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The Agon of Competition: The Violence of Sports Culture

Abstract

Sports and competitiveness often go beyond simple forms of entertainment and health as they celebrate hypermasculine ideals based on the notion that violence is a means of personal growth. The following study identifies how sports culture influences a culture of agonism in which violence and aggression are celebrated as virtues. The agon of competition is central within society, and its glorification has seeped into all aspects of modern society. Analyzing the understanding that competitiveness is linked with enjoyment and aggression suggests that normalized acts of violence have led to a further extremification of a dominant culture of agon within Canadian society. This paper contributes to a niche critique regarding the role of sports culture and its influence on the construction of hypermasculine hegemonies.

Keywords: Masculinity, Violence, Sports Culture, Competition

Introduction

"The Agon of Competition: The Violence of Sports Culture" examines the relationship between competition and the existence of popular sports culture. This is to understand better how the dangerous widespread acceptance of dogmatic understandings regarding the myths of competition impacts Canadian society and social norms. The agon of competition is the glorification and celebration of violence within the context of sports. Sports culture has normalized the behaviour of violence by making aggression and domination fashionable (Colaguori, 2012a). Modern society has normalized violence, perpetuating its transformative value, thereby justifying its existence within

popularized sports media as seen in slogans advertised such as: "No pain, no gain," "Just do it," and "At any cost." The focus of this work is determining how glorified competitive violence within sports culture feeds notions of supremacy and influences Canadian men to conform to violent behaviours as a means of growth and transformation. This form of transformative care damages the youth, particularly young men who must participate in violent actions to justify their manliness (Colaguori, 2012b). The agon of competition is central within contemporary Canadian society, and its glorification within the media has further normalized its existence and extremification, creating the questions: What

is the relationship between violence and competition? Is sports culture influencing toxic behaviour?

Framing the Agon of Competition

Three essential terms to understand and consider are Agon, Agonism and Agon Culture. Agon is a setting where conflict occurs, agonism is based on internalized conflict and competition with oneself because of various societal factors, and agon culture is the widespread myth that conflict and competition are positives required for progression (Colaguori, 2012a). It is also important to recognize that agonism itself is a form of violence, being a product of violent acts and thoughts turned inwards and is a representation of superiority out of contest (Colaguori, 2012a). These terms create an important context to demonstrate the connection between violence and the agonal society. Culture can be considered a form of domination as communities often covet tradition and heritage as defenses against societal challenges. The myth of agon's competitive spectacle and positive perceptions can lead to its flaws being overlooked. For example, survival of the fittest justifies brutal force if it meets the desired endpoint (Colaguori, 2012a). Agonism is pursuing strength, success, or preventing stagnation. The cycles of domination are forms of social control and power (Colaguori, 2012a).

Agon culture is, in particular, a culture of competition. Alfie Kohn's (1986) book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* outlines that competition has become a part of everyday life, that it goes unnoticed and unquestioned. Competitive sports teach a singular goal of victory over defeat. Sports are no longer about cooperation, sportsmanship, and team building but rather about winning. Competition is not just a vehicle for violence, but a tool agon culture uses to cement hegemonic practices and values as necessary. It is popularized within the media and specifically through sports culture. Competition also pushes challenge and change not exclusively for the individual, but also the psychological agonist aspect of identity and conformity.

Competitive sports culture feeds hypermasculinity while glorifying violence. In their work, *Agon Culture*, Colaguori (2012a) mentions that entertainment is based on having something or someone to hate. Popular forms

of media are represented by competitive sports culture and the fetishization of violence. Agon culture plays a part in the modification and perpetuation of aggression. Eliot Aronson (2012) defines aggression as any behaviour aimed at causing harm or pain. However, this definition is flawed, as aggression is more accurately an act of violence via the emotional response of anger or rage. Sigmund Freud describes the "hydraulic theory" as an analogy of water building pressure in a container; if not released, the result is explosive (Aronson, 2012, p.185). When aggression builds up without release, it becomes explosive. Situational factors can modify aggression, which opens possibilities for how aggressiveness is justified and modified within modern society.

Sports Culture

The Canadian Sports culture is controlled through the agon culture, which is constructed upon myths of violence and competition. Thus, understanding both terms of violence and competition is essential (Colaguori, 2012b). Violence is a complex phenomenon that needs to be understood because it has different applications and meanings across various discourses. Therefore, one singular term cannot adequately address and represent them all. Within sports culture specifically, violence is utilized to achieve an end goal. Violence is seen in multiple ways, casually through physical contact between sports players and, more broadly, through the actions of the fans and general public. In addition, it can be seen as being internalized through conceptions of hyper-masculinity.

An important distinction between violence is differentiating instrumental and expressive violence. Instrumental violence is focused on completing a set goal, such as threats to acquire money. In contrast, expressive violence is done for gratification. It often involves emotions such as hate or anger (Ray, 2011). Felson (2009, as cited in Ray, 2011) claims that all violence is instrumental in that it is ruled by choice and weighted by gain or loss of some kind. Throughout modern Canadian society, the concepts of agon, agonism, and agon culture are found in everything people consume. Sports culture specifically influences agon in various ways. The competitive sports culture is a sacred form of belief. It is a critical

part of the institution of agon culture as it is one of the most significant contributors to the indoctrination and reproduction of widespread positive violence.

In Canada, various professional sports, such as hockey and football, as well as online competitive gaming, all portray, glorify, and promote violence. The Canadian Football League (CFL) has a culture which promotes violence. Much like its American counterpart, Canadian conceptions of masculinity and dominance are celebrated and glorified by players and fans. Within the 1870s, while Canadian football culture was being integrated into the Canadian identity, it was founded on the ideal of "Muscular Christianity," the idea that sports participation would facilitate the development of positive masculine character traits, such as morality, discipline, and patriotism (Valentine, 2019, p.377). CFL culture within Canada symbolized nationalistic pride and was used to maintain cultural hegemony (Valentine, 2019). Canadian football culture imitates its American counterpart as they share these same foundations. In the film *Not Just a Game: Power, Politics & American Sports*, Young et al. (2010) explore the connection between escapist American sports culture and the prevailing social issues that construct modern American hegemony, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. The sport is played in all weather conditions regardless of risk, and players are expected to go through pain and injury until victory. Manliness is tied to players' suffering and punishment (Colaguori, 2012b). In Canadian football, the spectacle of violence and the suffering of others is worshipped. Off the field, football fans engage in combat against one another in hooliganism and gather in the thousands in stadiums and the streets to witness players tackle, crush, and break their opponents (Colaguori, 2012b). Canadian social issues, such as normalized racism, sexism, and homophobia, are distinct from the USA. Canadian football culture is one-way toxic sports culture affects Canadian society. The label of otherness thus translates to being identified as the opposition or enemy. This goes beyond the sport itself and seeps into everyday living, as violence and power are constructed as the sole ideals of manliness, thus putting at risk those who do not share in this vision. While Canadian sports share many similarities with the USA, the importance of studying Canadian-specific examples is to

understand better how Canada is to approach these social issues and how we may best protect our youth from falling into dangerous ideologies.

Hockey is the sport most associated with Canadian identity and thus holds a special relationship with constructing hypermasculine identities. Ice hockey, much like football, glorifies excessive violence and is plagued with aggressive body contact. Anne Tjønndal (2016) accurately depicts how the National Hockey League (NHL) perpetuates violence and hypermasculine ideologies as she examines how violence is normalized and accepted within hockey and focuses on how fighting and brawling are celebrated and sometimes endorsed.

Fighting among players on the ice is normalized within the NHL and is closely linked to violence. For example, NHL "enforcer" positions rely more on fighting prowess than skill (Tjønndal, 2016, p.54). Further, despite attempts in recent years to ban fisticuffs, it provides a commercial spectacle for fans and has been claimed to be part of the sport's popularity (Tjønndal, 2016). Colburn Jr. (1985) and Pappas et al. (2004) conclude that fist-fighting in Canadian hockey holds a symbolic significance as a way men settle battles and establish authority over opponents (As cited in MacDonald, 2014). Notions of power and dominance are evident in hockey culture, as combat and assault are part of the masculine rhetoric of hockey fandom. In the documentary *The Last Gladiators*, Chris Nilan (2011 as cited in Tjønndal, 2016), a former enforcer, describes this phenomenon. He likens the violence on the ice, relating to the viewers in the stands, specifically how to live through seeing others perform acts of violence they themselves wish they could do (Tjønndal, 2016).

The glorification of excessive competitive violence has, in turn, led to the normalization and internalization of violent acts as acceptable social behaviours. Fan culture and fandom behaviour contribute to the normalization of violence and agonism. Fans actively contribute to the escalation of violence as they encourage and chant for fights during matches (Tjønndal, 2016). In many recorded instances, win or lose, the fans riot, causing chaos in the streets (Pearce, 2011). An

example of this behaviour and escalation can be seen in both the 1994 and 2011 Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver, Canada. In 1994 after the Vancouver Canucks had lost to the New York Rangers, fans began rioting and clashing with authorities in downtown Vancouver (Arthur, 2011). While alcohol played a role in the actions of the participants, it is not fair to solely attribute it as the cause for the destruction, as many young Canadians fell into the herd mentality of violence (Arthur, 2011). As previously mentioned, the lack of accountability and individualism within the crowds made a welcoming environment for violence. Mass mentality, therefore, prevents critical awareness (Colaguori, 2012b). Such is the case of a 19-year-old rioter named Jason Anderson, who was jailed. He told the *Vancouver Sun* that feelings of anger after the defeat and the thrills of destruction contributed to his participation in the riots (Arthur, 2011, para. 12).

This violence was repeated during the 2011 Stanley Cup riot. Following the final game against the Boston Bruins, which ended with them taking the win from the Vancouver Canucks, a five-hour-long riot erupted in downtown Vancouver (Azpiri, 2021). Rioters flipped over cars, committed arson, smashed windows, vandalized various properties, and looted stores (Azpiri, 2021). Among the rioters, younger men were cited as agitators among the crowds (Lindsay, 2011). It was recorded that police had detained teenagers encouraging the destruction of property while others were seen carrying signs reading "Riot 2011" (Lindsay, 2012). Fans see themselves in the players and sports they worship. When teams and players lose, fans internalize this loss as an attack and loss on their own masculinity and identities (Pearce, 2011). Absolving individual accountability within fan gatherings fosters an environment which supports violence and aggression, thus encouraging young Canadian men to reassert themselves to feel whole (Pearce, 2011). The problem with idealizing violent, competitive sports is that they legitimize the myths that conflict and competition are natural positives constant to human development (Colaguori, 2012b). Therefore, it seems as if Canadian men must conform to violent behaviours as they are necessary and unavoidable rather than result from individual decisions and free

will (Colaguori, 2012b). The danger to Canadian society is that this mentality surrenders the accountability of individual choices and allows for violence to be performed while also being protected by various excuses, a phenomenon rampant through online gaming.

ESports or Electronic Sports are a branch of modern competitive gaming. The article by Geraci (2012), titled *Video Games and the Transhuman Inclination* and the collaborative work titled *Competitive Video Game Play: An Investigation of Identification and Competition* by Griffiths et al. (2015), both explore how competition is a core feature within gaming; the desire and need to dominate other players. Gaming allows sports to be taken from the playground into the home. Its negative impact on youth has come under public scrutiny regarding the connections between violence in games influencing real-world violence. Games people play reinforce notions of power and dominance in digital realms, thus creating a need to have that same control over themselves and the world around them. Therefore, competitive ESports connect virtual dominance and its desires within the real world (Geraci, 2012).

However, not all competitive sports require violence, domination, or aggression. *Sport, Health and Physical Education: A Reconsideration* focuses on myths of health and well-being and how popular sports have shifted from non-competitive exercise toward competitive sports (Waddington et al., 1997). Sports culture focuses on modifying aggressive behaviour and channelling it towards a target, with changes being made from health and well-being to entertainment. This represents the shift towards agonism and the influence of agon culture in that the myth of competition has become so ingrained that fitness and health as an institution have been corrupted.

Mediagon

Sports culture thrives through the mediagon. The mediagon uses agonism as the focus of entertainment, promoting and fetishizing the ideas of conflict and violence as forms of empowerment (Colaguori, 2012b). It enforces the ideas of agonism and competition as positives, and that

growth and development through suffering are beneficial aspects of everyday existence. The culture industry in which the mediagon exists is the device that helps form the dominant hegemonies that inspire loyalty between individuals and the state (Colaguori, 2012b, p. 226). This idea is based on the gladiatorial spectacle, traced back to the Roman colosseum, the enjoyment of brutal combat, conflict, and death as a source of pleasure and glory. This is also found in modern cinema, the web, and the news. In his book *Media Spectacle*, Douglas Kellner (2002) describes that modern media spectacle is structured on dreams, nightmares, and fantasies that the agonist culture has normalized. The mediagon functions as a vessel for these fantasies as the spectacle of violence and agon is worshipped and put on full display.

Similarly to Robert M. Geraci's (2012) work on why ESports are popular, the mediagon caters to the fantasies of power and domination. The normalization comes from the spectacle of violence as an attraction. Agonal entertainment is built on the idea of combative destruction (Colaguori, 2012b). Sports culture and the mediation's normalization of violence create the cycle of extremification. The constant bombardment of casual brutality desensitizes people to the horrors normalized violence and domination brings (Aronson, 2012 p. 181). Casual competitive violence is normalized in everyday entertainment. Excellent examples are found in cooking and art shows, such as *Hell's Kitchen* and *Faceoff*. Topics unrelated to conflict now find themselves riddled with competition, drama, and the romanticism of agonism as a form of self-growth. Competitive sports culture has much to do with this, as it promotes the warrior-victor archetype. The cycle of normalization leads to desensitization and further extremification. Once the new levels of entertainment and violence become normalized, the cycle begins again. Competition within sports exists as a justifiable way to teach violence and domination of the other, and the mediagon gives credibility to the myth of agon that draws followers and worshippers through flair and entertainment.

Hyper-Masculinity

Modern masculinity is deeply rooted in sports culture. Masculinity is tied to the institution of sports because sports are part of all aspects of society, from the economy to national identity (Colaguori, 2012b p. 242). As aforementioned, competition and conflict are sold and packaged by the mediagon. The agon of competition constantly evolves to project violence in self-combat and struggle to the masses. A key theme of violence is the idea of domination and power. Individuals use violence as a form of expression. Thus, concepts of masculinity are drawn from acts of violence (Ray, 2011, p. 13). It is embedded in social and cultural relationships, such as notions surrounding masculinity. Violence often changes and adapts itself to suit the times to better fit in social organizations (Ray, 2011, p. 21). Norbert Elias (1897-1990) builds on this idea, arguing that civilization had a transforming process that influenced the social "habitus" (lifestyles, norms, and personalities), ultimately altering conduct within society (Ray, 2011, p. 21). There is an evolutionary process to violence resulting from an adaptation phenomenon. Violence is universal to the human experience, and like other forms of human behaviour, it has been socially and culturally modified and further normalized. The myth of men's testosterone and violent behaviours resulting from anger is socially and culturally accepted, allowing men to show aggression or violence and women to remain "soft." Violent and aggressive responses are socially modified within the agon culture, and they are subject to variations based on culture and politics (Ray, 2011p. 23). Larry Ray (2011 p.12) argues that violence is "intimately interconnected with the body, pain, and vulnerability".

Youth, who often struggle in development, look to the messages the mediagon presents regarding achievement and success as defined by the agon culture and regard it as the set standard of how they should be. Chris Hickey's (2008) work titled *Physical education, sport and hyper-masculinity in schools* reiterates this point as he confronts the social

phenomenon of gender profiling in physical education and schooling. According to Hickey, PE in schools is the testing ground for the dominant pillars of the hypermasculine identity, which are hardness, loyalty, and stoicism (Hickey, 2008: 148). The point Hickey (2008) stresses is that the aggression and the violent nature of competition on display within controlled environments are taught. These “lessons” echo the distinction made by Aronson (2012) and Ray (2011), discussing how aggression and agon are modifiable, as shown in the dogma taught to youth. They are being taught to control their emotions and use force to their advantage. Identity construction is linked with both hegemonic interpretations of masculinity and nationalism within Canada. Canadian sports are associated with masculinity due to their promotion through the muscular morality movement (Valentine, 2019). Returning to the idea of agonism with sports culture presented in the NHL and how casual suffering is projected as positive, Hickey (2008) reveals how it is from an early age that these ideals are planted within young minds to groom them into being loyal and forceful adults.

Through the agon and sports, masculinity is transformed into an ideology known as Hypermasculinity, which is the exaggerated ideal of what men ought to be; linked to the myth of conflict and the warrior theme (Burstyn, 1999: 4). Warriors are strong and never quit, while losers are weak and are associated with femininity. Brain Pronger's (1990, p. 139), analysis of masculinity, homosexuality, and sports in North America states “‘Real men’, that is men who fulfill the masculine requirement of the myth of gender, are assertive with both men and women [...] Men who are not assertive are failures in the myth. Receptive men are worse than failures. They have betrayed their dominant position and made themselves ‘like women’”. The violence of the agon of competition is manifested by toxic masculinity, reflected in youth finding themselves confused and vulnerable. Eitzen (2012) and Adams (2012), argue, since young men are pushed so hard to be a certain way to conform to the idea of an “appropriate” form of masculine behaviour, boys often become afraid of femininity and homosexuality (as cited in, MacDonald, 2014, p.102).

Competitive sports are ideologically related to hypermasculinity and the normalization of societal violence. As a result, within the agon of competition, otherness is vilified. Femininity and homosexuality are vilified for deviating from the expected norm, creating a barrier of otherness (MacDonald, 2014). Society is structured to be in constant competition both with others and itself. The challenge Canadian sports culture faces within agon culture is that the notions of supremacy and competition rely on targets, which connects to the notion that entertainment is based on having something or someone to hate (Colaguori, 2012b). Therefore, it can be argued that Canada, a nation whose national identity derives from popular sports such as hockey and football, is directly responsible for representing, exemplifying, and reproducing its own national identity through the tenets of hegemonic masculinity (MacDonald, 2014).

Canadian sports reinforce the established patriarchy, and understanding how they are connected to the constructions of hypermasculine identities is the best way to inform and understand the phenomenon of agon within Canada.

Conclusion

The Agon of Competition: The Violence of Sports Culture reflects how dangerous the widespread acceptance of dogmatic understandings regarding the myths of competition impact Canadian society and social norms. Themes of power and suffering dominate the realm of sports, and violence is perpetuated by society's current gender norms and expectations. Canadian youth are especially vulnerable to the alluring comfort of mass mentality as it sheds accountability for individual actions and pushes Canadian men to conform to violent behaviours as a means of growth and transformation (Colaguori, 2012b). As previously mentioned, the spectacle of violence is worshipped; competitive sports culture justifies agon. Violence and competition share a relationship in which both solidify the existence of the other within Canadian society. Sports culture and its toxicity is the manifestation of the agon of competition running rampant and unconfined. Canadians must be more aware of the dangers that our culture's

hyper-intensification of competition poses to youth. The emergence of popularized hyper-masculinity within the media and sports promotes the toxic mindset and simultaneously further normalizes the ideology. Competition and the myths surrounding it will continue to be normalized and intensified so long as their enabling factors continue to go unchallenged. The normalization of violence and agonal culture does not justify its failings and should not make it immune to criticism. The lack of individual accountability and the structural protections which allow Canadians to express violence

have pushed the narrative that violence is ultimately inevitable, allowing the structuring of society around predatorial systems of competition that go beyond sports and play. The normalization of violence within Canadian sports culture, media, and within Canadian citizens is reflected in the ways people see themselves through agonism and how they treat others, making for a more volatile society. As stated by Colaguori (2012b) "Peace is far more difficult to achieve in a society that believes transcendence is possible through conflict" (p. 251).

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