

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Female Athlete Memoirs as Postfeminist Fairy Tales

By: Natasha Bodnarchuk

Supervisor: Dr. Maria Victoria Guglietti

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF “BA HONOURS COMMUNICATION AND
MEDIA STUDIES”

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, MEDIA, AND FILM

CALGARY, AB

APRIL 2024

Abstract

Athlete memoirs are a popular sports genre. They are often marketed as tales of fidelity that candidly detail an athlete's journey to success. This thesis conducts a narrative analysis of athlete memoirs to uncover how white female athletes talk about themselves and their experiences. The memoirs under analysis are "Letters To A Young Gymnast" by Nadia Comaneci, "In the Water They Can't See You Cry" by Amanda Beard, and "Brave Enough" by Jessie Diggins. Postfeminism and feminist standpoint theory serve as theoretical frameworks to support the interpretation of the data. Female athletes employ postfeminist tropes such as individuality, empowerment, and self-governance in the articulation of their athletic success. Moreover, they complete their narrative by disclosing details from their heterosexual romances. The research question this thesis answers is: how do white female athletes use the genre of memoir to talk about themselves and their experiences? This thesis identifies a prevalence of hypermasculinity and heterosexism in sports memoirs.

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis would not have been possible without the immense support I received from my supervisor, Dr. Maria Victoria Guglietti. Thank you for your generous insights, encouragement, and for your help in steering this thesis in a direction I am proud of. To my honours cohort, you all inspire me and I appreciate the reassurance and support I received from each and every one of you. I would also like to thank Dr. Tania Smith and Dr. Lisa Stowe for being part of my honours committee. Thank you for taking the time to read my thesis and for your check-ins and encouragements. I'd like to thank my friends, Siri and Michelle, for their unwavering support and for showering my thesis with compliments even though they haven't even read it yet.

To my former ski jumping coaches and teammates, I thought about you all a lot while conducting this research. You continue to motivate me and I want to thank you all for the impact you've had on the person I am today. To my brother Sam, thank you for providing the greatest source of comedic relief I could ask for. Lastly, to my parents who, in my humble opinion, are the most supportive parents in the world, thank you for cheering me on in all my endeavours. Thank you for instilling in me my passion for reading and for supporting my athletic career. I am truly privileged to have you both in my life and as much as I criticize the notion of individual empowerment and discipline in this thesis, I am grateful you've given me the means to try hard things without fear of failure. I dedicate this thesis to you.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
<i>Chapter 1: Introduction</i>	5
<i>Chapter 2: Literature Review</i>	
Introduction	8
Memoir as Genre.....	9
Female Athlete’s Standpoint and Barriers to	
Self-Expression.....	10
Female Athlete’s Discursive Construction of	
Identity.....	14
Conclusion.....	16
<i>Chapter 3: Theory and Methodology</i>	
Introduction.....	19
<i>Theory:</i>	
Postfeminism.....	20
Feminist Standpoint	
Theory.....	23
Methodology.....	26
Conclusion.....	30
<i>Chapter 4: Analysis</i>	
Introduction.....	32
The Heroine.....	33

The Adversity.....39
The Resolution.....43
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....49
References.....54

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis will look at how female athletes use the genre of memoir to narrate their experiences as professional athletes. As I began unpacking the common narrative patterns, I found that female athlete memoirs employ postfeminist tropes in the articulation of their unique standpoint as professional athletes. The memoirs that this thesis will be analyzing are, “Letters to a Young Gymnast” by Nadia Comaneci (2003), “In the Water They Can’t See You Cry” by Amanda Beard (2012), and “Brave Enough” by Jessie Diggins (2021). Nadia Comaneci is Romanian-American and a former gymnast. She competed in the 1976 Summer Olympics where, at only fourteen years of age, she famously broke the World Record and scored a perfect ten, requiring the judges to break the scoreboard in order to display her result (Comaneci, 2003, p. 44). Her other accolades include winning a gold medal at the European Championships in 1979 and completing an exhibition tour called “Nadia ‘81” where she toured around the U.S. (p. 76; p. 111) Comaneci grew up in Romania and defected to the United States in the 80s where she continued competing competitively (p. 135). Eventually, she retired in Oklahoma, where she now resides, running a gymnastics academy with her husband (p. 177). Gymnastics is a female-dominant sport, yet the routines men and women partake in are vastly different. Male gymnastics focuses on strength and endurance, while female gymnastics puts emphasis on grace and flexibility.

Amanda Beard is a former American swimmer and seven-time Olympic medalist. She won silver at the 1996 summer Olympics when she was only fourteen and continued to have a complimentary career (Beard, 2012, p. 49). She had a full-ride scholarship with the University of Arizona and competed in four Olympic Games (p. 79). Yet, Beard never saw swimming as a career choice until she decided to go “pro”, competing in races while representing sponsors (p.

137). She also incorporated modelling into her career, partaking in paid photoshoots with companies like Vanity Fair and Playboy (p. 205) Beard dealt with body image and mental health issues, resulting in self-harm (p. 122). She sought out therapy and writes about finding personal acceptance in her memoir. She married and had a child in 2009 and continued to swim professionally (p. 237). Swimming is mostly male-dominated, yet men and women earn the same amount in prize money and have the same number of races (D'addona, 2019).

“Brave Enough” is a memoir written by American cross country skier, Jessie Diggins. Diggins (2021) was an active, energetic child and started skiing when she was 12 (p. ix). She and her teammate Kikkan Randall won gold in the 2018 winter Olympic Games (p. 233). The pair made history as the U.S ski team hadn’t won an Olympic medal in cross country skiing in over four decades (p. 206). Diggins continued to showcase her dominance in the cross country skiing World Cup Circuit, proving her gold medal wasn’t a fluke. She openly advocates for eating disorder awareness, having experienced bulimia, which she writes about candidly in her memoir. She is currently an active athlete and continues to race on the World Cup Circuit. Cross country skiing is a Nordic sport and unlike many winter sports, it is gender equal; men and women compete in the same number of races, they ski the same distance, and they earn the same amount of prize money on the World Cup Circuit (McMahon, 2012; Small, 2022).

The following thesis will dissect and critique these memoirs using two theories: postfeminism and feminist standpoint theory. This thesis aims to shed light on the ways athlete memoirs reproduce or challenge dominant themes of athleticism and success. When I refer to these dominant themes, I am suggesting that sports and athletics have historically been viewed as a patriarchal institution created by and for men. The sports the women in my sample compete in are relatively gender equal, yet it is important to note that they have not always been this way.

For many years women were prevented from competing in some sport disciplines as they were deemed “physically weaker” than men. Moreover, some sports are costly and largely inaccessible to more vulnerable groups. Sports participation of racialized women in Canada is hindered by experiences of racism and sexism (Joseph et al, 2022, p. 873). Systemic racism and white privilege can impact the operation of sports institutions, limiting or rendering invisible women of colour athletic accomplishments (p. 877). Despite these structural barriers, a prevalent notion that is present in the athletes' memoirs analyzed is that hard work and resilience always leads to individual success.

This thesis will identify common narrative themes found in these three memoirs to understand how these three female athletes articulate their experiences and aspects of their identity. The goal is to evaluate how they might adhere or resist dominant views of sports as masculine undertakings. Moreover, sport governing bodies have not always been seen as inclusive, wholesome spaces. Recently, there have been several instances coming to light about the power abuse, neglect, and psychological trauma that can arise from harmful practises in sports (Wilson et al, 2022, pp. 4-5). These issues are typically unheard and unseen as athletes are trained to endure pain and discomfort, and therefore do not always vocalize these issues. Moreover, athletes may not feel that they will be supported if they come forward with concerns. It is of interest to consider whether the athletes in my sample call out any harmful practises from their own organizations, or whether they normalize such adverse experiences. The main research question this thesis aims to answer is: how do white women construct their identity as elite athletes through the genre of memoir?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The construction of athlete identity is explored in many studies, yet data on the ways athletes narrate their identity in memoirs is limited. In this chapter, I will discuss the current research on female athletes' identity and identify gaps and silences. I will begin by considering memoirs as a genre to construct a public identity, and will clarify how this genre focuses on fidelity. Sports memoirs are often written by an athlete who has achieved high accolades in sports, whether through winning an Olympic medal, becoming a World Champion, or breaking a world record. As such, their memoir functions as a type of testimony to this success. This implies that readers view memoirs as objective truth. As a result, female athletes who construct their identities through this genre are expected to tell stories that are accurate and truthful.

The second part of this review will look at studies that have explored female athletes' construction of identity. Some of these studies, which explored female athletes' use of social media to construct identity, have recognized a recurrent tension in the athletes' self-representation as both women and professional athletes. This discussion is important as it reveals a tension that is constitutive of female athletes' standpoints. Lastly, I will consider studies that directly interrogate how athletes discursively articulate their identity. This section is central to this thesis as it reviews work that has focused on how athletes' use language and narrative structures. These studies incorporate feminist theoretical approaches while discussing the influence of market pressures and hegemonic gender expectations. This body of work sets an important precedent for the theoretical direction of this project.

Memoir as a Genre

Memoir is a genre in which an author writes about a period of their life. Kerley (2014) describes memoirs as “an aspect of rhetoric that aims to take individual stories and communicate a narrative to a large, diverse audience” (p. 29). Memoirists utilize this genre to share important moments of their life as well as aspects of their identity (p. 30). While current published memoirs are diverse, it wasn’t until the women’s liberation movement that there was a rise in memoirs written by women and people of colour (Couser, 2012, p. 150).

Memoirs can be discerned into two genres: Somebody Memoirs and Nobody Memoirs (Kerley, 2014, p. 32). Somebody Memoirs are described as memoirs that are written by an already-established figure, such as a celebrity or an Olympic athlete (p. 32). In contrast, Nobody Memoirs are characterized as being written by someone who is not known in the public eye (p. 32). Athlete memoirs would be characterized as Somebody Memoirs.

Writing a memoir poses different ethical concerns than writing fiction. Memoirists must be accurate in their depictions of real-life events and real people (Couser, 2012, p. 80). This demand for fidelity is undermined by the frequent spectacularization of memoirs for entertainment purposes (p. 80). Memoirs are ultimately a product to be sold. In addition, memoirs recount a person’s life and rely on the author’s recollections. (p. 81). When an author’s recollection is distorted it not only affects the story they are telling, but also the ways in which their identity is constructed. Couser (2012) claims that identity is a core aspect of memoirs (p. 89). Yet many Somebody Memoirs are written with the help of a co-writer, an additional writer who helps the author construct their story, find their voice, and submit for publication. While the help of a co-writer—who was most likely not directly involved in the events the author is sharing—and the fickle nature of memory may influence the truthfulness of the stories, memoirs

are widely seen as true (Kerley, 2014, p. 41). The way an author narrates their identity impacts how their audience views the author's identity (p. 41).

Like many literary genres, memoirs follow a structure. This structure influences the overall narrative and pace of the novel, and it allows readers to have a better understanding of what to expect when they read the book (Couser, 2012, p. 55). In athletes' memoirs, the story often begins with a recount of the athlete's childhood; they share fond memories and explain how, as a child, they discovered their sport. The middle of the novel often illustrates the adversities the athlete faced, whether through an injury, eating disorder, or poor performance. The latter half of the memoir focuses on the importance of self-definition. The athlete remarks on what is truly important to them, declaring they are more than their medals. Sports memoirs are mostly written by athletes who are accomplished; they are well-known, have won medals or awards, competed on the international stage, earned sponsorships, and given back to their community. These memoirs document their successes and experiences. As Couser (2012) states, "testimony performs a certain kind of valuable cultural work" (p. 53). The genre of memoir is not simply a literary form but offers the audience a moral and political model that is expected to be true and objective. (p. 53).

Female Athletes' Standpoint and Barriers to Self-expression

There are several studies that examine how sportswomen attempt to control their identity construction online. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) argue that sportswomen are constantly navigating the lines between "athlete" and "feminine" (p. 28). This dichotomy reproduces a view of female athletes that is reflective of the pervasive influence of traditional gender definitions and postfeminist tropes (p. 12). For example, Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018) content analysis

found that female athletes post under three main themes: “self-love, self-disclosure, and self-empowerment” (p. 13). These themes contribute to the notion that a woman’s own individual efforts will lead her to happiness and success. The authors argue that on social media, female athletes are frequently producing content that encourages other women to love their bodies and take control over their happiness (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018, pp. 13-25). The authors also note that female athletes tend to broadcast themselves as self-loving individuals who put in work to achieve success, feel confident or empowered, and create media coverage for themselves and their respective sports (pp. 28-29). These public accounts define women’s success as an individual feat while ignoring the oppressive barriers they may face. A similar finding is present in Kane, LaVoi, and Fink’s (2013) study, in which they interviewed female athlete participants and examined the images the athletes claimed best represents them and their sport (p. 287). The images chosen illustrate the participants’ attempt to balance the dual identifications as women and athletes (pp. 287-288). It is clear that female athletes are aware of balancing their athleticism with femininity. This preoccupation with performing femininity challenges the stereotype that women who compete in male-dominated sports are “manly” or “lesbian” (Kane et al, 2013, p. 293). Using photographs that highlight women’s athleticism, however, is an integral step to further the professionalization of women’s sports. These studies demonstrate how common it is for sportswomen to advocate for themselves in ways that inadvertently contribute to a patriarchal view of femininity and athleticism. Constructing an athlete's narrative in this way occurs across many mediums.

When analyzing the female athletes’ identity construction, it is integral to focus on the athletes’ standpoint. In their analysis of a professional female golfers blog site, Kitching, Bowes, and Maclaren (2021) emphasize how these sites may offer a platform for female athletes to

self-advocate, but these efforts at self-representation frequently evoke patriarchal notions of femininity (p. 79). The researchers involved the professional golfer, Meghan Maclaren, as both a research participant and co-author. When asked about her reasons for creating a blog, Maclaren shared many, including her desire to be authentic by writing about both her good and bad experiences (Kitching, Bowes, & Maclaren, 2021, pp. 88-89). The researchers note that this response ignores the commercial and financial rewards of the blog and does not consider how these sites foster a “media-sanitized version” of one’s identity (p. 89). Kitching and Bowes (2021) also argue that Maclaren’s blog may be both a response and result of the patriarchal and cultural conditions that female athletes experience (p. 89). Female athletes are “expected to be entrepreneurial and adaptable in their self-promotion” (p. 88). This expectation contributes to “postfeminist sensibility” (p. 81). Characteristics of “postfeminist sensibility” include promoting individual choice, empowerment, and bearing the responsibility to obtain visibility in online spaces (p. 81). Maclaren has taken on the responsibility to make her voice public, and encourages other athletes to do the same (p. 89). The researchers argue that she has done this as a response to the lack of support that female golfers receive in this male domain (p. 89). This study highlights the importance of considering athletes’ standpoints in projects that concern the experiences of female athletes.

Similarly, Willson, Kerr, Battaglia, and Stirling (2022), recognize the greater implications associated with athletes’ lack of voice (p. 4). Utilizing the method of participant observation, the researchers asked Canadian athletes, both male and female, how their national sport organizations (NSO) could become a more inclusive, welcoming, and holistic space (p. 5). One of their main findings was that many Canadian athletes felt they lacked agency, power, and autonomy (p. 10). There are 49 NSO’s in Canada and only 39 of them have an athlete

representative on their board of directors (p. 10). It is integral that athletes are included in decision making processes as they are the ones directly impacted by such decisions. Many NSO's in Canada are self-governed (Willson et al, 2022, p. 10). The board of directors are largely made up of volunteers and their decisions frequently remain unchallenged by other institutions (p. 10). The athletes' recommendations made in this study "reflect broader challenges to power structures seen outside of sport" (p. 10). This illustrates how external dynamics and systemic structures may impact how sport governing bodies are structured which impacts how athletes are viewed and make sense of their roles. The limited number of athlete representatives in each NSO illustrates this power imbalance and reinforces the notion that athletes lack agency when they are not offered enough fair opportunities to self-advocate. This holds greater implications beyond simply providing a space for athletes to share their stories. Many athletes stated that they feared self-advocating because their sport fosters a "culture of fear and silence" (Wilson et al, 2022, p. 4). Athletes are afraid to represent themselves if a potential consequence is neglect, and verbal or psychological abuse (pp. 9-10). This is a critical point to consider, especially in the context of athletes' memoirs. Many athlete memoirs are written after the athlete has retired—but not always. Memoirs offer an avenue for athletes to share the unseen parts of their athletic career—both the positive and negative experiences. It is worth questioning whether the reason many memoirs are written after an athlete has retired is due to the fact that the athlete will no longer need to report and abide by the regulations of their sport governing body. If athletes are only speaking out after they have left their sport institution, the tribulations they faced may persist to the detriment of the next generation of athletes.

Athletes may resort to social media or blog sites to articulate their experiences and identity construction, yet these attempts are frequently criticized for reproducing hegemonic

assumptions of femininity and athleticism. Yet without dissecting the athlete's standpoint, regardless of the format it appears in, researchers and the general public will fail to recognize the challenges female athletes face, particularly when their experiences are so heavily impacted by gender inequity. Female athletes face a double bind where they are balancing their gender identity with what is widely understood as the athlete identity. To assert their professional identity, female athletes may borrow language that is patriarchal. Yet, it is worth considering how the incorporation of patriarchal language and narratives impacts female athletes' standpoint and identity construction.

Female Athlete's Discursive Construction of Identity

Balancing female athletes' identity with femininity is occasionally met with resistance. Yet when sports are described as "manly" or in the "male domain", they reaffirm and normalize the underrepresentation of women in sports (Kavoura et al, 2017, p. 246). The discourse of elite sports often determines what constitutes an athlete, and what is "natural" and "unnatural" (p. 248). Examining the ways female judo wrestlers articulate their identity through a Foucauldian discourse analysis enabled Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba (2017) to recognize how these dominant discursive patterns shape our ways of thinking and understanding what is and is not true (p. 240). Moreover, they give meaning to our experiences. When women self-identify in ways that oppose the gender binary of what constitutes a female athlete, they are in one way challenging the status quo, but are also inadvertently contributing to discourse on "female biological inferiority" (p. 248). For example, Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba (2017) found that a team of female judo wrestlers "differentiated themselves from ordinary women by performing the self-image of exceptional beings, born with masculine qualities, such as

competitiveness, tolerance to pain, and the ability to fight” (p. 248). When female athletes self-identify in this way (e.g., as aggressive), they are placed outside the binary definitions of womanhood (p. 248). While using language that reaffirms sports as masculine normalizes the underrepresentation of women in sport, it is possible that women may simply be using this language as a tactic to survive in this male domain (p. 246).

It is important to recognize that employing language that is reflective of a hegemonic understanding of athleticism is not always rooted in the desire to support the status quo. In her analysis on memoirs written by athletes with a disability, Kerley (2014) found that athletes may write about their disability as something they overcame (p. 63). This narrative shapes having a disability as something inherently negative even though it is not (p. 13). This ideology, however, is not reflective of the authors. Kerley (2014) explains how this narrative transforms over the course of the memoir, where the authors declare their pride in their accomplishments and express gratitude for their bodies (p. 63). Their stories do not focus solely on their experience as athletes with disabilities, despite being known as this (p. 37). This illustrates how even in a genre where there is an expectation for certain narratives to prevail, the “cultural script” of athleticism and success is not always followed (Kerley, 2014, p. 37). Additionally, Kerley (2014) asserts the importance of recognizing how the “sexual, gendered, racialized, classed, and disabled bodies all impact the individual story of each memoirist” (p. 64). Narrating these differences allows for readers to challenge any preconceived notions they held about athleticism (p. 64). While my sample does not include works from female athletes who have a disability, it is of interest to consider how they might challenge the “cultural script” of femininity and success. Being aware of their performance as both a woman and an athlete is something particular for female athletes.

These duelling identities conflate into a larger issue within the sporting world—which is an institution made largely by and for men.

Conclusion

In conclusion, memoirs may hold greater significance in the analysis of an athlete's construction of identity due to the assumption that the author has provided an objective testimony in the recounts of their experiences. As such, it becomes increasingly important to be aware of the language and narrative patterns an athlete uses to demonstrate and articulate their identity as a player in their respective sport. Much of the research on the process of identity construction has been analyzed using an intersectional framework, which looks at the interlocking layers of identity such as age, race, and gender. Several of the studies highlighted in this section involved feminist theories such as postfeminism and critical feminist theory. However, there were no studies in this literature review that incorporated feminist standpoint theory.

Female athletes are aware of the duelling expectations placed on them to perform as both feminine and athletic. When female athletes use language that reaffirms a hegemonic view of athleticism, for example referring to themselves as “fighters”, it places them in a category of “other” while simultaneously reaffirms the notion that masculinity is an inseparable component of athletics. It is integral to recognize that the implications of this language may be unintentional. Female athletes may be borrowing masculine language and hegemonic narratives to assert their belonging. The language used by female athletes may be both a response and a result of existing within a patriarchal institution, where they are not provided space to speak on their own behalf

and are subjected to sexist inequities. More importantly, the power structure of national sports organizations does not foster an environment where athletes feel they can openly use their voice.

A common finding in this area of research is that when female athletes use their voice to assert their identity, they often borrow language that reaffirms a hegemonic understanding of sports and athleticism. For example, they may refer to themselves as “fighters” or use other forms of patriarchal language that functions to separate their gender identity from their role as an athlete. This demonstrates how female athletes have learned to speak the language of male athleticism and have seemingly no other option.

In this literature there are several gaps, most noticeably in the medium through which athletes assert their identity. There is very little research into studying how athlete memoirs perpetuate ideas of athleticism. Moreover, in many analyses of female athletes, the focus is largely on how they are represented in the media with a focus on visuals and body image; there are less studies that directly interrogate the athlete’s perspective. Additionally, there are no studies highlighted in this literature review that employ a narrative analysis. While feminist theories are repeatedly used, there are no studies in this literature review that interrogate their findings using feminist standpoint theory. Furthermore, there are no studies that explicitly interrogate the standpoint of privileged athletes.

This literature review reveals the limited knowledge on how well-known female athletes use the genre of memoir to construct their identity and narrate their experiences. While it is essential to advocate for more studies that focus on athletes' standpoints when considering how they make sense of their experiences, memoirs offer a unique and accessible avenue to studying the athlete’s standpoint. As memoirs have the capacity to be read by a wide audience of readers, I concur this is an important area of study. I hope to illuminate this area of study and provide

insight into how female athletes have internalized hegemony by focussing on specific practises of identity construction through an analysis of narrative inquiry in memoirs.

Chapter 3: Theory and Methodology

Introduction

The following is a discussion of the two theories I will use to analyze the female athlete's construction of identity through the genre of memoir. The first theory I will be introducing is postfeminism. The application of this lens will enable me to understand how the memoirs of Jessie Diggins, Nadia Comaneci, and Amanda Beard contribute to, reinforce, or perhaps resist hegemonic notions of femininity and athleticism. As athletics have traditionally been a space created by and for men, it is of interest to consider how the female athlete memoirs have adopted tropes of postfeminism and incorporated them as integral elements to their success stories. The second theory I will discuss is feminist standpoint theory. This theory considers the unique knowledge produced by women who are socially disadvantaged (Intemann, 2020, p. 2). Due to gender inequities, feminist standpoint theorists argue that women possess a unique perspective; they recognize how they are oppressed while simultaneously understand how hegemony is upheld (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296). While I am not arguing that athletes—particularly the ones in my sample—are unequivocally oppressed as they possess social and economic advantages, there are disparities in sports, and it is of interest to consider whether the inequalities between genders, or within the same gender, go noticed in the athlete memoirs. Feminist standpoint theory holds limitations. It is sometimes criticized for implying that all women experience the same social perspective, yet as Rolin (2009) states, this is a misinterpretation of Harding's work (p. 218). This theory will provide a framework for understanding how elite female athletes' perspectives are narrated in their memoirs. Following this discussion on theory, I will discuss my methodology, including my sampling method and method of analysis.

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a term that reveals hegemonic discursive attempts at incorporating feminist critiques. Postfeminism is a product of hegemony. It adopts the aesthetics and façade of feminism to keep women subjected to patriarchy. A key critical feminist theorist who uses postfeminism to study this subjectification is Angela McRobbie. McRobbie (2004) describes postfeminism as the notion that there is no need to continue the battle for feminism and gender equality; from a postfeminist perspective, equality has been achieved (p. 255). Postfeminism asserts that the feminist achievements of the 1970s and 1980s no longer require our attention (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255). The notion that feminist tropes of freedom, choice, and bodily autonomy have been achieved suggests that feminism is “a thing of the past” (p. 255). Moreover, this infers that feminism has at some level been “transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 256). This further discredits the need for feminism's revival and demands the dismantling of feminist politics (p. 256).

One of the main tropes of postfeminism is female empowerment and choice. A key aspect that emerges through self-empowerment is the idea of female success. In a postfeminist landscape, where gender equality is said to have been achieved, the idea of success becomes an individual feat. Indeed, individuality is a key component in a postfeminist climate (McRobbie, 2004, p. 257). The notion of there no longer being systemic barriers in place that prevent women from achieving the same professional and educational goals as men suggests that women must take the responsibility to self-govern in order to achieve their goals and be deemed successful. The notion of female success then engenders a heightened sense of individualism; to be

successful in a postfeminist society, the process of achieving female success becomes a “me” rather than a “we” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 257). This implies that feminism is a movement of the past and there is no need for a collective undertaking towards a fairer and more just society.

Postfeminism is further described as a set of assumptions that have been disseminated in popular media forms (Tasker et al, 2007, p. 1). By considering feminism as a “thing of the past”, it can be “noted, mourned, or celebrated” (p. 1). Feminism has a long history of being met with “resistance, negotiation, and containment” (p. 1). In contemporary times, postfeminism views feminism as “no longer needed” (p. 1). One of the criticisms of adopting a postfeminist lens is that it holds contemporary views of gender equality that are highly limited. For example, one of the themes associated with postfeminism is choice, which infers that women are fully capable of attaining the same type of job as their male counterparts (Tasker et al, 2007, p. 2). This not only illustrates how a postfeminist perspective fails to consider the socio-economic disparities in society, but also assumes that a woman’s decision to work is not influenced by necessity (p. 2). Therefore, postfeminism is exclusionary. It assumes that the values and themes associated with feminism—namely individuality, choice, bodily autonomy, and professional or educational endeavors—are universally shared amongst all women (p. 2). It ignores intersectionality, overlooking the influence of age, race, and class on women’s behaviour and choice (p. 2). Moreover, postfeminism encourages consumption so as to demonstrate one’s capacity to self-actualize their goals. This further excludes marginalized women, as the notion of consumption infers that it is the most affluent and privileged in society who get to participate, and thus demonstrate their capacity to achieve female success (Tasker et al, 2007, p. 2).

There are several studies that utilize a postfeminist framework to analyze media texts. The notion that women are rewarded for their entrepreneurship, empowerment, and individuality

is a finding in a study conducted by Kitching, Bowes, and MacLaren (2021). As mentioned in the literature review chapter, researchers Kitching, Bowes, and MacLaren (2021) studied professional golfer Meghan MacLaren's blog posts from a postfeminist lens to better understand how the posts positioned her as an entrepreneurial agent who uses sports marketing tools to share parts of her life (p. 86). Social media can be a site that affords users the opportunity to self-advocate and challenge dominant regimes of visibility (p. 79). Yet this study highlighted how female athletes' self-representations frequently feed into tropes of postfeminism, appealing to patriarchal notions of femininity, and ignoring dominant power structures (p. 79). For example, in her blog posts, MacLaren writes about how she is aware of her visibility online and those she represents, namely her sponsors, the golf tour, and her fans (p. 84). As such, despite the seemingly authentic self-portrayal MacLaren aims with her posts, the articulation of her identity becomes a "media-sanitized version" (Kitching, Bowes, and MacLaren, 2021, p. 89). MacLaren uses her blogsite as a way to control her narrative. This is reflective of postfeminist tropes as it illustrates how sportswomen are seemingly in control of their representations yet are also "operating within a patriarchal matrix" (Kitching, Bowes, and MacLaren, 2021, p. 85). MacLaren's standpoint and articulation of her experience is impacted by postfeminism and her blog activity serves as a form of self-monitoring and self-regulation.

Incorporating postfeminism in my analysis of female athlete memoirs will provide me with a framework to identify how these athletes are constructing and sharing their stories in ways that may contribute to themes and tropes of postfeminism. The notion of individuality is prominent in sports memoirs, even when the athlete participated in a team sport. Drawing from postfeminism will allow me to analyze these memoirs and consider how the athletes' experiences and what they perceive to be true impacts their self-perception and self-representation.

Postfeminism will be used to interpret the data as one of the recurring themes in my sample is the notion of female success—a central trope in postfeminist discourse. Analyzing female athlete memoirs through a postfeminist lens will enable me to understand how themes such as individuality, empowerment, and female success may be reinforcing neoliberal conceptualizations of womanhood.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) is another critical feminist theory that examines the distinctive experiences of women in a socially constructed, capitalistic, and patriarchal society (Intemann, 2020, p. 2). FST theorists argue that as women are oppressed in a patriarchal context, they develop a “double consciousness” through which they become aware of both their own lives and the lives of the dominant group in society (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296). One of the key theorists of FST is Sandra Harding. She posits that people who are marginalized may gain a stronger knowledge of social reality, or what she calls “epistemic advantage” (Rolin, 2009, p. 218). Epistemic advantage is the knowledge accessed through a feminist standpoint, which consists of recognizing how patriarchy and hegemony are upheld and disproportionately affect those who belong to marginalized groups (p. 218). Power constrains the available choices of those marginalized and distorts the standpoint of women (p. 219). One instance of such distortion is through “hermeneutical injustice”. Miranda Frickner, who first proposed the term “hermeneutical injustice,” argues that when people’s social experiences are obscured, ignored, or unknown from collective understanding, they struggle to make sense of the injustice they experience (Rolin, 2009, p. 221). As such, FST functions as a tool to “centralize women’s

experiences in the research process, viewing them as a point of entry for the creation of new knowledge” (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296)

In their analysis of queer female athletes, researchers Fink, Burton, Farrell, and Parker (2012), employ FST to “identify the relationship between knowledge and social power” (p. 84). The authors argue that sport, more than any other institution, reinforces hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism (p. 85). This knowledge can impact how female LGBTQ+ athletes perceive their identity; it can impact what they share and how they represent themselves (p. 86). The findings of this study demonstrate how the female participants were acutely aware of how their sexual identities could impact their professional status and their relationship with other women on the team (p. 95). The stereotype of the “masculine lesbian athlete” who “lacks femininity” impacted the participants' decision on when and how to come out (p. 95). The dominant discourses in the sporting world are not inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. The participants of this study had experiences with homophobia, heteronormativity, and sexual prejudice (Fink et al, 2012, p. 95). FST served as a way to understand how these female athletes recognized the duelling experiences as athletes and as LGBTQ+ women. Their standpoint enabled them to see these duelling expectations and compelled them to adhere to a cultural script in order to resist being viewed through a stereotypical, binary lens (Fink et al, 2012, p. 83).

One of the central criticisms of FST relates to the notion of epistemic advantage. To assume all women who lack societal privilege gain a deeper understanding of the power relations that uphold hegemony is to determine that all women carry the same social perspective (Rolin, 2009, p. 218). It is a limitation to assume a singular perspective is applicable to all women. Moreover, this concept disregards the intersections of womanhood such as class, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and being able-bodied or non-able bodied (Fink,

Burton, Farrell, & Parker, 2012, p. 84). Therefore, one cannot assume an objective standpoint. A standpoint is defined as an outlook that is impacted by one's social experiences; different standpoints place women in different social positions which impact their perspectives and what they know (Intemann, 2020, p. 4). An "objective" standpoint refers to a social location that is viewed as producing knowledge "for marginalized people" (Harding, 1992, p. 444). Harding (1992) explains how some standpoint theorists believe in initiating research from the lives of marginalized women, as this allows for new knowledge on their experiences to emerge that might otherwise not be realized if research focuses on the lives of a dominant group (p. 445). Yet even the lives of marginalized women cannot be limited to a singular perspective. Harding (1992) acknowledges this when she says it "is a misreading to assimilate standpoint epistemologies to those older ones" (p. 438). While some may criticize FST for claiming all marginalized women produce the same social knowledge, this is not reflective of Harding's theory.

While I will incorporate FST into my analysis, I recognize the limitations this theory holds. Moreover, I recognize the limitations of my sample, as all the athletes' memoirs I am analyzing were written by white women who hold a North American perspective. As such, they possess white privilege which impacts their standpoint. However, I will be incorporating FST in a unique and alternative way. Rather than use FST to articulate how the athletes in my sample experience oppression and thus have a unique viewpoint on the world, I will draw from FST to argue that their privileged position as white, middle-upper-class women, blind them to the inequities that exist amongst more marginalized groups of women. FST will serve as a way to acknowledge whether the athletes recognize their privilege and incorporate it as part of their story. FST will help identify the silences in my data.

Methodology

The sampling method for this study is a purposive sample consisting of three athlete memoirs, written by female athletes who competed in sports for at least five years at an elite level (e.g., Olympics, World Championships, National Championships, etc.) and won Olympic medals. These parameters ensure that these athletes have been exposed to professional sports and are relatively well-known in this role. The three memoirs I will be analyzing are, “Brave Enough” by Jessie Diggins (2021), “In the Water They Can’t See You Cry” by Amanda Beard (2012), and “Letters to a Young Gymnast” by Nadia Comăneci (2003). The varying dates of publication will allow me to see how certain narrative patterns have persisted or transformed over time.

It is important to note that all of the memoirs in this sample were written by white women. In addition, the three athletes in my sample all live in North America. As such, my analysis cannot speak to the experiences of white women outside North America and the experiences of racialized athletes. Part of the reason why I chose to analyze memoirs written by white athletes is because I am a white athlete and, therefore, better acquainted with this experience. Another reason is my interest in looking deeper into privileged experiences. This is of importance, as there are not many studies that directly interrogate a privileged standpoint—most studies that employ FST do so when analyzing the experiences of marginalized women. A limitation of purposive sampling is that the findings cannot be generalized. As the sample only includes three memoirs, my discussion of findings only extends to the cases I analyzed.

The method of data analysis will be narrative inquiry. This is a qualitative method of analysis that is concerned with studying descriptive accounts from people or characters. According to Butler-Kisber (2010), a narrative “tells a short or extended story about something significant” (p. 62). Moreover, narrative offers “distinctive ways of thinking and understanding... [which] integrates the physical and psychological dimensions of knowing” (p. 62). In other words, a narrative is a form of inquiry that offers unique perspectives and ways of thinking. Storytelling allows individuals to make sense of their experiences, cultural life, and identity (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 63).

Narrative inquiry gained traction in the late 20th century in tandem with a heightened interest in anthropological research and the women’s liberation movement (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 63). Since then, narrative analysis has been considered an effective way to study personal accounts and stories (p. 63). This form of methodology is impactful, particularly when studies aim to “bring silenced voices centre stage and to question mainstream deficit notions of history, culture, and society” (p. 63). This aligns with the justification for why I intend to use a narrative analysis in my own study. By reading athlete memoirs, I am reading a narrative of one’s life and aim to better understand the voices of the athletes, uncover how they articulate their experiences, and identify whether they challenge or reaffirm a dominant narrative around female athletic success. A narrative analysis will enable me to dissect their stories, and identify their agenda and their omissions. As Butler-Kisber (2010) argues, “narrative[s] illustrate the poignancy and potential power of personal experiences” (p. 63). It is of interest to consider how these elite athletes, who are prestigious and successful in a hegemonic way, articulate their experiences and adhere to or defy dominant ideologies around athleticism.

Some forms of narrative inquiry involve real participants and as such, require the researcher to develop an ongoing trusting relationship with them. As my data is obtained from reading memoirs, this is not a concern in my study. It is important to consider the implications of authority, power, and representation in this kind of research (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 63). While the implications of this may not be as evident in my research, as there are no real participants, I concur that questioning the power dynamics in the memoirs is still an important consideration. It is integral to consider how the athletes may be inferring or directly contributing to existing power dynamics in the sporting world, as they were given the opportunity to write about their stories in a genre that is often seen as objective. As such, the way they form their thoughts around discipline, athleticism, and success has an impact. Moreover, the information they omit is of importance as well.

There are several different types of narrative. I have drawn from Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure, as explained by Butler-Kisber (2010), which involves the following steps: making note of "an abstract, an orientation, a complicating action, a resolution, an evaluation, and a coda" (p. 68). An abstract is a summary of the events in a story while the orientation refers to describing the events and considering the "time, place, situation, [and] participants" (p. 67). Butler-Kisber (2010) describes the complicating action as the sequence of events that ultimately leads to the resolution (p. 67). Lastly, a coda describes returning to the present and considering the narrator's outlook on their future (pp. 67-68). Since I am analyzing three athlete memoirs, I have articulated my findings slightly differently. I have provided a brief summary of the sequence of events and then broken them down into three key narrative themes and their underlying significant meanings—or ideological effects—associated with them. I refer to the "complicating action" as the adversity and have a section on the resolution of each story. Lastly, I

have brought this study back to the present and highlight how the heroines narrate their desired future.

When I analyzed these memoirs and their adherence or resistance to postfeminism, I first began by reading the athlete memoirs and gathering general notes about them. I marked down similarities in the narrative structure and noted similar themes of female success. I then read the memoirs a second time and made more specific notes. I pulled quotes that described the athlete as a child and how they got into their sport. I also looked at how they would describe themselves during competition and in their regular life. I paid special attention to how each story was resolved and identified several quotes. I then gathered these quotes and classified them into three themes: the heroine, the adversity, and the resolution.

Butler-Kisber's (2010) principles of narrative analysis will strengthen my research, as they will provide me with tools to understand how the athletes use narrative to "construct meaning and make sense of their personal lives" (p. 65). I will analyze my findings through postfeminist lenses by identifying how postfeminist tropes such as individuality, choice, and empowerment are prevalent in athlete memoirs. In addition, I will employ feminist standpoint theory to locate the athlete's standpoint which will enable me to discuss what the athletes are consciously or inadvertently choosing not to say. While I am not claiming that the white female athletes in my sample belong to a vulnerable group and are, therefore, oppressed, I aim to understand how they reproduce or challenge hegemonic ideas about female athleticism in their narratives. The memoirs may offer insights into how the female athletes self-govern, not only in terms of how they discipline themselves to achieve their athletic endeavors but also how they describe the various roles they undertake, which consequently reproduce postfeminist tropes. A

narrative inquiry will enable me to analyze these texts, and to also recognize if there are moments of resistance to the hegemonic athlete identity.

A limitation of this method is that it is highly interpretive. As such, the ability to generalize my findings will be limited. Moreover, reading athlete memoirs offers insight into their experiences, yet cannot substitute a genuine athlete voice. This study does not involve real participants, so there is no opportunity to ask the athletes how their experience as athletes was impacted by hegemony. The distinction between fact and fiction blurs when using a narrative analysis (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 78). This, however, isn't a major issue in this context as the point is identifying and evaluating the narrator's version of events. Narrative inquiry is highly conscious of the ethics behind this type of study. While my study involves no human participants, I still want to be considerate of these athlete's stories as they detail intimate parts of their identities, struggles, and self-perceptions. The findings of this study are of my own interpretation and should not dissuade anyone from reading the athletes' memoirs.

Conclusion

Incorporating both postfeminism and feminist standpoint theories into this study will provide me with a framework to analyze how the female athletes write about themselves and their experiences in ways that adhere to or resist hegemony. Postfeminist tropes such as empowerment, individualism, and self-monitoring contribute to the notion that female success is achievable by people who are disciplined and believe in themselves. These are common tropes in athlete memoirs. Despite struggling with gender barriers and competing in sports that are not easily accessible, female athletes do not always articulate these challenges. Rather, they focus on the individual struggles they faced and how they overcame them. Feminist standpoint theory

examines marginalized women's challenges to make sense of their oppression when they lack the vocabulary to express that pain. This struggle, otherwise known as hermeneutical injustice, may impact the ways female athletes talk about their experiences and roles as athletes; they may not be fully aware of the oppressions they face. Additionally, female athletes may recognize how writing about themselves solely as athletes limits facets of their identity. As such, feminist standpoint theory may serve as a way to understand why postfeminist tropes that focus on individual female success are so prevalent.

A narrative analysis will benefit this study as it will allow for an in depth dissection of how female athlete memoirs (re)produce or resist dominance and inequality. Memoirs are viewed as a manual to an athlete's success. While many have been edited, co-written, or written with the help of a ghost writer, they serve as a way for anyone to gain an inside look into an athlete's choices, training plan, and path towards success. Analyzing three female athlete memoirs will enable me to recognize patterns in the narrative construction of female success, and how they function as forms of power and control. It is critical to recognize who is offered the opportunity to speak on behalf of female athletes. Athletes are responsible for their narrative choices as anyone can read their story. As such, these memoirs function both as a commodified product and a popular representation of female athletes. Drawing from Butler-Kisber's ideas on narrative inquiry will facilitate a deeper understanding of how these memoirs contribute to or resist hegemony. Moreover, Butler-Kisber (2010) asserts that researchers may also "live the story" (p. 69). This means that researchers undergoing a narrative analysis may record any personal interactions in order to "interrogate their own assumptions" (p. 69). This is important to consider, since I am a former National Team athlete, and as such, I can practise reflexivity in this study to make clear my own assumptions, biases, or viewpoints.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Introduction

The following chapter outlines the analysis on my sample of three female athlete memoirs written by American cross country skier Jessie Diggins, former American swimmer Amanda Beard, and former American-Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci. Diggins's memoir begins with a recount of her childhood, her early years in Minnesota and her summers at her family's lake houses in Thunder Bay. She also writes about discovering cross country skiing and choosing to pursue racing competitively. She shares the ups and downs of training, including her experience with bulimia. The remainder of her memoir closely follows her training regimen in the lead-up to her and teammate Kikkan Randall winning the first gold medal for the U.S. in over 40 years at the 2018 Olympics.

Amanda Beard's memoir begins similarly, sharing stories of her childhood and her desire to join her two older sisters on their swim team when she was only four-years-old. She shares her experience winning a silver medal at the Olympics when she was only fourteen, and her desire to try swimming professionally for the next 13 years. She earned a full ride scholarship to swim with the University of Arizona, and she lived in Tucson in a five-bedroom ranch-style home bought for her by her father. Her memoir details the public yet problematic romantic relationships she had, which impacted her sense of self-worth. The climax of her adversity is when she begins to engage in self-harm as a result of high stress, body image issues, and an eating disorder, but concludes with her finding help and self-acceptance.

Nadia Comaneci was born in Romania and the beginning of her memoir also follows a similar structure with recollections of her childhood and family, who supported her in her pursuit to be a gymnast. She shares the seemingly anticlimactic moment of her gold medal win at the

1976 Olympics, and the continuation of her impressive career. The apex of her story is her defection from Romania to the United States in the 80s. Upon her entrance to the U.S. she continued to compete and attend gymnastics events. She then shares how she met her husband and ends the memoir by acknowledging how grateful she is for every opportunity her life has given her.

Throughout this analysis, I will be referring to the protagonist/author of each memoir as “the heroine”. A heroine is someone who is highly admired for her courage or achievements; she is seen as the ideal female character. I will be referring to the athletes as heroines to position them within narrative inquiry. Furthermore, I have divided up my findings into three parts: the heroine, the adversity, and the resolution. Following these sections, I will connect these findings to my chosen theories and articulate my interpretations.

The Heroine

Unlike the traditional fairy tale narrative where the female heroine needs a prince to save her, the athlete memoirs in my sample detail stories from women who are highly independent, motivated, and disciplined. They represent everything traditional fairy tales do not; they don't need a man to save them or achieve their goals for them. The memoirs in my sample all begin with a recollection of the athlete—the heroine—as a child. These memories allow the reader to understand how they got into their sport in the first place. Common descriptions of their childhood highlight their bountiful energy and supportive family members who encouraged them to participate in sports. Due to their keenness to play sports, the heroines describe themselves as “tomboys” (Comaneci, 2003, p. 11; Beard, 2012, p. 6). In addition, each heroine makes a point of saying how participating in sports was akin to doing something “for boys”, yet this never held them back. For example, Comaneci (2003) says she “used to practice every day so that the boys

would allow me to play on their teams” (p. 7). Similarly, Diggins (2021) states, “the more something was labeled a ‘boy thing’ because of how tough or gross or physically draining it was, the more I wanted to do it.” (p. x). And lastly, Beard (2012) holds similar sentiments when she says, “I didn’t care if they were ‘boys’ sports or not... I was the son [my dad] never had” (p. 11). These statements reflect the hegemonic tendency to consider sports as exclusively for boys and men. Rather than challenging the sexist connotations of these sentiments—such as drawing attention to the lack of logical reasoning to back up the notion that “physically draining” sports are for boys—the heroines use these stereotypical statements to further a postfeminist agenda. This relates to McRobbie’s (2004) description of “the new female subject” as someone who withholds the critique of sexism to demonstrate her freedom (p. 260). Rather than criticize the sexist ideologies around sports, which can impact the desire for girls and women to begin participating in the first place, the heroines imply that believing in themselves and working hard is the most effective way to earn their place. By choosing to omit any criticism, the heroines’ inadvertently advocate for feminism's dismantlement. They focus on what Tasker et al (2007) calls “production of the self”, which is where individuals withhold critique in favour of demonstrating their independent empowerment (p. 2). The heroines do not challenge this stereotype and instead, use it to further a heightened individual narrative.

When Diggins (2021) says, “if boys do that sort of thing, then I will too.” (p. x), she fails to acknowledge the inequities that exist and continue to persist in high performance sport and instead, turns this institutional issue into a matter of personal effort. This statement is reflective of “girl power” sentiments, which encourages individuals to chase their dreams rather than address the barriers that may make it more challenging—or impossible—for others to do the same. “Girl power” is embedded within a neoliberal discourse of choice (Zaslow, 2009). It offers

the idea that girls can choose when they want to be perceived as powerful or girly (Zaslow, 2009). This type of discourse celebrates dominant forms of femininity, but fails to advocate for social change. These statements relate to McRobbie's (2004) work on postfeminism, as they can be seen as "gentle denunciations of feminism" (p. 257). The heroines share how they didn't let the notion that sports are for boys undermine their vocation. In doing so, they indirectly encourage the reader to do the same and suggest that young women can be responsible for their own social change. Early feminist standpoint theorists argued that gender division offered ways for women to identify assumptions that were problematic and held by the dominant group (Intemann, 2020, p. 2). FST suggests that women's experiences can be used to dismantle these dominant assumptions (p. 2). Yet the heroine's articulation of their early experience in sports does not challenge hegemonic ideas. This discrepancy could be explained by considering the athletes' standpoint as white, affluent women. This privilege may impact their self-perception and belief that self-discipline leads to success. Unlike racialized athletes, who face oppression and stereotypes, the white heroines, who possess the means to be disciplined, can freely try any sport they want. Perhaps a reason Diggins supports this girl power mentality is because she competes in cross country skiing, a sport where men and women have the same number of races each season and earn the same amount of prize money (McMahon, 2012; Small, 2022). Despite this, there are still barriers that make entering sports more challenging for marginalized groups. This fact goes unnoticed by all three heroines.

Another way these statements undermine feminism is by inferring that their achievements are a product of female individualism. The heroines write as if accessing sports from a young age is a widespread and normal experience, and as if morally and financially supportive family members are something to be expected and not the exception. By failing to recognize the

privilege in their upbringing, the heroines regard their entrance and continuation in sports as a product of their own freedom of choice. It is then through this freedom to choose that they can begin to hold themselves accountable to achieve success. McRobbie (2004) argues that this depiction of feminism renders it insignificant; it implies that women no longer need a collective movement to advocate for change; women who want to achieve a goal must simply work for it (p. 258). In doing so, they become “privileged subjects of the new meritocracy” (p. 258). I would argue the female athletes in my sample exemplify this. Yet it is important to consider how their sentiments may be reflective of their standpoint as white women athletes.

In addition to being active children, the heroines come from families that valued and encouraged sports participation. Beard (2012) shares how her seemingly endless youthful energy persuaded her parents to enroll her “in every activity under the sun” (p. 11). Diggins (2021) shares a similar sentiment by stating that her parents “started signing me up for any sport I wanted to try” (p. 11). Sports participation does not come without a cost. To participate, one needs access in the form of financial support, living in a geographical area with sport infrastructure, and the familial support the heroines describe. This is not everybody’s experience. Perhaps a reason the heroines never acknowledge their privilege or the hurdles that make entering professional sport not universally accessible is because of how they grew up. They experienced supportive environments where they were never told they would fail. Being surrounded by this kind of encouragement might have impacted the way they believe success is achieved. In this environment, the heroines may have never considered the possibility of failure. This is noted in the statements they make about perseverance and self-empowerment, which reveals that they are blinded to their privileged standpoint. This contrasts Harding’s articulation of “epistemic advantage” which is described by Rolin (2009) as the notion that those who lack

privilege socially may obtain perspectives of social reality that are less distorted (p. 218). In other words, socially underprivileged folks such as women may gain an understanding of how their lives are oppressed in comparison to the dominant group in society (p. 218). Contrary to this perspective, the heroines in my sample do not appear to acknowledge that barriers exist. This is not to say they don't have an awareness of the relations of power that persist in a patriarchal, capitalistic society (and sport system), but they do not call it out. While they may have a "double consciousness", which means that they recognize the unfairness of women's life experiences in contrast to the dominant group (Watson et al, 2018, p. 296), their standpoint as white, middle-class women may prevent them from fully understanding or describing this in their memoirs.

In contrast, the heroines' narratives present frequent claims that blindly demonstrate their privilege. For instance, Diggins (2021) recalls that

I was raised in a culture where my parents and grandparents taught me that I could do anything I set my mind to regardless of my gender, size, and age. I was always empowered to go outside, try something new, and be fearless. (p. 7)

These recollections and statements contribute to the notion that athletes are made when they are children; it is rare that an adult will decide to try a new sport, commit to training every day for it, hire a coach and purchase the proper equipment, and become the next best competitor. These statements disregard the heroines' privilege; they never acknowledge the privileged access they had to their sport and the fact that, as they were young children, they had no choice in the matter. Additionally, sports are costly. Yet even this seemingly clear barrier to sports is never acknowledged. In fact, it is dismissed by Comaneci (2003) when she says, "... a level of personal and financial commitment will grow if it's meant to be" (p. 80). The phrase "if it's meant to be"

is dismissive and adheres to a postfeminist viewpoint of success; success is measured by one's individual efforts; if one wants to succeed they must work hard, be disciplined, and stay empowered.

All these statements contribute to the notion that to become an elite athlete requires a certain amount of financial breadth, familial support, and self-discipline. Moreover, these sentiments and reflections of moments that catalyzed their passion for sports support the notion that athletes are made when they are children. They suggest that if people don't have the supportive means from a young age, they will never become a champion. In addition to ignoring the difficult access to some sports, the heroines make statements that further imply that becoming a professional athlete requires a type of resiliency that one either has or doesn't have. For example, Diggins (2021) states that she "inherit[ed] my dad's tolerance for pain" (p. 45). Similarly, Comaneci (2003) says, "my father was always filled with a sense of joy in life, and I believe I inherited that from him in the joy I get from movement" (p. 7). It is noteworthy to mention how these traits are described as being inherited from their fathers, not their mothers. This contributes to sexist ideologies of sports and athletics. The implication that traits such as tolerance for pain and enjoying exercising, which are considered ideal characteristics to be an elite athlete, are inherited suggests that athletic success is something one is born into; success is inevitable if one possesses or inherits these privileges and traits. By virtue of this, becoming a champion is something that one is born into, yet it requires self-discipline and governance to maintain. Moreover, this self-discipline is crucial in times of adversity.

The Adversity

A second prominent narrative theme found in this sample is adversity. After the heroine has discovered a love for her sport, she runs into some sort of roadblock. Interestingly, the source of such adversity is rarely acknowledged. For example, one common form of adversity is an eating disorder. Both Diggins and Beard share their struggle with their body image and their disordered eating. In both of their memoirs, they describe the obstacle of overcoming such adversity as a highly individual matter. While I am critical of the way overcoming this obstacle is depicted, I want to clarify that I am not trying to trivialize their experiences; eating disorders are nuanced and can plague anyone regardless of whether they compete in sports. This being said, eating disorders are common in endurance sports, which both Diggins and Beard competed in. Neither one of them mentions the ubiquity of eating disorders in their sports or high-performance sport in general. Additionally, they don't call out western society's predisposition to favour thinness, and how the "ideal athletic body" is often reflective of this cultural ideology.

More importantly, overcoming this kind of adversity is narrated as an individual process. When Diggins (2021) recounts seeking treatment after relapsing in her eating disorder she says, "eventually, I asked for help and recommitted to taking care of myself. I got my life back on track after my little derailment" (p. 165). By referring to her recovering as an act of commitment, and the slippage into an eating disorder as a "derailment," one can deduce that this moment of adversity was an independent problem that required an independent solution. Such individualism is noted again when Diggins (2021) says, "I would have to be brave enough to take the next step [in my eating disorder recovery]" (p. 76). While I am not trying to diminish the overwhelming feelings of guilt that can plague a person with an eating disorder, the descriptions that Diggins offers of her experience with bulimia imply that it was her own individual problem, that she "let

herself’ fall under the pressures and stress of competing at the highest level and that in order to come back to a healthy body, she would have to entertain a new form of self-discipline. This contributes to what McRobbie (2004) referred to as “female individualization”, which is the idea that female individuals must “avidly self-monitor” to create their ideal life (p. 260). Not only do the heroines do this throughout their athletic careers in order to achieve their goals, but they also self-monitor to overcome obstacles. By virtue of this, it is not only a matter of making choices to achieve female athletic success, but it is about making the right choices. This narrative ignores the fact that people who possess less economic or societal privilege don’t have the opportunity to make such choices to begin with. For example, when Diggins was seeking treatment for her eating disorder, she lived in residency at The Emily Program, an eating disorder treatment centre that is costly. Privileging the freedom of choice ignores the instances of systemic disparity, such as socioeconomic class positions, which limits women’s capacity to have and make the same choices (McRobbie, 2004, p. 261).

Other instances of adversity are described by Diggins and Beard when they share how they were bullied (Diggins, 2021, p. 111; Beard, 2012, p. 106). In both cases, the heroines do not name their bully. While it is important to consider that this may simply be a tactic to protect the true identity of the bully, it is once again an example of how the adversity in these memoirs comes from no source. Diggins (2021) describes her bully as one who would say harmful things, calling such remarks a form of “psychological sabotage” (p. 111). She recounts another moment where a person—again, unnamed—commented on her weight gain, which resulted in Diggins spiralling back into her eating disorder habits (p. 164). In reaction to this, Diggins says she “lost faith” in herself (p. 164). Again, this illustrates how experiencing this form of adversity is viewed as a personal defeat. Similarly, Beard (2012) refers to her own experiences with bullying

and how they impacted her performance in races by saying “too much negativity weighted down on me” (p. 198). She then shares how the stress of competing led her to seek help with a therapist (p. 220). Despite acknowledging this help, she then shares how she eventually stopped therapy and claims, “I didn’t need [my therapist] anymore, because I could do it on my own” (p. 220). This is once again reminiscent of a “girl power” attitude. It infers that even if people seek help to overcome an obstacle, they should inevitably become sufficient on their own.

The fact these athletes do not acknowledge structural forces as the source of their adversity may be partially attributed to what Harding describes as “relations of power distorting evidence” (Rolin, 2009, p. 220). Harding argues that cultures of fear can impact people’s desire to share evidence of their experience (Rolin, 2009, p. 220). It is important to note that Diggins is still an athlete, competing for the U.S. and representing her ski club and sponsors. Choosing to not name her bully may be a choice to maintain positive relations with those she represents and who represent her. While this is important to consider, the retelling of such adverse experiences only serves to illustrate how Diggins and the other heroines ultimately overcome these obstacles on their own.

Similar sentiments are articulated by Comaneci (2003) who, while not suffering from an eating disorder or bullying, claims to have experienced her own form of adversity when she took six months off from competitive training (p. 68). She regards getting back into shape as “torture” but shares how she was not afraid of pushing her body to its limits: “the only way to escape fear is to trample it beneath your feet” (p. 69). This heightened sense of individualism in overcoming obstacles is further exemplified when she says, “no matter how much support you’re given from family, friends, and coaches, ultimately you have to succeed on your own” (p. 74). Such statements of heightened individualism seem to discredit the earlier mentions of her childhood,

where she described growing up with family members who were supportive of her athletic dreams. Yet it is this very part of her experience that perhaps contributes to her belief that hard work is solely an individual matter. Comaneci's comment is reflective of her upbringing and her experience as a young athlete; she achieved success by working hard and having the resources to train, therefore she believes anyone else in a similar situation will be successful as well. She embodies the empowered, self-disciplined, postfeminist athlete when she says, "I believe in being your own biggest supporter because that means you will always have someone in your corner" (Comaneci, 2003, p. 75). Moreover, she emphasizes her belief in the meritocratic ideology of sport when she says,

Hard work will always get you somewhere. If you have a little talent and work very hard, then you have a shot at being a big winner. And if you have a lucky star in your hand, then you may just accomplish your goals. (p. 79)

Ironically, this statement seems to contradict itself. Initially, Comaneci appears to adhere to the hegemonic notion of western meritocracy; she declares that consistently working hard will inevitably lead to success. Yet she then contradicts this statement by inferring that luck is involved. While one might consider this to be a moment when Comaneci is acknowledging her own privilege—despite growing up under communist regime in Romania, she was privy to resources that citizens who weren't athletes did not receive—the mention of luck discredits the notion that working hard will inevitably lead to success. If luck is a crucial ingredient in achieving one's athletic goals, then one must ask why discipline is necessary at all. As if in response to this, Comaneci (2003) then shares, "it doesn't matter whether you win gold medals. What matters is that you strive to be your best and then struggle to be even better" (p. 84). The

point of overcoming adversity then is to be a winner, regardless of whether this involves medals or not.

Comaneci embodies the idea of becoming the best version of yourself, which can only be achieved by holding yourself accountable and pushing through adversity, regardless of where it is coming from. Rather than challenging the source of the adversity, or attempting to dismantle the oppression underprivileged athletes face, the goal is to overcome it. This sentiment is also shared by Beard (2012), who discusses how after she switched swim teams and coaches she was having more positive experiences and had less urges to harm herself (p. 211). This suggests that her previous environment was contributing to her deteriorating mental health, eating disorder, and self-harm practises. This goes unacknowledged, as the point of this story is not to call out the harmful practises that can occur in elite sport environments; the sole goal of experiencing such trauma is to come out on top. This is what it means to be a winner.

The Resolution

Interestingly, it is the final section of the athlete memoirs where they read like fairy tales the most. In my sample, each memoir ends with the heroine describing how she met her boyfriend or husband and how they got engaged and married. Additionally, they either share their experience of having children, or express a desire to one day have children. While romantic partnerships and creating families are personal aspects in many people's lives, it is of interest to consider the ubiquity of this narrative across my sample. One would think that a memoir about athletic success would end with a remark about the experience of competing and having a career as a professional athlete. Yet all there is in the last few chapters is a detailed recount of their relationships, which are all heterosexual. Comaneci (2003) shares details from her wedding

which is reminiscent of a fairy tale. She notes that she wore “a gorgeous gown with a 23-foot train covered with 10,000 pearls” (p. 173). She also refers to her adversities and relates overcoming them to this moment when she says, “... everything I’d been through in my entire life was culminating in total happiness” (p. 166). Through this statement, she implies that one of the rewards of overcoming hardships is finding a romantic partner. Ending the memoirs in this way further restricts the meaning of what it is to be a successful female athlete.

A key point the heroines make is that female athletic success is not based on medals, yet all the athletes in my sample have won Olympic medals, and as such, hold this prestige and are offered the opportunity to speak on behalf of athletes. Success, as defined by the heroines in my sample, comes from self-discipline, believing in one’s abilities, doing things even those just considered “for boys”, and overcoming obstacles independently. Success is not defined by standing up for others or challenging institutions that oppress marginalized groups. Rather, female success is achieved when the heroine meets the love of her life. While achieving one’s athletic goals does not require the saving or assistance from a man, a successful woman must have a romantic partner. Their heterosexual relationships become a key part of their story. This relates to Romney and Johnson’s (2019) quantitative content analysis of male and female athletes on social media mentioned in the literature review chapter. The authors found that female athletes are often photographed alongside a male athlete (p. 749). The presence of a male athlete functions to validate women’s athletics (p. 749). Similarly, the heroines in my sample end their success stories by mentioning their heterosexual relationships, thus inferring their success as women is validated by the men in their life.

Despite all the setbacks and challenges these elite athletes experienced, they recall their decision to have a romantic relationship as being one of their biggest rewards. For example,

Diggins (2021) says, “perhaps the part of my life where I feel I’ve been the bravest is starting a life with someone I love” (p. 269). Similarly, Beard (2012) shares a sentiment on her shifting identity when she says, “I found my groove when it came to the title of ‘mom,’ and soon I came to love it more than ‘Olympian’ or anything else I’ve been called” (p. 232). These statements inadvertently normalize postfeminist ideas. As McRobbie (2004) argues, postfeminism considers feminism to be outdated and unneeded (p. 255). When women express a desire for convention, for example by wanting to be married, feminism is seen as a constraint to this desire (McRobbie, 2004, p. 262). Desiring traditional conventions infers that women are freeing themselves from feminism to liberally enjoy what is disapproved of by feminists (p. 262). Moreover, these sentiments relate to McRobbie’s (2004) description of “gender anxieties” (p. 262) McRobbie (2004) asserts that some popular cultural texts normalize postfeminist ideas about certain gender anxieties, such as the worry that one may never meet “the one” or become too old to have children (p. 262). These worries contribute to the postfeminist parameters of choice. Despite athlete memoirs being marketed as tales of athletic success, they still end with remarks on their conventional desires. As McRobbie (2004) argues, these choices and descriptions of gender anxieties reaffirm what “constitutes livable lives for young women without the occasion of re-invented feminism” (p. 262). By including details of the heroines’ romantic relationships and declaring such partnerships as more rewarding than Olympic medals, a new regime of female athletic success is established.

The most interesting aspect of this fairy tale narrative is that it persists across all three memoirs, spanning nearly two decades. It is perhaps not surprising that the oldest memoir, written by Comaneci and published in 2003, adheres to the fairy tale narrative the most, as seen in statements such as, “it seemed my Prince Charming had finally kissed me and I’d awakened

after a long sleep” (p. 166). While Diggins’s memoir is the most recent, published in 2021, her story ends similarly. She calls on the various aspects of her identity, declaring that she is more than her medals, wins, and losses. She says,

I play many roles: a daughter, an advocate for causes I care about, a teammate, a speaker, a girlfriend, a sister, an adventurous adrenaline idiot, and hopefully someday a mother.

‘Gold medalist’ is one of those roles, but it’s not the only role in my life. (p. 266)

This reflection on her identity may at first appear to challenge the dominant ideology surrounding athletic success. Diggins declares that becoming an Olympic champion is not the defining factor in her life as a successful professional athlete. Beard (2012) shares a similar outlook when she realized she “didn’t need to win to succeed” (p. 234). While these statements may be coming from a place of good intentions, it is the very fact that the heroines were winners that they had the opportunity to share their stories.

When addressing where the future of the rest of their life is headed, the heroines share their desire to continue to contribute to the existing world of elite sport. For example, Comaneci (2003) shares how she and her husband opened a gymnastics training facility and hopes to train gymnasts to a level where they can obtain college scholarships (p. 177). While this seems like a selfless act of giving back, one must reflect on her previous statements regarding her beliefs on the ideal gymnast body type:

Only by balancing calories can a gymnast maintain her weight and delay puberty. Puberty can end a girl’s career, and overweight gymnasts, no matter how talented, can’t be as powerful or graceful as competitors who maintain a healthier body weight. (p. 85)

While the heroines make claims of leadership, giving back to their communities, and supporting causes they care about, they ultimately do not demand change. They contribute to the cycle of

athletics which, according to them, requires self-discipline, inherited athletic traits, and luck. Despite there being seemingly positive representation in women's athletics, it does not mean that entrance and continuation in sports has progressed for women. Watson et al (2018) argues that FST "centralizes women's experiences in the research process, viewing them as a point of entry for the creation of new knowledge" (p. 296). Perhaps a reason the heroines do not demand change or challenge the status quo is because they are still trying to survive in this male domain. Waston et al (2018) emphasize how women who possess a feminist identity may form effective coping mechanisms to deal with discrimination and oppression (p. 308). Moreover, they argue that women who actively take part in feminist circles feel more supported in these challenges (p. 308). Despite the heroine's "girl power" sentiments and their encouragement of girls and women to chase their dreams, one must consider whether their sports environments are truly feminist spaces. Even sports like cross country skiing and swimming, which offer the same competitive opportunities for both men and women, must be challenged. Perhaps perpetuating athletics as inherently masculine, or sharing their desire to contribute to the sporting system without changing it is a coping mechanism for female athletes in this anti-feminist space. These narratives could be reflective of broader exclusions in the sporting world. They make visible the discriminatory practises in sports and produce a postfeminist narrative.

Interestingly, it is Beard (2012) who offers perhaps the only remark of resistance when she is asked if she thinks her son will want to become a swimmer like her. She says, "I hope not. I know how much you have to invest for what usually turns out to be little in return" (p. 243). Despite this comment, there is still no larger reflection on the privileges the athletes possessed. The reason for this is because the memoirs are fairy tales; the point is not to address their privileged standpoint, call out the institutional barriers that make accessing sport or sport-related

resources challenging, or demand the dismantlement of harmful ideologies around success and the ideal athletic body. The point of these stories is to inspire, motivate, and empower the reader. If the reader can't achieve athletic success, they can find it in other areas of their life, whether through romantic partnerships, or giving back to the systems that made them. While these stories are ultimately idealistic, and lack a critical reflection of their own upbringing and source of adversity, there is certainly something innately human in the desire to encourage one another to keep going.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through a narrative analysis, this thesis has identified how female athlete memoirs reinforce postfeminist tropes of individuality, empowerment, and choice as key components to their stories of success. FST suggests the heroines in my sample possess a unique privilege in their upbringing as they were strongly encouraged to participate in sports regardless of the assumption that those sports were “for boys”. The moral support they received and the success they had reinforced their view that anyone, regardless of origin, race or class, can find success too if they believe in themselves and stay focused on their goals.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in this thesis is the tendency for female athletes to refer to athleticism and sports as a manly activity. Each heroine in my sample refers to sports as something that is for boys. Moreover, they describe possessing characteristics such as tolerance for pain as being a contributing factor in their success. This relates to the study in my literature review by Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba (2017) who identified how the female athletes interviewed differentiated themselves from “ordinary women” by describing themselves using masculine traits (p. 248). In my sample, the heroines take it a step further and declare that these traits were inherited from their fathers. It is important to consider how this may reinforce gender roles and be perceived by the reader. It may inadvertently reproduce beliefs such as “female biological inferiority” which suggests that women are inherently biologically weaker than men (Kavoura et al, 2017, p. 248). Despite my sample consisting of women who have broken records, set new standards, won gold medals, and made a living out of their athletic careers, one can’t deduce that sports are now a welcoming, inclusive space. Feminism is needed in sports. Solely because there is perhaps more representation for female athletes, this doesn’t mean we can turn a blind eye to the ways “female biological inferiority” continues to be upheld. If anything, these memoirs offer what Alison Harvey (2020) calls “feminine leadership” as opposed to “feminist

leadership” (p. 165). Feminine leadership is when women combat exclusion at the individual level without engaging in feminist action (p. 165). For example, this happens in contexts where a woman succeeds in a male-dominant industry, without changing the structures that make such success challenging. Feminist leadership, on the other hand, actively challenges the patriarchy and is “motivated by fairness, justice, and equality” (Harvey, 2020, p. 165). The heroines in this study reinforce the notion that sports require masculine traits and are validated by masculinity when they refer to themselves as “tomboys” or “the son [my dad] never had” (Comaneci, 2003, p. 11; Beard, 2012, p. 6; p. 11). This is particularly interesting as the sports they each compete in are gender equal. This illustrates the deeply rooted sexism and misogyny that continues to persist at all levels of sport.

The three memoirs analyzed can be seen as fairy tales in which heroines achieve hegemonic success and find happiness in a romantic partner. While the heroines maintain that success can look like many different things to each individual, it is striking that their romantic partnerships are presented as being more important than their athletic wins. Since this narrative persists across all three memoirs, it is of interest to consider whether the heroines were encouraged to write so openly and extensively on this subject. Both memoirs by Diggins and Beard were written with an accompanying author. These authors, Todd Smith and Rebecca Paley, have extensive experience in co-authoring memoirs. While editing and collaborating is part of authorship, it is important to question whether the ideas and narratives that present themselves in the heroine's memoirs are authentic and true. Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018) content analysis identified how women navigate being perceived as both feminine and athletic (p. 28). Perhaps the inclusion of the heroine's romantic life is meant to showcase the negotiation of this duality. As discussed in the literature review, researchers Fink, Burton, Farrell, and Parker (2012) argued

that sports institutions reinforce hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism (p. 85). The pervasiveness of the fairy tale ending reinforces this finding. While writing about their relationships may have allowed the heroines to explore other facets of their identity, they ultimately connect them back to their athletic endeavours, thus reinforcing the idea that heterosexual partnerships are intrinsically tied to female athletic success.

A key criticism I had while analyzing these memoirs was the lack of critical reflection from the heroines. Now, I realize this may be reflective of my own biases. The sport I competed in, ski jumping, was highly unequal, with women earning one third of the prize money that men do and having half as many competitions. As such, I come from a sports background that is rooted in inequality. I assumed the athletes in my sample would use the opportunity to write a memoir to share their stories and call out the inequities in their sports. It wasn't until I realized that most of their sports are gender equal—with the exception of Comaneci, gymnastics is a female-dominant sport, that I realized my own bias. Regardless, I am still critical of the “champion narrative” as described by the heroines, which is written as a highly individual endeavour. I am critical of the postfeminist trope of empowerment which suggests that any woman can succeed so long as she stays disciplined and positive. I have a stronger understanding that success as a professional athlete often comes with privilege. Encouraging girls and women to chase their dreams, while seemingly optimistic, ignores the structural barriers, such as cost, location, familial support, and gender inequity that make success more difficult for marginalized women.

After completing this thesis, I have become more aware of the prominence of this narrative. In fact, I have even unfollowed some athletes on social media because of the ways they perpetuate this “girl power” mentality, without calling out the barriers that make sport

inaccessible to many. While I concur that inspiring girls to be active and try anything they want is an important message, I would have more respect for athletes who actively try to make sport spaces safer and more accessible for all people, rather than implying that girls need to simply work on themselves and believe in their dreams. This thesis has made me reflect on the benefits of girls participating in sports; it teaches teamwork, leadership, and instills confidence. Yet I concur that unless sports institutions can be made more accessible at the grassroots level, these skills will be lost on many prospective athletes.

There are limitations to this study. A narrative analysis is highly interpretive; my findings cannot be generalized. Despite the athletes in my sample being given the opportunity to speak and share their stories, their words cannot be representative of all women athletes. Moreover, due to the scope of undergraduate research, I was unable to speak directly to any athletes. It is of interest to consider what the heroines would have said if I had conducted an informal interview with them to ask how their voice had been impacted by hegemony or if their editors and co-writers had encouraged them to write from a particular perspective, and whether they had felt this accurately represented them and their experiences. While the heroines in my sample are all white and live in North America, I do not see this as a limitation. It was my intention to conduct a study that focussed on the lives of privileged athletes. I was concerned with uncovering how this privileged standpoint may be articulated, and whether the heroines would recognize how their standpoint impacted their entrance and continuation in sports. I would argue it is important to recognize the unfairness in narratives that position athletic success as a product of individual empowerment. There are several intersectional barriers that make access to sports challenging. This realization does not mean we should no longer read these kinds of stories. After all, a large component to these memoirs is that they inspire the reader, and inspiration can take on many

forms. Winning an Olympic medal is no small feat. Yet, as the heroines declare, it should not be the only indicator of success. We should not undermine the importance of trying. Perhaps the understanding that these athletes come from privileged backgrounds, and that this privilege has certainly shaped their success as Olympic athletes, can promote change in the sporting world at the grassroots level by focussing on accessibility and inclusion from an intersectional feminist lens.

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