

“She’s twice their age”:
Representations of aging and the creation of an age order in women’s gymnastics

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Acknowledgements: Thank you to Sarah Jessup and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on this work.

Grants: This work was generously supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Canada Research Chair Program (Physical Culture and Social Life).

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Abstract

Elite-level women’s artistic gymnastics is (in)famous for the youth of its competitors. Yet if age representation constructs the limits and possibilities of sport, it is important to explore the effects of these representations. Here we examine media coverage of gymnast Oksana Chusovitina, who has competed internationally up to the age of 46. We conduct content analysis of 17 international competitions in which Chusovitina competed, from 2001 to 2018, exploring coverage of her and the younger gymnasts with whom she competed. As hegemonic masculinity structures a gender order in sport and beyond, we argue that gymnastics coverage constructs an age order in the sport by (1) emphasizing the exceptionality of older competitors; (2) focusing on athletes’ private lives; and (3) constructing the athlete-coach relationship as familial, where coaches are represented as surrogate parents. These techniques diminish the agency of young gymnasts and produce their youthfulness as hegemonic, treating athletes competing beyond their twenties as unworthy of serious attention. When older athletes like Chusovitina are categorized as outliers, the sports media is free to infantilize younger gymnasts, naturalizing their ostensible lack of agency, as well as the sport’s high burn-out and injury rate.

Keywords: age, gymnastics, representation, media, ageing, gender order

Competing at the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games in her late 40s, Uzbek gymnast Oksana Chusovitina was the subject of much attention from the press. In what *Sports Illustrated* has deemed “a sport for younger bodies,” the media celebrated Chusovitina as an “ageless wonder” (Cazeneuve, 2021). News18 (2021) commented that for Chusovitina, “Age [was] no barrier.” On the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) flagship program *The National*, host Adrienne Arsenault catalogued Chusovitina’s accomplishments, beginning in 1992 at the Barcelona Olympics. Arsenault matter-of-factly stated, “She’s 46 years old in a sport where teenagers sometimes rule.” She reported, “[Chusovitina] has a son older than most of her competitors” (CBC News, 2021). As CNN noted, Chusovitina “was competing before Simone Biles [an elite-level American gymnast] was born. Now they compete against each other” (Scott, 2020).

The focus on Chusovitina as an older gymnast is unusual in mediated sport and its scholarship. There is a marked absence of attention paid to the athletic pursuits of those beyond teenagerhood or mid-life (Messner & Musto, 2014). Scholarly and popular media attention focus almost exclusively on the pursuits of those seemingly at the heights of their athletic careers (i.e., over the age of 14 and under the age of 35), frequently leaving behind representation and analysis of children or adults in mid-life and beyond. As Messner and Musto (2014) report, scholarly examinations of children between 5 and 14 years old in leading sociology of sport journals represented less than 1% of the scholarship. Likewise, an examination of the last five years of publications in *Communication & Sport* (2018–2022) found that in over 30 issues, the journal published only one article on aging or older people. This article examined the experiences of fans at different points over the life course (van Driel & Gantz, 2021), leaving questions of age representation entirely untouched over this period. In this regard, as Messner and Musto (2014) point out, social science scholars of sport study what they love, and that this

appears to be elite-level, professional, mediated sports, where those at opposite ends of the life course are frequently excluded.

Today, it seems that the age range for elite-level athletes is broadening, with increasingly younger and older athletes competing at the highest levels of sport (Chen, 2018). This means that age representation matters, constructing both the limits and possibilities of sport. Despite this, stakeholders, the press and others often view elite-level athletes in their 30s or even 20s as past their prime. As women's gymnastics is one of the most-viewed televised Olympic sports, it is instructive to examine how gymnastics commentators represent age and aging. **In this work, we ask how older and younger gymnasts are represented by sport commentators and what assumptions these representations forward.** To do this, we offer a comparative analysis, examining Western television coverage of Oksana Chusovitina and her younger peers, beginning in 2001, when Chusovitina was over the age of 25. We find that media commentators focused almost exclusively on Chusovitina's age, sometimes spending more time discussing her exceptionalism than focusing on her present athletic accomplishments.

We begin this paper with an introduction to Chusovitina. Then we provide a review of the extant literature on age, sport, and representation, beginning with some background into the sport of gymnastics. Next, we describe the methods, specifically content analysis, we used to evaluate the representation of older gymnasts and the parameters we applied when deciding which competitions to study, and how. After that, we describe our content analysis and move to analyze the major themes we developed in this work. We conclude by forwarding the idea of a hegemonic age order, discussing how this order is present in gymnastics coverage, how it might affect gymnasts, and its relevance in other sporting arenas.

Born in 1975 in Uzbekistan (then a part of the Soviet Union), Oksana Chusovitina's gymnastics career has spanned from the late 1980s until 2021; as of the writing of this paper in early 2023, she has not yet ruled out a return to the sport. She has competed in every summer Olympic Games since 1992, representing three different national or international teams in Olympic competition: the Unified Team of former Soviet states (1992), Germany (2008 and 2012, while her son was receiving medical treatment in the country), and her home country of Uzbekistan (1996, 2000, 2004, 2016, and 2020). This makes her an Olympian eight times over. Known for demonstrating quickness and strength in her gymnastics, she has spent the last few decades specializing in vault; her most recent Olympic medal was a silver on vault at the 2008 Beijing games.

Literature Review: Age, Sport and Representation

The world of elite-level sports appears to celebrate the young, save for a few notable exceptions, like curling, equestrian sports, and sailing (see Allain & Marshall, 2018; Atkinson, 2009). Sports like gymnastics, diving, and figuring skating stand out, as the press and the public often associate these sports with the *very* young (Atkinson, 2009). In the words of one *ABC News* headline, "Too old to be an Olympic figure skater? There's always curling" (Lupkin, 2014; see Ryan, 1995). This makes the accomplishments of athletes like Chusovitina noteworthy. Work by Georgia Cervin (2021) catalogues competitive gymnastics' shift from womanly femininity to youthfulness. She documents the reasons for this shift, including the arrival of male coaches who were accustomed to working with younger boys, changes in equipment, and Olympic rules around amateurism. These historic shifts saw the average age of gymnasts drop from approximately 28 years in 1952 to 18.3 years in 1960 and, for the US team, 17.5 by 1976. According to Cervin (2021), international gymnastics teams played up this youthful turn by

encouraging their athletes to appear young. Some athletes sported pigtails at international competitions, or performed routines mimicking child's play. The rise of young athletes like Belarussian Olga Korbut and Romanian Nadia Comaneci, whose routines were often described as play and not hard athletic work, signaled a new era for the sport, one that was and continues to be dominated by extremely young athletes. Today, the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG), which governs competitive gymnastics worldwide, mandates that gymnasts must be at least 16 years old in the competition year.¹

Images of young gymnasts abound on television, as the sport is one of the most popular televised women's sports in the West. For example, the *LA Times* reported that 33.44 million Americans viewed the women's gymnastics team final at the Rio Games and just over 14 million viewed the same event in Tokyo ("NBC wins gold," 2021).² The televised representation of these extremely young and muscular, yet petite, athletes does important work in producing social stories about age, gender and the body, and are connected to a larger body of scholarship on the representation of women athletes. Messner, Duncan and Jensen (1993) report that from the 1970s to the 1990s, there was a marked decrease in overtly sexist and discriminatory language in media representations of women athletes. Petty and Pope (2019) confirm this trend, stating that "there has been a shift towards more positive coverage of women's sport" (p. 499). Litchfield and Kavanagh's (2019) examination of social media posts during the 2016 Olympic Games draws a similar conclusion. Despite increasing equality in gender representations, however, there are still consistent issues with gendered reporting. Specifically, communication scholars note that the press frequently infantilizes women athletes (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Petty & Pope, 2019), focuses on their expressions of emotion (Petty & Pope, 2019), gives more coverage to sports that

appear to conform to normative femininity (Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018), and provides more information about the personal lives of women athletes (Petty & Pope, 2019).

Importantly, some of the scholarship on gender representation in sport has demonstrated the role that age plays in the differential representations of male and female athletes (e.g., Angelini et al., 2013; Billings et al., 2014). While examining gender representation in NBC coverage of the Vancouver Olympics, Angelini et al. (2013) found that coverage of figure skating, a sport with some of the Winter Games' youngest female competitors, tended to use very different language when discussing female vs. male competitors, particularly compared to sports like skiing, bobsledding, speed skating and snowboarding. For example, announcers were more likely to discuss the emotions and physical appearance of female skaters than male skaters. Similarly, Billings et al. (2014) found that NBC announcers had the most significant gendered differences in their coverage of gymnastics (another sport with some of the youngest female competitors) at the 2012 Olympic games. Comparing gendered discourse in coverage of five Olympic sports, they found that announcers were more likely to attribute men's success to "superior strength" and women's failures to issues with "composure" (p. 148). These studies suggest that age and gender form important entanglements in gendered sport discourse. These appear to be especially pronounced in subjective (judged) sports associated with normative femininity and practiced by younger competitors (Hardin & Greer, 2009). As Angelini et al. (2013) argue:

Future examinations should explore the variable of age as a potential influencing factor on dialogue differences, both in terms of traditional notions of chronological age and in regard to age in comparison to other athletes within megasporting events . . . as there may be a relationship between age and gendered attributions of athletic performance. (p. 1192)

Featherstone and Wernick (1995) point out the importance of examining media representations of aging and the aging body. Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) further assert that scholars and others should be attentive to representations of age because “they give meaning to later life” (p. 29) both at the individual and societal levels. Socially, this is important because “images . . . can act as representations of the general ideals which shape the ‘appraisal’ of everyday social practices; as such, their meanings are flexible and open to interpretation and reinterpretation in accordance with broader socio-historical change” (p. 29). Sandberg, Lövgren and Hearn (2022) reinforce this in their examination of how old men understood representations of aging masculinity when reading Frederick Backman’s novel, *A Man Called Ove*. They find that representations of old men allowed readers both points of identification and resistance to gendered aging. As Pike (2013) asserts, “Creative representations of ageing are in fact incredibly powerful” (p. 84).

Despite the importance of age representation, its scholarly examination in the field of sport is, at present, fairly limited. As Atkinson (2009) points out, this lack of analysis persists despite the growing pressure by government agencies, health officials and medical experts (and others) encouraging the old to stay fit and active in later life (see Allain & Marshall, 2018; Katz, 2000). Both mainstream and specialized publications directed at older media consumers reproduce these pressures. However, despite some important research on aging, sport and communication, Atkinson’s (2009) review of the relevant scholarship finds that there is plenty of room for new scholarship in this field.

The scholarly literature that does focus on age representation of elite athletes is extremely limited. Trujillo’s (1991) paper on media coverage of Nolan Ryan’s 25-year career is a good example of this work, where he asserts that Ryan was portrayed as a hegemonic model of white,

middle-class masculinity — one that men were encouraged to emulate — even in his mid-40s. On the other hand, Atkinson and Herro's (2010) examination of Andre Agassi's tennis career, which included 21 consecutive U.S. Open Tennis Tournaments, finds that representation of elite-level athletes is highly marked by age. Reporters often framed Agassi in his early years as too young to be successful, and as he grew older, they framed him as too old. In his later years, commentators lowered their competitive expectations of Agassi because of his age, constructing him as a mature athlete, marred by disability and physical markers of aging, including baldness and wrinkles. Similarly, Tulle's (2014) work on media representations of tennis star Roger Federer and cyclist Lance Armstrong finds that the media routinely forwarded narratives of age-related decline by focusing on "the numbers," demonstrating that the athlete's chronological age was a marker of bodily deterioration and projecting a linear, downward career model.

When performing analysis, we were mindful of Messner, Duncan and Jensen's (1993) seminal essay on representations of women in televised sport, which argued that it is important to explore not just coverage of female athletes, but the *differences* and *asymmetry* in coverage of female and male athletes. Applying this principle to representations of age, we were attentive to coverage not just of Chusovitina as an older gymnast, but the differences between coverage of Chusovitina and the younger athletes against whom she competed. By examining these younger gymnasts, we had a more complete picture of how sports commentators produce a sporting age order, where they position youth as hegemonically dominant. We thus began this project with questions about whether we would see similar tendencies in representations of Chusovitina and her younger competitors. Did sports commentators forward a narrative of age-related decline when Chusovitina competed? Did the presence of an older athlete like Chusovitina encourage them to view female gymnasts as more mature, empowered, and adult? Or were there marked

differences in the way they represented Chusovitina and her competitors, even as they went head-to-head, with each side of the constructed young-old binary reinforcing the other?

Methods

We examined English-language television coverage of Chusovitina in international competitions, beginning in 2001 and ending in 2018.³ We focused on television coverage of international competition because it has the widest reach, and most people who encounter gymnastics will do so via television or streaming broadcasts, with millions watching Olympic coverage in particular (Young, 2021). We chose to begin with competitions in 2001 because this year started a new quadrennium in gymnastics,⁴ and was the point at which Chusovitina had three Olympic games under her belt and was over 25 years of age. At 25, she was more than five years older than the median age for women Olympic gymnasts at that time —18 years old. (Davis, 2020; Zaccardi, 2021). We primarily used YouTube to find TV coverage of old competitions. We studied 17 competitions, and most of the coverage we studied was American (primarily NBC and subsidiaries), with some British (BBC) coverage and a small amount of Canadian (CBC) and Australian coverage.

We watched the coverage of the 17 meets in their entirety (see Figure 1.1) and transcribed all segments of competition coverage focusing on Chusovitina, as well as some of the coverage of her younger competitors. Following the work of Nowell et al. (2017) we began by reading and re-reading the transcripts and then assigning codes to the data. These included discussions of the age, maturity, experience, skill level, affect, appearance, and family of the gymnasts. We then grouped commentators' remarks on Chusovitina and her competitors into themes. Themes identified in the remarks on Chusovitina included technical descriptions of her performed skills, as well as remarks about her exceptionality, her stature within the gymnastics community, her

history in the sport, the countries for which she competed, her status as mother and wife, the condition of her body, and the difference in age between her and her competitors. Themes we identified for these younger competitors included discussion of their relationships with their families and coaches, their grade level, the normative “teen” activities they were missing to compete, their physical appearance, and their emotions and mental “fitness.” The broad approach to our analysis helped confirm that the coverage of Chusovitina and her competitors was not anomalous but rather reflected sustained and systematic methods of representation. By exploring coverage of Chusovitina and her younger competitors in terms of its consistencies and asymmetries, we can see more clearly the assumptions the media makes about both the old and the young.

Separating the Women from the Girls

Youth vs. Experience

One of the most salient and effective ways that gymnastics representation produces an age order, where extreme youthfulness is presented as normative, is to separate young gymnasts from older ones, drawing attention to the age gap and marking older athletes as exceptional. This action works in two important ways. First, it demonstrates that older athletes are unusual in gymnastics, marking them as bodies out of place. And second, it normalizes the extremely young age of many elite-level female gymnasts. In this research, it was not uncommon to hear commentators using Chusovitina to emphasize the relative youth of other gymnasts. Broadcasters frequently spent time comparing Chusovitina’s age – or the age of her child – to the age of the gymnasts she was competing against. For example, during NBC coverage of the 2016 Rio Olympics, former gymnast-turned-commentator Tim Daggett commented of Chusovitina, “She’s 41 years old, has a son that’s a year older than American [gymnast competing at this Olympics]

Laurie Hernandez” (Gymnastics 101b, 2019). During the 2012 Olympics, NBC commentator Al Trautwig remarked that American competitor McKayla Maroney “wasn’t even born when Oksana Chusovitina started competing on an international basis” (Gymnastics Fun, 2021). Similarly, during the 2013 Worlds, a male commentator on Universal Sports said of Chusovitina, “She is the oldest of the 410 gymnasts in Antwerp for these finals. And most of them, she’s twice their age. Or more” (nastiafan101take7, 2013). These comments generally functioned not to suggest that gymnastics could evolve in ways that might lengthen the competitive life of athletes, but instead used Chusovitina as an exception to prove the rule – in this case, that women’s gymnastics was a sport for the young. As announcer Chris Marlowe remarked during the 2002 World Championships, “We’ll see if youth and exuberance can overcome the experience of the world’s best gymnasts” (USA Gymnastics, 2016).

Once-in-many-lifetimes

Not only did announcers compare Chusovitina to younger athletes in a battle between “youth” and “experience,” they also routinely painted her as an anomaly – one that fans were unlikely to witness again. For example, in 2018, NBC commentator Tim Daggett remarked of Chusovitina, “I mean it’s like impossible, right? Before Oksana has done this, nobody thought. . .” Fellow NBC commentator and former Olympic gymnast Nastia Liukin replied, “And to be honest, I don’t think anyone will ever do this again” (lobaznyuk, 2020a). NBC commentator and three-time Olympic gymnast John Roethlisberger said of Chusovitina during the 2017 World Championships in Montreal, “In the best, most complimentary way, she is a freak of nature to be able to do this sport at age 42” (lobaznyuk, 2020b).

When describing Chusovitina as a once-in-many-lifetimes case, commentators have failed to consider how her success may provide important lessons about longevity in the sport and

maintenance and care of the body over a lengthy career. Chusovitina clearly has remarkable physiological attributes that have made her a great gymnast and kept her healthy for decades. However, as John and Thiel (2022) argue, athletic talent is shaped by many factors, including biology, psychology, and social and institutional structures. In this regard, the inability of broadcasters (many of whom are former gymnasts) to probe the reasons for Chusovitina's longevity in a sport where athletic careers are strikingly short tells an important story about the common-sense of youth in women's elite-level gymnastics, and important lessons for gymnasts hoping to extend their careers are lost.

Although representations of Chusovitina competing beyond her mid-20s demonstrate how sports coverage constructs an age order favouring young (and sometimes very young) athletes while marginalizing older athletes as outliers, ageist discourse was rare in the coverage we examined, occurring only periodically, and mostly in the early 2000s.⁵ For example, in 2005, Australian gymnastics commentator Liz Chetkovich dismissed the idea that Chusovitina would continue past the 2008 Olympics (Gymgold07, 2020). Another example of ageism came from former NBC gymnastics commentator Al Trautwig, who has a long history of calling National Hockey League games (Al Trautwig, 2022). He commented during the 2016 Rio Olympic vault finals, "Somehow, her 41-year-old knees got through that" (Gymnastics101b, 2019). Despite these remarks, commentators were far more likely to infantilize the athletes, including Chusovitina.

Playful Little Girls

Some scholars have found that sports commentators have distinctly shifted in their representation of women athletes, sexualizing them less than they did in the past (Petty & Pope, 2019). Despite this, researchers still routinely find that women in sport are infantilized through

condescending language, which refers to them as “girls,” “ladies,” or “young ladies,” while generally referencing men as men (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Messner, Duncan & Jensen, 1993; Petty & Pope, 2019). The use of this kind of language delegitimizes women athletes, downplaying their accomplishments and making them appear less important than their male counterparts — thus securing sport as the rightful place of men.

Unlike many other sports, the social construction of gymnastics has an association with femininity. Mary Louise Adams (2005) points out that acts of moving in aesthetically pleasing ways – e.g., pointing one’s toes – mark activities like dance (and in this case gymnastics) as decidedly feminine pursuits for women and girls but not normatively gendered for men and boys. Moreover, coaches and choreographers frequently design routines that make female athletes appear childlike (Cervin, 2021). The language of commentators further encourages viewers to view the women as playful little girls. This form of infantilization draws attention from the strenuous labour and training involved in the production of elite gymnastics routines, naturalizing this seemingly “playful” sport as the bastion of the young. Gymnastics fans even joke online about the number of times NBC commentator Tim Daggett has referred to female gymnasts on uneven bars as being like “kid[s] on a playground” (missbeefarm, 2019; Rooster84, 2021). During the 2016 Olympic bar finals in Rio, Daggett said of American gymnast Madison Kocian, “I love watching her do bars, she’s so light and airy, it looks like such fun” (Gymnastics 101a, 2019). Through the language of youthful play, culture-makers construct an age order of sport in general and gymnastics in particular, producing the striking youth of elite-level athletes as common sense.

Women gymnasts, including Chusovitina, can come under critique if they do not present themselves as sufficiently playful and friendly. During the 2001 Goodwill Games, Bart Conner

chided Chusovitina for dismounting from her bars routine without a smile. Evoking her son, he commented, “How ‘bout a smile there, Oksana? Her young son at home wouldn’t mind seeing that” (Gymgold07, 2019a). Drawing on the work of Wensing and Bruce (2003), Petty and Pope (2019) note that this preoccupation with female athletes’ smiles repositions powerful women athletes as “non-threatening” (p. 392), and “deflects from physical accomplishment” (p. 495).

Aside from drawing attention to the playfulness (or lack thereof) in women’s routines, we found that commentators frequently used infantilizing language to describe female athletes – both younger and older. Commentors often called them by their first names (see Messner, Duncan & Jensen, 1993) and referred to them as “girls.” For example, during the 2001 Goodwill Games, announcers referred to 13-year-old Carly Patterson as a “little girl,” “little Carly Patterson,” and a “little 13-year-old” (Gymgold07, 2019a). Other announcers at the same games focused on the physical features of younger athletes in ways that emphasized their status as children. For example, announcer Kevin Harlan – most known for commentating men’s football and basketball – said of 13-year-old competitor Kaitlin White, “Those big blue eyes of hers are about as big as saucers” (Gymgold07, 2019a). Work by Wensing and Bruce (2003) found that reporters referred to women athletes in ways that “supported stereotypes of female passivity and frailty” (p. 391).

Villalon and Weiller-Abels (2018) report that this kind of linguistic devaluation of women gymnasts has continued even in more recent international competitions. During the 2016 Olympics, when gymnast and Olympic champion Sanne Wevers (aged 24 at the time) was spotted writing in a small notebook, one broadcaster insisted she was “writing in her diary” (p. 1143), even as another explained that she was likely calculating her difficulty scores, something Wevers frequently did.⁶ Similarly, NBC sportscaster Jim Watson drew the ire of many

gymnastics fans on Twitter during the women's gymnastics qualifying rounds of the 2016 Olympic Games, when he said that Team USA (who qualified with an almost 10-point lead over the second-place team) "might as well be standing around at a mall" (Fryer, 2016; Moran, 2016). Thus, while coverage of Chusovitina has rarely derided her as old, sportscasters have used devaluing and infantilizing language to describe her and her competitors, castigating her for not appearing appropriately joyful and creating the impression that her competitors are young girls at play, or teens enjoying leisure time.

Separating the Mothers from the Daughters

Sports broadcasters also regularly define female athletes by their (heterosexual) relationships within the private sphere, commenting on their status as girlfriends, wives and mothers (Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018). As Villalon and Weiller-Abels (2018) point out, even as incidents of overt sexualization decrease in number, the media support a culture of normative femininity, connected to heterosexuality and motherhood. The impact of this is that women's own pursuits in sport are often devalued and rendered secondary to those of men. Broadcasters thus uphold the gender order (or the hegemonically dominant position of men in sport). Villalon and Weiller-Abels (2018) argue that despite the young age of elite-level female gymnasts, they are still subject to heterosexualizing discourse. In one example, the authors report that American sports commentator Bob Costas interviewed American Simone Biles, one of the best Olympic gymnasts of all time, asking her about her crush on celebrity actor Zac Efron instead of her excellent sporting record. For Chusovitina, on the other hand, gymnastics commentators focus on her status as a wife and mother, producing her as both heterosexual and a generational outsider past the age of celebrity crushes – a framework that simultaneously secures the gender and age order of sport. In the late 2000s, the media seized on the story of her moving to Germany so her

son could receive treatment for his cancer. This was described most ghoulishly by NBC's Al Trautwig:

We told you the story of her son Alisher, how when she was in Russia, they didn't have a bed for him to fix his leukemia, so she put a call out to . . . the head of the German team, and she said, please, we can help you here in Germany. As payback she is competing for Germany. . . . And really, when you think about it, without gymnastics, who knows what happens to little Alisher? (us015, 2009)

In Trautwig's framing, gymnastics was a kind of life-saving redemption for Chusovitina and her son, and enhanced her ability to parent him and keep him alive.

Other sportscasters framed Chusovitina's continued involvement in the sport as necessary for the well-being of her family, suggesting an uneasiness with the idea of a mother travelling and working away from her child. During the 2002 World Championships, commentator Bart Conner commented that while Chusovitina would have liked to be home with her son, her work as a gymnast was essential to their financial well-being. He reassured the audience, "As soon as these championships are over, she'll go right back to Germany to be with her son. Maybe she'll bring a medal home" (USA Gymnastics, 2016).

While commentators were eager to frame Chusovitina as a sacrificing mother, we did not identify any mentions of her parents. By contrast, commentators continually framed younger gymnasts in the same competitions as daughters. During the 2001 Goodwill Games, commentator Kevin Harlan remarked on 13-year-old Carly Patterson, "I know her mother's here, but I gotta believe that any parent watching their child in a competition like this has just gotta . . . something in your stomach, that's my little baby, swinging around (Gymgold07, 2019a).
Commercials airing during these competitions also framed athletes as daughters, most

prominently in Procter & Gamble's ongoing "Thank you Mom" campaign, the "biggest and most successful" in the company's history (Wieden + Kennedy, 2022), airing commercials on NBC during every Olympics since 2010 and featuring tributes to the mothers of Olympians. During the 2012 Olympics, one commercial in the campaign showed footage of 17-year-old US gymnast and Olympian Jordyn Wieber as a child, performing flips in her home, while Wieber intones in a voice-over, "From driving me to practice every single day to helping me with my laundry, [my mom's] always been there for me" (Stacy Hein, 2013). This campaign naturalizes middle-aged or older women as mothers, and Olympic athletes as children reliant on the support and labour of their caregivers. By contrast, coverage of Chusovitina during her son's illness suggested that her role as a gymnast was secondary to her role as a mother, giving her the ability to access life-saving medical care even as it sometimes took her away from her son.

Coach as Parent and Athlete as Daughter

While female athletes are often contextualized in terms of their family relations, there is also a tendency to frame their relationships to their coaches and team coordinators as familial. In women's gymnastics, commentators frequently represent the gymnast-coach relationship as akin to that of a parent and child. Here American broadcasters often cast gymnasts from other nations – often Russia – as troublesome or "diva-like" daughters. In commentator Kevin Harlan's discussion of Russian gymnast Elena Zamolodchikova's 2001 Goodwill Games gold medal floor routine, he stated, "Before that she was quarreling with her coach!" (Gymgold07, 2019). An NBC segment on Russian gymnasts airing during the 2012 Olympic Games stated that the "diva" behaviour from the female gymnasts had rendered team head coach Alexander Alexandrov "miserable." The piece featured Alexandrov saying of the team, "Everybody is like diva. A little – nose up" (Lowder, 2012).

On the other hand, American gymnasts in the same era were generally portrayed as more dutiful daughters. After American gymnast Gabby Douglas completed the final routine of her gold-medal-winning performance during the all-around final of the 2012 Olympics, NBC commentators immediately framed her performance in terms of its importance for her coach, Liang Chow. Instead of commenting on Douglas being the first African-American gymnast to win all-around gold, Tim Daggett yelled over the roar of the crowd, "Her coach Liang Chow was in the exact same position four years ago, had to settle for silver with Shawn Johnson, but I don't know, it's looking pretty golden for this girl right here" (GMcD OCH, 2019). In this formulation, Johnson, who also worked with Chow, became the daughter who failed by "settling" for silver, with Douglas bearing the burden for redeeming her coach. Immediately after Daggett's comment, commentator and former Canadian gymnast Elfi Schlegel further diminished Douglas by emphasizing her demeanour over her athleticism, stating, "The best part of that performance was her smile" (GMcD OCH, 2019). However, no parental coach figure loomed larger over the reviewed footage than American team coordinator from 2001 to 2016, Martha Karolyi. NBC footage from this era is rife with footage of "the watchful eye" of Karolyi, observing, judging, and instructing the gymnasts. Even the name the 2016 US Women's Gymnastics Olympic team chose for themselves, "the Final Five," relates to Karolyi, as the gymnasts knew that she would retire after the games, making them her final Olympic gymnasts. After the 2016 Olympic vault final, in which Simone Biles took gold, NBC featured footage of Biles on the sidelines with Karolyi. As a grinning Karolyi clasps the nape of Biles' neck, Al Trautwig intones, "Martha Karolyi's not done yet with her hugs. Not for Simone Biles" (Gymnastics 101, 2019a). Framing the importance of Biles' win in terms of the pleasure it brought to others, Trautwig placed Biles

in the relational role of the daughter who succeeded by satisfying the exacting but maternal gaze of Karolyi.⁷

Chusovitina's coaches, on the other hand, seemed non-existent in review footage. The only exception to this was during NBC's coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games, where Al Trautwig identified German coach Shanna Polyokova as a kind of savior figure who brought Chusovitina to Germany to give her son life-saving treatment. Trautwig explained that Chusovitina's performance at these Olympics was "payback . . . for Germany" (us015, 2009), framing Chusovitina once again as a sacrificing mother, but also as a grateful immigrant performing her duty to a new motherland. As a result of the lack of a paternal or maternal coach figure, commentators were more likely to attribute Chusovitina's successes and achievements to her alone, conferring on her an aura of sovereignty that was not as accessible to younger gymnasts, still typecast as daughters in need of guidance.

Conclusion

This work supports the burgeoning scholarship on gender and age representation in sport. It affirms the work of Angelini et al. (2013) and Billings et al. (2014), who suggest that age and gender intersect in public representations of women in aesthetic sports (i.e., gymnastics and figure skating). Here we show that in the case of representations of Chusovitina and her competitors, age and gender are produced as important markers of value, skill, and potential. This work demonstrates that sport is deeply aligned with — and supportive of — the hegemonic gender order and age ideals for women — a corollary to Trujillo's (1991) work on sport and age ideals for men.

More specifically, we find that sports broadcasters consistently and continually emphasize a difference between Chusovitina and the younger gymnasts with whom she has competed.

Sportscasters make exceptional not the youth of many of the athletes but the older age of Chusovitina, commenting on her breadth of experience, the extraordinary nature of her accomplishments, her status as a once-in-many-lifetimes phenomena, and her responsibilities as a mother. This form of discourse positions Chusovitina as “a freak of nature” (Iobaznyuk, 2020b), drawing attention away from how she has cultivated longevity in her career, marking it as a fluke never to be repeated. In so doing, this discourse produces youthfulness as hegemonic. When athletes competing beyond their twenties are marked as outliers, unworthy of serious attention, the sports media is free to continue infantilizing younger gymnasts. Therefore, although the commentary may, on the surface, appear celebratory, it results in a positioning of the young within gymnastics not only as normative, but as normatively lacking agency. This positioning is important, as it also emphasizes the presumed naiveté and lack of experience of competitive elite-level female gymnasts, as well as their dependence on older figures.

Raewyn Connell’s (1987) analysis of gender and power is instructive here. Via the intersection of historically and culturally variable gender regimes (institutional gender arrangements) and social performances of gender, the gender order produces some gender expressions as dominant and others as marginal (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Social institutions (such as sport), media representations of gender, and an individual’s gender performance (Messner, 2002) all sustain this process. Crucially, it is the relational context between masculinities and femininities that constructs and (re)produces gender expressions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Drawing from this framework, in this paper we demonstrate how gymnastics commentators use the relational context between young and old(er) to create an “age order” in women’s gymnastics, hegemonically producing the sport as “naturally” belonging to the very young. This

act does two important things. First, it devalues the efforts of athletes beyond (and even in) their early twenties, marking them as bodies past their prime and out of place. Even when viewers are witness to the phenomenal accomplishments of older athletes such as Chusovitina, these athletes' efforts are positioned as marginal and unlikely. Scholars like Salter and Salter (2018) describe how age acts hegemonically, where despite resistance and contestation (see Higgs & Gilleard, 2019), various actors position old age as a time of inevitable decline and loss. Second, within the sport of gymnastics, bodies are marked as old remarkably quickly, often long before the age of 30. This focus on the oddity of "old" bodies in women's gymnastics strategically draws attention away from the notably young age of other gymnasts. This action helps to curb mounting criticism on gymnastics stakeholders to account for the stress, abuse and pressure placed on elite-level athletes early in their lives (see de Nood, 2020; Riddell, 2022;), instead producing both the stress on the athletes and their relative youth as natural.

This work is limited in several ways, including its reliance on competition videos from YouTube (often uploaded by fans). These videos may be subject to copyright claims and can thus disappear at any moment. Also, complete information about the network or commentators is not always available. Additionally, the coverage studied all came from a handful of Western, English-speaking countries (and most of it from the USA), and we have not considered how the respective nationalities of broadcasters and gymnasts might have impacted the coverage. For example, journalists have often pointed out a blatant pro-American bias in NBC's international gymnastics coverage (Springer, 2008; St. James, 2016). Further studies might address this issue by (a) studying international coverage of Chusovitina, particularly in countries/regions for whom she has competed (e.g., Uzbekistan, Germany, and the former Soviet states); or (b) exploring American coverage of older American gymnasts. (In the latter case, the 2021 return of American

gymnast Chellsie Memmel to national competition at the age of 32 might be an instructive study). As a result our findings, we cannot speak to an age order beyond the representation of women's elite-level gymnastics in the English-speaking press. However, like the work of Angelini et al. (2013) and Billings et al. (2014), this work does suggest important ways that sports coverage supports and produces hegemonic **understandings of gender and age.**

Future work in this field might include an examination of whether other sports see this age order perpetuated in media representation, organizational structure, and athletic performance. It should consider how and if other sporting environments support this age order, whether and how this structure applies to men's and women's sports, and the impacts of a hegemonic age order on the minds and bodies of athletes and fans, young and old.

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¹ The minimum age rule for the sport has changed over the decades, from 14 years in the 1970s, to 15 years in the 80s. By 1997, the rules were fixed at 16 years (Cervin, 2021).

² The decline in viewership from Rio 2016 to Tokyo 2021 was not specific to gymnastics but occurred across Olympic sports, with NBC's ratings falling an average of 45%. This fall was attributed to the switch to digital viewership and the pandemic (Pallotta, 2021).

³ Although Chusovitina competed through to the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, she did not make the finals of any World or Olympic competition after 2018, meaning that televised coverage of her in competition after 2018 was not easily available.

⁴ Quadrennia, or "quads" in gymnastics-speak, are four-year periods that culminate in the Summer Olympics. After the Olympics and at the beginning of a new quad, FIG normally updates and revises its rules, regulations, and code of points.

⁵ This finding aligns with critical ageing scholars who argue that discourse of ageing shifted just before then, from language of decline to possibility (see Katz, 2005).

⁶ Wevers is famous for calculating her own difficulty scores, often adjusting her routines to maximize the difficulty scoring. Wevers has even challenged judges' scoring when her own calculations do not align with theirs (Sanne Wevers, 2022).

⁷ Martha Karolyi was fired as team coordinator in 2016 after the Olympic Games. Many survivors of sexual abuse by former US team doctor Larry Nassar (a group of hundreds that includes many Olympians) have claimed that Karolyi produced "a culture of fear" (Yan, 2018). A lawsuit filed by a survivor against Karolyi and her husband (also a former coach and team coordinator) claimed that they "provided no supervision to the perpetrator Nassar, in exchange for his silence and wilful blindness to their regime of fear, intimidation, and physical and emotional abuse" (Yan, 2018).