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Health and Physical Education 93501

TOP SCHOLAR

Psychological barriers facing youth sport participation.

“He waka eke noa”²

We are all in this together.

This well-known *whakataukī* (Maori proverb) appears on the left front hem of the Warriors 2025 Home Jersey, using the waka as a symbol of “unity and direction.” However, my experience as a New Zealand citizen of Asian heritage was far-removed from this idealistic togetherness. As I was unable to attend the basketball trials in Year 7, I was put into the lowest-graded basketball team. The Pakeha students that missed the trial got a chance to retriial, while I didn’t. I was 12 years old at the time. It felt unfair. I could score 3-pointers like the Pakeha kids. I could dribble like them too. So why? Fast-forward to Year 9 Kotahitanga Day, meant to foster unity within our year group. I was in an extension class that was made up of mostly Asians. We were in the sprint race when I heard a Pakeha boy from another class swearing at us and saying, “Why are there so many Asians?” My remembrance of his hateful rhetoric years on is a testament to the psychological damage this had on my perspective of sports. Finally, in Year 10 Cross Country, I noticed I was faster than most of the other students. This led my Asian classmates to call me the “representative” of the extension class. I felt happy they looked up to me, but now, I see the alternate take. In calling me “representative,” they are subtly affirming that Asians do not traditionally belong in the sports world. These collective personal experiences will ground my report to reality.

1 “Strategic Plan - Sport NZ - 2024: <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/pywhcqw5/sport-nz-2024-28-strategic-plan.pdf>

2. “Warriors 2025 Warriors Dynasty Home Jersey - Warriors Superstore - 2025: https://shop.warriorsstore.co.nz/warriors-2025-dynasty-home-jersey-toddler/?searchid=0&search_query=waka

I will critically analyse the attitudes and values that perpetuate psychological barriers in youth sport. These barriers are the hardest to overcome because of their invisibility. Unlike socioeconomic barriers or inadequate resources or facilities, psychological barriers cannot be visualised. They are shaped by the most nuanced, seemingly harmless comments or actions at the micro-level, which then shape the wider narrative of the sports landscape. A breakdown of these factors will reveal the true cause of declining sports participation in youth, specifically the Asian ethnic group and females.

Everybody Active Plan Analysis

In reference to the 2024-2028 *Everybody Active Plan* (henceforth referred to as the *document*) proposed by Sport NZ, I believe that they have done an outstanding job providing a superficial discussion of the barriers of sport. Statistics of current participation levels are provided, but reasons for their decline are not adequately explored. For example, the reason for lower female participation than males are “factors like confidence and fear of judgement are more present for young women.”¹ The lack of justification of the phrase “more present” makes it sound as if women are intrinsically more scared than men, which is entirely not true. The lack of emotional and analytical depth fuels unfocused strategies that do not address the underlying challenges. As I read through the document, I struggled to find specific measurable goals proposed by Sport NZ. Instead, it was easy to find vague strategies such as increasing the number of “more active people” by “strengthening partnerships.”¹ At the end, I will fill the void of Sport NZ’s shortcomings with my proposed SMART₄ (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. As described by the University of Auckland:

“Tē tōia, tē haumatia”⁴

Nothing can be achieved without a plan of attack.

The Importance of Physical Activity

The *Te Whare Tapa Wha*³ concept of *hauora* (wellbeing) was designed by Mason Durie. It is a Maori health model that utilises the symbol of the *wharenui* (communal house) and the four pillars that support the roof of the *wharenui*. These four pillars are *taha tinana* (physical health), *taha wairua* (spiritual health), *taha whanau* (family and social health), and *taha hinengaro* (mental health). When one pillar fails, the structure of the *wharenui* can collapse, threatening the wellbeing of the individual. Thus, *Te Whare Tapa Wha* acknowledges the importance of a holistic approach to wellbeing issues. Every pillar is interconnected. Strong *taha tinana* has a positive impact on *taha wairua*, *whanau*, and *hinengaro*. This symbiotic relationship between physical and mental health is also acknowledged by Mayo Clinic as “physical activity stimulates many brain chemicals that may leave you feeling happier, more relaxed and less anxious.”⁵ Furthermore, Sport NZ research has shown that moderate to vigorous-intensity exercise of “at least 2.5 hours a week are 51% more likely to have healthy mental wellbeing.”⁶ The importance of physical activity is indisputable.

3: Maori Health Models - Te Whare Tapa Wha 1 December 2023

<https://www.health.govt.nz/maori-health/maori-health-models/te-whare-tapa-wha>

4: SMART Goals - University of Auckland <https://learningessentials.auckland.ac.nz/key-study-skills/time-management/smart-goals/>

5: Exercise: 7 benefits of regular physical activity - Mayo Clinic - 26 August 2023

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/exercise/art-20048389>

6: New research confirms physical activity is tied to healthy mental wellbeing - Sport NZ - 5 October 2018:

<https://sportnz.org.nz/about/news-and-media/news-updates/new-research-confirms-physical-activity-is-tied-to-healthy-mental-wellbeing/>

Why are psychological barriers worth mentioning?

Health promotion policies laid out in the *document* develop *taha tinana*, but do not appreciate the importance of the other three pillars in ensuring the *hauora* of the individual. To increase participation numbers, the *document* mainly focuses on “improving access to play, active recreation and sport”₁ in communities of socioeconomic disadvantage. I commend Sport NZ for this approach because the participation levels between high socioeconomic status versus socioeconomic disadvantage is a 6% drop₁. However, I believe that Sport NZ’s often financial-based approaches, in the form of funds, treats the matter of declining youth sports participation as something that can be wholly solved by money. Sport NZ’s own research has found that “nearly all young people (4 in 5) know being active is good for them, but this doesn’t translate into action.”₁ Yet, Sport NZ never tailors their policies with this statistic in mind. If most young people have the resources to participate in sport and are aware of the benefits of doing so, why do they choose against it? Psychological barriers must be the key obstacle, preventing the pillars of *taha wairua*, *whanau*, *hinengaro*, and thus *taha tinana* from being fully realised.

Social Constructivism Model and The Cycle of Discrimination

The Social Constructivism Model is defined as a theory where we “build understanding through collaboration and observation of others.”₇ It emphasises the importance of social interactions in shaping the wider social narrative. Thus, this model proposes that our attitudes and values are a reflection of what we listen to and learn from others in everyday life. Social constructs have the potential to spread as much positivity as

negativity. When fuelled by prejudice, society constructs stereotypes. Stereotypes are a widely held idea of a particular type of person, group or thing, judged solely on the basis of their characteristics. They then feed into assumptions, which are beliefs that something is true without having proof. When our prejudice turns into tangible harm towards a certain group, this becomes targeted discrimination.

Consistent exposure to stereotypes and discrimination may lead to a phenomenon called the stereotype threat.⁸ Individuals subject to stereotypes may feel pressured to conform to the stereotypes in order to meet social expectations. These targeted groups are coerced by social constructs to behave, look, or act a certain way. As stereotypical attitudes and values grow, discrimination becomes more prevalent in society. A psychological experiment published by the National Institute of Health (NIH) using randomised controlled trials “provides the first empirical support for this long-standing hypothesis.” The “targets” were those who were stereotyped, whereas the perceivers were the discriminators. It showed “targets more strongly confirmed a stereotype as the number of perceivers who held stereotypic expectations about them increased.”⁹ To fully understand the circular nature of discrimination, it is best to visualise it.

Figure One: The Cycle of Discrimination

7: Social Constructivism - ScienceDirect, 2021

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/social-constructivism#:~:text=Social%20constructivism%20is%20defined%20as,participation%20in%20communities%20of%20practice>.

8: Stereotype Threat: American Psychological Association, 15 November 2023: <https://dictionary.apa.org/stereotype-threat>

9: The accumulation of stereotype-based self-fulfilling prophecies: NIH, November 2018: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30321051/>



Through the Social Constructivism Model, we learn that discrimination is not arbitrary. It emerges from shifts in attitudes and values, shaped by the knowledge we absorb daily. Participation levels for groups like Asians and young women will only rise when we rewrite the stereotypical attitudes and values of key players in the sports narrative.

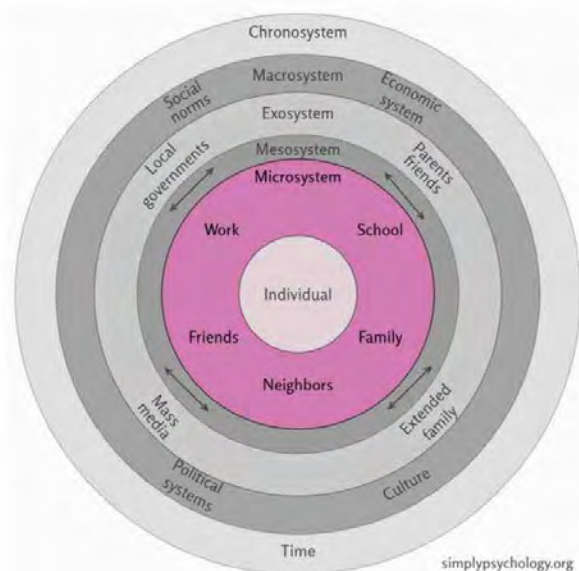
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The Social Constructivism Model has given valuable insight into rewiring our minds to eliminate discrimination. I believe a more specialised lens now needs to be applied in order to witness the profound impact of attitudes and values in the microsystem.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory proposes that human development is "influenced by a series of interconnected environmental systems."¹⁰ The microsystem consists of direct face-to-face interactions between youth and another person. In a sporting context, this could be dialogue between coaches and athletes. Next is the mesosystem, which are the connections between people in the microsystem, like

parent-coach communications. After this, the exosystem consists of external environments with indirect influence such as local sports organisations that create health policies. The macrosystem then provides the overarching cultural context, which helps stereotypes pervade so much in society. Oranga Tamariki describes the macrosystem as an “internal architecture” which is “built on the dominant cultural norms...of the group who have the most power and who design how most of the system works.”¹¹ This can lead to structural bias as health promotion policies may favour a certain group while neglecting the challenges in another vulnerable youth demographic.

Figure Two: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory



Eliminating bias is not easy, as it exists in a multitude of structures. However, by equipping the ecological systems lens, we can see that in order to catalyse change, the microsystem needs to be targeted first. This change will travel up the systems, leading to change at the macrosystem. This leads onto the role of the chronosystem, which affects how dynamics in the interdependent systems change over time. Supporting the

prior Social Constructivism Model, the systems theory and chronosystem show that negative social narratives can in fact be rewritten. Harmful discourse at the microsystem between youth and those closest to them provides the ideal breeding grounds for the perpetuation of stereotypes. While positive discourse has the ability to challenge these stereotypes. If these renowned theories and models have existed for decades, why is the New Zealand youth sports landscape still so desperate and participation plummeting at a record-breaking rate? It is because Sport NZ is not addressing the psychological barriers and the unique challenges facing each specific youth demographic. We are all diverse, and are thus confronted with our own set of barriers. A one-size-fits-all model will not work. Without support from sports agencies, youth like me will never overcome these barriers, instead staying chained to stereotypes and discrimination.

Hegemonic discourses and Asian and female athletes

How we talk about sport has a direct influence on youth participation, according to Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Hegemonic discourse refers to the prevailing and most dominant set of ideas and perspectives that are ultimately imposed on everyone and become the 'accepted' view. These dominant discourses shape knowledge and construct social narratives, creating stereotypes.¹² I will integrate this theory of hegemonic discourse with the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to show how discussions about sport shape all the social systems.

10: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: Research Gate, January 2024:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383500583_Bronfenbrenner's_Ecological_Systems_Theor

11: Systems Theory: Oranga Tamariki, 30 August 2021:

<https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/practice-approach/practice-framework/whai-matauranga/knowledge-and-research/systems-theory>

Ultimately, this will reveal the invisible psychological and *hauora* barriers facing both Asians and females. In order to catalyse change, we must first identify what is driving them to the fringe of the youth sports landscape.

Declining Asian Sports Participation

There are many barriers facing Asian participation in sports, such as language barriers for migrants, impeding access to information about sports. However, I will single out the psychological barriers. Firstly, there are conflicting perspectives of Asians in sports. These dominant sociocultural perspectives, held by parents, coaches, and wider society, are the source of hegemonic discourses. These sociocultural factors influence physical activity by shaping the youth perspective. Negative hegemonic discourses then provide the ideal breeding grounds that fuel cultural stereotypes and racism, leading to harmful psychological impacts on Asian youth.

Perspectives, psychological pressure, and stereotypes

Growing up in an Asian household, my parent's perspective of sports was quite traditional. They put great emphasis on academic excellence, while sports were of lower priority and thus put on the back-burner. Once an avid basketballer, the training schedules and practice games took time out of where I could study. I wanted to play sports, but I just did not have the time. This is a sentiment echoed by many Asian youth

12: Ideology, Hegemony, Discourse: A critical review of theories of knowledge and power: Research Gate, January 2007

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229033536_Ideology_Hegemony_Discourse_A_Critical_Review_of_Theories_of_Knowledge_and_Power

in a Sports NZ study. A Chinese female teen said that "a lot of Asian parents when their kids are young, they're trying to build them up to become either like a music prodigy or a maths and science prodigy as opposed to a really good sports player."¹⁴ This speaks to Asian parent's hegemonic discourse regarding academics as a higher priority than sports participation. The parent-child connection exists in the microsystem and is one of the most enduring relationships, so a parent's perspective ultimately shapes a youth's perspective. According to another Chinese female teen in the same Sports NZ study, she said that, "Most of [my Asian friends] didn't grow up playing sports, so they just never played. And the other side to it is that they wanted to focus on their academics, so then they quit."¹⁴ This is a significant factor contributing to why only 43% of Asians meet the physical activity guidelines of 7+ hours per week at any intensity.¹³ Whereas non-Asian ethnicities were 19% more likely (62%) to meet 7+ hours per week, with less academic pressures.

The coach's perspective further contributes to declining physical exercise trends for Asian youth. The connection between youth and coaches exists in the microsystem because of their direct interactions in games and practice sessions. Their power over how a team plays can either build up a team or break down a team. Coaches are therefore the clearest example of hegemony in youth sports. A coach's attitude can lead to negative hegemonic discourses, which directly impact youth sports experience. Unfortunately, I had a negative experience with my basketball coaches. When I was younger, I did not understand why I had no retrial while my Pakeha teammates did. I did not understand why my coach put me on the bench for a longer time than my white

teammates. I asked my coach if I could be subbed in and my coach always promised me game time. However, in the end, I only received about 10-20 minutes out of my hour-long games. I thought I was genuinely terrible at basketball. I even asked my fellow teammates and they said I deserved more gametime. Reflecting on these experiences, I understand how the coaches' perspective shapes the entire experience of sports. My coach was being racist to me, whether unconsciously or not. By looking at my black hair, he immediately assumed I had a natural disadvantage in sports versus my Pakeha teammates. His resulting discourse of promising game time, but not actually honouring his promise, limited my opportunities.

The oft-used phrase, the "coaches word is final," further illustrates the authority of the coach. Say, the coach exhibits stereotypical attitudes and values that lead to harmful hegemonic discourses. Quickly, those surrounding the coach, such as the teammates and parents of the teammates, may start to exhibit these dominant attitudes, values, and stereotypes because of the coach's position of power. For example, other parents may start to form assumptions that "if my son gets more gametime than his Asian teammate, my son is obviously better than him." Parents may then transmit these negative stereotypes to their children, the teammates. This is called mesosystemic interactions that result "when two areas of the microsystem interact,"¹⁶ in this case the interactions between coaches, parents, and teammates.

These cultural stereotypes and racism towards Asian youth are firstly held by coaches, but then also transmitted to parents and teammates. Cumulatively, these harmful

attitudes, values, stereotypes, and assumptions that Asians are bad at sport are amplified and transmitted throughout society. This socially constructs the “internal architecture” that Oranga Tamariki has described previously, the macrosystem. In order to meet social expectations, Asian youth conform to the stereotype that Asians don't do sports and study instead. These stereotype threats cause Asian discrimination to grow even more, and Asian self-esteem in physical activity to diminish. Stereotypes pervade wider society so much so that they become the dominant view and the cycle of discrimination continues indefinitely. The Youth 19 Survey by The University of Auckland surveyed more than 7,000 students. Currently, “one-in-four Asians said they were treated unfairly by a teacher because of their ethnicity (compared to 14% of Pakeha and other European students).”¹⁵ We can extrapolate this trend from a school setting into a sports setting, as discrimination is ubiquitous. Ultimately, the sociocultural perspectives of academic - centred parents and discriminatory coaches combine to create sufficient psychological pressure for Asian youth to drop sports entirely.

13: <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/eiulzcl0/presentation-asian-participation-combined-qual-quant-elise-v2.pdf> (Participation of Asian population groups - June 2023, Sports NZ with Victoria University and the University of Waikato)

14: <https://sportnz.org.nz/media/1zykk1bl/sport-nz-report-the-changing-nature-of-asian-participation-in-play-active-recreation-and-sport-thorpe-et-al.pdf> (The Changing Nature of Asian Participation in Play, Active Recreation and Sport: Voices from the Community - May 2023, University of Waikato)

15: <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2021/06/28/asian-label-youth-19.html> ('Asian' label hides health inequalities among school students - June 28 2021, University of Auckland)

16: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Ecological Theory: Lloyd Hughes, Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019
<https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/baa26b4ea5fee3c1df2f54d454292fac1da0208ff2331208eccca3e3038a0851/2086655/Final%20thesis.pdf>

Asians in the 2024-2028 Everybody Active Plan?

If a 56 page report¹⁴ was published on May 5 2023, detailing Asian barriers to sport, why wasn't the word "Asian" mentioned anywhere in the Everybody Active strategic plan? The only vague interpretation of helping Asians were "culturally distinctive pathways." Upon closer analysis, these cultural strategies were focused on Maori and "tangata whenua." I commend Sport NZ's focus on upholding the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi of Partnership, Protection, and Participation. However, seeing as Asians are the fastest growing youth demographic in NZ, predicted to have a 44% Asian population in Auckland by 2043 and also the least participative in sports ¹³, we have to question why Sport NZ isn't using their own research to have focused health promotion policies for Asians. The word "cultural" should include Maori, Asian, and other ethnicities to reflect the growing diversity of youth and society. If "culturally distinctive pathways" encompasses all cultures, health policies will then reflect and address the struggles and challenges of specific ethnicities participating in sports. Change made in Sports NZ policies is change in the exosystem. Change in the exosystem has the potential to challenge stereotypes in the microsystem and mesosystems of parents and coaches. Only then, can we start to think about rewriting the sports narrative and eliminating Asian discrimination in the macrosystem.

Declining Wahine Sports Participation

Competitive versus social sports

For many *wahine* (young women), the reason for inactivity is 'too busy' or 'too tired.' This is evident in quantitative data in the Young Women Profile 2021. By the time

wahine reach 17, 59% state they are too busy to participate¹⁸. However, qualitative interviews by Sport NZ uncovered that the responses of 'too busy or tired' were a facade for more troubling challenges and psychological barriers at play. Sport NZ stated that "the discussion uncovered they were intimidated by the environment, or worried about their performance."¹⁸ This is a key reason why young women are quitting sports at an unprecedented rate. 69% of young women do sports for fun¹⁸. I also conducted a survey at school with 50 of my female classmates and 80% said that "friends / social interaction is the most important motivator for sports." However, as young women go through college, more and more sports teams are centred around competition rather than the social aspect. Parents and schools hold this dominant view that funnels young women into choosing two options: either to compete or to quit.

Perspectives and psychological pressure

Parents view sports through a unique sociocultural perspective. They want their children to succeed and achieve their potential through sports. This leads them to focus on how to win the next match. However, their overemphasis on winning and success often creates negative hegemonic discourses around social sports. If their daughter is not going to compete, parents think sports are a waste of time. A quote most likely by a parent, captures this mentality perfectly. "I'd prefer her to be doing something a bit more competitive, she's good enough. But she just wants to be with her friends and

17: Young Women, Sport, Physical Activity, and the Teenage Years, Sports NZ, 2025:

<https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/young-women-sport-physical-activity-and-the-teenage-years/>

18: Young Women Profile , September 2021, Sports NZ:https://sportnz.org.nz/media/4446/young-women-profile-2021_v22.pdf

muck about.”¹⁸ The phrase, “she’s good enough,” shows how performance and competition is the number one priority. While the dismissive connotations of the phrase “muck about” reveal how parents treat social sports as somehow inferior to competitive sports. The parent - *wahine* connection exists in the microsystem, so a parent’s negative discourse causes direct psychological pressure on *wahine*. Since parents have a hegemonic relationship to *wahine*, *wahine* often do not have the autonomy to choose to participate in social versus competitive sports. Ultimately, when *wahine* do not want to do competitive sports and parents do not want their daughters to do social sports, *wahine* do not participate in sports at all.

This leads onto the school’s perspective on sports, another example of the sociocultural perspective. An invisible, but powerful sentiment pervades all aspects of school sports culture. Schools are hungry for competition. For schools, sports is a platform to compete and be the best in New Zealand. This is not only beneficial to promote the school to international students for financial profits, but also for recognition and fame nationally. For example, our volleyball team at Rangitoto College has seen great successes in national tournaments so much so that volleyball has become synonymous with Rangitoto College. Hence, there is a vested interest to invest more money into competitive sports. While competitive sports thrive, social sports and teams are of lower priority and often underfunded. A negative hegemonic discourse is created, as preferential funding decisions imply that schools think competitive sports is more important than social sports. This means that the capacity of social sports is extremely insufficient for the more than 4,000 students that attend my college.

Wahine also cannot find a sense of belonging in competitive sports because of the pressure to compete. In a Sports NZ study, a girl that used to play football admits that she gave it up "because it was too competitive, and I was always letting my team down."¹⁸ Competition should be healthy. *Wahine* should never feel like they are letting their team down, and this raises serious questions about the amount of support in competitive sports. Competitive sports are meant to be challenging. However, competitive sports should never result in a loss of belonging and psychological distress. This negative competitive environment and psychological barriers result in *wahine* opting for social sports, where they can have fun with their friends in a stress-free environment.

However, social programmes are often at full capacity due to the lack of available facilities and under-resourcing versus competitive sports. With no other opportunities, *wahine* quit sports altogether. This is true from hearing my friends' experiences. They account that the number of places in social badminton was limited and resulted in them missing out on a place. My friends who did get a place quit because their other friends did not get in. Fun and social connection are the main drivers for *wahine* engagement in sports as 61% of *wahine* are moderately engaged in physical activity. This means they are "more likely to be influenced by environmental and social factors when it comes to maintaining their activity level."¹⁸ Opportunities for social sports will boost participation levels of *wahine*. Conversely, when deprived of any chance to engage in social sports, the physical activity levels of *wahine* will keep spiralling downwards.

Together, the parent and school's sociocultural perspective results in a focus on competition, a lack of support for *wahine* in competitive sports, and a lack of social sports opportunities. These key factors constantly drive *wahine* from sports. We must urgently break the assumption that performance is more important than play. After all, it is not by chance that "by the age of 17, young women are spending 28% less time being physically active than their male counterparts."¹⁷

Female stereotypes, body image, and social media

The adolescent years can be a very turbulent time for *wahine* navigating both social and physical (body) changes. A key aspect I will focus on is social physique anxiety and the stereotypes associated with the female body. Social physique anxiety is defined as "an emotional response that reflects individuals' concerns regarding the way their body may be observed or judged by others."¹⁹ As the female body changes during puberty, *wahine* are increasingly aware of their bodies. Research by Sport NZ found that "68% of *wahine* will avoid participating in activities in their day-to-day lives when they do not feel confident about their bodies."¹⁸ Body confidence is highly related to overall confidence, directly impacting sports participation. As three quarters of *wahine* are concerned about their body image¹⁸, there is a real psychological barrier that needs addressing.

Social media imposes unrealistic body expectations on *wahine*. Its psychological effect is powerful on youth because 95% of New Zealanders aged 15+ use social media.²⁰

Through the Social Constructivism Model, a negative hegemonic discourse is created regarding the female body image. Usually, thin, hour-glass figures are celebrated. Whereas larger or more muscular physiques are labelled as unfeminine in sports and looked down upon. As social media shapes the wider social norms, this discourse exists in the macrosystem. The macrosystem and its ideals naturally pervades the microsystem. Accordingly, attitudes and values in the microsystem thus reflect the macrosystem. For a *wahine*, their own attitudes and values are shaped intrapersonally. *Wahine* may feel psychological pressure since they do not have the ideal body, leading to decreased body satisfaction. Also, classmates, coaches, and parents of *wahine*, may mirror negative discourses and echo female body stereotypes. This leads to psychological pressure in the *wahine*'s interpersonal relationships in the microsystem. For example, a *wahine* recounted that she has "a friend who is like bigger and taller all over. She loves to dance, but she got bullied out of it by the girls in her class because she wasn't skinny or tiny."¹⁹ As her friend possessed the 'wrong' physique for dance, she faced psychological pressure from her classmates, ultimately driving her out of sports. Coaches and parents are likely to have the same negative perspective as this girl's classmates because of the pervasive nature of stereotypes. Constructed by social media and the resulting discourses, stereotypes on *wahine*'s bodies proliferate.

19: Social physique anxiety and physical activity, NIH, August 13 2021: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9479786/>

20: The teens saying no to social media (and yes to brick phones), RNZ, May 22 2025:

<https://www.nz.co.nz/life/relationships/family/the-teens-saying-no-to-social-media-and-yes-to-brick-phones>

Assumptions and discrimination

In the Cycle of Discrimination, stereotypes may lead to assumptions around female bodies and participation in sports. For example, there is an assumption that *wahine* with certain physiques cannot participate in physical activity. A *wahine* voiced this harmful assumption, saying that “For girls, people look at them and their bodies like especially. If a girl’s fat they just straight up shame them and stuff.”¹⁸ Here, assumptions have morphed into discrimination as stereotypical people weaponise their words to “shame” and bring *wahine* down. *Wahine* may start to question, “Why am I so fat.” Social physique anxiety is extremely likely to develop in these damaging interactions. This often leads *wahine* to become strangers in their own body as “55% of *wahine* feel judged on their appearance by others when they go out.”¹⁸ Repeated exposure to body discrimination causes psychological barriers that prevent *wahine* from participating in physical activity. *Wahine* actively choose against exercise to save themselves the judgement from their bodies being stereotyped. Ultimately, this stigma results in a cycle of self-shame, loss of confidence, and a continued decline in *wahine* physical activity.

Wahine in the 2024-2028 Everybody Active Plan?

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the positive aspects of the Everybody Active Plan regarding *wahine*. The document identifies that young women participate less than young men and also correctly identifies that lack of “confidence and fear of judgement are more present for young women.”¹ However, the document does not elaborate on female stereotypes in sports or health policies to address these barriers to sport. I had to conduct further research into the Women and Girls Action Plan, which was mentioned

only once in the Everybody Active Plan. When reading through the Women and Girls Action Plan, I was alarmed that this document mentioned how Sport NZ “will continue making progress ... until the end of Sport NZ’s 2020-2024 strategic period.”²¹ What happens after 2024? What does Sport NZ plan to do differently in the period of 2024 to 2028 to help *wahine*? I do commend how Sport NZ aims to provide safer and more supportive environments for *wahine* through funding and investment. This is evidenced in their statement to “Explore opportunities to financially support partners to develop and implement strategic approaches that address inequities for women and girls.”²¹

Considering this, I do also believe that health policies should not only provide sporting opportunities for *wahine*, but also acknowledge the negatives, like harmful stereotypes. Health promotion policies should actively seek to challenge the status quo. As challenges to *wahine* evolve, Sport NZ should keep refining their health policies and not rely on something that worked 4 years ago to keep working in the future.

A reflection on hauora

Asian and female groups face their unique challenges in sports, which leads to them experiencing profound psychological stress and barriers. Declining physical activity levels for both Asians and females will have a negative impact on *taha tinana*. However, the other pillars of *hauora* in the *Te Whare Tapa Wha* model are often invisible and thus overlooked. *Taha hinengaro*, *taha whanau* and *taha wairua* suffer from the harm of stereotypes, which cause a loss of belonging. Stereotypes not only exist in the sporting sphere, but are encountered everywhere in daily life due to its influence in the

21: Women and Girls Action Plan, March 2023, Sport NZ: <https://sportnz.org.nz/resources/women-and-girls-action-plan/>

macrosystem. According to the Youth19 survey by the University of Auckland, "One-in-four (26%) Asian girls (and 16% of Asian boys) said they had seriously thought about killing themselves in the previous 12 months."¹⁵ For *wahine*, medical studies show that adolescent girls have two times higher rates of depression and anxiety versus boys.¹⁷ Mental health illnesses are often invisible because the psychological barriers that feed them are invisible. Stereotypes and everyday discrimination erodes a young person's self-identity, stripping away their individualism and purpose in life. Both Asians and female groups want spaces in sports where they are free from judgement and discrimination. However, these spaces do not exist and these psychological barriers are not addressed by Sport NZ. This is despite promising to be "responsive to the needs, wants, and aspirations of tamariki and rangatahi."¹ I personally know that *wahine* and Asians at my school are not unlocking the social connection and *hauora* benefits from physical activity. In a time meant for personal growth and self-discovery for *wahine* and Asians, Sport NZ is currently letting them down.

Challenging the sports narrative

As I believe the current health promotion policies in Sport NZ's Everybody Active Plan is inadequate, I will therefore be proposing my own policy. My policy's effect will be viewed through Bronfenbrenner's Socio-ecological Model²². This model consists of five levels. Firstly, the intrapersonal level comprises the attitudes and values an individual holds. Next, the interpersonal level is made up of immediate social relationships between youth and others, such as friends, coaches, and parents. The organisation level includes Sport NZ among other sporting agencies. The communities then provide the

broader sociocultural environments that either promote or discourage physical activity. Finally, the system level provides the overarching social context. Policy-making exists at the systems level because it ultimately shapes all the systems. My policy, through health promotion, will rewrite the education system as seen in the systems circle of Figure Three. The Ecological Systems Theory and Socio-ecological Model are different, but often interrelated. Hence, I will combine both of Bronfenbrenner's theories / models to analyse the impact of my policy. By doing so, I will aim to challenge the current status quo of the sports narrative and remove psychological barriers to youth sport.

Figure Three: Socio-ecological Model



Figure 1: Socio-ecological model of mental health, based on the Ecology of Human Development (Dr Urie Bronfenbrenner)

22: The Social Ecological Model, March 2023, Research Gate

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Social-Ecological-Model-Note-The-social-ecological-model-depicting-the_fig1_369238312

Health promotion through counter-hegemonic discourses

Counter-hegemonic discourse refers to “the efforts of social and political actors that challenge the cultural and institutional foundations of hegemony.”²³ They question existing sociocultural constructs and perspectives. By doing so, they seek to prove that “alternatives to the status quo exist, are needed, and are achievable.”²³ Negative hegemonic discourses spread stereotypes, allowing discriminatory attitudes and values to persist. Whereas positive counter-hegemonic discourses can rewrite these dominant attitudes, values, and stereotypes.

Viewed through the Cycle of Discrimination

The dismantling of stereotypes challenges assumptions about Asians, *wahine*, and other groups in sports. These groups can now express their individuality without being confined to limiting stereotypes. As stereotypes fuel discrimination, an absence of stereotypes will reduce discrimination. Discourses around youth sport participation become empowering instead of discriminatory. As this wider social change occurs in the macrosystem, stereotyped groups experience less judgement and have increased confidence to stand up for themselves. They can now resist stereotype threats, breaking the cycle of discrimination within sports.

Stereotype training and Bronfenbrenner’s principles

Counter-hegemonic discourses will be utilised for stereotype training in the sports education system. These workshops will be led by cultural experts or a trained adult, like a teacher in a classroom setting. It will be delivered in the sporting curriculum to youth, in staff training to sports coaches, and in educational evenings to sports *whanau*.

Stereotype training will target the intrapersonal attitudes and values that youth, staff, and family hold. This provides the necessary cultural capital to firstly identify, then denounce stereotypes. By influencing sociocultural perspectives at the microsystem, positive discourses spread. Hence, interpersonal relationships will improve, such as youth-coach and youth-parent connections. Sports narratives will also be rewritten in organisations like Harbour Sport and even Sport NZ itself. Unconscious bias, especially in policy-making, will be revealed through this stereotype training. This change happens at the organisational and systemic level. Therefore, the macrosystem is transformed. Ultimately, hegemonic discourses promoting stereotypes transform into counter-hegemonic discourses denouncing stereotypes.

Empowerment

Sociocultural pressures to conform to stereotypes are removed. For example, parents and coaches of Asian youth create an inclusive and accepting place to engage in sports. This causes Asians to feel more empowered to participate in sports rather than being confined to the academic space. For *wahine*, they may feel more empowered to participate in social versus competitive sports when supported by coaches, parents, and friends. *Wahine* may also feel more confident in their bodies as they encounter less discrimination around body physique. As body confidence improves, so does sports participation. When sporting environments are more inclusive, physical activity levels

23: Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony, Laurie Adkin, 2021:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/showingtheory/chapter/hegemony-and-counter-hegemony/#:~:text=Counter%2Dhegemony%20references%20to%20the%20efforts%20of%20social%20and%20political,are%20needed%2C%20and%20are%20achievable.>

will rebound for historically stereotyped groups like Asians and *wahine* youth.

SMART Goals

Referring back to the SMART goals, stereotype training will be *specific*, aiming to train 100% of school sports staff by 2028. It is *measurable* since Sport NZ can track the changes in Asian and *wahine* groups in sports participation. A rebound will indicate that the stereotype training is effective in creating inclusive sports spaces. Also, Asians and *wahine* can fill out Google forms to document the impact that stereotype training had on their sports experience. In order to make this *achievable*, Sport NZ could partner with Asian family services or female advocacy groups like the Ministry for Women. By doing so, Sport NZ could cover a larger audience in sports, increasing the effectiveness of counter-hegemonic discourses. Next, stereotype training is *relevant* because stereotypes and psychological barriers are evidenced by Asians and *wahine*, not only through quantitative data on declining physical activity levels, but also through qualitative first-hand accounts of discrimination from personal quotes. It will also be *time-bound*, with a pilot in at least 100 schools in 2026 and a nationwide rollout by 2028. Stereotype training can be implemented in primary schools, intermediate schools, and colleges across New Zealand. This is because all schools, regardless of age, experience stereotypes, discrimination, and the resulting psychological barriers to sport.

A final thought

In my critical evaluation, I have revealed and broken down the psychological barriers to youth sport. The 2024-2028 Everybody Active Plan proposed by Sport NZ too often emphasises *taha tinana*. Whereas the pillars of *taha whanau*, *taha wairua*, and *taha hinengaro* – so essential for psychological wellbeing – have often been overlooked. The decline in sports is not only a physical wellbeing issue. It jeopardises our holistic wellbeing, encroaching on the integrity of our *wharenui*.

"Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini" ²⁴

My strength is not that of a single warrior, but that of many.

This *whakataukī* addresses sports leaders, policy-makers, schools, parents, coaches, friends, and finally youth. We must collectively take a stand against discrimination, as we are warriors together. Only when long-standing attitudes, values, and stereotypes are challenged, can we break down psychological barriers to youth sport, increase physical activity rates, and unlock the *hauora* for youth in New Zealand.

24: Ngā pēpeha a ngā tipuna, Ministry of Education, June 27 2025:

<https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Tu-rangatira-English/Nga-pepeha-a-ng-a-tipuna>