

FROM CLASSROOM TO CUBICLE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF
HEALTH AND LEISURE STUDENT INTERN MENTAL HEALTH

by

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Dalhousie University is located in Mi'kma'ki, the
ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq.

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Abstract

Introduction: Internships offer critical experiential learning for undergraduate students, yet the mental health experiences of interns in health and leisure programs remain underexplored. This study investigates these experiences in Health Promotion (HPRO), Recreation Management (RM), and Therapeutic Recreation (TR) internship programs at an Atlantic Canadian University. **Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to understand the mental health experiences associated with internships of undergraduate post-secondary students in the identified health and leisure internship programs. To achieve this purpose, I investigated two research objectives: 1) to identify, explore, and understand factors influencing student mental health while preparing for internship, and 2) to identify, explore, and understand factors influencing student mental health during internship. **Methods:** Guided by a constructivist worldview, my study employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to analyze data from 10 semi-structured virtual interviews with participants aged 22 to 29 (mean: 24.23 ± 2.42). My positionality and reflexivity as the researcher were integral throughout the research process. **Findings:** Four main themes were developed through analysis: (1) Preparing for Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress, (2) Empowered Interns: Achievement and Growth, (3) Navigating Role Transitions and Mental Health During Internship, and (4) The Cost of Experience: Mental Health Challenges in Unpaid Internships. **Discussion:** This thesis highlights various factors affecting mental health during internship preparation and completion, emphasizing the need for robust support and resources. The insights from my study can inform the development of better support structures for students in future internship programs.

Keywords: internship, undergraduate interns, intern wellbeing, intern mental health, experiential learning, reflexive thematic analysis, qualitative description

List of Abbreviations Used

KT: Knowledge Translation

HPRO: Health Promotion

PI: Principal Investigator

NCTRC: National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification

RM: Recreation Management

RTA: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SEM: Socio-Ecological Model

SKILL: Student Summer Skills Incentive

TA: Thematic Analysis

TCPS: Tri-Council Policy Statement

TR: Therapeutic Recreation

UDL: Universal Design for Learning

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Internships are pivotal experiences that bridge academic learning with real-world practice, yet their impact on student mental health remains underexplored. Despite the critical role these internships play in shaping future professionals, there is a notable lack of literature addressing the mental health experiences of post-secondary students in health and leisure-related programs. In this introductory chapter, I will provide a comprehensive summary of existing research on post-secondary internships and student mental health, highlighting gaps that underscore the need for further investigation. I will then outline the purpose and rationale of this study, define key terminology, and provide an overview of the research. Additionally, in this chapter, I will introduce researcher positionality and reflexivity, and discuss the overall significance of this project.

1.1 Brief Overview of the Literature

Experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, are increasing in popularity at post-secondary institutions in Canada (McCarthy, 2016; Stirling et al., 2017). Internships offer numerous benefits for students, including the development of professional skills, the establishment of network connections in their prospective fields, and the application of theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts (McCarthy, 2016; Pascoe et al., 2020). However, the mental health experiences of interns can vary widely, encompassing both positive and challenging aspects (Gillespie et al., 2020; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin & Chen, 2022; McHugh, 2017). While some students may experience growth, empowerment, and a sense of achievement, others may face stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges (Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; McHugh, 2017; Patil & Sharma, 2022) Understanding this spectrum of experiences is crucial for developing

comprehensive support systems for interns.

Often, the structure of an internship program can influence the mental health experiences of post-secondary students (Stirling et al., 2017). Structural elements of internship programs such as coursework, supervisor relationships, and intern preparation can contribute to stress and other negative impacts on interns' mental health (Craig & Sable, 2011; McCarthy, 2016; McHugh, 2017). Negative mental health impacts like anxiety and lower self-efficacy not only hinder the internship experiences but can also lead to prolonged stress, harming students' overall wellbeing (Azza et al., 2020; Pascoe et al., 2020; Lin & Chen, 2022). Conversely, positive mental health experiences during internships are linked to increased self-efficacy, improved psychosocial characteristics, and better psychological outcomes (Gillespie et al., 2020; Lin & Chen, 2022).

Existing literature highlights a range of both positive and negative mental health experiences among student interns (Gillespie et al., 2020; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin & Chen, 2022; McHugh, 2017). Research emphasizes that internships should be educational, providing structured and career-relevant experiences that are meaningful to students (Holyoak, 2013; Stirling et al., 2017). Holyoak (2013) expanded on this by describing internships as opportunities for post-secondary students to enhance personal and professional skills applicable to their future careers. The type of internship structure can vary based on the academic program or the goals of the student, resulting in different experiences (Rogers et al., 2021). For instance, a medical student's internship will differ significantly from that of a marketing or hospitality student due to the differing placement contexts (Mensah et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). Recognizing these varied experiences can help identify factors that contribute to intern satisfaction and program

effectiveness (Rogers et al., 2021).

Understanding the factors that contribute to intern satisfaction is essential for designing effective internship programs. Rogers et al. (2021) explained that intern satisfaction can be influenced by various characteristics: task identity, skill variety, task variety, intern autonomy, the work itself, positive relations with co-workers and supervisor(s), opportunities to learn, task significance, supervisor support, and feedback. These factors can be categorized into three characteristics: task characteristics, knowledge characteristics, and social characteristics (Rogers et al., 2021). If an intern felt they were succeeding in all three characteristics, they would indicate a high level of intern satisfaction (Rogers et al., 2021).

A key barrier to achieving intern satisfaction is stress, a common feeling experienced by many post-secondary interns (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Roush et al., 2021). Existing research indicates several potential causes of stress for post-secondary interns, including supervisor relationships, lack of clarity in responsibilities, and compensation (Holyoak, 2013; Lin & Chen, 2022; McHugh, 2017). Craig and Sable (2011) indicated that interns tended to experience stress in unfamiliar, challenging experiences within an internship placement. In these situations, Craig and Sable (2011) suggested that support from the supervisor and/or program coordinator tended to reduce feelings of stress, while increasing feelings of support and self-efficacy. Lin and Chen (2022) highlighted the positive impact of social support in internship programs, finding a link between self-efficacy and internship performance, which can enhance mental health. Additionally, self-efficacy is positively correlated with intern-supervisor relationships (Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022; Stirling et al., 2017).

Interns who reported having a trusting relationship with their supervisor also reported higher levels of self-efficacy and better performance overall in their internships. (Lin & Chen, 2022). Lin and Chen (2022) suggested that support from supervisors plays a key role in intern performance – if the intern feels supported, encouraged, and trusted, they tend to perform better and feel more confident in their abilities, much like Roush et al. (2021) also discussed. These findings were supported by Bender (2020), who suggested that student interns had higher satisfaction and success when provided meaningful feedback from their supervisor. Overall, existing research identifies a relationship between internships and the mental health experiences of post-secondary students; however, there is a lack of representation of undergraduate intern experiences in the literature (Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022).

1.2 Gaps in Literature and Project Rationale

Existing literature has focused on internships that take place in medical and business settings, as well as post-graduate or graduate-level internships (Frazier et al., 2020; Klein & Weiss, 2011; McTorry, 2014; Mensah et al., 2021; Parent et al., 2016; Roush et al., 2021). To fill this gap in the literature, the findings from this study contribute perspectives from undergraduate health and leisure interns. Existing research discusses internship experiences in the scope of intern success, attainment of learning outcomes, and career success, with a lack of literature about the relationship between mental wellbeing and internships (Bender, 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; Saltz & Oh, 2012; Stirling et al., 2017). Finally, there is a lack of qualitative research on student intern mental health experiences in the existing literature (Briet & Runnerstrom, 2019; Frazier et al., 2020; Mensah et al., 2021). My study adds to the existing literature with direct

qualitative feedback from post-secondary students about their internship experiences.

In Nova Scotia, 49.4% of undergraduate students participate in at least one internship program before they graduate (Galarneau et al., 2020). Post-secondary internship opportunities have been associated with many benefits for students, including personal and professional development (McCarthy, 2016; Roush et al., 2021). In internships, students can gain hands-on learning experience in a potential future career field and improve professional skills such as personal and professional development, communication, leadership, and more (McCarthy, 2016; Stirling et al., 2017). Developing an understanding of intern mental health experiences can help us identify and explore shared experiences among health and leisure students and fill the gap in the literature surrounding health and leisure internship programs (Burr, 2022). While I have provided a brief overview of existing research in this section, a deeper examination of the literature will be further discussed in the literature review chapter.

1.3 Research Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to understand the mental health experiences associated with internships of undergraduate post-secondary students in health and leisure internship programs in one Atlantic Canadian university. To achieve this purpose, I investigated two objectives:

- 1) To identify, explore, and understand factors influencing student mental health while preparing for internship.
- 2) To identify, explore, and understand factors influencing student mental health during their internship.

1.4 Defining Key Terms

An internship, generally, is a placement in which undergraduate students are matched with a host agency, to engage in a full-time work placement, to receive credit hours toward graduation requirements (McCarthy, 2016; Stirling et al., 2017). Existing literature explores internships and other related opportunities, including co-operative, work, or field placements, practicums, etc. Throughout this study, I have solely referred to these opportunities as *internships* to avoid confusion of labels for similar experiences. It is important to note that the term *internship* can be applied in a variety of contexts, settings, and programs, including outside of the post-secondary environment, and not all post-secondary education includes a required internship component (Stirling et al., 2017). In the context of my study, the internships of interest are the 14- to 16-week required full-time placements for students in their final term of study in three health and leisure undergraduate programs at an Atlantic Canadian university. Through these required internships, students receive 15 credit hours, or the equivalent of five courses, toward their undergraduate degrees.

Mental health is generally defined as the state of emotional and psychological wellbeing (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010; WHO, 2005). According to Westerhof and Keyes' (2010) two-continua model, mental health and mental illness are not opposites but exist independently on two continua, varying in degree and presence throughout life. Mental wellbeing, on the other hand, encompasses positive mental health states that include resilience to stressors and adaptive coping strategies (Waddell & Burton, 2006; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010; WHO, 2005). In the context of this study, intern mental health is defined as the mental wellbeing of undergraduate students participating in internship programs. This definition encompasses interns' capacity to manage internship demands,

sustain a positive emotional state, and engage in healthy behaviours and relationships (Gillespie et al., 2020; Waddell & Burton, 2006).

Stress is a response to excessive pressures or demands, characterized by psychological, social, cognitive, and physical components (Pascoe et al., 2020; Waddell & Burton, 2006; WHO, 2005). While stress can be a normal part of life and can sometimes enhance performance, chronic or excessive stress can negatively impact mental health and overall wellbeing (Mensah et al., 2021). In the context of this study, stress refers to participants' experiences of managing academic, professional, and personal demands during their internships, which may affect their emotional and psychological state (Azza et al., 2020; Gillespie et al., 2020; Mensah et al., 2021; Pascoe et al., 2020; Waddell & Burton, 2006).

Anxiety is defined as an emotional state characterized by feelings of apprehension, worry, and fear, often in response to perceived threats or challenges (Limone & Toto, 2022; NIMH, 2018). It can manifest in physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate, sweating, and difficulty concentrating. While mild anxiety can be a normal and adaptive response, chronic anxiety may lead to mental health challenges and impact daily functioning. In this study, anxiety is considered within the context of interns' mental health, reflecting their experiences of uncertainty and pressure during their internships (Limone & Toto, 2022; Pascoe et al., 2020; WHO, 2005).

1.5 Study Context

This research took place in the context of a medium-large university in Atlantic Canada, specifically within a health and leisure-related department offering three undergraduate internship programs: Health Promotion (HPRO), Recreation Management

(RM), and Therapeutic Recreation (TR). Each of these programs includes a mandatory 14- to 16-week, full-time internship component, where students engage in experiential work-related activities at host agencies alongside academic assignments.

In response to recent curriculum and accreditation updates, the department has initiated a program evaluation project to assess these internship components. The broader evaluation project aims to explore student learning experiences and gather insights from individuals in influential roles through surveys and interviews, contextualized by an environmental scan. The rationale behind this evaluation project is to identify improvements that could enhance students' learning and mental health experiences during their internships. My study, which is a sub-study of the larger evaluation project, specifically focuses on student mental health experiences. While both my study and the broader evaluation project use the same student data, interview guide, and ethics approval, they differ in their approach. This study is descriptive, whereas the broader project employs a transformative approach to assess the internship programs.

1.6 Overview of Study

I used a constructivist worldview and qualitative description study design to guide this research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Denzin et al., 2017). I collected data through interviews with participants, all of whom were either preparing for, currently participating in or had recently (between 2021 and 2024) completed a health and leisure internship program. Following data collection through one-on-one interviews, I used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), guided by Braun and Clarke (2022) to analyze the data. Identifying common themes and patterns in the experiences of health and leisure interns was instrumental in gaining insights into students' mental

health within these programs.

1.7 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As the researcher, it is crucial for me to acknowledge my position and values, as they may influence my interpretation of the data in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I am a graduate student in the department associated with the internship programs of interest and am interested in developing an understanding of student mental health experiences. My interest in this area stems from my past roles in various mental health support positions within the post-secondary environment, which have heightened my curiosity about student experiences. Moreover, during my undergraduate studies, I participated in an internship program that was not a graduation requirement but rather a summer internship of personal interest. Reflecting on my own internship experience, where I encountered stress, I recognize the potential for stress in undergraduate internships more broadly. This awareness motivates me to explore common themes and shared experiences among participants in this study, aiming to deepen my understanding. I have worked in several mental health support positions associated with the post-secondary environment, which has made me interested in the mental health experiences of students.

Given the qualitative nature of this study and the use of RTA, my reflexivity has been integral (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexivity is a technique in which the researcher acknowledges how their position, experiences, and assumptions can shape how they view and interpret data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My reflexivity process included reflecting on the research methodology and considering how my personality and values shape the knowledge produced through personal, functional, and

disciplinary lenses (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A more thorough description of how reflexivity was implemented in my project will be further discussed in the Methods chapter.

1.8 Project Significance

The findings of my study offer valuable insights into the experiences of undergraduate interns in health and leisure programs. They contribute to enhancing the support systems for future interns within these programs and shed light on effective strategies for preparing students for their internship placements (Fried et al., 2022). By advancing the current understanding of intern mental health experiences, this study informs the operational practices of health and leisure internship programs, fostering student interns' personal and professional growth (Craig & Sable, 2011; Fried et al., 2022).

1.9 Chapter Summary

Internships are crucial in linking academic learning with real-world application, yet there are significant gaps in the existing literature regarding student mental health experiences in health and leisure-related internship contexts. There is a need to better understand these intern experiences to gain a comprehensive context for student perceptions of mental health and wellbeing throughout their participation in the internship programs. Based on a lack of adequate representation in the literature, my study was guided by a constructivist worldview, and I collected qualitative data through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with health and leisure interns. I used RTA to guide the data analysis throughout this study, and my reflexivity as the researcher was an essential component of the research process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Internships are widely recognized for contributing to professional development and learning in post-secondary education, offering students valuable hands-on experiences (Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; McCarthy, 2016; Merlini et al., 2021; Narayanan et al., 2010). However, while much literature focuses on the benefits of internships, there is a notable gap in research specifically addressing the mental health experiences of interns, particularly in health and leisure undergraduate programs. In this chapter, I critically review existing literature on post-secondary student mental health, mental wellbeing during internships, and related learning experiences. I also highlight gaps in the literature, specifically within the health promotion discipline, to contextualize the need for my study. By addressing these gaps, this chapter underscores the significance of this study in contributing to a more nuanced understanding of student intern mental health experiences.

2.1 Post-Secondary Student Mental Wellbeing

As presented in the introduction chapter, mental health is a dynamic continuum encompassing emotional and psychological wellbeing, while mental illness refers to specific conditions such as depression and anxiety (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010; WHO, 2005). According to the two-continua model by Westerhof and Keyes (2010), mental health and mental illness are not mutually exclusive but exist on a separate continuum, reflecting the idea that mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness but a state that can fluctuate based on various factors. This perspective highlights the importance of addressing mental health and wellbeing in post-secondary students by acknowledging that they may experience a range of states along this continuum.

Thirty percent of students in post-secondary education experience mental health challenges during their studies (Dekker et al., 2020). Student mental health can be impacted by various factors, such as stress or the transition to post-secondary education (Visentin et al., 2022). For students with prior mental health challenges, symptoms can be significantly more impactful in the post-secondary environment (Visentin et al., 2022; Dekker et al., 2020). Lindsay et al. (2022) indicated that stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties significantly impacted the academic success of post-secondary students.

It is important to acknowledge the spectrum of mental health experiences among post-secondary interns, as these concerns can stem from factors within the intern experience, independent factors, and/or pre-existing conditions (Fried et al., 2022; McTorry, 2014; Mensah et al., 2021; Pascoe et al., 2020). For example, low-income students in unpaid internship placements may experience more negative mental health outcomes compared to higher-income students (McTorry, 2014). Additionally, the 35% of post-secondary students experiencing anxiety and 30% experiencing depression tended to indicate higher levels of academic stress because of their pre-existing mental health symptoms (Fried et al., 2022; Parent et al., 2016; Pascoe et al., 2020).

Beyond financial strain, other factors can further complicate the mental health landscape for university students. Housing precarity, a growing concern among students, can exacerbate feelings of instability and stress, negatively impacting mental wellbeing (Bezgrebelna et al., 2021). Relational conflicts, including strained relationships with peers, family members, or romantic partners, may also contribute to increased anxiety and depression during internships (Aldam et al., 2019). Additionally, students with caregiver responsibilities often struggle to balance their academic and personal

obligations, leading to heightened stress and potential burnout (Lafferty et al., 2022). Furthermore, interns may be reluctant to disclose mental health challenges due to experiences of discrimination, racism, or other personal factors (Parent et al., 2016; Pascoe et al., 2020).

Access to mental health resources also presents challenges for interns. While many students may recognize the need for support, barriers such as long waitlists for counseling services, the difficulty of scheduling appointments without missing classes, and the stigma associated with seeking help can deter them from pursuing the necessary care (Dekker et al., 2020). Interns may also fear that disclosing their mental health needs to internship supervisors or coordinators could lead to preconceived notions about their abilities or reliability, ultimately affecting their professional relationships and opportunities (Reavely et al., 2017). These barriers further complicate the mental health experiences of interns, highlighting the need for more accessible and stigma-free support systems (Dekker et al., 2020; Reavely et al., 2017; Rivera et al., 2021).

Because of these experiences, it is important that the mental wellbeing of students is prioritized through adequate support and resources (Lisnyj et al., 2021; Stanton, 2019). Literature suggests that resources such as therapy, personal strategies, mental health education and awareness, and services offered by post-secondary institutions can have positive outcomes for student mental health (Moghimi et al., 2023). Further, access to mental health resources has been linked to a greater sense of belonging, positive self-esteem, engagement, and resilience (Stanton, 2019). For post-secondary students, mental wellbeing is closely connected to learning experiences and academic success (Stanton, 2019).

2.2 Student Mental Wellbeing and Learning Experiences

The workload assigned to a student can be impactful on their mental health and academic success (Limone & Toto, 2022). Heavy workloads for post-secondary students were linked with higher rates of anxiety and depression symptoms (Limone & Toto, 2022). Students who felt like they could accomplish pre-determined learning outcomes tended to experience positive states of mental health (Stanton, 2019). Additionally, students who felt confident in their academic abilities tended to experience stress and anxiety than students who did not feel academically confident (Limone & Toto, 2022). Stanton (2019) suggested that academic environments that valued flexibility, fairness, collaboration, and a focus on experiential learning were identified as being supportive of student mental wellbeing.

Experiential learning opportunities involve students engaging in hands-on experiences to enhance learning and personal growth (Kolb, 1984; Stirling et al., 2017). Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) highlighted the positive impact that work-integrated learning experiences can have on post-secondary students. In discussion about ELT, Kolb (1984) discussed experiential learning as a four-stage cycle of concrete learning experiences and suggested that optimal learning occurs when each of these learning dimensions are incorporated into the internship learning experience (Stirling et al., 2017). Implementing Kolb's (1984) ELT within post-secondary internship programs can help students form connections between content learned in the classroom and experience in the workplace setting (McCarthy, 2016; Stirling et al., 2017).

Experiential learning opportunities can present positive outcomes for students, including post-secondary students in recreation programs (Craig & Sable, 2011; Gallant

et al., 2017; Stirling et al., 2017). Students indicated deep engagement with learning opportunities through reflection and applying classroom-learned knowledge to workplace settings (Gallant et al., 2017). Additionally, Gallant et al. (2017) suggested that experiential learning settings fostered positive relationships between students, instructors, and community practitioners. Additional literature demonstrates that integrating experiential learning in internship programs provides students with opportunities for personal and professional development (Holyoak, 2013; McHugh, 2017; Stirling et al., 2017).

2.3 Student Mental Wellbeing and Internships

The impact of post-secondary internship programs on intern mental health is an important, complex issue (Craig & Sable, 2011; Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022).

Internships provide hands-on learning opportunities, but the length and components of these programs can vary, as can their impact on intern mental health (Craig & Sable, 2011; Fowler-Holdham, 2022; Mensah et al., 2021). This section considers the effect of internship experiences on post-secondary student mental health.

Post-secondary internship programs are typically work-like placements required as a part of an academic program, providing hands-on learning in potential future career fields (Craig & Sable, 2011; Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2021).

Internship lengths can range from 10 weeks to 12 months (Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; Holyoak, 2013). Components of internships typically vary depending on the department, academic institution, or program requirements (Craig & Sable, 2011; Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022). Most post-secondary internship programs require students to complete full-time hours at their placement, with additional coursework required by their program

coordinator (Craig & Sable, Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; Holyoak, 2013).

Achieving learning outcomes in internship programs can help health interns feel better equipped to make future career-related decisions and increase their knowledge and skills (Gilbert et al., 2014). Skills acquired in internships can address both professional and personal development, including self-efficacy, leadership, and communication (Kolb, 1984; Lin & Chen, 2022; Stirling et al., 2017). Stirling et al. (2017) suggested that incorporating all of Kolb's (1984) learning outcomes into an internship program would lead to optimal learning outcomes for interns. Internships are crucial opportunities for experiential learning at the post-secondary level, highlighting the need to explore the relationship between student mental health and wellbeing within these programs (Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021; Stirling et al., 2017).

Stirling et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of an educationally driven approach to internships, including collaborative problem-solving, social support, assigned coursework, intern reflexivity, and intern preparation. Addressing these elements can contribute to a positive experience for interns and help mitigate potential stressors or negative mental health impacts for interns (Benach et al., 2014; McHugh, 2017; Rogers et al., 2021).

The impact of internship programs on intern mental health is multifaceted, influenced by various factors such as self-efficacy, personality, stress, and mood (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Briet & Runnerstrom, 2019; Gordon et al., 1986; Lin & Chen, 2022; Vyas, 2019). While self-efficacy and personality can positively affect intern satisfaction and success, stress and mood can negatively impact intern mental health (Gordon et al., 1986; Lin & Chen, 2022). It is important to note that experiencing stress is a normal part

of life (Mensah et al., 2021); however, adverse mental health outcomes, like mood changes or mental illness, tend to be associated with excessive, prolonged stress that may impact the intern's ability to achieve more beneficial outcomes from an internship experience. Gordon et al. (1986) explored the impact of internship stress on intern mood and found that higher stress levels were associated with anger, self-doubt, pessimism, inferiority, and a decrease in self-efficacy.

Vyas (2019) discussed the negative mental health impacts associated with post-secondary internships through qualitative feedback from students. Vyas' (2019) article highlighted student intern experiences in which students felt disrespected by their supervisor and other negative experiences in the workplace. These negative internship experiences impact an intern's psychosocial characteristics and psychological outcomes (Gillespie et al., 2020). Higher levels of intern satisfaction and self-efficacy have been associated with the achievement of internship program learning outcomes (Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022). Understanding how internships can influence self-efficacy is crucial, as it plays a significant role in shaping interns' mental health and professional development (Briet & Runnerstrom, 2019).

2.3.1 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, the individual beliefs about someone's own capability in accomplishing tasks, efforts, and coping skills, is important for our mental wellbeing (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Gillespie et al., 2020; Lin & Chen, 2022; Stirling et al., 2017). Lin and Chen (2022) and Bhuwandeep (2022) discussed the positive relationship between self-efficacy, academic success, and personal development in internships. Together, these studies highlighted the importance of considering intern self-efficacy and personality

factors in understanding the experiences of internship placements for personal and professional development (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Lin & Chen, 2022).

Lin and Chen (2022) investigated the relationship between intern self-efficacy and personality attributes, such as motivation and proactivity. Findings from Lin and Chen's (2022) study indicated that high levels of self-efficacy and proactive personality were positively associated with higher levels of intern satisfaction, trust in supervisors, and internship success. Bhuwandeep's (2022) article echoed the notion that higher levels of self-efficacy tended to lead interns to experience higher levels of academic success and personal development. Personality attributes such as self-efficacy and motivation can be challenged when adjusting and adapting to a new workplace environment for an internship, and the transition can elicit increased feelings of stress (Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022; Payne, 2021).

2.3.2 Personality Influence

Kim and Coco-Ripp's (2024) study discussed the influence that personality attributes can have on shaping internship experiences. Findings from Kim and Coco-Ripp's (2024) study highlighted three personality attributes most highly associated with successful internships: self-motivation, adaptability, and positive attitude. As suggested by Kim and Coco-Ripp (2024), interns who possessed these top three attributes tended to have successful internships, according to their host agency and academic program coordinator. Further supporting this, Grehan and colleagues (2011) discussed the Big Five model of personality, originally presented by Costa and McCrae (1992) in relation to academic and workplace success.

The Big Five model of personality presented five personality traits:

conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Grehan et al., 2011). Grehan et al. (2011) indicated that the conscientiousness personality trait is highly related to academic and workplace success, and that conscientious students tend to be goal-oriented and self-motivated. Findings from Grehan et al.'s (2011) study align with research by Kim and Coco-Ripp (2024), indicating that students who are self-motivated have a high tendency to experience successful internships. Overall, existing literature highlights the complexity of intern experiences and the role that personality attributes can play in shaping those experiences (Craig & Sable, 2011; Grehan et al., 2011; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin & Chen, 2022).

2.3.3 Collaboration

Craig and Sable (2011) indicated that “as the intern encounters unfamiliar ethical dilemmas in daily practice that might appear threatening to personal security, [they] may feel uncomfortable or off balance. To make sense of these unfamiliar ethically challenging experiences, the intern is guided by more experienced others” (p. 14). Opportunities for collaborative problem-solving can facilitate cohesive relationships between interns and supervisors, and help the intern adapt to situations that might be challenging (Craig & Sable, 2011; Stirling et al., 2017). Further, collaboration in an internship can lead to increased feelings of success and social support for the intern (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Rogers et al., 2021).

Social support, whether from a supervisor or colleague, in an internship position can lead to higher success rates (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Roush et al., 2021). Kaslow and Rice (1985) discussed intern perceptions of the importance of supervisor support throughout different stages of the internship placement. Existing

literature suggests that interns tend to experience higher levels of stress in relation to their responsibilities at their placement – being unsure about how much responsibility the intern has and struggling between being a student while also being a professional in the internship setting (Craig & Sable, 2011; Kaslow & Rice, 1985). Kaslow and Rice (1985) also suggested that interns tended to experience higher levels of stress at the beginning of their internship placement due to feeling insecure about their role in the placement, which was remedied with additional social support, from their supervisor and/or program coordinator throughout their placement.

2.3.4 *Assigned Coursework*

Supervisor support can also extend to course-specific assignments of an internship program. Saltz and Oh (2012) discussed internship coursework and suggested that all assignments provided to interns must be designed to be directly applicable in the workplace setting, and flexible in their delivery. Variations in the delivery of coursework during an internship can benefit both the instructor and the interns, as a distance-based learning approach can open the door for internship placement opportunities that may be limited if the only option were in-person learning (Saltz & Oh, 2012). These flexible means of course delivery and learning tended to elicit a greater sense of belonging, and decreased intern anxiety among students (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021; Saltz & Oh, 2012). Bhuwandeep (2022) supported the idea of distance learning in their study, and suggested reflexive strategies that can help foster communication and a better sense of belonging for interns completing their placement and/or coursework remotely.

Specific examples of coursework assigned to interns were presented by Craig and Sable (2011), who discussed assignments that encouraged personal and professional

development. These assignments included reflection essays, online forum posts, project reports, and site-visits by the academic coordinator (Craig & Sable, 2011). Fowler-Holdham et al. (2022) also presented various suggested course assignments for HPRO interns, which included internship evaluations and reports, internship task/activity logs, and seminar presentations. Existing research suggests that internship assignments, especially those that focus on reflection among interns, tend to support intern development; both personally and professionally (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022)

2.3.5 Intern Preparation

Bhuwandeep (2022) and Lin and Chen (2022) suggested that the use of reflexive practices before and during internship placements provided evidence for increased intern success, satisfaction, and self-efficacy. Interns who participated in reflective practices throughout their internship tended to achieve higher levels of professional development, stress relief, and less anxiety in preparation for their internship placement, compared to students who did not participate in reflective practices (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022).

Providing opportunities for interns to reflect on their mental health prior to their internship placement can have positive impacts on overall intern mental health (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; Lin & Chen, 2022). To prepare students for their internship placement, Fowler-Holdham et al. (2022) discussed setting personal learning goals for each student intern. During the internship program, Fowler-Holdham et al. (2022) encouraged interns to engage in reflexive journaling about their experience, in addition to attending academic seminars and completing coursework.

Bhuwandeep (2022) and Lin and Chen (2022) supported intern reflexivity in preparation for and during the internship placement, which can facilitate learning and self-efficacy, and encourage interns to be mindful of their mental health throughout the internship program.

2.3.6 Impact of COVID-19 on Internships

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many aspects of post-secondary internship programs, perhaps most notably in the format in which intern placements are carried out (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Patil & Sharma, 2022). Disruptions in regular in-person delivery of internships were stressful for students and contributed to negative mental health experiences as a result (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Hamaideh et al., 2021). Interns reported having fewer interactions with their hosting supervisors with an online delivery compared to in-person, and interns reported a decrease in intern satisfaction because of the online delivery (Patil & Sharma, 2022).

Though an online internship placement can elicit feelings of stress and decrease intern satisfaction, Shtembari and Elgün (2021) suggested that students who completed their internship placement online developed better problem-solving, and critical thinking skills compared to interns who completed their placement in-person. Online communication remained strong between interns and their hosting supervisors and/or program coordinators, which contributed to positive feelings of success among interns (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Hamaideh et al., 2021; Patil & Sharma, 2022).

Overall, existing literature suggests a strong correlation between post-secondary internships and student mental health and wellbeing, as well as the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the internship experience (Briet & Runnerstrom, 2019;

Craig & Sable, 2011; Lin & Chen, 2022; Patil & Sharma, 2022). The aspects of this relationship between post-secondary internships and student mental health and wellbeing should be further explored.

2.4 Critique of the Available Literature

The current body of literature on internships primarily focuses on clinical placements and business settings, as well as internships for post-graduate or graduate-level students. Through a review of the literature, I noticed that studies by Frazier et al. (2020), Klein & Weiss (2011), McTorry (2014), Mensah et al. (2021), Parent et al. (2016), and Roush et al. (2021) that explore these types of internships in detail. However, I identified a significant gap regarding the experiences of undergraduate interns in non-clinical health and leisure settings. My study aims to fill this gap by providing new insights into the experiences of undergraduate interns in these fields. By focusing specifically on the mental health experiences of undergraduate interns, my research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of their unique challenges and perspectives.

Building on this, previous research has explored various aspects of internship experiences, such as intern success, attainment of learning outcomes, and career success (Bender, 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; Saltz & Oh, 2012; Stirling et al., 2017). Bender (2020) investigated how structured internships contribute to skill development and job readiness, revealing that well-designed internships can significantly enhance career prospects. Rogers et al. (2021) examined the role of mentorship and found that supportive mentorship relationships are crucial for achieving learning outcomes. Saltz and Oh (2012) focused on the alignment between academic preparation and internship tasks,

showing that a close match can lead to greater intern success. Stirling et al. (2017) highlighted the impact of internships on long-term career success, emphasizing the importance of real-world experience in professional growth.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the various factors that contribute to intern success, there is still a gap in the literature when it comes to exploring the relationship between mental wellbeing and the internship experience, particularly at the undergraduate level. My study fills this gap by taking a more holistic approach to understanding intern experiences, exploring how these factors can impact mental health. By examining the range of mental health experiences of undergraduate interns in health and leisure programs, this study provides a comprehensive understanding that can inform the development of better support systems and policies to enhance intern wellbeing.

The existing literature on the mental health experiences of interns is limited, particularly in terms of qualitative research that captures the unique experiences and perspectives of undergraduate students. While some studies have acknowledged mental health as a factor in internship success, they typically rely on quantitative measures or secondary data sources to draw conclusions and define intern success, which can be subjective (Briet & Runnerstrom, 2019; Frazier et al., 2020; Mensah et al., 2021). These quantitative approaches provide valuable insights into the prevalence and severity of mental health concerns among student interns but often fail to capture the full complexity of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

We know from existing research that internships can both positively and negatively impact student mental health (Gillespie et al., 2020; Lin & Chen, 2022; Mensah et al., 2021; Parent et al., 2016). For instance, supportive mentorship and

alignment with academic preparation can enhance career readiness and reduce stress (Lin & Chen, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021; Saltz & Oh, 2012). However, negative experiences, such as feeling disrespected or unsupported, can exacerbate stress and anxiety (Gillespie et al., 2020; Diver, 2021; Vyas, 2019). Despite these findings, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of how these factors interplay from the interns' perspectives.

Qualitative research is crucial in this context because it allows for a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences of interns, capturing the diversity and complexity of their mental health experiences. My study addresses the gap in literature by providing direct qualitative feedback from undergraduate students about their internship experiences in health and leisure programs, which focuses specifically on mental health and wellbeing. Employing a qualitative approach allows for the examination of emotional and psychological dimensions that are often missed in quantitative research. My role as the lead researcher involves not only analyzing these rich, personal narratives but also reflecting on my own perspectives and assumptions, ensuring that the insights gained are both authentic and impactful. By delving into these personal experiences, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of intern mental health, ultimately guiding the development of more effective support systems and policies.

Ultimately, by providing an understanding of the mental health experiences of undergraduate interns, my study contributes to the literature and offers additional representation for this population. Findings from this study add to the body of knowledge in this area from a health promotion perspective, emphasizing the lived mental health experiences of interns. Additionally, my study included a list of mental health resources that were sent to participants following interviews, demonstrating a practical application

of the health promotion lens. These mental health resources included a range of supports, including resources offered by the university, community-based, and provincial resources. This approach not only fills a gap in the literature but also offers actionable recommendations to enhance the wellbeing of student interns.

2.5 Chapter Summary

Internships are widely recognized for contributing to professional development and learning in post-secondary education, offering students valuable hands-on experiences (Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; McCarthy, 2016; Merlini et al., 2021; Narayanan et al., 2010). However, while much literature focuses on the benefits of internships, there is a notable gap in research specifically addressing the mental health experiences of interns, particularly in health and leisure undergraduate programs. In this chapter, I have provided a critical review of existing literature on post-secondary student mental health, mental wellbeing during internships, and related learning experiences. I also highlighted gaps in the literature, specifically within the health promotion discipline, to contextualize the need for this study. By addressing these gaps in this chapter, I have underscored the significance of this study in contributing to a more nuanced understanding of health and leisure intern mental health experiences.

Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter outlines the methodology, and methods employed in this research project. I begin with a restatement of my study's purpose and objectives, followed by discussions on the theory I used to guide this research, as well as my positionality and reflexivity as the researcher. My use of a qualitative description study design is detailed, encompassing participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical approaches. Additionally, in this chapter, I address quality, rigour, and ethical considerations for this project.

3.1 Research Purpose & Objectives

As presented in the introduction chapter, the purpose of my qualitative descriptive study was to understand the mental health experiences associated with internships of undergraduate post-secondary students in health and leisure internship programs in one Atlantic Canadian university. To achieve this purpose, I investigated two research objectives:

- 1) To identify, explore, and understand factors influencing student mental health while preparing for internship.
- 2) To identify, explore, and understand factors influencing student mental health during their internship.

3.2 Worldview: Constructivism

A constructivist worldview guided my research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Constructivism emphasizes that realities are socially and historically constructed, acknowledging the existence of multiple, contextualized, and interpretive perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Recognizing these

multiple realities was important, as participants' experiences in health and leisure internships can vary significantly from one participant to the next, based on their unique contexts and individual perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Constructivism provided a framework for understanding how participants construct meaning through social interactions and individual internship experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach aligns with my qualitative description methodology, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the diverse mental health experiences of undergraduate interns (Damico et al., 2015). By focusing on the social construction of meaning, I aimed to capture the complexity of participant experiences without imposing predetermined categories or frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Damico et al., 2015).

Craig and Sable (2011) discussed a constructivist-developmental perspective in health and leisure internship programs, where students actively construct meaning through activities and learning rather than passively discovering it. Learning in a post-secondary internship program is an active process, in which interns continually make sense of their experiences (Craig & Sable, 2011). Constructivism aligned well with the purpose of my study because it allowed for flexibility and researcher reflexivity throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011). This flexibility allowed me as the researcher to adapt to new insights and evolving themes as the study progressed, ensuring a more responsive and dynamic approach to data collection and analysis. Additionally, researcher reflexivity under constructivism involves a continual reflection on the researcher's role and influence on the research, promoting transparency and depth in the interpretation of participant experiences. These aspects are

consistent with RTA, which emphasizes the active role of the researcher in generating themes and understanding data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011).

Based on these descriptions of active learning and meaning making (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Craig & Sable, 2011; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Damico et al., 2015), a constructivist worldview was best suited for my study. I applied a constructivist worldview to this study by collecting qualitative data through individual interviews, which provided opportunities for participants to fully describe their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Damico et al., 2015; Thompson, 2019). Open-ended questions provided through interviews as well as flexibility within the delivery of these questions helped guide a constructivist approach to this study (Damico et al., 2015; Thompson, 2019). More in-depth explanations of my data collection process will be discussed further in this chapter.

3.3 Study Design: Qualitative Description

A qualitative description study design was implemented for this project. Qualitative description studies seek to explore and understand a phenomenon (Doyle, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Sandelowski, 2000). In this case, the phenomenon of interest was undergraduate student intern mental health experiences. Sandelowski (2000) discussed the interplay between interpretative and descriptive research in the context of a qualitative description study, indicating that although a study may lean heavily on description, it is impossible to carry out a qualitative description without some component of interpretation. Sandelowski (2000) indicated that “researchers seeking to describe an experience or event select what they will describe and, in the process of featuring certain aspects of it, begin to transform that experience or event” (p. 335).

Qualitative description, as an approach, aligns with the principles of RTA by emphasizing rich, detailed accounts of participant experiences while encouraging reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Sandelowski, 2000). This alignment was crucial because RTA involves an active and reflective process where researchers continually consider their influence on data interpretation. In health research, qualitative description can be useful for exploring individual participant experiences to increase knowledge about specific phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was chosen for my project due to the limited existing research on the mental health experiences of undergraduate health and leisure interns. The exploratory nature of this project, combined with a constructivist worldview, aligns well with qualitative description, which supports multiple interpretations based on participants' detailed accounts of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sandelowski, 2000). Specifically, qualitative description was instrumental in gaining a complex understanding of interns' mental health experiences. In this study, my use of RTA provided a structured yet flexible framework for analyzing data, allowing me to remain aware of my positionality and reflexivity as the researcher, particularly in instances where my interpretations might differ from those of the reader.

3.4 Researcher Positionality & Reflexivity

My positionality was important in this study, as the researcher in a qualitative study plays a significant role in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Reflexivity, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2022), “involves the practice of critical reflection on your role as the researcher, and your research practice and process” (p. 47). It is important to be reflexive as a qualitative researcher, as my

assumptions may influence how knowledge from this study is produced (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

For this study, it was imperative to consider the functional and disciplinary elements of my positionality and how they influenced my approach to the research. My undergraduate experiences shaped my perception of internship opportunities, as I completed an internship focused on student mental health and accessibility through Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This background led me to adopt an accessibility/support lens when evaluating internship experiences. Additionally, as a student with ADHD who benefitted from various accessibility resources at my undergraduate institution, I was well-supported during my internship. This experience, which mirrored the structure of the current study's internships, provided me with insights into effective student support mechanisms.

Functionally, my role as an intern involved navigating a 16-week placement, with support from hosting supervisors and program coordinators, akin to the support structures in this study. Through my internship, I gained knowledge and experience in student support, learning about a range of resources that enhance student mental health and accessibility. These experiences, combined with my interest in student mental health, directed my focus toward exploring this topic.

Disciplinary perspectives further shaped my approach to this research. My mental health/UDL internship, coupled with a graduate certificate in Mental Health and Addictions, deepened my understanding of the significance of diversity of mental health support. These experiences informed my methodological choices, drawing me to constructivist and collaborative approaches that align with RTA. The exploratory nature

of this study and my constructivist worldview were well-suited to qualitative description, which acknowledges multiple interpretations grounded in participant narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In my own internship, despite experiencing stress, the presence of robust support systems fostered a positive mental health environment. This personal experience has shaped my approach to research, reinforcing my preference for methods that are constructive and collaborative, engaging both participants and fellow researchers in a meaningful way. This study was driven by my assumption that student interns often experience stress and aimed to understand their mental health experiences within this context. By examining the support mechanisms and stressors reported by interns, my study sought to uncover insights that extend beyond the specific programs studied, potentially offering valuable implications for mental health support across various post-secondary institutions. I will revisit and expand on these aspects of positionality in the discussion chapter, further detailing their impact on the research process and findings.

3.5 Participants

Eligibility criteria for participants included (1) being a current student in one of the associated health and leisure internship programs or (2) have recently completed one of the associated health and leisure internship programs (between 2021 and 2024). Including intern experiences after 2020 was an important factor, as the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the internship experience for health and leisure students (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Iogansen et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic altered the structure and execution of internships, making placements from before 2020 less representative of the current contexts (Bhuwandeep, 2022). Prior to the onset of COVID-

19 in 2020, internships were predominantly conducted in-person, whereas by 2024, a mix of remote and hybrid placements became more common (Becker et al., 2022; Bhuwandeep, 2022; Iogansen et al., 2024; Irwin et al., 2022; Patil & Sharma, 2022).

Guided by RTA and existing research, a study population size of 10 eligible participants was deemed optimal for this qualitative description study (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fried et al., 2022; Leung & Savithiri, 2009). I chose this population size to ensure depth and richness of data while maintaining manageability for in-depth analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.6 Recruitment

The study population for my research included university students who were preparing for, completing, or had recently completed health and leisure internship programs at an Atlantic Canadian university. This sub-study is part of a larger evaluation project exploring student learning experiences in these internship programs. While the larger project seeks to evaluate various aspects of the internship programs comprehensively, my sub-study specifically focused on the mental health experiences of students within these internship programs.

Participants were recruited during the fall of 2023 and the winter of 2024, coordinated by the health and leisure internship program coordinators. Recruitment occurred through distribution of a poster that included a summary of the study, its purpose, and the inclusion criteria for participants, which is presented in Appendix A. A virtual copy of the recruitment poster was distributed via e-mail to students in the HPRO, RM, and TR programs who met the inclusion criteria. A copy of the recruitment e-mail for students is provided in Appendix B. Additionally, physical copies of the recruitment

poster were printed and put up in common spaces that eligible participants might frequent, like the department office space.

Additional outreach to potential participants occurred via social media channels, like LinkedIn, where health and leisure professors reached out to past interns who might not have received the poster via e-mail. The recruitment poster included contact information for both myself and my supervisor, allowing interested students to reach out directly. Those who expressed interest via email were screened to confirm their eligibility before being scheduled for one-on-one interviews.

3.7 Data Collection

Data collection for my study involved semi-structured interviews with future, current, and past health and leisure student interns, followed by a demographic survey. The data collected for my study is the same student data that is being passed on and used to inform the broader overall evaluation project. All participants had the option to participate in small group interviews based on their preference, however, they all chose one-on-one interviews. These individual interviews aligned with a constructivist approach, as their open-ended nature allowed for multiple perspectives and experiences to be recognized (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Brinkmann, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gill et al., 2008).

I chose semi-structured, one-on-one interviews as the primary method for this study because they were well-suited to the small study population and fit within the qualitative framework of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The verbal consent script is provided in Appendix C, and interview guide used for these interviews is provided in Appendix D. It is important to

note that the interview guide includes all questions that were used for this study and the larger evaluation project. The interview guide was crafted collaboratively with the larger evaluation project team to gather contextual information about participant experiences. It included questions on various topics, with questions seven and eight directly addressing mental health and wellbeing during the internship.

I, along with another researcher from the evaluation project, conducted all 10 interviews in this study virtually via Microsoft Teams, focusing on open-ended questions to allow participants to share their subjective experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This semi-structured approach was useful because it gave us the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participant responses, which could be a limitation of survey-based research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leung & Savithiri, 2009). For example, when participants discussed feeling stressed or overwhelmed, probes such as “can you tell me more about what contributed to that feeling?” or “how did that experience impact your mental health?” were used to elicit more detailed responses. The interview questions covered topics such as participant mental health, their specific health and leisure program, their internship hosting agency, and their preparation process for the internship. This format facilitated meaningful dialogue and enabled me to provide context to participants’ responses as needed.

3.8 Data Analysis

3.8.1 Data Management

All interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, and we used Microsoft Teams recording and transcription functions to provide a detailed record of what was said (Gill et al., 2008). After interviews, we saved the audio recordings in a

password-protected hard-drive, which only the research team had access to, and recordings were deleted following transcription. Each interview was automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams' transcription function. After each interview, I revisited the audio recording and double checked the transcript, removing any personally identifying information. For example, names of participants were replaced with pseudonyms such as Participant 001, Participant 002, etc. Additionally, identifying information such as participants' internship agency or role were replaced with square bracket descriptions, such as [provincial health organization] or [internship role]. I then uploaded the de-identified transcripts to NVivo to allow for coding.

I sent out the demographic survey via email containing a link to the survey through Opinio, after each participant interview (Object Planet, 2024). Opinio is a platform secured and approved by the university for research, used for creating, publishing, and managing survey data (Object Planet, 2024). Responses from the demographic survey provided contextual information about participants, such as their age, program, and the timing of their internship.

3.8.2 *Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)*

To provide a meaningful analysis of the collected data, I employed RTA as described by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic Analysis (TA) is a qualitative research method that identifies and interprets patterns of shared meaning across a dataset through coding and theme generation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). RTA is a specific form of TA that emphasizes the crucial role of reflexivity and researcher subjectivity as resources throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Unlike other types of TA, which may seek more objective or critical stances, RTA acknowledges and incorporates the

researcher's positionality, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022).

My approach to data analysis was experiential, focusing on understanding the lived experiences and subjective meanings participants assigned to their experiences, rather than critiquing underlying power structures of ideologies (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA aligns well with a constructivist worldview, which suggests that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed realities of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexivity was a key component in my study, influencing various stages of the research process. For instance, during the data collection phase, I remained conscious of how my position as both a researcher and graduate student might shape the participants' responses, particularly in the context of shared experiences in academic settings.

I kept a reflexive journal to document my thoughts, feelings, and assumptions as I conducted interviews, which helped me stay aware of how my own perspectives could influence the questions I asked and interpretations I made. Additionally, during data analysis, I regularly revisited my initial assumptions and coding decisions, discussing them with my supervisor to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' voices rather than my preconceptions. This reflexive approach allowed for deep engagement with the data collected through one-on-one interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018), capturing the complexity and richness of mental health experiences of participants through their internships.

3.8.3 *Analysis Procedures*

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phases of RTA: familiarization, coding, initial theme generation, theme development and review, refining themes, and writing, offered a

structured approach to qualitative analysis. Although the six phases are outlined chronologically, the process is inherently iterative and flexible (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This section will outline each phase of RTA, highlighting their application within the context of this study and emphasizing the role of researcher reflexivity and positionality throughout the analysis.

Familiarization. Familiarization was about familiarizing myself deeply with the data through immersion and critical engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To fully immerse myself with the data, I engaged in thorough note-taking and reflexive journaling, to keep track of my thoughts for later reflection and meaning making (Braun & Clarke, 2022). My reflexive journal consisted of detailed entries where I recorded my initial impressions, emotional responses, and emerging questions after each participant interview. This process helped me stay actively engaged and critically reflective. For instance, after each interview, I wrote about my initial thoughts, highlighted any notable quotes, and marked any patterns I noticed. These notes were both handwritten and digital, often including diagrams and mind maps to visually represent my thoughts.

My familiarization notes were detailed summaries of each interview, capturing key points and reflections. I also created summary sheets that included major themes, interesting points, and questions for further analysis. This approach allowed me to continuously reflect on and interrogate the data. These notes and journal entries provided a rich context and depth to the coding process, ensuring that my interpretations were grounded in a thorough understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Coding. Braun and Clarke (2022) described coding as a meticulous process of examining data to identify segments that are meaningful, relevant, or thought-provoking.

In this study, *meaningful* refers to data segments that offer insights into participants' mental health experiences, reveal patterns, or raise further questions. Following the transcription of audio-recorded interviews, I utilized NVivo for the initial coding phase (Lumivero, 2023).

NVivo is a qualitative analysis software designed to help researchers organize, analyze, and find insights in unstructured or qualitative data such as interviews or open-ended survey questions (Lumivero, 2023). NVivo was useful for coding my data in this study. By uploading interview transcripts into NVivo, I was able to use its coding function to tag excerpts that shared similar meanings or exhibited patterns among participant responses.

Braun and Clarke (2022) outlined various approaches to coding, on two continuums: inductive to deductive, and semantic to latent. I implemented an inductive approach to coding, focusing on the experiences of participants rather than relying on pre-existing theories (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Further, my study fell between semantic and latent analysis on the coding continuum (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Semantic analysis involved identifying explicit, surface-level meanings, while latent analysis sought to uncover underlying implicit meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Given my interest in developing a better understanding of mental health experiences, but also establishing and identifying common patterns among shared experiences of participants, application of both semantic and latent analysis characteristics was valuable, with a greater emphasis on a semantic description (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Theme Generation, Review & Refinement. Braun and Clarke (2022) described initial themes as clusters that share a main concept or idea. After coding, I examined the

data to identify relationships and patterns among the codes, with the goal of grouping them into themes that represented the overall dataset. This process involved organizing related codes into broader categories that captured the main concepts. For example, I decided to group the following codes into one theme: compensation, financial stress, and financial planning, and created the theme titled: The Cost of Experience: Mental Health Challenges in Unpaid Internships.

To refine initial themes, I re-visited both the data and the coded excerpts within NVivo to ensure that each theme accurately represented the participants' experiences and told a coherent story. This involved several steps: I reviewed each theme to assess whether it encompassed the full range of data it was intended to represent and checked its alignment with the research purpose and objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I examined the themes for completeness and relevance by checking that all relevant codes and excerpts were included, and by ensuring that each theme effectively highlighted significant aspects of the data. This iterative process helped to refine and clarify themes, ensuring they provided a comprehensive and meaningful interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

One important step in refining themes involved not just naming them but deeply developing and refining their substance, as emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2022). This process required examining what each theme was intended to convey and ensuring it accurately reflected the data. For instance, the first theme was initially named *Challenges and Expectations in Internship Preparation* and encompassed only the negative emotions of stress and worry. However, I realized this neglected the positive experiences of participants who were excited for their internships. By combining both the positive and

negative experiences with pre-internship preparation, the theme evolved to represent a comprehensive view of pre-internship preparation, capturing the varied emotions and experiences of participants. Based on my theme refinement and reconsideration, the theme name evolved to *Preparing for Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress*.

Procedurally, I refined themes by continuously comparing them against the data and research purpose and objectives. This iterative process included merging overlapping themes, splitting broad themes into more specific ones, and ensuring that each theme was supported by sufficient data excerpts. After my initial coding, my supervisor and I engaged in a collaborative peer review process. We worked together to discuss the codes, explore potential patterns, and reflect on theme development. This iterative process involved meeting, exchanging feedback, and revising themes based on conversations with my supervisor. As the Principal Investigator (PI) on the broader evaluation project, my supervisor was well-acquainted with the data, which allowed for a richer and more nuanced analysis. This collaborative approach, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022), helped to refine the themes by integrating diverse perspectives and validating the findings, ultimately enhancing the depth and accuracy of the analysis. Once the themes were thoroughly refined and I was confident they provided a nuanced and accurate representation of the data, I moved on to the writing phase, which is phase six of Braun and Clarke's (2022) RTA process.

Writing. Throughout the research process, my reflexive journal was an invaluable tool, capturing my thoughts, reflections, and evolving understanding of the data. This journal provided ongoing insight into my analytical approach and decision-making. During the writing phase, I used the journal alongside the codes and themes from NVivo

to bring together all the information. This approach helped ensure that the final narrative was clear and well-organized by combining my reflections with the data. This integration was key to developing a thorough and understandable research narrative.

In addition to using my reflexive journal to document my thoughts, insights, and decisions throughout the research process, I conducted ongoing literature reviews and managed references using Zotero, an open-source citation software (Zotero, 2024). This helped maintain a comprehensive bank of relevant literature, which I frequently referred to while writing. The writing process itself involved organizing the data extracts and initial themes into a clear narrative. I aimed to present the themes and supporting data in a way that clearly illustrated the mental health experiences of participants during their internships. This involved careful selection of quotes, integrating them into the discussion to highlight key findings, and ensuring that each theme was thoroughly explained and contextualized within the broader literature. My goal was to make the connections between the data and the study's purpose and objectives clear and accessible to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.9 Quality & Rigour

To ensure the quality and rigour of this study, I implemented several procedural measures, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2022) 15-point checklist, provided in Appendix E. These measures focused on accurate transcription, thorough coding and theme development, interpretation of the data, time allotment, and considering specific RTA approaches when writing.

Each interview was audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim using transcription software through Microsoft Teams. This process ensured the

accuracy of the qualitative data by minimizing the risk of missing or inaccurate data. To verify the precision of the transcriptions, I cross-checked the transcripts against the audio recordings, ensuring that no data was overlooked. Throughout the analysis, I engaged reflexively with the data, recognizing that my own perspectives and experiences influenced the coding and theme generation processes.

Using NVivo analysis software (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Lumivero, 2023), I iteratively revisited and refined the codes and themes, not with the goal of uncovering *true* themes, but to explore and construct meaning from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This process involved an ongoing dialogue between my interpretations and participant narratives, ensuring that themes were not only grounded in the data but also reflective of the research purpose and my engagement with the material. By acknowledging my role in shaping the themes, I aimed to capture the complexity of participants' experiences while maintaining a clear alignment with my research purpose and objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Maintaining an active researcher position was crucial in this study, as emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2022). My reflexivity throughout the analysis process helped in recognizing and accounting for my own influence on the research. By keeping a reflexive journal, I documented my thoughts, decisions, and feelings, which was instrumental in maintaining a critical and self-aware stance during data analysis. This intentional engagement ensured that themes did not simply *emerge* but were consciously constructed with an awareness of my positionality, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022). I reflected on how my experiences as a graduate student in health promotion might shape my interpretations, particularly in emphasizing certain student stressors. Rather than

mitigating my influence, I embraced my perspective, recognizing that my background provided valuable insights into participants' experiences. To deepen this reflexive process, I maintained a reflexive journal and engaged in ongoing discussions with my supervisor. These discussions allowed me to critically examine and refine my interpretations, ensuring that the themes were not only grounded in the data but also reflective of both the participants' experiences and my informed perspective as the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Another factor contributing to the quality of this study is the extended timeframe for qualitative analysis. Originally, I planned to complete the research in the spring of 2024; however, I extended this timeframe to ensure a thorough and intentional analysis. This extension allowed me ample time to reflect on the process, discuss the analysis with my supervisor and committee, and review past qualitative studies that used RTA without feeling rushed, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the university's research ethics board via the larger evaluation project and adhered to ethical guidelines set forth by the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) (Government of Canada, 2023b) and SoTL (2017) recommendations. As the researcher, I implemented several measures to ensure the ethical conduct of this study, specifically addressing issues such as power dynamics, dual-role research, and confidentiality. All participants were provided information regarding the study's purpose, the potential associated risks, and were advised on how the results could benefit them and others prior to providing consent.

Acknowledging the inherent power imbalances between researchers and

participants, measures were taken to minimize undue influence and coercion (Government of Canada, 2023b). Participants were assured of their voluntary involvement and right to withdraw from the study at any point without any repercussions. Typically, SoTL (2017) indicates that unequal power relationships occur between instructor and participant, however this was taken into consideration during the recruitment process of participants to ensure this was not a barrier to our research.

Dual-role research occurs when a researcher has a trusting relationship with a participant, sponsor, institution, etc. (SoTL, 2017). Given the small program sizes of HPRO, RM, and TR, it was likely that participants will be familiar with one or more of the members on the research team for this study. Prior to data collection, I confirmed that there was one dual role present that might impact the quality or outcomes of the study (SoTL, 2017). To address any dual roles or conflicts of interest, interviews were conducted by two researchers, who had no familiarity with the participants that they interviewed (Government of Canada, 2023b). Further, any member of the research team that was responsible for academic grading for one or more of the participants did not have access to data during the term in which the participants were a student of the researcher.

Confidentiality in the use of participant data was very important for my study. To safeguard participant information, all participants were deidentified and masked throughout the entire research process (SoTL, 2017). Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent, and therefor used to accurately transcribe the sessions verbatim, with participant identification hidden (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; SoTL, 2017; Government of Canada, 2023b). Interview audio recordings and transcripts were kept

secure among the research team with password-protected recording software included with Microsoft Teams. As we were discussing mental health experiences, which can be challenging for participants, I felt that establishing this confidentiality piece was important in ensuring participant comfortability and willingness to share their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moghimi et al., 2023). If a participant decided to revoke their participation in the study once data had already been collected, that participant's data would have been removed entirely to adhere to participant consent and ethical guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Government of Canada, 2023).

3.11 Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter has outlined the methodological approaches that I implemented in this study. This qualitative description was guided by a constructivist worldview, to describe the experiences of health and leisure interns without interfering or interpreting the data too heavily. I used RTA works by Braun and Clarke (2022) to guide data analysis, and each of the discussed six phases for data analysis have addressed. My reflexivity as the researcher was an important component to the research throughout the process, and reflexivity was accomplished through use of reflexive journaling. Data analysis was carried out using NVivo. The steps taken to address quality, rigour, and ethical considerations have been discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings of this qualitative descriptive study. I used RTA to explore the mental health experiences of undergraduate students in health and leisure internships at an Atlantic Canadian university. Specifically, my study aimed to identify and examine the factors influencing student mental health both during the preparation for internships and throughout the internship period itself.

Remaining mindful of the study's purpose and objectives, I conducted 10 individual interviews and developed four themes. These themes offer insights into the lived experiences of participants. The themes included in this chapter reflect the diverse perspectives and narratives shared by participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of the mental health experiences of interns in these programs. I begin this chapter with participant information, followed by an overview of the four identified themes. Next, a detailed exploration of each theme supported by relevant participant quotes is presented. My study contributes nuanced insights into the mental health experiences of undergraduate interns, adding to the existing literature in the field.

4.1 Participant Information

Ten students took part in my study, all of whom were engaged in a health and leisure internship program between the years 2021 and 2024. Between the HPRO, RM, and TR programs, three participants were in the HPRO degree program, two participants were in the RM program, and five participants were in the TR program. Two participants were preparing for their internship at the time of their interview, two participants were on internship, and six participants had recently completed their internship. A summary of participants and their associated programs of study is presented in Table 1. A

demographic survey was used to contextualize our findings, and eight out of ten participants completed the survey. In response to an open-ended question about gender identity, seven participants identified as woman or female, and one participant identified as man or male. Ages of participants ranged from 22 to 29 years old (mean: 24.23 ± 2.42). All eight participants who completed the demographic survey identified as Canadian, with one participant also identifying as non-status Indigenous. Three participants reported mental health diagnoses, and no participants identified as having a disability. Two participants were first-generation students, meaning none of their parents or grandparents completed university degrees. Finally, five participants indicated that they transferred into their academic program from another degree.

Table 1. *Participant Identification and Associated Program of Study*

Participant ID	Degree Program	Preparing, On, or Completed Internship
001	Health Promotion	On Internship
002	Health Promotion	Completed Internship
003	Therapeutic Recreation	Completed Internship
004	Therapeutic Recreation	Preparing
005	Health Promotion	Preparing
006	Therapeutic Recreation	Completed Internship
007	Recreation Management	Completed Internship
008	Therapeutic Recreation	On Internship
009	Therapeutic Recreation	Completed Internship
010	Recreation Management	Completed Internship

4.2 Overview of Themes

I developed four themes to describe the experiences of participants in this study. The first theme, *Preparing for Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress*, covers the pre-internship process, highlighting its impact on mental health, including finding the right internship, feeling prepared, adapting to changes brought about by COVID-19, and managing self-imposed pressure. The second theme, *Empowered Interns: Achievement and Growth*, examines the sense of accomplishment from hands-on learning and completing challenging tasks. The third theme, *Navigating Role Transitions and Mental Health During Internship*, focuses on role clarity, work-life balance, and routine establishment, with an emphasis on the social and mental health impact of remote work. Finally, the fourth theme, *The Cost of Experience: Mental Health Challenges in Unpaid Internships*, addresses financial stress from unpaid internships, including affording necessities, balancing additional employment, and the importance of compensation in alleviating financial burdens and promoting better mental health.

4.3 Theme 1: Preparing for Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress

This theme explores the importance of pre-internship preparation on participants' mental health, highlighting how perceived readiness for internship can impact anxiety and stress levels. Participants emphasized the significance of choosing the right internship and shared that feeling unprepared led to nervousness and stress, which could have been mitigated with better preparation. Further, participants shared their experiences with internships that had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that the preparation process was hindered due to restrictions associated with COVID-19. Participants expressed a range of anticipatory feelings, from excitement to anxiety, and often grappled with imposter syndrome while aspiring to make a positive impression.

Participants stressed the importance of choosing an internship that matched their expectations and needs, as misalignment of these factors could lead to heightened stress and anxiety, adversely affecting their mental wellbeing. Participant 005, who was preparing for their HPRO internship, described the stress of the selection process, recalling the uncertainty of reaching out to potential hosting agencies: “*[I was] blindly just kind of reaching out to people and hoping for the best. Like we didn't really know what we were doing*”. Two participants discussed reconsidering their internship plans when their original plans did not meet their expectations. Both Participant 001 (HPRO) and Participant 008 (TR) deferred their internships by one year, recognizing that their initial internships did not align with their preferences. Participant 001 explained: “*when I applied, I didn't get [my preferred agency], so I said ‘okay, you know what? I'm gonna push it off’ and I waited*”, eventually securing their desired agency one year later. Participant 008 described the challenging experience they had at their first agency, which opted them to delay their internship by one year:

I tried an internship a year ago at [agency]. I really didn't like it and knew that I wouldn't, but you know, my plan fell through. And then decided, ‘no, I'm gonna leave. I'm gonna find something that's more what I want. More what I think aligns with my future’.

The experiences shared by Participants 001 and 008 remark the importance of selecting an internship that aligns with interns’ interests and wellbeing, highlighting that factors such as alignment with career goals and personal preferences, were fundamental in the internship selection process.

Participants expressed that feeling unprepared for their internship led to

heightened anxiety and stress, contributing to mental health challenges. Participant 003, who recently completed their TR internship, discussed feeling like the skills they learned in academic courses did not prepare them enough: “*I felt like very stressed and very frazzled and was like, ‘I don't know what I'm doing’ [...] ‘I didn't learn this’*”, suggesting that more preparation for applying classroom knowledge to real life settings would have been helpful. Another aspect of feeling unprepared was discussed by Participant 001, who shared that the involvement from their professor during internship was more hands off than they expected:

[I would have liked] more of a preparation to let people know that it is gonna be more hands off from the professor side because that was something that was really daunting to me. I'm so used to [...] having the professor be there 24/7, right. So definitely a big change that I don't think I was really aware about.

These perspectives highlight the role that pre-internship preparation plays in the mental health experiences of participants and re-iterate the importance of interns feeling confident in their skills and expectations before internship.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a factor that impacted the internship preparation period, particularly for TR participants, exacerbating feelings of anxiety and unpreparedness, thereby negatively impacting their mental health. The sudden shift to an online environment meant that the internship preparation process differed for participants in my study compared to internships that occurred before the pandemic (McIver & Murphy, 2021). Notably, TR participants faced unique difficulties due to the clinical nature of their internships, which typically required in-person engagement. Participant 009, for example, discussed the challenge of carrying out their clinical-based TR

internship during COVID-19 with less preparation than expected: *“I felt ready in my knowledge, but the actual experience part took a bit of time to get used to because we just didn't get that experience in the last two years”*, noting that a portion of their internship preparation was hindered because of impacts due to COVID-19. Participant 003 also discussed how their TR internship preparation was different than expected because of the pandemic:

[...] a lot of my courses were supposed to have a placement component built in, which I was unable to do because of COVID. [...] while we had a lot of theory, [...] I didn't have a lot of chance to put it into practice before coming to internship.

The accounts shared by Participants 009 and 003 underscore the mental health impact of COVID-19 on the pre-internship preparation period.

In addition to these challenges, participants reported positive mental health experiences leading up to their internships, characterized by feelings of excitement and anticipation. For instance, Participant 004, who was preparing for their TR internship, expressed a high level of enthusiasm: *“I am so excited. I am really looking forward to it.”* Similarly, Participant 005 was eager to join the team at their HPRO internship agency: *“I've had meetings with some other people in the team as well and they've just been very welcoming and supportive.”* Participant 010 noted that their RM internship signified the end of their degree program, which evoked feelings of excitement: *“[it was] exciting also in the regard that like I was getting so close to being done my degree at that point.”* These accounts highlight how anticipation and the prospect of joining a supportive team contributed to positive mental health experiences before internship.

Participants expressed a sense of pressure to make a positive impression during their internship, which often led to self-imposed stress and anxiety. Participant 001 conveyed feeling nervous leading up to their HPRO internship placement, *“I wanna make a good impression. I didn't wanna like mess up my chances”*. Participant 007 described self-imposed pressure to set a good impression in their RM internship, saying, *“I wanna make sure that I have a, you know, a good reputation. I wanna make sure that they know I've got my good work ethic and I'm not, you know, slacking off”*. These sentiments reflect participants' aspirations to excel in their roles by creating a positive first impression. Imposter syndrome, or feeling inadequate, like a fraud (Rivera et al., 2021), was evident in comments from Participant 003: *“can I do this? Am I good enough to do this?”*, regarding their readiness to apply academic knowledge to their TR internship. Participant 002 echoed similar worry, questioning *“maybe I'm not prepared content wise in this specific area [...] will I have enough specific knowledge on this topic?”*, revealing that their HPRO internship preparation process prompted feelings of worry or self-doubt.

4.4 Theme 2: Empowered Interns: Achievement and Growth

Through interviews with participants about their internship experiences, positive mental health outcomes were identified. These outcomes include feelings of empowerment and a sense of pride from achieving internship goals. This theme examines how the application of classroom theory to real-world situations, the accomplishment of challenging tasks, and professional development during internships contributed to improved mental health experiences.

Internships provided opportunities to apply classroom theory to real-world situations, fostering growth and positive mental health among participants. Participant

002 described the excitement of applying classroom knowledge during their internship: *“I was really excited to get the opportunity to apply my health promotion knowledge”*.

Participant 007 emphasized the value of practical RM learning over traditional coursework: *“we were able to learn from people rather than just kind of learning from, you know, the coursework”*. Further, Participant 009 noted the development of practical TR skills relevant to future roles, stating:

I got to learn a lot about patience and just how would you deal with some of the more challenging cases that you might find. How to think outside the box when the usual programming and the usual stuff that you would do throughout the day doesn't work with everybody, [and] how you adapt to that.

The perspectives of Participants 002, 007, and 009 highlight the value in applying theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world settings, and the positive mental health experiences associated with this application of knowledge, evoking feelings of growth and self-efficacy among participants.

Participants also reported a sense of accomplishment and enhanced mental health when completing challenging tasks during their internships. Participant 002 described the rewarding experience of presenting their final HPRO project: *“the presentation of my [project] was just back to the people at my agency, which was good and still nice to feel like I'm actually presenting them with a product that they can use”*. Participant 007 echoed this sentiment, recounting the satisfaction of seeing their RM project come to life:

[The project] specifically has like been the one thing I truly loved about it. [...] you work hard for three months and then at the end of the three months, boom, you get to see your full project like take place right in front of your eyes.

These accounts highlight how the transition from theoretical to practical learning and the successful completion of daunting or challenging tasks contributed to positive mental health experiences during internships.

Professional development experiences on internship helped interns feel better equipped to enter the workforce after their studies, reducing nervousness about future job prospects. Participant 008 highlighted feeling less nervous to seek out future TR jobs after their internship: *“I’m not having necessarily like academic learning experiences, but I feel better prepared and less nervous to transition into workplaces”*. Further speaking to internship preparing them for a career after their degree program, Participant 010 discussed a specific skill they gained while on their RM internship, and how this skill has transferred over to jobs after graduating: *“[...] when I was applying for jobs, [skill] was something I put on [my resume] [...] that’s definitely something that I did through my internship that has continued on in my life”*. Supporting these sentiments, Participant 002 reflected positively on engaging in professional development on their HPRO internship, highlighting that they felt better prepared to apply for positions in the future: *“I gained a lot [of experience] and it gave me a lot to talk about, not only in my [academic] assignments, which is helpful, but also just in terms of thinking about what I want to do going forward”*. These perspectives from participants highlight the positive mental health experiences associated with acquiring skills that can be transferred into future jobs, leaving interns feeling empowered and equipped for future job prospects following their internship.

4.5 Theme 3: Navigating Role Transitions and Mental Health During Internship

Navigating role transitions in internship experiences has become increasingly

relevant, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in this study discussed various social transitions and challenges they encountered during their internships, whether remote or in-person. Two participants discussed feelings of social disconnection, particularly in remote internships where virtual interactions replaced face-to-face engagement, which negatively impacted their mental health. Establishing a healthy routine, balancing work with personal life, and prioritizing self-care were additional challenges faced by interns. In this study, 50% of participants who were currently completing or had recently completed an internship had a remote internship. The prevalence of remote internships during the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the significance of navigating role transitions and adjusting to new virtual work environments, especially in terms of intern mental health.

Participants discussed the transition from full-time academic studies to full-time internship, highlighting the adjustments required for role clarity and balance. Participant 001 described this adjustment as being challenging: *“finding that fun balance and understanding my role in the internship and where I sit, it’s probably one of my biggest challenges”*, which was an experience shared by Participant 002, who noted, *“I think adjusting to [full-time internship] was a bit of a challenge, especially with a remote job”*. When Participant 002 expressed finding the HPRO internship adjustment challenging, their supervisor encouraged them to prioritize work-life balance: *“my supervisor was super open about [my adjustment being challenging] and she was like, I don't expect you to be at your computer all day, which I really appreciated”*. Participant 003’s supervisor was also supportive in prioritizing work-life balance when Participant 003 felt the need to exceed their required hours to get work done:

Something that [internship supervisor] told me that has stuck with me is she would say '[participant], did anybody die today or if anybody gonna die? No. Has anybody died, has anybody got seriously injured or is anybody gonna get seriously injured? No. Then it doesn't matter, and we'll worry about it another time'.

Participant 006 also discussed feeling supported by their internship coordinator, which helped with the transition to their internship, noting “*my internship coordinator [...] made sure we were prepared, that we had all the resources that we needed to get prepared*”. These experiences highlight the importance of achieving role clarity and maintaining work-life balance during the transition from academic settings to full-time internships, as well as strategies that can support this adjustment.

Participants discussed the challenges of establishing a daily routine during their internships. Participant 002 described the difficulty of staying focused while working remotely and suggested that a structured routine might help mitigate distractions:

I need to maybe be in a bit of a stricter routine with myself here in terms of like [...] I'm going to do the morning check-in meeting and then I'm having these tasks that I do and then I'm going for a lunch break and I'm going to take a screen break during lunch.

Participant 001 echoed these sentiments, stating: “*I find too though, same with like online schooling, staying focused is kind of hard because you know my bed's right there like you know, I can just go do whatever I want in my house*”. Participant 009's supervisor recognized the challenge of balancing a TR internship and academic work, offering specific time each week to focus on school tasks: “*so it was like, okay, pick a day this*

week where you're not gonna do any [internship tasks], you're just working on your schoolwork". Participant 009 felt that this arrangement improved both their work-life balance and productivity, therefor improving their mental health during internship: *"I felt like I just had so much time during the week that [...] I'd really get to enjoy my time off which is really nice because then I'd go to my internship actually awake and ready to be there".* Participant 010 also spoke to establishing a daily routine, an experience that was new for them after being a full-time student for so long: *"I went on my internship [...] I didn't have school on top of that, [...] I got home from work and was like, what do I do now? I don't know what free time is".* The experiences of Participants 001, 002, 009, and 010 underscore the adjustment interns face in establishing a structured work routine while on internship and emphasized the importance of such a routine for improved mental health and productivity.

Missing out on social connections was an aspect of remote internships that participants highlighted to be mentally challenging and elicited feelings of disconnection. When discussing their experience in a hybrid HPRO internship, Participant 002 noted that *"I maybe would have preferred a little more in person [...] it was more like the social component that you miss out on and less of actually the physical location",* adding that connecting with team members was trickier to do online versus in-person. Further supporting the experiences shared by Participant 002, Participant 003 discussed the value of social connection during the remote parts of their TR internship, indicating that connecting with their colleagues following virtual sessions was important to them: *"connection is super important when you're working doing your internship".* The accounts from Participants 002 and 003 highlight the sense of disconnection experienced

during remote internships, as well as the importance of maintaining connections with colleagues, which is significant for understanding and addressing interns' mental health experiences.

4.6 Theme 4: The Cost of Experience: Mental Health Challenges in Unpaid Internships

Internship compensation and its impact on mental health were key discussion points among participants. Internships, defined as 14-16-week full-time placements combining work experience and academic assignments, require students to pay full-time tuition and earn 15 credit hours, or the equivalent of five academic courses. Internships serve as a learning opportunity for students, and the university does not require students to be paid in addition to receiving academic credit. Individual agencies may have internal policies regarding intern compensation, but this is not mandated by the university. In my study, none of the participants were paid a full-time salary; only two received minimal stipends or bursaries. Despite receiving academic credit, students often face substantial financial challenges due to the lack of mandated compensation.

Participants expressed concerns about the financial implications of unpaid internships. Participant 006 (TR) worried about managing expenses without compensation: *"I'm doing a full-time internship with no pay; I was a little bit worried"*. Similarly, Participant 004 (TR), focused on strict financial planning while preparing for their internship: *"we don't get paid for internship, so [I'm] making sure that I'm kind of being really smart about what money I'm spending right now"*. These perspectives underscore the financial uncertainty and strategic budgeting required during unpaid internships.

Affording basic life necessities during unpaid internships proved to be a stressful experience for participants. Participant 001 discussed their experience trying to make ends meet, feeling like they needed to have two jobs on top of their HPRO internship to afford necessities: *“it makes my life a little bit harder [...] it’s very stressful in the sense where I’m kind of fighting to make rent and fighting to buy food”*. Further speaking to juggling life expenses and unpaid internships, Participant 009 questioned *“how are people keeping their apartments and able to live?”*, referring to unpaid interns in less stable financial positions than they were. Echoing the thoughts shared by Participants 001 and 009, Participant 003 described the cost of full-time tuition as a burdensome expense, *“financially, [...] very few people are in a position to be able to afford bills and life [...] even just not working for four months [and] having to pay for the course. It was a struggle”*. These instances provide evidence of the challenge in affording basic life necessities while on an unpaid internship, and how financial hardships can impact mental health experiences of interns.

Participants discussed the challenge of balancing other employment with their internship, indicating that juggling both responsibilities was mentally taxing. If students choose to engage in employment on top of their internship, they must be able to keep up with their internship responsibilities, which limits their time availability and scheduling flexibility. While preparing for their TR internship, Participant 004 noted the stress they were anticipating without the financial support of additional employment: *“you can’t even like pick up shifts, cause you’re gonna be working a full-time [internship]. So, it’s gonna be really difficult”*. Further highlighting this challenge, Participant 003 expressed that they secured additional employment because working without pay for the 16-week

TR internship wasn't feasible for covering their living expenses: "*I still worked. I was just like, hey, [internship coordinator], I'm still gonna do this because I have rent to pay.*" The experiences shared by Participants 004 and 003 underscore the pressure felt by interns to live without pay for 16 weeks, or to seek additional employment to ease financial strain during their internship.

While more than half of participants discussed the anxiety associated with balancing life costs without receiving internship payment, other participants spoke to the experience of giving up paid employment to carry out their unpaid internship position. Participant 006 discussed their experience of giving up their paid employment to fulfill their TR internship requirements, noting that it elicited feelings of worry, "*I had to tell my supervisor that I'm going to be on internship, I won't have capacity to work [...] that was like my main income*". A similar experience was shared by Participant 004, who gave up long-term employment for their TR internship: "*I've been working since I was 16 [...], even through school I've been working nonstop. It's going to be really hard, and you have to prioritize money [...] it's really my biggest negative with the internship*". Financial support was a key discussion point among participants, who noted the mental health challenges associated with relying on others for financial support during internship.

Dependency on external financial support led to feelings of guilt for participants in this study. Participant 009 noted impacts on their mental health when they had to rely on their significant other to provide for the household during their internship:

[...] that was a huge stressor because all of a sudden, my [significant other] has to be paying for everything for four months. [Significant other] has to pay our

rent. [Significant other] has to pay our food, and I was fully dependent on [significant other]. [...] I felt a lot of guilt and a lot of stress when it came to that.

The experience of Participant 009 speaks to the feelings of guilt that come with an unpaid internship and relying on someone else for financial support during that time. While receiving external support from others can be helpful, participants discussed feeling guilty for depending on loved ones to take over some of their financial responsibilities. Participant 006 recognized the privilege that came with external financial support, noting that this is an option that is not available to all unpaid interns: “*my parents kind of helped me out with rent [...] I know that [...] some students didn’t have the privilege that I had of having my rent paid*”. This account by Participant 006 provides evidence of the mental health impacts associated with unpaid internships and relying on others for financial support, reiterating the sentiments of guilt that were mentioned by Participant 009.

While some internships offered minimal compensation, such as one-time stipends or bursaries, this support was generally insufficient to cover the full range of expenses interns faced. Participant 008 discussed a bursary option available to interns in certain areas, highlighting its partial relief: “*there’s like a bursary program for interns who are in rural areas [...] part of why I chose that placement was because I would get that bursary that would like significantly contribute to tuition*”. This indicates that although some financial aid existed, it was often limited to specific circumstances and did not fully address the broader financial needs of all interns. Similarly, Participant 010 mentioned receiving a stipend unexpectedly, which, although helpful, was not guaranteed or sufficient: “*I had no idea up until [...] the beginning of March, I think that’s when I finally figured out that like, yes, I was gonna get paid something. I was like ‘okay*

great’’. This unpredictability and limited scope of compensation underscore participants’ sentiments that any form of financial support, while appreciated, was generally inadequate to meet their needs. These experiences highlight that minimal compensation, though beneficial, often fell short of alleviating the overall financial burden on interns.

All participants expressed a strong preference for paid internships, believing that compensation would alleviate the stress associated with their roles. Participant 006 voiced this desire, stating: *“I’m not expecting like the full salary paid. But I think it would have been nice to have like an honoraria or even minimum wage, but not having that was definitely the component that worried me the most”*. This statement reflects a common sentiment among participants who felt that even modest compensation could provide substantial relief from financial worries. Similarly, Participant 009 emphasized the need for compensation to prevent negative mental health impacts:

I believe that internships need to be paid because it's a job. Like it was a full-time job. That was a huge stressor, a huge burden as well was the fact that you have to try and manage doing an internship and you still have a life to live outside of it.

This participant’s experience underscores the dual pressures of managing an internship and personal life, highlighting how unpaid internships can exacerbate financial stress and impact mental wellbeing. Collectively, these views suggest that paid internships could mitigate the mental health challenges faced by interns by reducing financial strain and providing a more balanced life experience.

4.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the four themes exploring the mental health experiences of undergraduate health and leisure interns. The first theme, *Preparing for*

Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress, explored pre-internship challenges and anticipations and their impact on wellbeing. The second theme, *Empowered Interns: Achievement and Growth*, discussed the satisfaction from practical learning experiences and overcoming challenges. The third theme, *Navigating Role Transitions and Mental Health During Internship*, explored role adjustments and the impact of remote work on mental health. The final theme, *The Cost of Experience: Mental Health Challenges in Unpaid Internships*, examined financial concerns and the importance of compensation for intern mental health. These themes highlight various factors influencing the mental health experiences of interns, addressing this study's research purpose and objectives.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research explored mental health experiences as they related to internship for post-secondary students in undergraduate health and leisure programs. The internship programs explored included HPRO, RM, and TR. Through individual interviews with 10 participants, I addressed the research purpose and objectives through the development of four themes. Using RTA, guided by Braun and Clarke (2022), each theme explores factors that influence mental health experiences of participants in preparing for and carrying out internships. Within this discussion chapter, I contextualize and interpret the findings of this study using relevant literature. This chapter will also include a discussion about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on internships. Then, the significance and implications of my findings will be presented, highlighting recommendations provided by participants. Finally, the project's strengths and limitations will be discussed with recommendations for future research.

5.1 Contextualizing the Findings

The study findings were presented as four themes. In the first theme, *Preparing for Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress*, participants discussed the mental health experiences associated with the preparation period before internship. The second theme, *Empowered Interns: Achievement and Growth*, highlighted the positive experiences shared by participants, in which they felt empowered through professional development. The third theme, *Navigating Role Transitions and Mental Health During Internship*, explored participant descriptions about their experiences with the adjustment from the academic to the internship setting, and how role transitions impact mental health experiences. Finally, the fourth theme, *The Cost of Experience: Mental Health*

Challenges in Unpaid Internships, presented participant discussions about the challenges associated with unpaid internship opportunities. Further analyses of the findings are described by each theme below.

5.1.1 Preparing for Internship: Balancing Excitement and Stress

In this section, I explore the impact of pre-internship preparation on interns' excitement and stress, detailing the structures of the HPRO, RM, and TR internship programs. In this section, I will also emphasize the importance of aligning internship choices with career goals and preferences, highlighting the role of clear communication with hosting agencies. Further, this section considers how personality attributes can influence the selection process and intern stress, integrating insights from previous research to propose health promotion strategies for stress mitigation before and during internship.

Findings from my study indicate that securing an internship that was the right fit was important to participants, noting that the internship should align with intern preferences and career goals. Kim and Coco-Ripp (2024) discussed finding the right fit for TR internships, suggesting that agencies who presented clear expectations and clear communication to prospective interns tended to have improved internship experiences compared to unclear expectations before internship. Participants in my study echoed the findings by Kim and Coco-Ripp (2024), suggesting more clarity in communication and expectations in the internship selection process might have eased some stress. While the research by Fowler-Holdham et al. (2022) supports the idea that clear role expectations improve the internship experience, my study expands on this by providing specific insights into how interns' preferences and career goals influence their perceptions of fit.

Additionally, this study explores the nuanced ways in which clarity in communication impacts the overall stress levels associated with the internship preparation process. This contributes new understanding by linking these factors directly to both the selection process and the internship experience, offering practical recommendations for improving internship programs beyond what has been previously documented.

The preparation process for internships plays an important role in shaping intern experiences and warrants further discussion. The three internship programs in this study (HPRO, RM, TR) had similar preparation elements. The TR program requires students to meet criteria for certification and licensing with the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC). All internship programs provide students with examples of past internships and information about potential hosting agencies, allowing interns to choose their preferred agency based on availability, or seek out hosting agencies independently. All participants completed their internship in the last semester of their degree program. Some preparation tasks for students before internship include providing first aid and CPR certification, obtaining a criminal record check, and attending informational meetings. Additionally, there was assigned coursework required for all interns before and during their internships that required time management and organizational skills.

Selecting and securing an internship was a source of stress for participants, influenced by various approaches and environmental factors. Participants used resources such as Brightspace (the university's learning management system), consultation with professors, and direct outreach to hosting agencies to search for and secure their internships, helping to mitigate stress during this process. According to Kim and Coco-

Ripp (2024), personality attributes like self-motivation, adaptability, and a positive attitude led to improved internship search processes and experiences. Environmental and systemic factors, such as access to resources, clear organizational guidelines, and positive mentorship, play a significant role in shaping intern experiences (Ardiles, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2020; Lin & Chen, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021). Supportive organizational cultures that foster positive mentorship and provide clear guidelines can mitigate stress and better prepare interns. This aligns with health promotion strategies that emphasize systemic support and resource accessibility. By integrating these findings into the wider context of health promotion, my study highlights the importance of creating structured, supportive environments that align with effective strategies outlined by existing research (Craig & Sable, 2011; Diver, 2021; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024).

Existing literature indicates that personality attributes, in addition to environmental and systemic factors, can influence the internship selection experience (Craig & Sable, 2011; Grehan et al., 2011; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin & Chen, 2022). Kim and Coco-Ripp (2024) found that attributes such as self-motivation, adaptability, and a positive attitude contribute to a more successful internship search, selection process, and overall positive experiences. Participants in my study who found the selection process stressful might have had lower self-motivation or autonomy, potentially leading to negative mental health experiences (Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin & Chen, 2022; McHugh, 2017; Zhou et al., 2021). These personality attributes could also influence feelings of unpreparedness for internships (Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin & Chen, 2022).

Participants in this study experienced stress and anxiety when they felt

unprepared for their internships. Preparation, as defined by my study's participants, involved clarity about roles and responsibilities and the ability to apply academic learning to practical settings. However, there is a crucial distinction between formal preparation and perceived readiness. Formal preparation involved completing tangible tasks such as updating resumes, meeting with the internship coordinator, and securing a hosting agency. Perceived readiness, on the other hand, is subjective and reflects how interns feel, which may not align with their level of formal preparation. Previous research highlights that perceived readiness can vary based on individual personality attributes, emphasizing its subjective nature (Craig & Sable, 2011; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Lin and Chen, 2022; McHugh, 2017).

Even when all formal pre-internship preparation tasks are completed, an intern may still feel unready, indicating that preparation and readiness are distinct experiences. While thorough formal preparation can contribute to perceived readiness, it does not guarantee it. My study adds to the existing literature by highlighting the diverse experiences of health and leisure interns and emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems. These systems should ensure clear communication and guidance during the preparation phase, promoting positive mental health outcomes for interns, regardless of their perceived readiness or personality traits.

Participants emphasized the importance of role clarity during the internship preparation period. Interns who were well-informed about their responsibilities and expectations before starting their internships tended to report positive experiences, aligning with findings from (Diver, 2021). For instance, one participant highlighted how having a detailed role description and clear expectations boosted their confidence and

eased their nerves to engage more effectively in their internship. In contrast, those who felt uncertain about their roles or who perceived themselves as unprepared experienced higher levels of imposter syndrome and anxiety. This contrast illustrates how essential role clarity is for mitigating stress and enhancing overall internship satisfaction. My study adds to the literature by providing specific examples of how role clarity affects interns' mental health and performance, highlighting the need for structured preparation support to foster positive internship experiences.

Imposter syndrome was a common discussion point among four participants in the current study. Imposter syndrome, as defined by Rivera et al. (2021), is the “internalized feeling of self-doubt and not belonging in a particular group that can lead to the fear of being discovered as a fraud” (p. 2). Imposter syndrome contributed to lower self-efficacy and negative emotions leading up to internships (Lin & Chen, 2022; Ramsey & Spencer, 2019; Rivera et al., 2021). For example, participants in this study expressed feeling inadequate for internship tasks or felt they had to overperform to prove their worth to supervisors. Participants who experienced imposter syndrome described the additional stress of trying to make a good impression, even when it was not expected by their hosting agency. Imposter syndrome can be related to personality attributes (Rivera et al., 2021), which might provide context as to why some participants experienced imposter syndrome and others did not. While some participants described pre-internship preparation as evoking negative mental health experiences, others perceived the learning opportunities during their internships as empowering.

5.1.2 Empowered Interns: Achievement and Growth

In this section, I examine participants' empowerment through acquiring

transferrable skills during internships, supported by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). This section discusses the role of intentional reflection in fostering personal and professional growth. Additionally, I explore how overcoming challenging tasks can enhance feelings of achievement and self-efficacy, contributing to positive mental health experiences.

The notion of hands-on learning or learning by doing was discussed in McCarthy's (2016) article which focused on ELT, a theory initially introduced in Kolb's (1984) research. ELT suggests that transformative learning comes from the opportunity to take learned knowledge from a classroom setting and apply it to a real-world scenario (McCarthy, 2016). At their core, the goal of internships is to offer students experiential learning opportunities (Gilbert et al., 2014; McCarthy, 2016; Trager, 2020; Werkmeister, 2023). Participants in the current study described their experiential learning experiences through positive reflections, noting that they valued being able to engage in practical learning rather than traditional coursework. Further supporting the existing literature in this area (Diver, 2021; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; McCarthy, 2016), participants described positive mental health experiences like feelings of growth and self-efficacy when they reflected on engaging in experiential learning.

Participants in my study described instances during their internships that made them feel empowered, such as applying classroom theory to real-world settings. This sense of empowerment stemmed from realizing that their academic learning had practical, tangible applications, boosting self-confidence and self-efficacy. These positive mental health experiences described by participants underscore the empowering nature of experiential learning (McCarthy, 2016). Similarly, Fowler-Holdham et al. (2022)

explained that acquiring new professional skills can increase confidence and competence in applying internship experiences to future workplaces. My study highlights the critical role of professional development opportunities in reducing anxiety about future job prospects and evoking pride among interns, reinforcing the work of Gilbert et al. (2014). To further evoke the principles of ELT (Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 2016), the internships explored in this study incorporated structured reflection assignments, where interns could critically assess their experiences and connect them to theoretical knowledge.

Reflection was a key point that stood out through my interpretation and analysis. My study provided participants the opportunity to intentionally reflect on their experience, by asking questions about their learning and professional development. Participants described learning more about themselves through their internship experience. One described learning about patience, thinking outside of the box, and learning to adapt when situations unfolded differently than they anticipated. Previous literature by Gallant et al. (2017) and Bhuwandeep (2022) indicated that reflection is an important aspect of experiential learning, and personal development for interns. All internship programs included in this study had bi-weekly reflection reports, goal setting at the beginning of internship that was revisited, and a reflection assignment at the end of the internship as required course assignments. These opportunities for reflection can prompt interns to engage in deeper learning and professional development by intentionally reflecting on various aspects of their internship experiences (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Eden, 2014; Stirling et al., 2017).

Participants had mixed feelings about the reflection assignments in their internship course. Some found these tasks encouraged professional development,

allowing them to deepen their understanding and integration of their experiences. Others, however, perceived the required coursework as redundant or merely a chore, detracting from their practical engagement. Despite these differing perspectives, structured reflection, including bi-weekly reporting and end-of-internship reflection, aids interns in reframing stressful situations and intentionally considering their mental health experiences (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Eden, 2014). My study adds to the existing body of literature by demonstrating how structured reflection can support deeper learning and professional growth (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Eden, 2014; Stirling et al., 2017), even when it is sometimes viewed as an additional burden for participants.

Among discussions of positive mental health experiences on internship, participants experienced feelings of achievement when accomplishing tasks they once viewed as daunting. Participants in this study described feeling proud of their accomplishments when they got to check a challenging task off their to-do list, such as the final internship project or program facilitation. Previous research indicated that interns who approached challenging tasks with intentional effort tended to be resilient, which led to increased self-efficacy and positive mental health experiences (Huang et al., 2023; Lin & Chen, 2022; Tan et al., 2023). Participants in the current study described feeling proud and accomplished after tackling a task they perceived as challenging, which supports findings from previous research (Lin & Chen, 2022; Tan et al., 2023). Additionally, other factors contributed to self-efficacy, such as receiving positive feedback from supervisors, engaging in collaborative projects, and successfully applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations. For example, participants who discussed feeling proud of themselves after completing their final internship assignment described

feelings that could be associated with increased self-efficacy and confidence compared to when they started their internship. These experiences collectively contributed to a stronger sense of self-efficacy, ultimately enhancing their mental health experiences during internship.

5.1.3 Navigating Role Transitions and Mental Health During Internship

This theme examines the challenges and mental health impacts of transitioning from university life to full-time internships. In this section, I will address the difficulties participants encountered in understanding their roles and responsibilities, adjusting to a full-time schedule (particularly for participants in remote internships), and maintaining work-life balance. Additionally, I will discuss the influence of supervisor relationships, emphasizing the value of support, encouragement, and genuine interest in professional development.

Transitioning from a flexible university class schedule to the demands of a full-time internship proved challenging for participants. Participants in this study expressed uncertainty about their specific responsibilities as interns. For instance, one participant noted discrepancies between content they learned in their courses compared to situations encountered during their clinical internship. This participant anticipated applying classroom knowledge in certain scenarios but found the actual experiences differed significantly, leading to stress, anxiety, and a sense of unpreparedness. As previously discussed, participants felt unprepared due to factors such as a lack of role clarity and feeling like their academic knowledge was not adequate for real-world scenarios. Existing research underscores the mental health impact of unclear role expectations among interns (Diver, 2021; Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024),

highlighting the need for clearer, more detailed descriptions of internship expectations and responsibilities. Enhancing pre-internship orientations to include detailed role outlines and scenario-based training could better equip interns for the challenges they may face, fostering confidence and readiness in real-world settings.

Participants in remote internships faced challenges adjusting from student to intern roles, particularly in adapting to new schedules and virtual team dynamics. These findings align with Tan et al. (2023), who identified task availability, resource access, and supervisor support as crucial factors affecting intern adjustment. Unlike Diver's (2021) findings which linked a lack of motivation to adjustment difficulties, participants in this study did not discuss issues with motivation. Instead, participants emphasized the strain of social disconnection and isolation, echoing Becker et al.'s (2022) findings on work-related loneliness in remote settings. This discrepancy may be due to the unique context of the internships in this study, which may have offered more social support and structure compared to the population in Diver's (2021) study. Additionally, the remote work setting highlighted by Becker et al. (2022) may have intensified feelings of isolation, overshadowing issues related to motivation.

My study highlights the importance of a healthy work-life balance to mitigate negative mental health experiences, underscoring the need for structured support systems, like peer mentorship or more frequent check-ins with their program coordinator, to help remote interns navigate their roles effectively. This study contributes to the existing literature (Becker et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2023) by emphasizing the specific challenges of remote internships and the critical role of social connection and support. Participants in this study who carried out remote internships discussed implementing work-life balance

to prevent or reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Participants in this study highlighted the importance of maintaining work-life balance during their internships. Participants shared various strategies such as establishing a structured daily routine, logging off at specific times, changing locations for breaks, engaging in physical activity, and socially connecting with peers, all of which contributed to their wellbeing. Supervisors played a crucial role in this by advising against exceeding internship hours, encouraging breaks, and allocating time for academic tasks. Supervisors modeled positive work-life balance by discouraging overtime, understanding balance challenges, and promoting good routines. These practical approaches are essential for fostering a healthy work-life balance and offer actionable recommendations to enhance intern support and wellbeing (Becker et al., 2022; Lin & Chen, 2022).

Participants in this study expressed appreciation for their supervisors. For some participants, getting to work with their supervisor was the part of internship for which they were most excited. This finding aligns with Baker and Fitzpatrick's (2022) research, which emphasizes the positive impact of supportive and development-oriented supervisor relationships on internship experiences. The current study extends existing literature (Baker & Fitzpatrick, 2022) by underscoring how participants felt consistently supported and encouraged by their internship program coordinators, significantly enhancing their overall internship satisfaction and evoking positive emotions throughout the experience. Echoing and extending this literature, the current study underscores how participants felt consistently supported and encouraged by their internship program coordinators, which significantly enhanced their overall internship satisfaction and evoked positive emotions

throughout the internship experience.

5.1.4 The Cost of Experience: Mental Health Challenges in Unpaid Internships

This section explores the financial and mental health challenges of unpaid internships, emphasizing participants' experiences of financial strain and emotional stress. In this section, I will discuss ethical and practical dilemmas surrounding intern compensation, addressing tensions between acknowledging interns' contributions and upholding professional standards. Finally, this section will distinguish between co-op and internship programs, focusing on how each defines compensation and supports student financial needs.

Participants in this study expressed negative experiences and emotions associated with unpaid internships. As discussed in previous literature, the financial strain experienced by students in unpaid internships is a significant concern, with complex implications for their mental health (McTorry, 2014; Rogers et al., 2021). In my study, eight out of ten participants undertook unpaid internships, while the other two participants received minimal stipends (with a maximum value of \$2400 in the form of a tuition rebate). This imbalance highlights a relevant issue in health and leisure internship programs, which often operate within the constraints of government budgets that limit their ability to provide compensation comparable to full-time employees (Fowler- Holdham et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2021). Many of the internship hosting agencies are integrated within public health systems, where financial resources are tightly controlled and primarily allocated for certain professionals.

Payment for students in internship roles they are not fully certified for or prepared to handle introduces both practical and ethical challenges. In clinical settings, for

instance, budgets can be limited, and interns are generally seen as learners rather than full contributors to the workforce (Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022). This distinction raises ethical questions about how to fairly compensate interns without undermining the authority and experience of certified professionals. However, the absence of compensation can further contribute to financial stress, leading to adverse mental health outcomes (McTorry, 2014). Findings from the current study resonate with findings from West and Castro (2023), who noted that guaranteed income can significantly reduce financial, emotional, and psychological distress. Participants in this study strongly advocated for paid internships, emphasizing that compensation, even if not equivalent to a full salary, is crucial for mitigating financial stress and enhancing their overall mental wellbeing. This suggests that programs that integrate opportunities for payment might address ethical concerns while also supporting interns' mental health, thereby contributing to a more sustainable internship model compared to unpaid internships.

Given that the university may not mandate payment for internships, there are several alternative strategies to consider. Offering a part-time option could provide interns with the flexibility to balance work and other responsibilities, potentially making internships more accessible. Another approach could be to explore alternative forms of support, such as providing stipends or covering specific expenses like travel or materials, to alleviate financial pressures (McTorry, 2014; Rogers et al., 2021). Recognizing the distinctions between co-op programs, which integrate paid work experience as a mandatory part of academic programs (Rogers et al., 2021), and internships, which typically offer course credit without guaranteed payment (West & Castro, 2023), can help in developing more equitable internship models. Canada's federal labour standards

support intern compensation options like stipends or expense reimbursements (Government of Canada, 2023a), understanding the need for consistent compensation policies (McTorry, 2014). My study also highlights pandemic-related challenges impacting internship preparation and execution, echoing broader societal impacts on student work experiences (Bhuwandeep, 2022; Werkmeister, 2023).

5.2 Impacts of COVID-19: On Internships and Beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted internship experiences, affecting everything from pre-internship preparation to the settings in which internships occur (McIver & Murphy, 2021; Werkmeister, 2023). In this study, one participant completed a fully remote internship, while three completed hybrid internships, which combined virtual and in-person elements. One participant, who completed an in-person TR internship, discussed feeling like the virtual learning environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted their pre-internship preparation. They described being academically prepared but missing out on hands-on opportunities, like volunteering or job shadowing before starting their internship.

While TR participants expressed concerns about their preparation, it is important to consider whether HPRO or RM participants experienced similar disruptions. In my study, all RM and TR participants carried out internships that were either fully in-person or had limited virtual elements, whereas all HPRO participants carried out primarily online internships. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to a shift in how internships were conducted, with many moving to virtual settings to continue despite in-person restrictions (McIver & Murphy, 2021; Werkmeister, 2023).

Though virtual internships allowed for continuity, they also presented challenges

such as professional isolation and unproductive work behaviours (Becker et al., 2022), experiences that align with participant reflections from the current study. Participants in this study reflected on their remote internships, noting that they felt socially disconnected and found it challenging to establish a healthy routine and work-life balance. Findings from my study support previous research by Becker et al. (2022), which indicated that remote interns tended to experience higher rates of loneliness and lower work-life balance. Patil and Sharma (2022) found that students in remote internships experienced more stress and felt pressure to exert extra effort to be recognized by their peers or supervisors. Previous research (Patil & Sharma, 2022; Teng et al., 2021) also noted that remote interns can experience social isolation when communicating only through virtual channels. This sense of isolation was apparent in the current study, where remote interns discussed the challenge of connecting with colleagues in a strictly virtual environment, noting that it made them feel stressed and frustrated.

Reflecting on the pandemic context, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic not only altered internships logistically but also heightened mental health pressures for interns. The sudden shift in 2020 to virtual and hybrid internships required the university, hosting agencies, and students to rapidly adapt to new modes of working and learning, often with limited resources and supports (McIver & Murphy, 2022). This context magnified pre-existing challenges, such as financial stress and mental health struggles, making them more acute. For example, the financial stress experienced by many during the pandemic, exacerbated by unpaid internships and the rising cost of living in Atlantic Canada, likely contributed to the stress and anxiety reported by participants (Beland et al., 2022; Bezgrebelna et al., 2021; Cooke, 2023). The financial insecurity brought on by

the COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing stressors for students, highlighting the need for better support systems during such crises.

Now, in 2024, many internships have returned to incorporating more in-person elements, with a growing preference for hybrid work arrangements (Gintova, 2024; Iogansen et al., 2024). Hybrid work is seen as beneficial for balancing work and life while providing flexibility (Gintova, 2024; Werkmeister, 2023). In-person interactions offer external motivation and a sense of connection, which can be lacking in remote settings (Werkmeister, 2023). The hybrid model may become the standard for future internships, combining the benefits of both virtual and in-person work (Gintova, 2024; Iogansen et al., 2024; Werkmeister, 2023; Wilson et al., 2023).

Hybrid internship opportunities were more popular than remote-only internships in the context of this research. Findings from my study can add to the literature regarding hybrid internship placements, providing reflections from participants who carried out their internship in a hybrid setting. As we continue to navigate a world living with COVID-19, hybrid working environments are becoming the new 'normal', extending to internships (Becker et al., 2022; Gintova, 2024; Iogansen et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2023). Wilson et al. (2023) found that hybrid internships can create meaningful experiences and support the development of necessary professional skills.

The societal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic extend beyond internships, affecting various aspects of life (Hamaideh et al., 2021). During its initial phases, the COVID-19 pandemic created heightened uncertainty in most people, influencing their professional, social, familial, and community interactions (Becker et al., 2022; Teng et al., 2021). The global enforcement of social distancing and the new norm of staying at

home disrupted lives significantly (Begolli, 2021). Beland and colleagues (2022) found a correlation between socioeconomic status and mental health, indicating that individuals with lower socioeconomic status tended to experience more negative mental health outcomes compared to those with higher socioeconomic status.

With the increased prevalence of hybrid work environments, it is essential to consider how these changes might impact mental health experiences reported by participants. Hybrid internships could potentially reduce financial strain by lowering commuting costs and allowing for more flexible scheduling, thereby enabling students to balance paid work and internship responsibilities more effectively. However, they may also introduce new challenges, such as feelings of isolation, difficulty accessing resources, and then need for technological support (Iogansen et al., 2024; Jenkins, 2023). Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure that hybrid internship models do not inadvertently exacerbate stress and anxiety. Institutions must develop comprehensive support systems that consider these factors to promote positive mental health outcomes for students in hybrid internship programs.

5.3 Significance and Implications

This section examines the significance and implications of the current study, highlighting its contributions to the limited literature on mental health experiences of undergraduate students in health and leisure internship programs. This section discusses the learning experiences of the researcher and participants, the potential benefits of the study for academic institutions and policymakers, and the critical issue of intern compensation. Additionally, this section reflects on the study's findings and methodology, providing insights into the diverse internship settings and their implications

for future research and practice. By addressing these impacts, this section underscores the study's significance and offers a foundation for supporting intern mental health and wellbeing.

There are notable implications for myself as the researcher in this study. Conducting this research allowed me to further my knowledge and understanding of intern mental health, develop qualitative research skills, and obtain a master's degree. Engaging with the reflections of undergraduate interns highlighted the importance of reflexivity in research. Initially surprised by the prevalence of in-person internships despite the COVID-19 pandemic, I explored how diverse health and leisure settings influenced the internship format, with some roles requiring in-person participation and others adapting to virtual or hybrid formats. My background in health promotion shaped my data interpretation, prompting me to continuously question my assumptions. This reflexive approach ensured a balanced representation of remote and in-person dynamics, aligning with literature suggesting hybrid work settings as a post-pandemic norm (Werkmeister, 2023; Wilson et al., 2023).

Moreover, by considering how the data collected at various stages of the internship; preparation, carrying out, and completed, were reflected throughout the analysis, I was able to capture the evolving nature of intern mental health. For instance, when participants discussed preparing for internship, responses highlighted a mix of excitement and anxiety as interns anticipated the challenges and new experiences ahead. As participants discussed their experiences on internship, the focus in interviews shifted to managing stress and adapting to new roles. Finally, in reflecting on the internships after they had been completed, participants provided insights into the lasting impact of

these experiences on their mental wellbeing and professional development, including feelings of achievement and growth. This dimension of analysis emphasized the dynamic process of mental health during internship, highlighting that these internal mental health is not static, but rather fluctuate in response to the varying demands and experiences at different stages, further supporting the two continua conceptualization of mental health by Westerhof and Keyes (2010).

Additionally, this study has potential implications for participants. By providing participants with the opportunity to intentionally reflect on their mental health during their internship experiences, this study may have empowered them or helped them process their experiences in a different light. Participants were able to use their reflections to articulate how various aspects of their internships affected their mental wellbeing, potentially fostering self-awareness and personal growth. It is important to note, however, that discussing negative experiences or mental health challenges might have been difficult for participants. Future research could explore how to better support students in navigating such reflections effectively.

This study contributes to the limited literature representing the mental health experiences of undergraduate students in health and leisure internship programs. Applying a health promotion perspective, participants were encouraged to reflect on their mental wellbeing throughout their internship. This research expands current knowledge by examining factors influencing internal mental health, such as pre-internship preparation, compensation, and remote working environments. Although a qualitative description study does not seek to instill direct change, this study might pave the way for future research in this area and add to the growing knowledge base. With the recognized

importance of mental health and wellbeing, the field of health promotion is situated to advocate for intern mental health and internship programs that support this (Ardiles, 2017).

Universities and other post-secondary institutions with health and leisure internship programs could benefit from the findings of this study. The findings and following recommendations could aid in the creation of new institutional policies or the reconsideration of existing structures to support intern mental health throughout internships. Additionally, these recommendations can help identify ways to increase supports to reduce financial burden on students, compensating for a lack of paid internships.

5.3.1 Recommendations for Health and Leisure Internships

Participants provided recommendations that could be beneficial for the programs explored, as well as other post-secondary internship programs. Some of the recommendations provided by participants focus on internship role clarity, mentorship and peer connection, and the structure of the internship. Finally, avenues for internship compensation will be explored, and findings from this study that can extend beyond the scope of internship programs will be presented.

As discussed, role clarity is important for students who are preparing for their internship. Feedback from participants highlighted a desire for more detailed information about internship opportunities during the application process, noting that existing descriptions were often insufficient. While interns receive a list of potential placements, it is recommended to enhance these listings with specific details to facilitate informed decision-making (Kim & Coco-Ripp, 2024; Trager, 2020). For instance, templates for

outreach emails to agencies could include suggested content outlining daily tasks and working hours. Additionally, revisiting the structure of post-internship forms completed by students could provide future interns with more comprehensive examples of past experiences, thereby improving clarity and decision-making for incoming interns. These recommendations aim to ensure that internship information is detailed, relevant, and supportive of student needs. Participants in this study expressed wishing they were clearer on what some internship opportunities entailed, noting that the information they were given about internship options during the application process was limited.

Mentorship was discussed by participants in my study, both from a supervisor during internship, but also guidance from a past intern in the HPRO, RM, or TR program. Participants noted feeling unsure about what to expect in their internship, and that having insights from former interns may have alleviated uncertainties about their roles and expectations. Research supports the benefits of mentorship in fostering positive mental health outcomes and a sense of support (Lin & Chen, 2022; Palmer et al., 2015; Roush et al., 2021). To enhance future internship experiences, it is recommended to consider formalizing mentorship programs where current interns can connect with recent graduates or experienced professionals in regular meetings or through structured mentorship profiles. Additionally, establishing peer networks or intern profiles that provide contact information for past interns could further support incoming students in navigating their internship experiences effectively. Another approach to fostering support among students could be by facilitating peer connections within internship programs, possibly through platforms like LinkedIn, where interns can create and engage professional networks, share experiences, and seek advice. These initiatives aim to strengthen support systems

within internship programs, promoting student wellbeing and professional development.

The importance of peer connection was highlighted by participants, emphasizing the value of sharing internship experiences with fellow students. This exchange can foster a sense of community and mutual support among interns (Holyoak, 2013). Despite existing opportunities like drop-in hours, online discussion forums, and meetings, which currently see limited attendance, there is a clear need for more effective strategies to facilitate peer interaction. To enhance peer connection, HPRO, RM, and TR programs could consider implementing regular structured group check-ins, such as weekly reflection sessions and themed discussion groups, facilitating one-on-one meetings between interns through mentorship pairings and a buddy system, or establishing more interaction within the online discussion forums. These platforms not only promote community but also provide opportunities for interns to reflect collaboratively on their internship experiences, potentially enhancing their overall learning and support network.

Participants in this study expressed interest in potentially dividing the internship period into two shorter segments, each around eight weeks in duration. One participant suggested that this structure could allow students to gain experience in two different settings, enhancing their preparation for post-graduate professional roles. Additionally, dividing the internship into shorter periods was seen as a potential strategy to mitigate financial stress, as completing an unpaid internship for eight weeks at a time appeared more manageable than committing to a full 14- to 16-week period without income. While adapting to university semester structures may limit the feasibility of this exact proposal, internship programs could explore other structural adjustments. For example, offering more flexible internship durations of developing part-time options that align with

university credit requirements could provide students with diverse learning opportunities while addressing practical concerns like financial stability. Introducing shorter placements nested within coursework could also help students gain familiarity with internship settings before undertaking longer, formal placements. These tailored approaches aim to optimize internship experiences by balancing academic rigor with practical considerations, supporting student learning and wellbeing.

Intern compensation was a prominent subject in my study's findings, in which eight participants expressed wishing there would have been more opportunities for payment during their internship. Given the logistical challenges of monetary compensation, exploring alternative forms of support could alleviate financial pressures on interns (Hurst et al., 2023). One potential solution is offering tuition or fee reductions for students engaging in unpaid internships, as discussed by Hurst et al. (2023). This approach could provide financial relief without directly conflicting with budgetary constraints of hosting agencies. Rogers et al. (2021) noted that fee reductions or scholarships tied to internship performance can motivate students and reduce stress, thereby enhancing their overall internship experience and mental health.

Another avenue for compensation could involve more structured stipends or bursaries specifically designed for internships, similar to existing models within the current program structure, where students can receive financial support to offset living costs (Hurst et al., 2023). These stipends or bursaries could be sourced from university funds allocated for student support, external grants, or partnerships with sponsors interested in investing in student development and career readiness. As discussed by participants, wage subsidies, although not equivalent to full salaries, can offer crucial

financial support, contributing to improved mental health experiences and a more positive internship experience overall.

Federal and provincial programs offer wage subsidies for hiring interns from underrepresented groups, providing financial support to enhance internship experiences for women in STEM, persons with disabilities, newcomers, Indigenous students, and visible minorities (Government of Canada, 2018). In Nova Scotia, the Student Summer Skills Incentive (SKILL) program provides wage subsidies to non-profit and charitable organizations that offer summer employment opportunities to post-secondary students (Government of Nova Scotia, 2024). While these examples target specific underrepresented groups, additional funding resources are listed on the university's website, benefiting both students and internship program coordinators (Dalhousie University, 2024). Findings in this study align with previous research (Hurst et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2021), and should be shared with policymakers and researchers to explore expanding intern payment opportunities. Leveraging these funding sources can significantly reduce intern fees and costs, fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for students.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations

Several strengths have been identified in my study, as my study was able to explore the mental health experiences of undergraduate students in post-secondary health and leisure internship programs. By meeting the research objectives of identifying, exploring, and understanding factors influencing student mental health during internship preparation and throughout their placements, this research provides valuable insights. For example, this study uncovered how internship structure, such as the duration and clarity

of role expectations, impacts interns' mental wellbeing. Additionally, my study contrasts with existing literature predominantly focused on medical and technology industry internships, broadening the understanding of mental health experiences across diverse internship settings within health and leisure fields.

As a student in a health-related academic program, my ability to relate to participants potentially created a comfortable environment for discussing their mental health. However, my personal feelings and perceptions about mental health may have influenced the interviews and analysis. During data analysis, I initially overlooked the full spectrum of mental health experiences shared by participants, focusing more on the challenges. This could be due to my background in mental health support, which often focuses on negative emotions and mental illness experiences. During theme generation, I recognized the need to balance the representation of both the highlights and challenges within internship experiences. Braun and Clarke (2022) discussed the benefit of peer review in RTA, indicating that it can help develop richer insights by offering different perspectives. Generating the themes for this study was an iterative process, going back and forth multiple times to ensure each theme accurately captured a story and represented participant experiences adequately (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During theme generation, my supervisor suggested codes that might fit better together, and noted that positive mental health experiences were underrepresented, which prompted a reassessment of my themes.

Using guidance from the works of Braun and Clarke (2022), this study ensured quality through various measures. An accurate transcription was important for this study to properly capture the reflections shared in each participant interview. Transcripts were generated using Microsoft Teams' transcript function during the interviews, and each

interview was audio recorded through Microsoft Teams' meeting recording function. I revisited each transcript and compared it with the recorded audio to ensure that the transcript that would be coded was accurate. The coding process for my study was extensive and thorough, to ensure that I was deeply familiar with the data and able to provide themes that represented accurate depictions of the stories being shared by participants. Matching data analysis to my research purpose was important to ensure the goal of the research was being addressed, in connection with the study objectives as well. Finally, I made sure to maintain active positioning through the research process.

Reflexivity, an essential element of RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022), guided my engagement in the study from start to finish, ensuring I avoided a passive role as the researcher. Central to this approach was the use of a reflexive journal, used to document my thoughts, perspectives, and experiences from data collection to theme generation and writing. For example, during the familiarization stage of data analysis, I posed questions like "why did this participant say this?" or "what does this mean to me?", fostering deeper reflexivity and meaningful engagement with the data. This journal was a helpful tool for processing information and capturing participant narratives. Echoing findings in literature about reflective practices (Bhuwandeep, 2022), my reflexive journal assisted in enhancing the rigour and depth of this research.

While qualitative interviewing and description can offer valuable insights into participant experiences, they also present limitations that merit consideration. A potential limitation associated with qualitative interviewing is that the presence of the researcher could lead participants to respond differently than they would outside of the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, all participants in this study were aware of

the purpose of the study, therefore they may have provided answers to the questions that specifically addressed the research purpose. Another potential limitation of qualitative description could be that it is, well, descriptive. While qualitative description effectively provided a detailed account of participants' experiences, it may have limited the exploration of underlying issues and systemic factors that a more critical design could facilitate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In hindsight, integrating a Socio-Ecological Model (SEM), like those of University of Minnesota (2021) or Lisnyj and colleagues (2021) into my analysis could have provided a more complex representation of participants' experiences as they were impacted by environmental and social factors. Although it is possible that a more critical design for this study may have allowed for more depth in the analysis portion, the goal of my study was not to be critical or transformative, but rather to explore and describe the experiences of participants without seeking to actively instill change (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Despite aiming to include diverse and intersecting perspectives in this study, all but one participant identified as White. Additionally, the absence of participants identifying as disabled potentially excludes further marginalized experiences. It is important to note that the HPRO, RM, and TR programs explored for this study are small programs, which could have limited the availability of diverse representation. While this study provided participants the chance to disclose whether they were a first-generation student, other forms of diversity, such as international student status and socioeconomic status were not sufficiently explored. These factors can significantly influence intern experiences, suggesting that future research should consider multiple dimensions of diversity to provide a more comprehensive understanding of intern mental health.

Another limitation of my study is the variability in the time elapsed since participants' internship experiences and their interview. The recall of internship-related events and feelings may be influenced by how recently the internship was completed. Participants who completed their internships the semester before their interview might recall their experiences with greater clarity and emotional intensity compared to those whose internships ended three years ago. This disparity could have affected the accuracy of participant reflections during their interviews. Furthermore, hindsight is 20/20, which may also have influenced how participants remembered and interpreted their internship experiences. These factors highlight the potential for memory distortion and differing emotional responses based on the timing of the internship in relation to their interview.

My study's analysis highlighted the evolving nature of intern mental health by considering data collected at various stages of the internship: preparation, during the internship, and reflection post-internship. This approach allowed me to provide insights into how mental health fluctuated as interns navigated new roles, managed stress, and reflected on their growth. However, analyzing all the data collectively without explicitly comparing the timing of experiences introduces a potential limitation. The way mental health was conceptualized and analyzed in my study is closely tied to when participant interviews were conducted in relation to the internship stages. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture intern mental health outside of these distinct stages. Additionally, participants' reflections on their mental health might have been influenced by the time elapsed since their internship, potentially affecting recall accuracy and emotional intensity. Future research could benefit from adopting a more longitudinal approach, tracking intern experiences and mental health over time, or collecting data at specific

time points (such as during preparation or immediately following the internship), to provide a more in-depth understanding of how these experiences evolve.

This study sought to address two primary research objectives: identifying and understanding factors influencing intern mental health both in preparation for and during internships. Post-analysis, there were three themes that addressed the second objective, but only one theme addressing the first. This imbalance likely stemmed from the number of participants preparing for and carrying out or completed, as only two participants were preparing for their internship at the time of their interview, while the other eight had completed or were completing their internships. Additionally, the interview guide included only one question specific to the internship preparation process. Although only one theme specifically explores the preparation experience, many aspects of the other themes connected to the pre-internship period. For example, the conversation surrounding financial stress and unpaid internships was prominent for participants in preparing for and while carrying out their internship. To address this imbalance in future research, I would suggest incorporating more questions focused on the preparation phase and ensure a balances participant demographic to provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing intern mental health throughout all stages of the internship experience.

5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study and the underrepresentation of health and leisure intern mental health experiences in the literature demonstrate a need for future research. First, examining other health and leisure internship programs across diverse post-secondary institutions, such as universities and community colleges, would provide a broader understanding of these experiences. Specifically, future research should explore more

diverse student experiences, particularly focusing on low-income students in unpaid internships and underrepresented groups, including racial minorities, 2SLGBTQIA+ folks, and students with disabilities. By further exploring intersecting identities such as race, income, and disability, future research can foster a more nuanced understanding of mental health in this population and ultimately promote greater awareness and more effective support systems (Fowler-Holdham et al., 2022; Kahn & Kobayashi, 2017).

Second, future research should investigate the impact of internships on program enrolment. As literature is updated and the results from my study and the larger evaluation project are considered, it would be insightful to examine how enrolment patterns may change, especially as student populations become more diverse. The idea of a 14- to 16-week internship component without guaranteed payment could act as a potential barrier to overall program enrollment. Previous research (Hurst et al., 2023; McTorry, 2014) has indicated that unpaid internships can be seen as exclusionary, or opportunities that favour only wealthy students who have financial freedom to be able to juggle the expenses of rent, groceries, tuition, etc. for their internship duration without compensation. Participants in this study discussed feeling financially stressed and guilty about requiring external financial support, suggesting that the lack of compensation negatively impacts mental health. Future research should investigate whether the requirement of an internship without guaranteed payment deters prospective students from enrolling in the HPRO, RM, or TR programs.

Third, it is essential to evaluate any changes made to internship programs to ensure that students' needs are being met. This evaluation would require collaboration between students, program coordinators, and other university roles (Healey &

Zimmerman, 2009). As discussed in the first theme, implementing a development-focused framework, like Craig and Sable's (2011) constructivist-developmental integrated learning framework, could be beneficial. This framework includes principles like contextualized learning and balance between experience and inquiry, which might help prepare students more effectively for internships. Future research should explore how different preparation approaches impact the mental health experiences of interns, as well as the effectiveness of new internship structures or support mechanisms, such as comprehensive pre-internship workshops (Diver, 2021), mentorship during the internship period (Lin & Chen, 2022), and structured reflection practices (Bhuwandeep, 2022).

While my study did not specifically examine the role of personality attributes in relation to preparation stress, future research should investigate this connection, as highlighted in studies like Kim and Coco-Ripp's (2024). Although my research focused on other factors affecting intern mental health, the findings of Lin and Chen (2022), which highlighted a link between self-efficacy and personality attributes, further support the relevance of this area of inquiry. Exploring how specific personality attributes impact mental health during internships could provide valuable insights and inform targeted support strategies for students in this field.

The time and context in which this study was conducted are important. All participants completed their internships in a COVID-19 impacted world and had a significant amount of their schooling completed virtually prior to their internship. If this study had been conducted prior to 2020, or five years into the future, the findings might have differed depending on the state of the pandemic and applicable restrictions. Future research can add to the findings of this study by providing perspectives from interns who

carry out a health and leisure internship in the future, when the context of COVID-19 might be different. For example, five years from now, it is possible that all internships may revert to fully in-person, but it would be interesting to contextualize the internship settings from the current study compared with those in the future.

5.6 Knowledge Translation

An important part of research is to disseminate findings to those who may benefit or may have the power to act in ways that benefit the study population (CIHR, 2016). The dissemination of this study first includes the defence of this thesis. The implications of this study have the potential to be far-reaching as part of a larger transformative evaluation project considering the three internship programs included in this study. Following the completion of this study, the findings will inform the larger evaluation project researchers, contributing meaningful data to their project. Participants interested in this study's progress and findings will receive a summarized report and this thesis as a token of gratitude for their participation. Additionally, I plan to publish these findings in a health promotion journal, such as the Healthy Populations Journal. Presenting at conferences like the Crossroads Interdisciplinary Health Research Conference will further disseminate this research within relevant academic and internship communities, enhancing Knowledge Translation (KT) and potential impact.

5.7 Conclusion

The current literature revealed a gap wherein health and leisure intern mental health experiences had yet to be fully studied. By exploring the perspectives of undergraduate students in HPRO, RM, and TR internship programs, my research fills a significant gap in intern mental health research. This study underscores the unique

stressors faced by these interns and emphasizes the need for tailored support systems within internship programs.

Participants in this study shared valuable insights into their mental health experiences, highlighting the stressors unique to health and leisure internships and underscoring the need for targeted support systems. These insights emphasize the importance of considering intersecting identities, such as race, 2SLGBTQIA+ status, disability, income, and education, in understanding and supporting intern mental health.

Key findings from my study include the critical role of preparation in mitigating stress and fostering positive internship experiences, the value of intern empowerment, the role transitions required for students to adjust to intern responsibilities, and the financial stress experienced by those in unpaid internships. This study underscores the necessity for internship programs to provide clear role expectations, mentorship opportunities, and resources to support interns' mental wellbeing effectively. While this research does not directly influence policy or internship structures, it significantly enhances our understanding of intern mental health within health and leisure programs.

Moving forward, efforts in health promotion should prioritize comprehensive approaches to intern mental health, integrating findings from this study to inform evidence-based practices. By continuing to explore the factors influencing mental health in internship settings, we can foster environments that promote wellbeing and professional growth among health and leisure interns. My study advocates for ongoing research and proactive measures to improve intern mental health outcomes, ensuring that future interns can receive the support they need to thrive in their professional endeavours.

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Appendix A: Poster for Participant Recruitment



PLEASE SHARE YOUR HAI PINTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE



WE WANT TO BETTER UNDERSTAND &
IMPROVE OUR INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS!

Potential Participants

If you have completed an internship in health promotion, leisure, or recreation, in the School of Health and Human Performance in the last two years, are currently on internship, or are preparing for internship, you are eligible to take part!

Opportunities

You can choose to take part in an anonymous survey (link below) or an interview - contact us to learn more! Interview participants will be provided a \$20 honoraria for their time.

COMPLETE OUR
ANONYMOUS SURVEY
& BE ENTERED INTO A
DRAW FOR \$50!
[BIT.LY/HAIINTERNSURVEY](https://bit.ly/haiinternsurvey)



INTERESTED? QUESTIONS?

Please contact:

- Becky Feicht (becky.feicht@dal.ca)
- Julia Bedell (julia.bedell@dal.ca)

Appendix B: Recruitment E-mail/Brightspace Post for Students

Dear Students or Recent Graduates,

We are reaching out to all students who are currently preparing for, currently completing, or who have recently completed, a HAHP internship (in Health Promotion, Therapeutic Recreation, or Recreation Management). We are currently conducting a research project to evaluate the HAHP internship programs to better understand student experiences and support student learning and wellbeing.

As a student, you can take part in the study in one of two ways:

First, all students will be invited to take part in a survey. More information and the survey are available here: [insert survey link]. Survey participants will have their responses submitted anonymously, and will be invited to enter a draw for \$50.

Second, interested students can also take part in an individual or small group interview to discuss in more detail about your experiences related to internships. If you are interested in learning more or taking part in an interview, please email [insert email address].

We're happy to answer any questions as well, please contact us to discuss further!

Sincerely,

The Research Team

Appendix C: Verbal Consent Script

My name is [RA or researcher name] and I [describe role]. I am part of a study that is conducting research on the experiences of students and people in influential roles related to HAHP internship programs. You have been asked to take part in an interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Every effort will be made to keep your data confidential. Interviews will be audio recorded, and all recordings will be deleted once they are transcribed. Transcripts will be saved on a password protected hard drive, and only the research team will have access to the data. Although your individual quotes may be used in study results, they will not be attached to your real name, and any personally identifying information in them will be removed. Of course, given our small fields and programs, it is possible that our reports and publications would contain contextually identifying information, though we will not identify individual participants in any personal way.

[Read for groups only]: There is always risk that other participants might share your data with non-participants. It is asked that all participants respect the privacy of others in the group, not discuss details with anyone outside of the group, and refrain from any type of recording at all times.

Should you feel discomfort while discussing your experiences, you are welcome to skip any question. Further, you can stop participating in the study at any time without consequence. If you have chosen to participate in an interview, you may ask to have your data removed from the study up to a week after your participation by emailing the lead researcher. Data removal is more difficult in groups, but should you wish to remove a particular story or anecdote from your data, this can be done by emailing myself up to a week after the interview.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation or the study as a whole, please feel free to ask me now or contact myself, my supervisors, or the Dalhousie Research Ethics board.

To be read aloud and checked off by the researcher:

I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Yes No

I understand that I have been asked to take part in an interview (individual or small group). I agree to take part in this study. My participation is voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, but that my individual voice cannot be removed from audio-recorded group discussions.

Yes No

I understand that interviews will be audio recorded, and direct quotes of things I say may be used in presentations and/or publication, but will be attributed to a pseudonym and will not contain identifying information such as my school, placement, etc.

Yes No

Provision of Results

Would you like to receive a copy of a summary of this study's results? **Yes No**

Would you like to be updated (via email) regarding publications, events, or presentations associated with this study? **Yes No**

If you said **Yes** to either of the above questions, please spell out your name and email for me.

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide for Participants

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your internship?
 - Potential probes: program, whether they are planning/current/completed, role or desired role, agency or desire agency
2. Can you discuss how prepared you feel or felt for your internship?
 - Potential probes: academic preparation, content preparation, professional preparation, the School's procedures, meetings, timelines, requirements, forms
 - Additional probes: feelings associated with pre-internship (e.g., nervous, stress, excited, scared, hopeful)
3. If you've already secured your placement or completed your internship, can you tell me a little about how you selected your internship? If you haven't finalized your placement, how do you think you might select your internship?
 - Potential probes: topics/populations of interest, preparation, location, payment
4. How do/did you feel about the structure of our internship program?
 - Potential probes: timing, course credits, requirements, payment
5. If you've completed or are completing your internships, can you tell me about your learning experiences? If you are preparing for your internships, what learning experiences are you looking forward to?
 - Potential probes: Academic assignments, opportunities for personal/professional development, reflection
6. If you have completed or are currently completing your internship, what has been or were the biggest highlights? If you are preparing for your internship, what are you looking forward to most?
 - Potential probes: structure, peer or supervisor or School supports, preparation, hands on experience, projects
7. What challenges have you experienced in preparing for or completing your internship?
 - Potential probes: logistical/structural, contextual, role-related, relationship-related, mental wellbeing/stress
8. If you have completed or are currently completing your internship, how has your internship impacted your mental wellbeing? If you are preparing for internship, how has the preparation impacted your mental wellbeing?
 - Potential probes: Sources of stress, coping strategies, pre-existing factors
9. Can you tell me about your familiarity with resources offered by the university to support you during your internship? To what extent do you use those resources, and why/why not might you access them?
 - Potential probes: Connecting with internship coordinator, academic advising, study or career programs/services, accessibility services, student health and wellness
10. What coping strategies do you use to support your mental wellbeing as a student/intern?
 - Potential probes: student services, resources, programs, leisure, physical activity

11. What recommendations would you suggest to improve HAHP internships?
- Potential probes: More formal preparation, connections between classmates, changes to timing/options, flexibility, etc.

Appendix E: Braun and Clarke’s 15-Point Checklist for Good Reflexive Thematic

Analysis

Table 2. *Braun and Clarke’s 15-Point Checklist for Good Reflexive Thematic Analysis*

No.	Process	Criteria
1	Transcription	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail; All transcripts have been checked against the original recordings for ‘accuracy’.
2	Coding and theme development	Each data item has been given thorough and repeated attention in the coding process.
3		The coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive; themes have not been developed from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach).
4		All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.
5		Candidate themes have been checked against code data and back to the original dataset.
6		Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive; each theme contains a well-defined organizing concept; Any subthemes share the central organizing concept of the theme.
7	Analysis and interpretation – in the written report	Data have been - interpreted, made sense of - rather than just summarized, described or paraphrased.
8		Analysis and data match each other - the extracts evidence the analytic claims.
9		Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic; Analysis addresses the research question.
10		An appropriate balance between analytic narrative and data extracts is provided.
11	Overall	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately without rushing phase, or giving it a once-over-lightly (including returning to earlier phases or redoing the analysis if need be).
12	Written Report	The specific approach to thematic analysis, and the particulars of the approach, including theoretical positions and assumptions, are clearly explicated.
13		There is a good fit between what was claimed, and what was done – i.e. the described method and reported analysis are consistent.
14		The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions of the analysis.
15		The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; Themes do not just ‘emerge’.