related to kickball was the phrase "Boobs over Ball". While funny and provocative, it actually serves a purpose and anatomically makes sense. When kicking, a player should shift the weight of their upper body forward to force the trajectory of the ball outward instead of upward to eliminate pop flies. In simpler terms, "Boobs over Ball".

Finally, the concept of athletic ability and training was discussed among participants throughout the Midwestern Kickball League. For some players, improving their athletic ability and on-field performance is one of their top priorities. They not only attend their team practices, but they never miss the league-wide practices on Wednesdays either. Donald Marrow expressed, "I really had to focus on my game because the league has really grown. Better players have joined, and the league has just really grown in terms of athleticism."

This notion of increased athleticism across the Midwestern Kickball League is also evident in the game previews on the blog and podcast. The teams at the top of the league are

consistently described based on their athletic ability, speed, and talent. The #1 team, Midwest Tree Care, in the top bracket was given the following rank play preview:

MTC already had one of the best collections of talent in MKL history, then they added the premier lady in the league to the mix and have been the odds-on favorite to win the title ever since. Elite athleticism combined with veteran kickball instincts make it hard to imagine this team losing a game, even against the best teams in the league, but then again the regular season has never been the problem for Midwest Tree Care...

To showcase the determination and training by some individuals in the league, a girl shared a story regarding her boyfriend, their new house, and kickball. Shortly after moving in together and purchasing a new house, the couple decided they were going to renovate the back yard. In her mind, there was a perfect place to build a fire pit in the ground and install seating around the area. In his mind, there was an ideal place to build a batter's box featuring home plate so he could practice his bunting skills. According to the girlfriend, a compromise was made, and both were installed, however, the bunt stop was the first to be built because "it served more value".

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

The Midwestern Kickball League's cultural environment was analyzed through a modified circuit of culture. The themes discussed in Chapter 5 are comprised within the overall culture of the league. Specifically, the circuit of culture model will be central to the analysis and will allow the author to discover ways in which cultural products of the Midwestern Kickball League were produced, represented, and consumed by participants (Hall, 1997; Leve, 2012). The following general discussion will be framed using the three aspects of the circuit of culture model: production, representation, and consumption. Further, the information will be organized in relation to the societal/community, organization, and individual.

Production of Culture

To Jessi Fairbank, a former/current board member, kickball “is a sport I never thought would be possible to play because I’m an adult, but here I am with the love affair with this yellow ball.” Her view on the Midwestern Kickball League is common among long-time players, and cultural meaning has been created along the way. Specifically, “symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught and preserved” (Peterson & Anand, 2004, p. 311). In the subsequent paragraphs, the cultural products of the Midwestern Kickball League will be examined from the societal/community, organization, and individual perspective.

Societal/community level. The culture within the Midwestern Kickball League is influenced by societal pressures and traditional hegemonic practices. As stated by Furusten (2013), “We, as individuals and as a collective, cannot isolate ourselves from what is going on around us” (p. 5). The beliefs and values of individual members are shaped by their environment

and are integrated throughout the Midwestern Kickball League.

These societal processes can manifest both positively and negatively. From a positive perspective, the environment created within the Midwestern Kickball League closely pairs with that of the Springville community. The liberal views, progressive beliefs, and inclusive mindset transcend from the community to the Midwestern Kickball League. These similarities in cultural practices explain why participants believed the league represented the city. It was clear the Midwestern Kickball League and its participants felt an identification and connection with the Springville community. As detailed in the literature review, social identity theory examines how an individual's identity can be based on a specific group membership (Tajfel, 1978). This collective identification manifests in group settings (such as the Midwestern Kickball League) through the value and emotional significance attached to the group membership. For many players, this connection to the local city was a priority because they believed the league to be representative of the larger city community (Heere & James, 2007). The current findings provide support to this statement, as responses indicated a perception that the Midwestern Kickball League represented the city of Springville. This representation was shown through a variety of avenues involving inclusive atmospheres, political affiliation, and overall uniqueness of the league and city. The Midwestern Kickball League is the epitome of Anderson and Stone's (1981) work where they "acknowledged the symbolic power of sport as an instrument for individuals to identify with other members of the community" (as cited in Heere & James, 2007, p. 319).

Additionally, Peterson and Anand (2004), maintained culture is not solely shaped by the conditions of production. Rather, Liebes and Katz (1990) discovered the influence of social conditions and relationships on the underlying tenets of culture. The various social connections that existed within the Midwestern Kickball League were evident from the beginning of the data

collection process. In particular, relationships were formed because of the sense of community that was created within the specific setting of kickball. Individuals were able to experience deeper connections with each other because of the context. Previous research has highlighted the importance of creating and fostering a sense of community within sport (Warner & Dixon, 2011). Based on the responses, the Midwestern Kickball League has been shown to provide places where individuals can feel safety, a sense of belonging, and personal attachment (Warner & Dixon, 2011). In particular, these opportunities created by the league offer more meaningful social interaction based on the sport of kickball. Through these interactions, individuals with diverse backgrounds are able to connect within the Midwestern Kickball League community and find commonality and shared interests (Warner & Dixon, 2011).

In addition to the sense of community experienced within the league, the opportunity to socialize and interact with other players was commonly mentioned. Specifically, players discussed how they would volunteer to ref the earlier game or stay after the Game of the Week to help with pick up. Although these activities required extra time, they provided the player with more opportunities to interact with individuals on other teams throughout the league. In general, these extra interactions between kickball players added to the environment of the league and positively impacted the overall experience for participants (Kerwin, Warner, Walker, & Stevens, 2015). By volunteering their time, they formed genuine relationships with other players, and demonstrated a commitment to the league. Warner, Dixon and Chalip (2012) discovered volunteer activity by members of informal sport groups to be “central to cultivating a sense of community” (p. 998).

Individuals also expressed their social benefits through the topic of friendships and social interactions. Participants discussed how close friendships and relationships were formed because

of the Midwestern Kickball League. Previous scholars have supported this notion by suggesting the social context of sport is salient to an individual's participation because of the opportunities available for interpersonal interaction (Allen, 2003; McCullagh, Matzkanin, Shaw, & Maldonado, 1993). For many of the respondents, these social connections exist outside of kickball, which furthers the importance of these relationships. Further, these social bonds have been found to satisfy fundamental human needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Contrarily, a negative perspective exists in terms of societal processes and the production of culture within the Midwestern Kickball League. As shown throughout various portions of the season, implicit bias and blatant discrimination was prevalent among some members of the Midwestern Kickball League. In particular, certain individuals believed in hegemonic masculine norms, which created a divide between male and female players. Smith, Stewart, and Haines (2012) postulated:

Sport generally displays rigid gender-role behavior, often personified by a widespread, fundamental belief that males and females should behave with specific and stereotypical conduct. Images such as rugged, tough, strong, and courageous exemplify traditional, stereotypical masculinity... Failure to behave within specified gender boundaries may create dissonance within the organization, and undermine the sanctioned ideology (p. 109).

The stereotypical conduct mentioned in the previous quote was shown through the differing descriptions given to male and female players throughout the Midwestern Kickball League season. First, the podcasts were hosted by hypermasculine males who reproduced problematic ideals on air such as "the valorization of victory, strength, aggression, and violence" (Crocket, 2012, p. 319). It was also observed that the male hosts sometimes spoke over women or

interrupted them when they were speaking from the audience. Another way discrimination surfaced throughout the Midwestern Kickball League was through inadvertent or sarcastic phrases such as “Don’t be a dick. Let the girls play!”. Comments such as these illustrate the perceived inequality of female athletes. As described by McParland (2012) “Most often, [it’s] subconscious and not intended to hurt, but I recognize their practices as also having long histories, and I feel dismayed by our lack of progress” (p. 476). Further, in light of discriminatory practices, it is important to remember female athletes for who they are:

Our flesh and bones hold wisdom waiting to be discovered; they tell stories of pain, exhilaration, and triumph; our muscles remember what was thought to be long forgotten; our appearances reflect our relationships with physical activity; our sports injuries define us as athletes and former athletes; our bodies and the way they move through space in a presentation of self are shaped by the past (Popovic, 2010, p. 202).

Because cultural production is heavily influenced by societal factors and specific environments, the Midwestern Kickball League needs to be cognizant of what values, beliefs, and behaviors are produced throughout the league.

Organizational level. At the organizational level, the production of culture focuses on converting individual cultural values into a single product accepted amongst members (Leve, 2012). Within the Midwestern Kickball League, the board and commissioner are typically associated with creating conditions for new culture formation.

When examining the structure of the league, it was apparent the board wanted an inclusive environment free of hegemonic societal norms. Not only did they want women to be represented on the field and in the kicking lineup, they wanted to account for individuals who did

not fit into traditional gendered categories. As self-described feminists and progressives, members of the Midwestern Kickball League are known to challenge the status quo through:

their knowledge, creation of oppositional culture, deep feelings of empathy, the development of a collective sense of identity with subordinate group members, and organizational ties that encourage activism (Ortiz, 2012, p. 50-51).

Based on conversations with members of the board, it was apparent the three women rule was introduced for a reason. Although the league had always been co-ed, very few women actually participated. Based on these historical accounts and personal stories of discrimination throughout the league, the policy was enacted. Hemmings (2005) discusses the influence past decisions have on future action, “all history takes place in the present, as we make and remake stories about the past to enable a particular present to gain legitimacy” (p. 118). Because some of the board members had personally experienced the gender discrimination, they were able to positively contribute to the new rule.

Additionally, the individual captains of teams are responsible for maintaining cultural beliefs and values so they can become adopted by the rest of the league. However, as discussed throughout theme two, a divide exists within the Midwestern Kickball League, and power struggles have occurred based on underlying beliefs and assumptions. The board, commissioner, and team captains must actively assert their cultural beliefs on the organization because it is an on-going and fluid process (Johnson, 1986). With every new player, different cultural backgrounds and environments are introduced to the league. This notion in itself, relates back to the production of culture from a societal and community level of analysis. Board members of the Midwestern Kickball League must acknowledge an individual’s personal beliefs if they plan to eventually establish shared values, beliefs, and practices among the organization (Schein, 2010).

Further, the tight social connections and strong team membership provide the opportunity for subcultures to develop and for production of culture to occur (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Because of the nature of teams, social circles were formed, and an automatic similarity existed among players. This basis of similarity, which can occur in the form of demographic attributes, preferences, or activities, creates strong bonds of loyalty to one's group (Triandis, 1989). Because of the strong cognitive identification that exists within a kickball team (in-group), anyone who is associated with a competitor is automatically placed in a different category (out-group). While not all in-group/out-group feelings are hostile, unconscious bias exists and a preference can still be made for one's in-group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). On a broader scale, the in-group/out-group dynamic was shown through the division between the teams at the top and bottom of the league. Shown through online blog posts, observations, and podcast recordings, participants on the better teams consistently degraded and disrespected individuals on the lower level teams. According to Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, and Semin (1989), "Disidentification from the out-group is often displayed by derogation in some manner, typically occurring in the form of in-group members describing the actions and behaviors of the out-group more negatively than similar actions of the in-group" (as cited in Havard & Reams, 2016, p. 129).

Individual level. At the individual level of analysis, the production of culture is influenced by those members in positions of leadership. Specifically, within the Midwestern Kickball League, team captains and board members have the power to produce culture compared to standard players. Past experiences of these individuals in leadership roles are vital to the vision of the team and organization. Schein states, "they will typically have their own notion, based on their own cultural history and personality, of how to fulfill the [mission of the organization]" (p. 220). Because the team captains and board members have been a part of the

league for many years, they also understand the foundation and cultural goals of the Midwestern Kickball League as a whole.

A commonly cited example was the formation of the [women's kickball clinic], which was developed by board members and long-standing players of the Midwestern Kickball League. In its entirety, the [women's kickball clinic] served as a way for female kickball players to interact outside of the regularly scheduled games. It also provided women with the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals who had similar athletic abilities. Through these new social connections, a sense of belonging was created, and women had a shared faith their mutual needs could be met (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

However, despite the relationship formation and underlying notions of sense of community, gendered power imbalances were prevalent during the [women's kickball clinic]. Power, viewed as relational and productive, attempts to produce specific social relationships between individuals and groups (Foucault, 1977). From the perspective of the author who attended the [women's kickball clinic], the power imbalance, paired with reinforced masculine ideals, lead to uncomfortable situations where the researcher's athletic ability and previous knowledge of the game were not considered.

Further, when the conversation regarding the power imbalance occurred with organizers of the clinic, brash responses were provided, and the reasoning was rooted in the past. Vertinsky (2012), alluded to this situation through her discussion of collective memories. She conveyed, "The use of pre-existing friendship groups among the women, for example, can affect collective remembering given that it provides one of the social contexts within which ideas are formed and decisions made" (p. 481). In order to continue with the progressive nature of the Midwestern

Kickball League, new perspectives should be considered to help avoid collective memory among a close group of individuals.

Representation of Culture

Similar to the production of culture, the representation of culture will be examined from the societal/community level, organizational level, and individual level. In the most basic sense, “representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people” (Hall, 1977, p. 15). From the Midwestern Kickball League perspective, influential members, such as the board and commissioner, decide which values, beliefs, and ideals they want to be integrated throughout the organization (Johnson, 1986).

Societal/community level. When examining the representation of culture from the societal or community level, it is imperative to make comparisons to other kickball leagues and parks and recreation events. Because many members of the Midwestern Kickball League play on various sports leagues in the area and across the United States, this comparison can be made. One unique facet of the Midwestern Kickball League is Hawks Park and the Game of the Week. Hawks Park provides the league with cultural heritage and connects the league to the history of the community and city. It provides social cohesion across generations and recognizes the rituals and traditions of the time period (UNESCO, 2018). Further, Hawks Park served as a social space for players to interact with each other on Sunday nights. Listed as one of the six factors associated with sense of community within a sport setting, social spaces can create “an environment where athletes felt supported, understood, and “in the same boat” (Warner, Dixon, Chalip, 2012). A common occurrence during the Game of the Week is the seventh inning stretch, which brings the spectators and teams together as one in the middle of the game. As everyone linked arms and swayed back and forth while singing ‘Take Me Out to The Ball Game’, a social

reality was constructed. This display of unity highlights a level of social commitment by each participant. The shared communal experience of singing the song and catching Jell-O shots illustrated the sense of community that exists at the Game of the Week. On a much larger scale, Satterfield and Godfrey (2010), found similar displays of crowd unity, sense of place, and communal bonding during the “tunnel walk” at a University of Nebraska-Lincoln football game. Both examples highlight the emotional connection exhibited by participants which influences their thoughts, actions and values.

Further, the stakeholders involved with the league (players, teams, fans, etc.), acknowledged the importance of developing and maintaining good relations with their local community (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). These relationships are rooted in the history of the Midwestern Kickball League and provide further insight to why players feel connected to the local city community. In addition, this league shows how the passion and identification involved with sport can be beneficial to local communities through encouragement and integration (Wakefield & Wann, 2006). Further, the reciprocal relationship that exists between the league and local businesses supports previous research on group cohesiveness (Kelley & Volkart, 1952; Solomon, 1960; Zander & Cohen, 1955). Specifically, the current results align with the findings by McMillan and Chavis (1986), when they discovered individuals are more attracted and identified to a community in which they feel influential. This support for the community and local businesses are shown through the extra-role behaviors exhibited by players in the Midwestern Kickball League. Respondents described how positive word-of-mouth helps create favorable impressions of both the league and the local businesses that sponsor the teams/league (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnold, 2009). They also described a sense of responsibility they felt toward other members of the community regarding the consumption and acknowledgment of local

businesses (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In almost all cases, respondents mentioned the likelihood of visiting a business that supported the league compared to one with no affiliation. This reciprocal relationship between sponsor and customer highlights "the fact that they are connected to other consumers through the benefit of community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 427).

Although the Midwestern Kickball League has a strong connection to the city and its residents, concerns have emerged which put the relationship in jeopardy. Issues such as the urinating incident showed a breach in social trust where individuals acted against social norms and expectations (Putnam, 2000). Because the relationship between the city and league is primarily based in nonmaterial benefits for both sides, it is important that the board addresses the situations of misconduct. McCabe (2012) examined the connection between homeownership, community, and social capital. The author discovered, "trust is a critical resource for building social capital within communities" (McCabe, 2012, p. 403). By adding in programs and policies, the board can encourage stability regarding the tenants of social trust.

Organizational level. The organizational environment of the Midwestern Kickball League impacts the representation of culture in several ways. Schein (2010) discusses the concept of cultural artifacts as, "the product of some of the underlying assumptions and [are], therefore, a manifestation of culture" (p. 24). Specific artifacts that represent the cultural values of the Midwestern Kickball League are as follows: team jerseys, league merchandise, koozies, dog bandanas, team banners, etc.

Further, the awards given to the champions of each division are a prevalent example of league culture represented through symbolism. At the start of the Midwestern Kickball League, only one championship was held, and one team won 'The Cup'. As the league continued to grow, the 'Not so Awesome' bracket was created for teams to play in outside of the

championship game. The award for winning the ‘Not so Awesome’ bracket is a dinner plate containing the photo of Princess Diana. As years went on, the board decided to add another championship, which is where the Mark Twain trophy comes in to play. Finally, ‘The Boot’ was created as an award for the battle of the bottom six. Currently, the Midwestern Kickball League has awards for 1st, 9th, 16th, and 30th place. The team who wins the championship of their division gets to take ownership of the coveted award until the next season.

To an individual with no association with the Midwestern Kickball League, the Princess Diana Dinner plate, Mark Twain trophy, and Boot has no significance or symbolism. However, to members of the league, these cultural artifacts hold value. Although these artifacts are extremely well-known within the Midwestern Kickball League, the team captains and board members must continue to emphasize, support, and reinforce the cultural messages (Smith et al., 2012).

When examining the artifacts produced by the Midwestern Kickball League, it was apparent extrinsic motivational factors were at play for members within the Midwestern Kickball League. For these individuals, they engage in certain behaviors as a means to an end (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Typically, individuals who are motivated by external factors are participating in the sport for recognition, a sense of obligation, personal goals, or to confirm their own sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 1985). One of the top motivating factors for individuals within the Midwestern Kickball League are the awards given to the teams who in the championship game of their division. Other individuals were observed trying to impress spectators in the stands with their athletic ability.

Individual level. At the individual level of analysis, cultural values and beliefs are represented through communication. The most common way to present cultural values to

members is through verbal communication such as speeches, everyday discourse, and dialogue (Hall, 1977). However, “any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, ‘a language’” (Hall, 1977, p. 19).

Various forms of communication were used to instill the cultural values and beliefs to the members of the Midwestern Kickball League. Intentional and repetitive messages were used to convey important information about the organization (Hall, 1977). Written communication was used in the form of social media posts (Facebook and Twitter), website content, emails, and blogs. Verbal communication occurred in the form of speeches, dialogue in practices and games, everyday discourse, and podcasts. Visual communication was also utilized by the Midwestern Kickball League through logos, merchandise, apparel, signs, and fliers.

According to Smith and colleagues (2012),

... memorable ideas and recurrent concepts in stories take advantage of two particular aspects of memory in order to enhance recall and subsequent transmission: repetition and arousal. The former is straightforward in the sense that the more exposure leads to better recall. The latter is important because the more emotionally stimulating a piece of information or event, the easier it is to remember (p. 181).

Typically, the Midwestern Kickball League used the form of repetition to enhance recall of the materials. Repetition of the materials occurred in the form of the information being posted on multiple online platforms.

However, this past season the league did communicate information that related to the sudden death of Daniel. Because of the emotional content of the message, and the shock of his passing, the concept of remembrance surfaced throughout the online discourse, interviews, and

observations. Previous research by Abramovitz and Albrecht (2013) describes this concept as collective loss which “can ripple throughout the entire community in ways that undermine community function and its sense of efficacy or effectiveness” (p. 683). Participants alluded to this behavior when they described the initial shock of hearing about the death of Daniel. Those close with Daniel were affected the most, but even through the excerpt by the researcher, it was evident the impact the death had on the Midwestern Kickball League community as a whole. Additionally, the messages and communication produced by the league were solemn and focused on all those the Midwestern Kickball League had lost over the years.

Another way culture is represented at the individual level is through the positive messages and thought processes that were present among individuals and groups. Similar to past research in sport recreation and leisure activity, participants described an increased psychological well-being based on improved feelings and emotions (Netz et al., 2005). Based within the realm of intrinsic motivation, the increase in psychological well-being is derived from an internal desire to perform certain behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As shown through the attendance at league-wide practices, individuals who are motivated by intrinsic factors have a deserve to learn and improve in the sport.

Although positive psychological behaviors and an overall improved quality of life were mentioned by participants across the league, teams toward the bottom of the league typically exhibited more intrinsic motivating factors than those at the top. Captains of the lower teams were more focused on the process and improvement over the season, while captains and players in the upper divisions focused on external factors such as victories. Kat Jensen, captain of one of the lower ranked teams, echoed these sentiments by saying:

I want my team to embrace the process and focus on the improvement we have made since the beginning of the season. Yes, I would like to win, but too many people get caught up in winning the game, they forget about bettering themselves.

Motivational tactics are also exhibited by captains and players in the form of pre-game and post-game speeches. Similar content differences emerged by teams through these messages as well. While the Redbirds focused on “not getting shut out” and improving their cohesion as a team, the Midwest Tree Care reinforced the value of winning every game and remaining victorious. These inspirational talks served as a common way for captains to convey the cultural messages and beliefs to the team (Schein, 2010).

The three subdimensions proposed by Vallerand and Losier (1999) for intrinsic motivation were evident during the participant’s descriptions of improved quality of life. First, individuals were shown to be motivated through the subdimension *to know*. For many participants they initially joined the Midwestern Kickball League with the purpose of learning a new activity. Through the advancement of skills and knowledge associated with the game of kickball, individuals felt a sense of satisfaction and achievement for trying a new sport or engaging with a new group of individuals. *Toward accomplishment* is the second subdimension for intrinsic motivation (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Within this category, individuals are motivated to accomplish an activity or task. These activities can be as small as ‘getting on base’ or as big as becoming the champion of the main bracket. Regardless of the task, the accomplishment leads to an improved self-concept (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). Finally, *to experience stimulation* is the third subdimension for intrinsic motivation (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). The fun and excitement associated with the Midwestern Kickball League, can provide

individuals with much needed stimulation, which in terms positively impacts their psychological well-being.

Consumption of Culture

Overtime, individuals will become aware of the cultural expectations set forth by the organization and integrate them into preexisting cultural practices. Reflect the statement by Denzin:

...Consumption involves the study of particular moments, negotiations, representational formats, and rituals in the social life of a commodity. The consumption of cultural objects by consumers can empower, demean, disenfranchise, liberate, essentialize, and stereotypes.

In line with the other constructs of the circuit of culture model, the consumption of culture will be explored at the societal/community level, organizational level, and individual level.

Societal/community level. Although the cultural product is directly associated with the Midwestern Kickball League, it influences the Springville community in many ways. Because the Midwestern Kickball League is a non-profit, they do not engage in the typical sales strategies that other organizations do. Instead, the organization focuses on giving back to the community through a variety of charity events. The product being brought to the city of Springville matches that being consumed by members of the Midwestern Kickball League (Furusten, 2013). This sense of volunteerism and contributing back to the community are essential cultural tenets of the league.

A plethora of charity event examples were discussed by participants of the Midwestern Kickball League. Many individuals provided specific stories relating to each event as well. Kick the can, Game of the Week raffle, pre-season charity tournament, and the post-season party are a

few examples of the events that have been held to raise money for a local charity in past years. Participants expressed their love for charity work stemmed from the desire to help others as well as contribute to the betterment of the local community. These motives are similar to previous research on recreation-based and charity-based motives. In particular, four motives are relevant to the charity sport event context: reciprocity, self-esteem, the need to help others, and the desire to improve the charity (Dawson, 1988; Gladden, Mahony, & Apostolopoulou, 2004).

Additionally, a study conducted by Filo, Funk, and O'Brien (2011), proposed these "motives act as factors contributing to enhanced meaning and importance for a charity sport event" (p. 492). Further, these results provide additional evidence that these motives reflect attachment to the charity event, which can lead toward enhanced self-expression and a stronger connection with others (Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2011; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). This attachment to the charity event was prominent throughout the observations, interviews, and online discourse material. Participants had a genuine interest in the charity, which encouraged individuals to promote and participate in the events. Similar to the findings of Bunds, Brandon-Lai, and Armstrong (2016), the individuals felt a stronger connection with the charity through active participation. In fact, the Midwestern Kickball League board encourages active participation rather than straight monetary donations. This helps explain why each charity event is made into a spectacle, game, or party to encourage attendance.

Despite the cultural product being consumed by members, local businesses, and non-profit organizations of the Springville community, it was made clear the Midwestern Kickball League and its members did not want to associate with the local university. A division was evident, and the league chose to only connect with the local community. Because the players view the league as a representation of the local city community, in-group and out-group

comparisons are likely being made with those associated with the university. Specifically, Stets and Burke (2000) discuss how in-group/out-group behavior occurs when perceived differences emerge between the groups in terms of attitudes, beliefs and values, behavioral norms, and styles of speech. In terms of the Midwestern Kickball League, participants clearly expressed how the league is made up of ‘townies’ and represents the blue-collar workers of the city. Recall the sentiment expressed by Kat Jensen, “It [the Midwestern Kickball League] doesn’t have the collegiate atmosphere- thank god. It’s the real Springville”. This dichotomy between the city community [in-group] and the university community [out-group] provides further support of the intergroup behavior occurring throughout the league (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Organizational level. From an organizational perspective, the stereotypical hegemonic gender norms were prevalent once again when analyzing the culture of the Midwestern Kickball League. In particular, the traditional sex role conflicts can lead to “fears, concerns, or worries regarding negative evaluations from peers” (La Greca & Lopez, 1998, p. 86). Although women have broken the gender barrier within the Midwestern Kickball League, there are many players who live in this fear. Specifically, Nevada mentioned her fear of messing up during a game. She elaborated, “You know, if I mess up, I mess up. My captain is super supportive, and I just move on. BUT.... I’m just waiting for the day someone brings my name up on the podcast. Talk about embarrassing.”

Other cultural practices highlight the progressive nature of the Midwestern Kickball League. The insistence on keeping the three women rule, integration of alcohol into every event, and openness toward underage drinking and marijuana use, illustrate the forward-thinking and inclusive values of the league. In particular, the Game of the Week served as a place where individuals could become consume the Midwestern Kickball League culture. Through cultural

learning, individuals are able to acquire knowledge, traditions, and values that are associated with a given culture (Tomasello et al., 1993). Two of the three prevalent forms of cultural learning exist and are manifested within the Midwestern Kickball League, specifically at the Game of the Week. First, imitative learning occurs when a new member mimics the actions of established members (Tomasello et al., 1993). During the seventh inning stretch, Jaguar goes to the middle of the field and tells the stands to get on their feet for the song. The long-time players of the league quickly jump to their feet, followed by those who are new to the event. Although the new attendees may not understand why the behavior is occurring, they comply with the request and follow the older players in the league. Next, instructed learning occurs when culture is taught to new members (Tomasello et al., 1993). During this process, the new member does not simply comply. Rather, they are taught the reasoning behind the behaviors (Tomasello et al., 1993). An example of instructed learning is exhibited through the wide-spread underage drinking and drug use at the Game of the Week. As described in the excerpt, the author originally was caught off guard by the illicit behavior. However, after speaking with established members of the Midwestern Kickball League, it was made clear that progressive values existed, and the cops stayed away. Because of the cultural learning process, participants of the Midwestern Kickball League are taught the values, beliefs, and behaviors associated with the organization. Further, this behavior transcends the league and encourages future social reform.

Individual level. Regarding the consumption of culture at the individual level, past experiences and knowledge influence the understanding of the cultural norms. While some members of the Midwestern Kickball League fully accept the progressive behavior and cultural values/beliefs, others are unwilling to let go of their conflicting values. For example, the excerpt detailing the researcher's conservative parents at the Game of the Week. Although the author had

fully consumed the cultural norms of the league, her parents resisted because the values were drastically different. Furthering this point, although her parents did not apply meaning to the cultural practices, it is possible for individuals to consume culture without fully accepting the cultural values of the organization (Leve, 2012).

In reference to the Midwestern Kickball League, the acceptance of marijuana use at the Game of the Week represents the cultural value of acceptance through progressive behavior. Individuals associated with the league will attach one of two meanings related to consuming this cultural practice. Participants of the Midwestern Kickball League can view the practice as an excuse to engage in illicit behavior without worry of getting caught. They can also attach meaning to this practice and view it as a step toward equality where individuals no longer have to live in fear because of their behaviors, beliefs, or physical traits.

Further, participants of the league discussed how their past experience and knowledge as an athlete influenced their understanding of cultural norms through the concept of athlete identity. Because the role of an athlete carries a visibility unlike most others (Webb et al., 1998), it can be easy for players to project this identity. Additionally, since many players within the Midwestern Kickball League had previously lost their athlete identity prior to discovering the league, this self-concept is evident. Furthering the sentiment, it was observed that individuals with strong levels of athlete identification typically established a reputation for themselves within the Midwestern Kickball League. Thor and the shirtless guy are two examples of individuals where their public reputation as a strong player and good athlete “carry a high degree of social status and esteem” within the league (Webb et. al, 1998, p. 340).

While an individual’s performance influences their public reputation, a private orientation also exists where one’s athletic identity is unavailable to public opinion. A private

athletic identity, “refers to one’s internal thoughts, feelings, and assessment of oneself as an athlete” (Webb et al., 1998). Recall Kensley Todd’s explanation:

I just really missed team sports. I’d played team sports my whole life, and I just thought I’ll go out there and see what kickball was like. You know, then I fell in love with it. I fell in love with the game...

These internal expressions and feelings are not part of his public reputation, but they exist and further his level of identification as an athlete and kickball player.

Similar to that of athlete identity, physical benefits based on previous experiences manifested within the Midwestern Kickball League culture. As detailed in the physical activity literature, organized sport programs have an important influence on an individual’s physical well-being (Jõesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011). In fact, evidence suggests that regular physical activity produces a variety of health benefits for the individual (Jõesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011). Specifically, studies have historically found individuals who are physically active notice improvement in cardiovascular endurance, strength, and flexibility (Silvestri, 1997). Through the ethnographic approach, the author was able to personally discover the variety of health benefits associated with playing in the Midwestern Kickball League. In particular, it served as a way to increase heart rate through a moderately vigorous activity such as running the bases.

Because of the strong social connections present within the Midwestern Kickball League, participants are also encouraged to engage in physical activity outside of the games on Sunday. Many individuals mentioned they used kickball as a precursor for other physical activity. The most common form of activity among league members was biking or walking to the fields. Centola (2010) discovered individuals within a social network are likely to adopt similar health benefits from others in the group. Within the Midwestern Kickball League, this is shown by

friends who walk their dogs to the Game of the Week instead of drive. Through the pressure to conform to group norms, individuals are able to benefit through physical activity and increased health related benefits.

As previously discussed, the members of the Midwestern Kickball League are not simply passive in their experience with the recreational sport kickball. Instead, they actively construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the meanings they receive from society, the community, the organization, and individuals within the organization (Fiske, 1987). Summarized by Storey (1996):

Meaning is always the result of an act of ‘articulation’ (an active process of ‘production in use’). The process is called ‘articulation’ because meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific historical moment within a specific discourse(s)...

Meaning is therefore a social production; the world has to be made to mean. (p. 4)

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the relevant findings and practical implications from the study, it is not without limitations. As the qualitative ethnographic approach occurred in one specific sport setting, the results cannot be generalized. In the future, it will be necessary to evaluate other recreational sport leagues to discover if any similarities exist when compared to the Midwestern Kickball League. Additionally, another limitation stems from the chosen methodological approach. While the author used Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criterion for establishing trustworthiness, issues of reliability and validity may still occur. Further, although the author addressed her positionality within the study, her perspective and analysis of the data could be influenced because of the direction connection with the league.

In relation to the connection with the league and participants, the author felt a couple topics of conversation were not appropriate to include in the manuscript. The material was left out and not analyzed based on the discretion of the researcher. The decision to not include certain stories and quotes was based on the sensitive nature of the content and possible risk of anonymity.

An additional limitation exists in relation to the participant's demographics. Although the individuals spanned various teams, positions, years in the league, and age, the male perspective was not portrayed through the journal entries. Additionally, the four individuals who were followed throughout the season were all female.

Because of anonymity, the author was also unable to provide detailed information regarding each participant. Specifically, additional information was not included in the participant table because it was believed to be easy to discover the identity of the individuals. Information that was recorded and analyzed as part of the data collection process, but not included in the participant table were: number of teams individuals had played for, role as the commissioner, and family within the league.

Finally, the author was unable to attend a couple events throughout the year, such as the 'End of the Year Party', so personal perspectives were not considered. Instead, the author had to rely on detailed accounts from individuals through formal and informal interviews. These events were also closely monitored on social media.

Even though limitations may have impacted the study, I believe the findings should be considered for future research regarding community recreation sport leagues. Based on this holistic examination, there are numerous routes for future research regarding the topic of community recreation and sport. First, it would be beneficial to qualitatively explore the

relationship between the league and community from the perspective of a city official. While some of the interviews contained information regarding conversations between the city of Springville and the league's board, the author believes the perspective could expose different information.

Additionally, a longitudinal approach would be beneficial to examine how the league changes over time based on the political climate of society. Another angle to examine using longitudinal methods is the familial dynamics within certain teams. As the league ages, the children that once watched their parents play, are now participants themselves. With the younger generation infiltrating the league, different themes could emerge.

Finally, future research could focus specifically on the online discourse and podcast transcripts of the Midwestern Kickball League. While both were incorporated into the current dissertation, the author did not analyze the content over time. In particular, future studies could analyze how the content has shifted over the years. They could also analyze how different podcast hosts or blog writers portrayed different ideals and values within the same platform.

Self-Reflection

A text is: A finite, structured whole composed of language signs. The finite ensemble of signs does not mean that the text itself is finite, for its meanings, effects, functions, and backgrounds are not. It only means that there is a first and a last word to be identified... even if those boundaries... are not watertight (Bal, 1999, p. 5).

As I reflect back on my experiences with the Midwestern Kickball League, I smile at all of the stories I could have included in this project. There are truly not enough words to describe what the league has meant to me, but this project is an attempt to detail my story and fill the pages between the front and back cover. While my data collection only included one season, I have memories, stories, and scars from my five years as a player within the Midwestern Kickball League.

When I started on my journey with this ethnography, a lot was unknown. However, I am forever grateful for Emma, Kat, Kelsey, and Jessi for providing me with their thoughts on the league, access to a variety of events, and suggestions on who to contact for formal interviews. Because of these four, I was able to interact with various teams and individuals, which allowed me to gain a variety of perspectives regarding the Midwestern Kickball League culture.

After the first five weeks of the season, I became more comfortable with my role as a participant observer. It became easier for me to observe in large settings, mentally document informal conversations, and converse with individuals during formal interviews. In all, I felt extremely welcome throughout the Midwestern Kickball League, and the participants were genuine and open throughout the season. However, when reflecting back on the ethnographic process, I wonder if my association with the Redbirds impacted the relationships I developed (or did not develop) with players/captains on the top tier teams. As shown from my results, there

was a divide between the top and bottom part of the league, and a stigma was exhibited by certain players towards teams like mine. Once again, I am thankful for Emma, Kat, Kelsey, and Jessi, who helped me maneuver the league politics and gain access to individuals at the top of the league. Because of them, I was able to utilize the relationships they had previously formed to gain a sense of credibility during my formal interviews.

Another concerning thought consistently bothered me as I was collecting, analyzing, and interpreting my data. How could such a progressive league be so unaware of the gender inequities and discrimination that I observed and personally experienced? This question still surfaces now that the project is complete, and I still do not have an answer, and quite frankly, I realize I may never have one. Based in societal underpinnings, I recognize gender is contextual, fluid, and unstable. Further:

Gender can thus be thought of as a particular discourse, that is, a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference, which arises from and regulates particular, economic, social, political, technological, and other non-discursive contexts. Gender is inscribed in the subject along with other discourses, such as those of ethnicity, class, and sexuality... as part of an ongoing process by which subjects are constituted in paradoxical ways. (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 33)

This quote serves as a reminder and helps me realize the answer to my question is not as simple as I would like it to be. This is because our experiences are not mutually exclusive and do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, these beliefs appear within the contexts of relationships with power, which favor masculine viewpoints due to their origins throughout history and society.

I must acknowledge that while the “us vs. them” mentality frequently occurred in terms of both league tiers and gender, I found myself looking past it and focusing on the good that

surrounded me. The friendships I developed, connections I made, and impact I had on the local city community were insurmountable. I not only felt like I belonged, but I truly believed I was making a difference. Every taco I purchased, can I donated, and charity event I attended, gave me a small sense of accomplishment and allowed me to contribute back to the community that has given me so much these past five years.

In a similar vein, the friendships I gained because of my association with the Midwestern Kickball League are ones I will never forget. To be honest, I don't know how I could cease to remember the Game of the Week shenanigans, bowling excursions, post-game cookouts, and in-game collapses. However, if I do and the memories slip my mind as I age and move on from kickball, I'll forever be grateful for the artifacts (photos, apparel, and team koozies) I have collected over the years.

Finally, the Midwestern Kickball League, and this project in particular, forced me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to grow as an individual. I was challenged to question my conservative beliefs, which were fundamental to my upbringing in small town Iowa. I learned how to communicate with a variety of individuals, including some where English was not their first language. Through these encounters, I realized the importance of non-verbal communication. Specifically, I became aware of the impact a simple smile can have on an interaction. I grew both personally and professionally over the past year because of this project, however, the entirety of my experience with the Midwestern Kickball League made me who I am today.

As I move forward and close the door on my graduate career, I understand my time with the league is ending as well. My aim for the project is to provide insight into an organization that

has meant so much to me over the past five years. Further, I can only hope I included enough detail in my story to fill the gaps between the first and last word.

APPENDIX A

**APPROVAL OF
 PROTOCOL**

May 9, 2018

Peyton Stensland
 peyton.stensland@ku.edu

Dear Peyton Stensland:

On 5/9/2018, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Type of Review: | Modification |
| Title of Study: | Motivations, Experiences, and Outcomes of the Kaw Valley Kickball league |
| Investigator: | Peyton Stensland |
| IRB ID: | STUDY00141541 |
| Funding: | None |
| Grant ID: | None |
| Documents Reviewed: | • Kickball Observations Oral Consent Form, • Kickball Motivations IRB Protocol |

The IRB approved the study on 5/9/2018.

1. Notify HRPP about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training.
2. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
3. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

Continuing review is not required for this project; however, you are required to report any significant changes to the protocol prior to altering the project.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project:
<https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationandHandlingProceduresGuide.htm>

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the “Documents” tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Jocelyn Isley, MS, CIP
 IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus

APPENDIX B

Oral Consent Form

As a graduate student in the University of Kansas's Department of Health, Sport, and Exercise Science, I am conducting a research project that will examine the social and community connections individuals gain by playing on a local recreational kickball team. I would like you to give consent to allow me to conduct observations during kickball games, practices, and team related events. If you choose not to consent, no information about you will be recorded during my observations.

Your participation should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life. Although participation may not benefit you directly, the information obtained from the study will help us gain a better understanding of the relationships and community connections individuals gain by participating in this league. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. It is possible, however, with Internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response.

Participation in this survey questionnaire indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. Should you have any questions about this project or your participation in it you may ask my faculty supervisor, Dr. Jordan Bass (jrbass@ku.edu) in the Department of Health, Sport, and Exercise Science or myself, Peyton Stensland (peyton.stensland@ku.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus at (785) 864-7429 or

email irb@ku.edu.

KU Lawrence IRB # STUDY00141541 Approval Period 5/9/2018

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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