A Feminist Analysis of the Impact of COVID-19 on Olympic Female Athletes from Canada and the People’s Republic of China

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Kinesiology
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Abstract

Gender equality in sports acquired unprecedented discussion in the past few decades with the efforts of sports organizations such as the United Nations (UN), athletes, professionals, and scholars worldwide. Girls’ participation, women’s media representation, participation of transgender athletes, equal opportunity, equal pay, etc. drew attention and awareness successfully. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has been limiting the achievement of women in sports due to the cancellation of sports events, postponement of the Olympic Games, stay-at-home orders in lockdown, and restrictions on health measurements. This study utilized methods of semi-structured interviews, media analysis, and comparative analysis to examine the barriers faced by female Olympic athletes, along with their coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. A comparison between Chinese and Canadian female athletes was implemented to gain insight into the barriers they struggled with in the pandemic, including the level of adaptation to COVID-19, length of building resilience to return to sports (RTS), accessibility of training facility, mental health problems, and other possible barriers. The results in this thesis indicated that Canadian female athletes had more significant obstacles in training whereas Chinese female counterparts did not perceive they had a considerable challenge since the pandemic. Despite the differences, the main similarity between Canadian and Chinese female athletes was the delay of the Olympic Games allowed them to re-concentrate on training and disassociate from the stressful ambience. The differences between the athletes’ experiences in the pandemic were due to different levels of accessibility to resources: female athletes in China acquired secured environments for training while Canadian female athletes had more opportunities to find various official resources online. Chinese athletes had better training accessibility and supervision from coaches while Canadian athletes had relatively limited access to training facilities. Overall, the pandemic increased gender inequality for elite female athletes to participate in sports and support systems. Sports organizations should comprehensively review and improve their operations to learn from the pandemic in order to support elite female athletes.

Key Words: COVID-19, gender, female athletes, Olympic Games, Canada, China
Summary for Lay Audience

This multidisciplinary study utilized feminist concepts in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the current situation for female athletes in the sports context, particularly elite women athletes in Canada and China and their experiences during the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games and the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. The first part outlines predominant ethical issues from primarily the philosophy and history of sport literature and is part of the literature review. The context for women in sport and the content of masculinity and sexuality, the history of sexual segregation and its current replacement rules, and autonomy and paternalism for female athletes, are all an important part of the story. Each of these topics could be expanded into a full dissertation. However, I have tried to use a multidisciplinary kind of puzzle game to demonstrate how these ethical issues have shaped and are shaping female athletes in sports. Also, barriers that stem from these ethical issues are representative of not only pre-existing discrimination against female athletes, but also the socialized gender culture which has decision-making power during the global pandemic. In the second part, the study also utilized methods of semi-structured interviews, social media content analysis and comparative analysis. Some predominant barriers for female athletes were training and living accessibility; motivation as elite athletes; mental stress with uncertainty; lack of resources for coping with COVID-19 and potential injury risks. Media content analysis was a comprehensive tool to better understand of Chinese female athletes for their experience during COVID-19. The comparative study between Chinese and Canadian female athletes identified the differences and similarities in coping strategies. Generally, Chinese female athletes met a lower level of barriers with a secure training environment stemming from its sports system. In contrast, Canadian female athletes had addressed more obstacles, but multiple resources were available for athletes to use. The result was that athletes from two countries had relatively sufficient resilience to return to sports. The third part identifies and explains the challenge that pre-pandemic barriers provided a social context for female athletes during COVID-19. This social context included the existing discrimination against female athletes where the global pandemic reflected and stressed those issues with masculinity and sexuality. Furthermore, the double and combined pressure from socially constructed barriers and the pandemic restrictions, triggered potential ethical issues such as existential crises for female athletes.
Co-Authorship Statement

The information presented in this Ph.D. thesis is my original work. However, I must acknowledge the co-authorship to my supervisor Dr. Angela Schneider who enriched this document from philosophical insights and feminist perspectives.
Acknowledgments

The first person I would like to show gratitude to is my supervisor Dr. Angela Schneider, who fully supports me and always gives helpful advice. I remember she had a lecture in a graduate student seminar four years ago. I was inspired by her logical and knowledgeable lecture and admired her intelligence and wisdom. She is a mentor. I also would like to thank Dr. Alison Doherty and Dr. Karen Danylchuk. They were always passionate about helping me when I took their courses, during my Candidacy exams and on my way to completing my thesis. I like that they both always smile and send emails to us every year in the summer to introduce Canadian customs and history to international students. I am sad that Dr. Darwin Semotiuk passed away after this new year. I want to say, “Thank you!” Your knowledge of sports in China and comparison studies stimulated my thinking about the contrast between China and Canada. Dr. Robert Barney is another professor I want to thank. Even though he is 90, he is always there to help me when I need him on my research.

I became a mother during my Ph.D. program and my husband, mom and dad gave all their love to me. My husband resigned from his job in China and came to Canada to support me. I felt much more settled after he came and got support mentally, which made me feel London was my home. He provided financial support to me because he successfully found his way to live and work in Canada. My parents came to care for my son for almost two years, which relieved much of my anxiety when I had just entered motherhood. My two kids are beautiful, smart, and sweet, but I was afraid to receive phone calls from daycare during weekdays because 99% of these calls told me they were sick and needed to go home. Whenever they went to sleep, I thought I could get up and work on my thesis. However, I was too tired to get up every night. I have learned and still learning how to balance everything in my life.

Finally, my gratitude would go to all Kin staff, especially Jenn Plaskett, who supported me when I had a hard time. My friend Edwin Zhou also contributed his own time to check my translated transcripts and had critical suggestions on my topic. Prof. Donnie Pei always chats with me. He was the person who brought Canadian perspectives to me and made Western a special place in my heart when I took his course more than 12 years ago in China. I would not have come to Canada, realizing the world needs more diversity, and have learned we are part of this diversity, without him.
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>COC1</td>
<td>China Olympic Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>COC2</td>
<td>Canada Olympic Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>DSD</td>
<td>Differences of Sexual Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAS</td>
<td>General Administration of Sport of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>IAAF</td>
<td>International Association of Athletics Federations</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOC</td>
<td>International Olympic Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NHC</td>
<td>National Health Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSF</td>
<td>National Sports Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCR</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>PHEIC</td>
<td>Public Health Emergency of International Concern</td>
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<tr>
<td>REB</td>
<td>Research Ethics Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTS</td>
<td>Return to Sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSHRC</td>
<td>The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Sports Illustrated</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>Union Nations</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

Now, the Games are getting delayed pales in comparison to the tragedies that COVID-19 would cause all over the world, but the impact was not just on people’s physical health. It was also dangerous for our mental health. Fear, uncertainty, disruption, isolation: all of that was very real for millions of people…… now they (athletes) have to pick up pieces for the everything changed.¹

This introductory chapter provides some background for this multidisciplinary thesis and why it is important. COVID-19, as a global crisis, has exposed more and greater disparities and the opportunity to reflect on the existing discrimination against women and female athletes. “The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented the world with its biggest challenge to date, is thought to have widened existing gender equality gaps in both elite and grassroots sports.”² China and Canada are two countries with different political, economic, and cultural contexts. The strategy that was utilized for responding to COVID-19 also varies. Some of the background information for a greater understanding of Chinese and Canadian female athlete participants has been included for a richer context. The research questions, objectives, and rationale for conducting this study are presented in this section.

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO)’s office in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)³ learned from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission that cases of ‘viral pneumonia’ were detected.⁴ One month after the official report from China, the WHO started a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) of a

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³ The People’s Republic of China will be shortened to China in this thesis.
novel coronavirus (known as COVID-19) outbreak and marked it as the highest level from the WHO alarm system. The worldwide outbreak heavily impacted everyone’s life. All industry and social activities, including sports and sports mega-events, have been negatively affected. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) declared on March 30, 2020, that the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games would be postponed and rescheduled to July 23, 2021, which was exactly one year after the original celebration date.

The Games of the XXXII Olympiad were successfully held as rescheduled between July 23 and August 8, 2021, in Tokyo, Japan. There were plenty of unique memories of the Games and Olympic Spirit. The first joint Olympic Podium since 1912 happened in Men’s High Jump when Qatar and Italy shared the gold medal. For Canada, the Women’s Soccer team played against Sweden in overtime penalty kicks in the final and got the title with the last goal. A Chinese girl who stood on the top podium in the Women’s Beam in gymnastics was cheered and encouraged by US players and coaches while she was competing on the balance beam.

As of the beginning of 2022, two years after the announcement of the outbreak by the WHO, the COVID-19 pandemic is still sweeping across the world. Jeffrey Fry and Andrew Edgar, authors of *Philosophy, Sport, and the Pandemic*, note that the pandemic “had wrapped its tentacles around every aspect of our lives. The world of sport was not immune to it”. Elite sports may not be as equitable as many in the general public may have thought. The pandemic is exacerbating unfairness, but in particular to females and

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female athletes. Every athlete puts effort into training to conquer known and unknown barriers to reach athletic achievement.

Generally, only one athlete or team will be the champion in a sports competition.\(^8\) Besides the exclusive nature of competitive sports, existing auxiliary rules from International Sports Organizations also add to the restraint of women’s participation. Testosterone level is regulated by the IOC and the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to determine eligibility for female athletes. Athletes have been impacted due to travel restrictions from different countries and the implementation of public health measures. These restrictions included cancellation of international sports competitions, reduced accessibility to training facilities, a decreased capability to meet supportive team members, etc. Minority groups, including female athletes, faced more significant challenges than ever before under governmental public health measures due to often being expected to fulfill a larger role in the family, along with other unexpected sufferings, such as increasing domestic violence and economic difficulties.\(^9\) Females are also likely to experience depression and stress that reduce motivation and increase concerns.\(^10\) Loss of athletic identity occurs when they are expected to play intensive roles and devote time to family routines. Being forced to give up training means little to no funding for competition. Even if they had a balance between family and sports, isolated training and requisite quarantine reduced their contact with children and family in order to minimize the chances of infection. UN (United Nations) Women listed five aspects of inequality that have been enhanced and that women have been suffering since COVID-19:

1. “Women’s leadership in sports:” The lack of women in leadership positions led to

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fewer women in the evaluation process of COVID-19’s influence on the sport.

2. “Gender-based violence and sports:” Violence may explode with the lockdown around the world, and women and girls were under potential stress of violence due to remaining indoors 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

3. “Economic impacts on women in sports:” Curtailment of revenue and investment through the whole ecological system of sport resulted in priority input to men’s sports. Men’s sports benefitted by having larger audiences, media representation, and sponsors, while female athletes were up against an insecure training environment and contracts, with the existing barriers of salary cuts and contract termination before COVID-19.

4. “Women’s representation in the media:” Women who were returning to sports competitions faced conflicts with men’s sports events due to the rescheduling of postponed competitions, thus reducing media exposure for women.

5. “Girls’ participation in sports:” Financial problems increased due to caring for family and forced isolation reduced opportunities to get involved in physical activities. Challenges around mental health and sexual abuse increased during COVID-19.¹¹

1.1 China versus Canada

In the following section, some of the differences between the Canadian and Chinese responses to the COVID pandemic are introduced and highlighted.

¹¹ “Women, Girls and Sport,” 2-5.
China and Canada have distinct responses to the outbreak of COVID. China has been implementing a stringent zero-COVID strategy since the beginning of the pandemic, and China is still utilizing the dynamic zero-Covid strategy with the surge of the Omicron variant in 2022.\textsuperscript{12} Mass testing is applied to cities with increasing positive cases. By contrast, Canada has been changing its COVID policy based on the curve of positive cases and has lifted health measures in March 2022.\textsuperscript{13} Canada also has shifted COVID


tests to a more targeted population instead of people who have COVID-19 symptoms.

The chart in Figure 1. above indicates the daily new confirmed cases from January 2020 to May 2022 in Canada and China. China had a burst of COVID confirmed cases at the beginning of 2020, but the transmission was controlled a few months later, which was lower than 100 new cases every day. In the meanwhile, Canada confronted a sharp rise of confirmed cases in March 2020, which resulted in the announcement of a lockdown. Implementing different strategies during the COVID pandemic contributed to the cross-cultural comparison between Canada and China. Female athletes\textsuperscript{14} who needed to return to sports were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and impacted by local policies. Canada had an immediate response to the sports industry and issued a supportive project for athletes during the lockdown. China’s response can be distinguished from Canada; in particular, due to the length and levels of lockdown, training formats and frequency, and female athletes’ personal perspectives toward COVID-19. As the researcher of this study, I experienced living and studying in both countries, which provided me with a unique perspective and ability to undertake this analysis and piqued my curiosity for this comparison.

1.2 A Background of Women’s Sports in Canada

A report from an organization which looks to enhance gender equity in sports, Canadian Women and Sports, stated that the prominent culture of “male-dominated and highly competitive” results in sports are not reviewed by female athletes as an acceptable practice in daily life.\textsuperscript{15} Underrepresentation of female athletes in media coverage, lack of female leaders, and gender inequity in payment are the significant issues that female athletes encounter today.\textsuperscript{16}

When looking back to the history of women’s sport in Canada from a feminist lens, male hegemony as a predominant culture and cultural practice from the privileged population

\textsuperscript{14} Although male athletes were also impacted by the pandemic, the focus of this study is on female athletes.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
led women to combat their experience participating in sports and acquire recognition from their own practice in society. After World War II, “graceful and feminine” were the adjective to figure female athletes in the 1950s in media coverage. Canadian female athletes achieved tremendous accomplishments from the 1960s to the mid-1970s; however, descriptions of female athletes in the sports media were prominently changed. Media turned to depict female athletes’ physical appearance, and they were “frequently treated as sex objects rather than the serious athletes they wished to become.”

Sports were significantly influenced by feminist activities in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Along with the female athletes’ outstanding performance in team sports and professionalization in sports in the 1990s, issues such as treating sex as a commodity weakened women’s athleticism and became consistent themes. In the 21st century, Canadian female athletes are taking part in a great number of sports. They had a remarkable performance in the Olympic Games, including masculine sports that were traditionally viewed as gender-inappropriate sports, such as wrestling and boxing. However, the culture of judging female athletes on appearance and physical attractiveness has never ended, even though Canadian women have excellent achievements in elite sports.

1.3 A Background of Women’s Sports in China

The progress of women’s sports reflected the “historically conditioned attitudes” of the society to gender and sports in China. Since the establishment of the new China in 1949, women’s sport has been a platform for women to do social practices. The national support system for elite athletes has been utilized since the mid-1950s following the

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid, 11.
22 “The History of Canadian Women in Sport.”
reconstruction of the sports system from voluntary and decentralized to organized and centralized sports systems.\textsuperscript{24} As part of history to catalyze Chinese modernization, women participated in sports as jobs until the mid-1960s. Women’s sport in China was contractive during the Cultural Revolution between the mid-1960s to mid-1970s due to all kinds of activity in sports being cancelled in this political movement. In the late 1970s, China gradually connected with the world and female athletes resumed participating in international competitions. After the door-open policy, the West started keeping close eyes on Chinese female athletes in the 1980s. The Chinese government allowed foreign capital into the market, and Chinese athletes became dominant in sports such as diving, gymnastics, and volleyball. Women’s sports became a way to gain national confidence and international recognition.\textsuperscript{25} Chinese female athletes have received massive attention and suspicion from the West toward what as viewed as the masculinization of their bodies (just as the former East German Women athletes, particularly swimmers, did before them in the 1970s and 1980s) since the 1990s due to their extraordinary performances and the booming economy in China. James Riordan, the sports historian, noted the express progress in a wide scale of events contributed to the rooted prejudice concerning sexuality in the Western world.\textsuperscript{26} “Olympic fever” spread in the first decade of the millennium. The media preferred reporting individual sports rather than collective sports to meet audience tastes. In mainstream media, physical appearance and attractiveness were underlined more often, while femininity and emotionality were also emphasized, while women’s sports engaging power and hard physical contact became low-profile components.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, transnational activity, involving and operating beyond national boundaries, allowed Chinese female athletes to gain international sports success; however, challenges from internal and external biased arose from the predominant ideology and culture of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{24} Jinxia Dong, \textit{Women, Sport and Society in Modern China: Holding up More than Half the Sky}, Sport in the Global Society (London;F. Cass, 2003), 23.
\textsuperscript{26} Riordan, “Chinese Women and Sport Success, Sexuality, Suspicion,” 1.
1.4 Objectives

The purpose of this thesis was to complete a multidisciplinary critical feminist analysis of gender in sport and women’s participation in elite sports, comparing the role of cultural context (China versus Canada). Specifically, the primary goal of this study examined the impact of COVID-19 on elite female athletes during their preparation for the Olympic Games and how they are adapting to the impact of COVID-19 in training and competition. Along with these objectives, state policies for social distancing and sports from China and Canada were reviewed for comparison in order to investigate strategies and programs that the governments and National Olympic Committees implemented in regard to Olympic women athletes. Researchers and scholars from an English background can gain a better understanding and knowledge of Chinese female athletes’ circumstances and adaptation to COVID-19 and how they coped with potential health and mental health issues to return to sports (RTS).

The second goal of this thesis focused on comparing the differences between China and Canada on how they support female athletes in recognizing and overcoming the barriers to RTS. The definitions of sex and gender were significant in this thesis as gender is a performed behaviour and social expectation that medical intervention cannot determine. Sex can be determined by medical intervention as it is biological and was designated at birth. I use Female Athlete in this thesis to denote sex instead of Women Athlete, which denotes gender because the goal of this thesis is to discuss barriers for biological females in sports. The WHO summarizes the distinction between sex and gender as follows:

“Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.”
"Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs."\textsuperscript{28}

Moreover, women, as part of vulnerable populations, encounter sexual discrimination in elite sports. The discussion of the definition of women and eligibility criteria has been investigated in the last few decades in the sport. Schneider noted, from an ancient Olympic historical perspective, that it was believed that women should embody “chastity, modesty, obedience,” which is the traditional role of a good wife. This is incompatible with the potential characteristics of ideal athletes who are “hard, powerful and strong.”\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, the motto of the Olympic Games, “faster, higher and stronger,” can be tied to idea of men and warriors. I will argue that this point is still very relevant today.

In terms of eligibility criteria, doping and gender rules restrained women from competing. Compulsory sex verification was abandoned in 1999, but Eligibility Regulations for female classifications from IAAF determines qualifications for female athletes to compete against other female athletes if androgen levels are over the lower limit for males.\textsuperscript{30} However, eligibility rules only apply to female athletes, and they get penalized even if they have naturally higher testosterone levels. Doping issues collide with gender issues in sports when hormones such as anabolic steroids or testosterone are prohibited by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) due to the advantages of using androgenic drugs. Restrictions from COVID-19 combined with existing barriers intensify stereotypes and bias toward elite female athletes. The reason this information is important and relevant for this study is that it will also provide information about whether prepandemic socially constructed sexual discrimination are roadblocks for elite women.

\textsuperscript{28} WHO, “Gender and Health,” accessed May 12, 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender.
\textsuperscript{29} Angela Schneider, “On the Definition of ‘woman’ in the Sport Context,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Gender in Sport and Physical Activity*, (Routledge, 2010), 41.
\textsuperscript{30} IAAF. “Eligibility Regulations for The Female Classification,” April 23, 2018. file:///C:/Users/Henry/Downloads/IAAF%20Eligibility%20Regulations%20for%20the%20Female%20Classification.pdf. It came into effect on November 1, 2018.
athletes’ resilience to return to sports during the pandemic. Therefore, I identify in this thesis that the original existing barriers, including the socially constructed definition of women and unfair eligibility rules, are pre-pandemic barriers. As such, how the COVID-19 pandemic affects elite female athletes’ original barriers is the third aim of this study. As such, my research questions are as follows.

1.5 Research Questions:

1. What are the barriers for female Olympians in the COVID-19 pandemic? How can they adapt to the pandemic in their sports career and personal life? What strategies are they using to RTS?

2. What are the differences and similarities between Chinese and Canadian elite female athletes in terms of their coping strategies?

3. Does pre-pandemic discrimination towards elite female athletes play a pivotal role during the pandemic? How do these pre-pandemic barriers affect elite female athletes in the pandemic?

1.6 Rationale/ Concerned Engagement

Various elements of identity shape, restrict, and locate people, along with the ways they think and act. Social roles and experience of sport are two things that need to be discussed. Although there are constantly improving traditional practices pertaining to gender relationships and family roles, women still play a significant role in doing domestic labour. When examining female athletes in sport, it is important to recognize not only the role of women in sport but also the historical and current roles of women in society in order to properly contextualize the female athletes’ views. Massey, an author in Mahler and Pessar’s, “Gendered Geographies of Power,” helps us to see not only how people's social locations affect their access to resources and mobility across transnational spaces but also their agency as initiators, refiners, and transformers of these conditions.

31 Dong, Women, Sports and Society in Modern China, 15.
Chinese women have been dramatically impacted by the One-Child Policy, especially in the labour market and marriage choices, which indirectly affects their rights to participate in sports.33 The One-Child Policy limits women’s ability to have equal opportunity in sports compared with females from other countries because of the imbalance in terms of gender population, patriarchy, and privilege in society. This policy took effect in 1980 to restrain the growth of China’s population, and it had significantly increased the male-based sex ratio in China.\textsuperscript{34} The life changing historical moment happened on January 1, 2016, when all Chinese couples could have a second child, and this symbolized that the One-Child Policy was abolished.\textsuperscript{35} Due to many social and economic issues stemming from this policy, the Chinese government announced that all couples were allowed to have three children for sustainable development on May 31, 2021. Chinese women in the 21st century have increased awareness of being free, and they are more independent. However, when women cross the line and attempt something more, their “gender identity, sexual orientation, values and social roles” are questioned by the society.\textsuperscript{36} A report pointed out in 2007 that the One-Child Policy triggered a crisis that sporting talent could not be selected and supported because parents pursued paternal intervention to protect their sole child from participating in harsh training.\textsuperscript{37} I personally experienced this phenomenon in China as a female athlete and only child as my parents always inculcated that girls should play something elegant, such as playing piano but not sports that lead to intense physical training and the acquisition of physical strength. The impact of the One-Child Policy on female athletes in China could lead to a full doctoral dissertation in and of itself and is suggested for future research. The information in this thesis provides a background of policy decisions that influenced female athletes and sports in China leading up to the COVID-19

\textsuperscript{35} Feng, Gu, and Cai, “The End of China’s One-Child Policy,” 82.
Philosophical perspectives on women’s participation and gender equity in sport from a cultural perspective are not well discussed. In this thesis, I sought to bring insight into knowledge and understanding of gender in sports in the context of different cultural backgrounds. The IOC encourages women’s participation in sports and indicates in the *Olympic Charter* that they “encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women.”

COVID-19 as PHEIC reduced female athletes’ opportunities and capabilities to participate. Even though the *Olympic Charter* promotes equality, the emerging negative consequences of the global pandemic have been interrupting the regular flow of female athletes’ training and competition, which indirectly undermines their confidence and mental health. Since being the first country that reported a confirmed case of COVID-19, China has adopted strict health measures. Actions from Chinese authorities have been criticized largely by Western nations, and China also has been suspected of being the original birthplace of COVID-19. However, the origin of COVID-19 is still largely unknown and still under investigation.

By the end of 2021, the measurement and control of the pandemic in China had been efficient, and most people had gone back to normal life. The COVID-19 pandemic is a timely topic as many life patterns are continually changing along with the new variants. With the strong spread of the Omicron variant in 2022, cities like Shanghai in China are again under extremely strict lockdowns. People who are in China are experiencing another round of isolation. Sports activity has been postponed again with ‘a zero-COVID strategy.’ Even though Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 Olympic Games are parts of history now, athletes still need to return to sports as Paris 2024 Olympic Games are only two years from now. Findings from this thesis could still apply to women in sports who are experiencing strict COVID-19 health measures. How these actions and policies affect Chinese Olympians, especially elite female athletes remains unexposed in English literature and research.

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Moreover, Training facilities that are necessary for several sports such as stadiums, arenas, pools, tracks, and public gyms were closed. Female athletes had reduced training hours, and they adjusted their training to concentrate on fitness at home even though training equipment was limited to meet their needs. Human rights issues are also being raised. Mega sports events, including the Olympic Games, have issues with labour rights and the exclusion of social groups, which means income and finance is an interest to organizers who sell broadcasting rights, sponsor rights, and attract tourists. Women’s issues in sports during the pandemic are accumulated and the complexity of these issues is also increased.

As a Chinese woman researcher who is studying and living in Canada, my cultural identity reflects self-concepts and self-perception from both the Western cultural context and Eastern ideology. This is common to many researchers who live and study in Western countries that have been impacted by different cultures and languages, but each individual story is unique. Cultural identity is also a conflicting factor for me when I am attempting to discuss sports and gender issues. It is the complexity of my original culture that has defined me and my point of view, and the impact of the culture that I am located in now (Canada). Narrating a story of myself demonstrates how I became who I am today and why I am pursuing research on women in sports. I was interested in track and field after I had been chosen by my school PE teacher to join the after-school training program. I did very well. I ran the fastest and jumped the farthest amongst the girls. However, my father went to argue with the PE teacher because my grades ranked in the middle among my classmates, and I did not pass my piano grading examination on my first attempt. In the meantime, my main teacher supported my father’s action as she thought I was not very good at studying. Eventually, track-and-field was edged away from me, although I still loved watching almost every kind of sport on TV. This is part of

the reason why I wanted to continue my education and do research on women in sports. During my long journey as a graduate student, I learned my own story could be related to many ethical and feminist concepts such as autonomy and paternalism in sport.
Chapter 2

2 Literature Review

The general impact of COVID-19 as a background was placed at the beginning of the literature review. This chapter also included researchers’ views of current barriers for competitive sportswomen by exploring issues from an ethics-based feminist perspective. Furthermore, how female athletes have responded to this global crisis was reviewed in order to learn the practical problems during their life and training.

2.1 The Impact of COVID-19 on Women

Statistic from UN Women demonstrated that women have been suffering from more poverty, more childcare work, and increased violence since the COVID-19 global pandemic. Around 47 million extra women and girls are predicted to be classified in ‘extreme poverty’ and COVID-19 could also broaden the gender poverty gap; data from 16 countries shows that women completed 29% more childcare every week than men; surveys from 13 countries resulted that almost one in every two women have experienced violence or they knew other people who have gone through violence.\(^{41}\) The Canadian Women’s Foundation also noted the experiences of gendered inequality for women during COVID-19 are based on prolonged social inequalities.\(^{42}\) The same source indicated that besides financial load, the gendered impact of violence and domestic labours, lack of opportunity for women to support services, are also challenging in the pandemic.\(^{43}\) In the meantime, frontline workers have consisted of more women than men during the pandemic. WHO pointed in 2021 that women take up to 70% of the “health and social workforce” globally.\(^{44}\) European Parliament provided the statistics that

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\(^{43}\) Ibid.

approximately 76% care workers are women who take great chances of exposure to COVID-19 in the European Union (EU) in the total of 49 million frontline care workers. However, women are confronted with losing jobs during COVID-19 due to side effects on economy. Women’s health have been directly impacting by COVID-19 as they occupy essential positions during the pandemic. Gender bias based upon socially constructed perspectives of women in sports has been identified for many years. The implementation of health restrictions such as lockdown led to women spending more time at home and taking on even more domestic responsibility and this affected women athletes too. COVID-19 has given rise to evidence that operation of economy and our daily lives has relied on unpaid women and girls. Daycare and schools were either closed or moved to online learning, which enhanced the needs of education from women to children. Researcher Tracy Smith-Carrier on social work emphasized that women have worse mental health levels and greater stress levels than men since the COVID-19 outbreak due to exposure to the virus when participating in workplace and domestic duties. Many problems around family planning, social roles and gender stereotypes enhanced difficulties for female athletes. The evidence indicated that it was supposed that women should stay at home and take care of children. Staying at home orders promoted further inequality. Women naturally take responsibility for looking after kids at home, often without realizing social-constructed concepts for women. Research showed mothers were more likely to be interrupted during paid work for household jobs, and they did two hours fewer than fathers in paid employment but an

extra two hours doing baby-sitting and housework. This context had the potential to affect sportswomen in similar situation, like unessential businesses, including gyms and many other public places. The paternalistic perspective on balancing the schedule for children and training was intractable for female athletes who had to train at home alone. Trivial matters were accumulated and cost energy. House cleaning, cooking, assisting kids in online learning, grocery shopping, working, training, etc., many female athletes lost the opportunity to compete and gave up sports careers forever.

In addition, people spent more time than ever at home and work from home, which increase the incidence of domestic violence when occupied by household duties and demands by family. Statistics indicated every six days, a woman is killed by her intimate partner in the world. In the article “Health Care Practitioners’ Responsibility,” authors Bradley et al. added more important information, in that intimate partner violence is neglected due to certain discrimination and prejudice, and it “affects all races, ethnicities, socioeconomic strata, ages and relationship statuses.” Therefore, the global crisis provided an opportunity for the society to revisit the gender inequality in current systems including sport.

2.2 Historical overview of relevant gender issues in Olympic sport

The background of gender issues in sports can be traced back to both ancient and modern Olympic ideologies. Women were not allowed to compete in the ancient Olympic Games, and women who were married would be killed if they participated. Some characteristics of ideal women from the ancient Olympic philosophical perspective included “beauty,

chastity, modesty, obedience”. The motto of the Olympic Games is, “faster, higher, stronger,” which is incompatible with the image of ideal women who should be “soft, graceful, weak and beautiful.” Pierre de Coubertin’s ideology on women was also influenced by traditional ancient Olympic values when he started reviving the modern Olympic Games. He believed women’s activities in physical education are acceptable but that appearance of women in sports competitions in the Olympic stadium was of concern. Coubertin did not want women to participate in the Olympic Games but instead to be included as spectators. Coubertin emphasized, “I felt that the Olympic Games must be reserved for men.” Although women had attended Olympic Games since 1900, and Coubertin admitted that there would be more different sports clubs for women, Coubertin still believed achieving sex equality would not make any difference in the Olympic Games because women cannot defeat men in some sports such as running and fencing. Practical issues, such as a shortage of workers in the first few Olympiads, were part of the reason that Coubertin did not consider women’s competitions necessary, but he insisted on the traditional Olympic ideology: women as the audience to applause ‘male athleticism’ as suitable. Eventually, modern spectators came to regard the Olympic Games as a two-week sports competition and festival that involves both men and women who represent their countries.

From the historical point of view, hostility is one serious barrier to female participation in the Olympic games. For some events, it took more than 100 years to have women’s

53 Mary R. Lefkowitz, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome (London: Duckworth, 1982).
56 IOC, Olympism (Lausanne: Union de Banques Suisses, 1972), 711.
57 Ibid, 711.
58 Ibid, 712.
59 Ibid, 713.
60 Ibid, 713.
61 Schneider, “The Ideal Olympic Athlete,” 314.
corresponding events to men’s events. Women’s boxing appeared in 2012, while the men’s boxing event started in 1904 in the Olympic Games. Similarly, if we look at the sport of ski jumping, the 1924 winter games were the starting year of ski jumping for male athletes; however, the women’s event was excluded until 2014.63 The IOC’s first conference on women and sport was held in 1996 in Lausanne in order to have a better movement for gender equity via sport. The Olympic Agenda 2020 also included a plan in its recommendation for gender equality which consisted of achieving 50% participation by women in the Olympic Games to create more opportunities for women by working with IF and to include more mixed-gender team events.64

2.3 Current sexual discrimination in sport

2.3.1 The definition of women and masculinity in sports

First, in order to discuss female elite athletes, the definition of “women” along with current related sexual discrimination needs to be discussed. Since sports have been defined as a masculine area, women’s issues in sports are much more controversial than men’s issues.65 One form of gender discrimination is based on gender-appropriate sports and gender-inappropriate sports. Sports which demonstrate beauty, grace, and mildness are viewed as feminine sports, such as artistic gymnastics. In contrast, sports which involve aggressiveness, hard physical contact, and violence are masculine sports that are proper for males to play. Some examples of these sports are ice hockey, boxing, and weightlifting. This ideology stems from beliefs that involvement in “male” sports could make women less attractive physically and mentally and playing these aggressive sports would cause physiological damage.66 Feminist author of ‘It’s Just Because We’re Girls,’ McSharry, states that “in spite of an increase in the visibility of women in the field of

63 Ibid, 1789.
65 Karen Appleby and Elaine Foster, “Gender and Sport Participants,” In Gender Relations in Sport, edited by Emily Roper, (Rotterdam;Boston:: Sense Publishers, 2013), 14.
66 Schneider, “The Ideal Olympic Athlete,” 320.
sport, the association of sport with perceived natural male characteristics such as muscularity, strength and aggression remain.” 67 This idea limits women to a situation of what they should do instead of what they can do.

The “abnormality” of being masculine when participating in sport raised further discrimination against women in sport. Common cultural values idealize women’s bodies as sexual objects, and as a result, women may be excluded from sports. “Sexual objectification is a specific type of appearance focus concentrated on sexual body parts,” and women's entire personhood is ignored.68 The problem with body objectification is that women do not gain self-determination.69 Women have been objectified in sports and sports-related media. For example, women in Sports Illustrated magazines have had their heads excluded during photographic coverage, and they do not care about women and female athletes’ personal experiences, which leads to a fake sense of gender empowerment.70 Feminist author, Charlene Weaving, argues that a false feeling of empowerment comes from financial compensation for posing sexually for Sports Illustrated (SI). Women have also been presented as sexual objects as there are usually no sports action shots on SI coverage, and they use sexual poses instead.71 Therefore, female athletes who wear sexually attractive clothing and pose for sports magazines would cause women to mistakenly believe that they were accepted in sports. Female athletes are up against the impact of the male gaze on the criteria of being women. This socially constructed perception of gender differences has contributed to triggering the exclusion of women in sports.

67 Majella McSharry, “‘It’s Just Because We’re Girls’: How Female Students Experience and Negotiate Masculinist School Sport,” Irish Educational Studies 36, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 343.
71 Ibid, 385.
It is also important to note, for the purposes of this study, the historical perspective from the Chinese culture. Sports historian and anthropologist, Susan Brownell, argues that the early image of masculinity for Chinese women was built by a famous animation character who is very famous in Western countries -- Hua Mulan -- who in the story replaced her father to join the army in ancient China; and that Chinese people today still address the female winning athletes as ‘headdress heroines’ which refers to the female hero. She also recounted that in contrast to the ideology that the YMCA interprets sports as moral education, Chinese culture understands sports more as a physical education since the establishment of new China. It stems from the Western stereotype in history of “the sick man of East Asia” – a labelled applied to Chinese people. This racism triggered Chinese people to be eager to prove through competitive sports thus proving that this stereotype is not accurate. Outstanding performances by Chinese female athletes in international competitions led to high rates of media coverage as they are the heroines to build national glory. Sports such as gymnastics are regarded as gender-appropriate sports for female athletes, while sports that engaged in power and/or hard physical contact received decreased media consideration, with both China and Western culture sharing this ideology that gender-appropriate sports are more acceptable, and the feminine ideal is still relevant. For example, Xu, Billings and Fan examined how Chinese gymnastic female athletes received less attention from the media during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games about their athletic performance. Instead, non-sport aspects of the athletes, such as appearance and personal life, were focused on to attract potential audiences. This standpoint coincides with Weaving’s opinion in SI magazine that objectification and

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75 Yu, Chia-Chen, “A Content Analysis of News Coverage of Asian Female Olympic Athletes,” 298.
body shape are emphasized by media reports for female athletes now. This comparability in terms of treatment between female athletes in China and Western society will provide thought-provoking analyses along with interview questions in this study.

2.3.2 Sexual segregation and sex verification

The logic of sex verification was to have eligibility rules in order to keep fair play in sports, but it failed to do so. Mandatory sex verification in sports was implemented from 1968 to 1998 with goodwill in order to beat gender discrimination in sports and avoid men who play as women and some women who are viewed as like men.\textsuperscript{77} The same research indicated there is medical expertise in the Olympic Games to verify sex for competition. However, sport is not only about medical aspects. It is also influenced greatly by political, social and legal aspects. These considerations cannot be ignored as the sports world puts a great amount of pressure on medical experts.\textsuperscript{78} The IOC abandoned compulsory sex verification in sports but eventually issued some other policies related to gender. It has been argued that these current policies do not help to increase the participation of women but rather restrict many female athletes who have natural talent in the sport.

The level of testosterone is not an acceptable proxy for sex testing is a fair argument. The transgender policy called Stockholm Consensus and IAAF’s hyperandrogenism on women in sport limited the ability of transgender athletes and athletes who have high testosterone levels to compete.\textsuperscript{79} The most recent update from IOC and IAAF notes women “must reduce her blood testosterone level to below five (5) nmol/L for a continuous period of at least six months” and female athletes who have a testosterone level higher than five nmol/L are recognized as Differences of Sexual Development (DSD) and are excluded from 400m to one-mile races in Olympic Games and other international competitions.\textsuperscript{80} This means any woman whose testosterone level is beyond

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} IAAF, “Eligibility Regulations for The Female Classification.”
five nmol/L is not eligible to compete even though these women have been recognized as women legally and have been living as women for their whole life. Therefore, some women have been excluded from competing at the international level. One could argue that forced reduction of testosterone for female athletes is based on testosterone being viewed as the male hormone; however, it has been argued that this is not actually based on sound and consistent reasoning and that we need better policies.

Feminist author, Silvia Camporesi, argues that testosterone is similar to natural talents, so banning someone from competing due to their testosterone levels is not “tolerable unfairness”. Tolerable unfairness could be height, genetic mutation and other physical and psychological distinctions between athletes, which could bring significant competitive advantages. For example, Asian countries focus on sports such as gymnastics because petite body shape is more common in Asian women than in Western women, which may be advantageous in these “individual mechanical and artistic sports.” Also, the same research indicated socioeconomic impacts should not be neglected for those athletes from wealthy countries with more resources as they have advantages in competitive sports. Therefore, distributions of talents, accessibility to training, and coaching resources are all part of competitive sports. Feminist author and sports historian, Bruce Kidd, provides a similar perspective -- that there is no peer-reviewed evidence to indicate women with higher natural testosterone levels contribute to unfair competition. His comment on transgender policy also discussed “social scientific, legal and ethical” aspects are factors in sports and we also need to accept “the extraordinary social, economic, political, cultural and individual diversity around the world, and endeavours to promote understanding and respect for those many

83 Yu, 287.
differences. Therefore, testosterone level cannot be the only convincing benchmark to render women athletes ineligible under current auxiliary rules, the purpose of which is to regulate athletes to meet certain pre-game conditions in order to take part in sports such as “uniform requirements, professional or amateur status, training hours or techniques, and banned substances and methods.” In other words, auxiliary rules are rules required to compete that are in addition to the rules of playing the sport itself.

Sexual segregation must be an issue when discussing sex verification and testosterone level in international competition. There will be no justified distinction between genders if we do not segregate biological males and females in sports, but the 2018 regulation from IAAF declared the legal category for intersex (having both biological traits of male and female) now exists due to the presence of intersex people in sports. Some athletes, such as Caster Semenya, who may be intersex, enhanced the complexity of the gender category in sport. However, it has been argued that separating women and men in sports is discrimination and gender inequality if women still need to meet the rules for testosterone levels. Scholars have argued if we separate intersex athletes based on testosterone levels, we may need to eliminate sex categories entirely because male athletes also have wide ranges of testosterone levels, but they have not been segregated into different categories. Separating women and men in sports is a source of gender inequality if women still need to meet the rules for testosterone levels and men have no requirement. Pam Sailors, feminist sports philosopher, argues there are cases that not all sports require gender segregation if women do not have physiological disadvantages, such as the sports requiring balance and buoyant force such as beam in gymnastics and synchronized swimming; however, the precondition of this is not to violate gender equity. Schneider has pointed out that Swedish Bio-ethicist, Tannsjo, argued over

85 Ibid, 782.
86 Angela Schneider first identified this in 1992, “Doping in sport: the straight dope.”
88 IAAF, “Eligibility Regulations for The Female Classification.”
twenty years ago that the advantage of allowing men and women to compete together is that it would moderate the rule to reduce men’s possible aggressiveness in competition. Even though it is a long way to go for women to compete with men if we cancel the categories completely, women should be allowed to compete against anyone they wish. Tannsjo would agree with the point from Sailors as Tannsjo believed female athletes would not be discouraged as gender stereotypes are caused by socially constructed discrimination but not the sexual differences and then, female athletes would view they defeat in competition as a challenge rather than discrimination.

However, Schneider revealed the practical reality that far fewer female athletes would qualify for Olympic teams if there were no gender separation in elite sports, thus setting back women’s rights and advances in sport over fifty years. The simple fact of the matter is that female athletes would win more often with the maintenance of sex segregation. Sailors also noted that there is sufficient reason to not eliminate gender segregation in sport, and she provided an example that the women’s soccer World Cup in 1999 as being viewed as the most significant moment for women in contemporary athletic success. Sarah Teetzel, sport philosopher and feminist author, partly supported Tannsjo’s argument, but she added the significant precondition that to root out sex categories entirely in sport is the only method if women are not to be defined by “essential characteristics of women;” or to allow athletes to choose the sex category by themselves. But, the removal of sex segregation is also unfair for other female athletes without “high” testosterone levels. The jury is still out on what prospects they have to compete with intersex athletes fairly. Therefore, it is clear that sex verification and gender segregation issues for females increase human rights issues for Olympic female athletes and their participation in sports.

93 Tannsjo, 351.
95 Sailors, 1127.
2.4 Philosophical Feminist Perspectives of Women in Sports

2.4.1 Autonomy and paternalism

Some philosophical and feminist theories regarding autonomy and paternalism can be invoked to enable a better understanding when discussing women’s barriers in sports. It has been explained in the introduction above that sex refers to biological characteristics whereas gender deals with social expectations. Authors of “Gender and Sports Participants,” Appleby and Foster explain, “gender is a performed behaviour that aligns to how society expects men and women to act,” which medical intervention cannot determine. Feminist sports philosopher, Michael Burke argues that we can always hear people say, “the market says women’s sports are not interesting,” and “women do not want to play football.” The reason for this according to Burke is that we greatly emphasize winning the game in sport and not the process of getting there. Schneider noted that being a human, one has the right to choose what they most care about and also has the right to make decisions on things that impact them the most. No one can represent another’s views without permission from that person. It is paternalistic to say, “it is bad for women to play,” and “girls should play like a girl.” To inculcate a girl to be a girl is to cause them to abandon competence in athletics which boosts inequity and brings about the illusion for younger generations that women should be in less competitive sports. From a historical perspective, this means that females who play sports are less attractive in the eyes of men, and it has been assumed women suffer physiological damage from sport.

In the same research from Burke, it is identified that many power and decision-making positions in sports are occupied by men, such as coaching and administration, with

98 Appleby and Foster, “Gender and Sport Participants,” 1.
100 Schneider, “On the Definition of ‘Woman’ in the Sport Context.”
101 Burke, “Women’s Standpoints and Internalism in Sport,” 40.
women having to look for alternative methods to acquire authority due to authority being identified as excellence in sports performance. The same research identified unethical hierarchical opinion towards women -- indicating that women are not fit for sport because women are thought to perform worse than men. When connecting internalist values to sport, the process of the pursuit of excellence is the basic purpose of competition. This internalist idea about women in sport has been viewed as sex or gender ‘blind’ and improvident as it is only judges on intrinsic principles in sports rather than any other excellence from external social values. Outside of the internalist view, ‘excellence’ is regarded as being only measured performance, other important internal values are ignored for women in sport. Butcher and Schneider argued extrinsic values might reduce intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic rewards also may result in pressure or coercion to do things that are not what is desired. However, Martinkova and Parry, both sport philosophers, argue that externalist values could help women to pursue other forms of recognition: “Extrinsic goals point to something outside of sport itself and make the claim that sport can be used as an instrument that leads to achieving various values that people have elsewhere in life.” They also claim, in the same research paper, that self-affirmation, money, fame and success are the extrinsic goals which can be achieved in elite sports. Female athletes need external recognition to be autonomous and avoid paternalistic intervention in low-profile sports and hegemonic masculinity, which emphasize winning.

2.4.2 Cultural relativism in sports

Due to, in part, the cultural differences, people have diverse perspectives towards sports and women in sports. This cultural relativism brings different attitudes and ethical judgements to sport. Taylor noted that moral value is not always accepted universally

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103 Burke, “Women’s Standpoints and Internalism in Sport,” 48.
because our own social context shapes our judgement. One thing may not be considered ethically correct in one society while the other society may deem it is a normal and acceptable phenomenon. This means the moral standards are different and only accepted in this environment and society, as arranged marriage and abortion are allowed in some religions and cultures, but not in others. However, Taylor argues that there are great weaknesses with the theory of moral relativism as it leads to the impossibility of moral progress against things like racism, sexism etc. because there is not a way to arbitrate one practice over another when they conflict as it is argued in this theory that all cultural practices are equal. Thus, Taylor concludes it is not a good moral theory, but it is a social description of practices, not a prescription for moral action. Pieper argued that competitive sports and the Olympic Games are the products of Western culture and have been implemented and developed for a long time in Western countries with less involvement of ideas practiced in other parts, and social contexts, of the world. Thus, the religious orientation, social background and place of residence should be considered when discussing women in sport. According to moral philosopher, Rachels, in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Normative ethical relativism is the view that “the fact that societies differ about what is right and wrong does not mean that one society may not have more correct or enlightened moral beliefs than another.” There is no unique value to deciding what is right and wrong, but there are moral principles that most cultures widely agree with. If there is no universal moral code what are sex discrimination and barriers for women in sports based on? Ten people can give ten different answers as our beliefs are formed by the society that we live in. Some argue that encouraging women’s participation in sports is an efficient way to decrease gender inequality; others emphasize providing equal prize money and events to men and women in sports. It is apparent that social constructs and self-identity have significant impacts on

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108 Ibid.
what is perceived to be wrong or right. Cultural relativism intends to assert that “there are no moral norms common to all cultures.” Teetzel claimed that there are cultural differences in sports policy that “different organizations have adopted different conditions of eligibility, and multiple sets of parameters of inclusion are applied at different levels of sport.” For example, when applying cultural relativism in implementing policies, organizations from different areas would have multiple understandings of the policies based on their language, religion, etc. Cultural relativism increases the complexity and exclusiveness of women in sports with various interpretations of the policy.

2.5 Barriers for Elite Female Athletes in COVID-19

Sport researcher, Mann, and his colleagues, emphasized that “public health centres on the recognition that individual athletes are situated in and are integral parts of wider communities that include other athletes, their multidisciplinary support teams, families and local/national/international societies.” The idea that athletes are human beings who are members of a community rather than being viewed as commodities is important for health. Authors of “Social (Un)distancing,” Graupensperger et al. went further and argued that social interactions such as support from teammates could promote athletic identity and mental health during the pandemic.

2.5.1 Financial Difficulty

Athletic career development barriers are significant, and inadequate funding reduces athletes’ resilience to return to sport. Many works of research focused on elite

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111 Taylor, “Ethical Relativism,” 38.
113 Mann et al., “Athletes as Community”, Sporting Mega-Events and Athlete Health Protection, 1071
sportswomen and gender-specific inequality of COVID-19 in 2020 and discussed their feelings of uncertainty from the stressful situation of financial needs and resulting mental health concerns. Research indicated that RTS is the second priority to sportswomen compared to high-level male team sports in the UK.116 Women usually play primary roles as caregivers and healthcare workers.117 This is a pre-pandemic gender issue that has a large effect on women during the pandemic. Media disclosed evidence of why elite female athletes suffered more than men in sports. In the beginning of the pandemic, SI raised the concern that female athletes have lower salaries than men due to fewer sponsorship deals, as they were not in a good position to deal with the discontinuation of sports economically.118 The report also discussed that women’s leagues are not sufficiently funded. For example, even though the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA) has intimate connection to the National Basketball Association (NBA), female athletes embraced more complicated circumstances, especially for athletes who left their own countries and compete in the WNBA.119 Players who chose to continue their career abroad were anxious about their post-pandemic career, especially for lower ranking clubs athletes as salaries were largely based on their ranking in the season, but tournaments were suspended during the pandemic.120 Reuters, in their report, urged government to support insufficiently funded women’s sport after the pandemic crisis.121 BBC (British Broadcasting Company) also included stories of women who encountered financial dilemmas since the outbreak, as some female athletes were

120 Peterson, “Women’s Sports.”
121 “Pandemic Hit Women’s Sport Much More than Men’s - UK Parliamentary Report,” Reuters, July 2020.
struggling between working for rent and continuing in sports. Skysports touched on a gender play gap that women were more likely to be physically inactive than men in the pandemic, where the main concern for female athletes was the long-term financial hit from COVID-19 and it had been enlarged with the early restart and steadiness of men’s sports. This is like adding insult to injury for female athletes because women have been receiving less attention all-around in sport. Now, sponsorships prefer male athletes in spite of female athletes competing in the same level at their sports. Lack of full-time professional status and financial instability were the reasons for female athletes to be more anxious about sports careers.

Women as a minority group in sports have been encountering unfairness financially before COVID-19. Cancellation of games and delayed restarting of women’s leagues reduced the exposure and media coverage for female athletes resulting in an exacerbation of inequality and disparity for female athletes. Lower salaries and shorter-term contracts than male athletes were already obstacles for female athletes before the COVID-19 crisis, according to the UN women’s report. In the meantime, Bowes, Lomax, and Piasecki argued supports provided to athletes had no significant gender difference, but men’s sports are reviewed as “prioritization” sports which had the stability to be funded and for investment. Lebel and colleagues criticized reduced revenue for sports programs as increased worries by athletic managers and coaches regarding the financial support of women in sports as it flowed instead to men’ programs with an excuse of COVID-19. To attach social roles to female athletes, RTS becomes a practical issue due to the closure of training facilities, public services and lack of community support such as teammates.

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123 Peterson, “Women’s Sport.”
125 “Women, Girls and Sport,” 3.
interactions, the team supports, and even commercial activity. Besides accessibility of training facilities and competition opportunities, many barriers such as physical, psychological, cognitive, and social problems for female athletes have occurred. The existing negative societal views and lack of consideration of them can be investigated through interview questions from a feminist viewpoint. Some of the information in this study contributed to filling in some of the gaps in research about the problems that Chinese and Canadian Olympic female athletes adapted to, and even conquered at times, during the global pandemic of a Novel Coronavirus and RTS under the implementation of states’ policy to COVID-19 in both countries and with the current adverse sports environment.

2.5.2 Training Barriers

Training, an essential aspect of athletes’ lives, was met with difficulty. Before the back-to-normal era, athletes had to follow all public health measures while also requiring training accessibility to keep their bodies at a certain level of athleticism. In order to stop spreading the virus globally, athletes, like everyone else, had to comply with the regulation by law. However, the counterargument question here is: how could they attend the Olympic Games without the regular level of training, even though there was one more year to prepare for Tokyo?

There was not enough supervision in training. Many female athletes felt that they received sufficient support from coaching network to keep their fitness, but there were still notable problems such as not being able to train together with teammates or with sport-specific equipment in appropriate facilities. Some other female athletes chose to train independently and invite their family members such as parents to undertake coaching responsibility when they faced reduced instruction from coaches during lockdown. This practice gave rise to another problem of compliance, with exercise load not easily monitored and required level of sports performance not easily

controlled. For some team sports, coordination is required in competition. Female athletes who were isolated at home could not access their specialized sports facilities. In this screenshot Figure 2. below from the IOC website, US synchronized swimming athletes were practicing together via video call with their head coach. It is impossible to have synchronous control because video calls are affected by internet speed and other unpredictable factors. They were also on the floor instead of water which largely reduced the effect of training. This training method was the only way synchronized swimming athletes could use while isolated at home. The feeling of communicating with coaches online was another unusual experience which resulted in inadequate supervision for these female athletes. Images provide a straightforward perspective as to how female athletes trained in COVID-19 lockdowns. The following images are from the Olympic channel.

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Even though practicing together online was not ideal, athletes could still interact with their teammates and coaches. Staying connected through the internet with professionals also helps athletes deal with stress during isolation.\textsuperscript{131} For other individual sports where athletes compete by themselves, they would not have an activity like synchronized swimming athletes, who listened to music while practicing via video call at the same time. Many female athletes trained by themselves at home, especially for combat sports with characteristics of attack and defence. These athletes could not train with their teammates online. Here is a photo from the World Economic Forum website demonstrating how athletes kept fit in lockdown. A woman Judo athlete from Jordan was training with her coach to keep physical strength as seen in Figure 3. below.

Swimmers do not need to compete with other athletes directly in swimming competitions. However, due to the closure of public swimming pools and arenas, athletes could not train in normal size swimming pools in lockdown. Many of them set up temporary small swimming pools in backyards and rigged a controlling tether/string to mimic swimming in a normal size swimming pool as seen in Figure 4. below.
2.5.3 Injury risk

Athletes training alone with no supervision or with visual supervision in isolation can result in injury. Sarto et al. discussed the fact that impaired performance and injury risk, including ligament rupture and muscle injuries resulted from training alone.\textsuperscript{132} Injuries can not only impact athletes preparing for the Olympic Games but also, serious injuries are negative factors to their careers. One study indicated that women are less likely to suffer injury than men, but if women players experience severe injury, the period of recovery is longer than men, and the degree of injury is often greater.\textsuperscript{133} Another study of injury among female athletes noted that “Training and match number of injuries follow a similar trend, in which the risk of injuries was higher in the early stages of the season and post-winter/Christmas break,” which was identical to the situation that female Olympians


encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.\textsuperscript{134} RTS after isolation in lockdown may trigger injury due to the body not being able to keep up with the high intensity of competition and frequent races.\textsuperscript{135}

2.5.4 Psychological/Mental Health

Research illustrates that mental health problems significantly affect elite female athletes more than their male counterparts. The feelings of continuous anxiety and uncertainty about athletes themselves and their family members may cause distress: “Elite athletes reported uncertainty about their future, decreased income, modified university teaching procedures, unavailable facilities, and cancelled competition as the leading psychological stressors.”\textsuperscript{136} 137 A study also showed female athletes tended to state feelings of energy loss, suffered from loss of motivation, and have depressive feelings.\textsuperscript{138}

Financial difficulties also trigger mental health problems. Bowes \textit{et al.} indicated in their research that 64\% of semi-professional or professional female athletes’ funding, salary and sponsorships were reduced, and because of the postponement and cancellation of sports events -- 44\% of these female athletes could not receive any more competition fees.\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{134} Iñaki Ruiz-Pérez \textit{et al.}, “Injury Incidence, Characteristics and Burden among Female Sub-Elite Futsal Players: A Prospective Study with Three-Year Follow-Up,” \textit{PeerJ} 7 (November 5, 2019): 11.

\textsuperscript{135} Bruinvels \textit{et al.}, “COVID-19–Considerations for the Female Athlete,” 5.


Furthermore, loneliness, motivation and social support also have effects on mental health. Athlete motivation was goal-driven before the pandemic, but directionlessness threatened athletes’ well-being during lockdown due to a deficiency of agency. The research included female athletes’ adaptations of their aims from ego-orientated to task-guided ones in order to concentrate on self-improvement.\footnote{Woodford and Bussey, “Exploring the Perceived Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic Social Distancing Measures on Athlete Wellbeing” 9.}
Chapter 3

3 Methodology and Methods

This chapter discusses the theories, perspectives, and frameworks used to frame the research question and analysis in this multidisciplinary study. Feminist theory, including the transnational feminist paradigm, is explained below in this section. Methods of semi-structured interviews, social media content analysis and comparative analysis are also detailed.

3.1 Methodology

Ethical perspectives are applied in the methodology of philosophical analysis in this thesis to examine female athletes’ barriers, adaptation, and coping strategies during COVID-19. The use of ethical values is to set dimensions in pursuit of evaluating actions and reasoning in sports positioning. Critical reflection is a “meaning-making process” which assists people in recruiting their knowledge to direct further action and practice.\(^\text{141}\) It requires researchers to think about ideas and arguments that are valid and can avoid strengthening stereotypes and proposing primitive solutions to sophisticated issues.\(^\text{142}\) All possible arguments are considered and accepted with an open-minded attitude to achieve as much objectivity as possible in the context of philosophical analysis.

A critical feminist perspective is utilized in the literature reviews and interview analysis when examining female athletes’ barriers pre-pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to understand the nature of gender inequity. For example, Carol Rodgers, in “Defining Reflection: Another look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking,” uses a critical pragmatic feminist approach, “The particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation”.\(^\text{143}\) For


the purposes of this study, Rodgers definition is considered an important one, but due to
the limited scope of this work, not all of the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits
were incorporated, but a few of the relevant ones are selected (e.g. some historical and
cultural considerations are included but not the larger current world political situation
which could be a separate study itself). In addition, feminist views have theoretically
incorporated pre-pandemic gender issues and situations that occur during COVID-19.
Women’s issues should be viewed from women’s perspectives rather than what society
believes women should do. “Critical feminist theory focuses on issues of ideology, power
and change” and defines sports as gendered activities with the belief and idea of
“domination, conquest and male superiority.”

When emphasizing the problem of power, it wants to interpret the results of gender relations in the context of gender ideology (masculinity versus femininity), in which the everyday lives of men and women provide insight into how “gender ideology is produced, reproduced, resisted and changed.”

For example, feminist sports philosopher, Michael Burke’s critique emphasized that the solution to remove the systematic and symbolic exclusion of women is to challenge benchmarks from male games. Chinese feminist sports historian and former elite athlete, Fan Hong, argued women’s participation in sport has challenged the traditional socially constructed definition of women and men’s predominant role and authority and acquired self-actualization. However, some of the changes to create women’s participation in sports are doubted by male-dominated supporters -- that the game will not be intense and serious enough to be considered “normal”. This example indicates that sports with socially constructed features can be reflections of society and demonstrations of the particular society, as a consequence, becoming a site to challenge the predominant ideology related to gender.

Female athletes were in the context of the culture that values male powers more than female prowess. Women and female athletes’ experiences could be determined and constrained during COVID-19. Also, the barriers they suffered in daily life during the

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145 Coakley and Donnelly, 45.
147 Coakley and Donnelly, 41-42.
pandemic might reflect and enlarge their inferior situation in elite sports.

3.1.1 Transnational Feminism

The framework of transnational feminist theory was utilized in this thesis to analyze emerging themes. In particular, the work of Iris Marion Young’s “Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy” was utilized for parts of the analysis, “Feminism means attention to the effects of institutions, policies, and ideas on women’s well-being and opportunities, especially insofar as these wrongly constrain, harm, or disadvantage many if not all women.”\textsuperscript{148} Transnational activity across international borders triggers new ways of inequality, oppression and conflict. In Postcolonial Remains, Young notes the influence of colonization from some Western countries is still acting on other countries, and it is not going to end.\textsuperscript{149} Today, the fast development of technology, the power of cultural transmission and information interchange, contribute to understanding and misunderstanding between ethnicity and nations.\textsuperscript{150} The cultural invasion has far-reaching influence in the postcolonial era. Transnational feminism represents the political and conceptual struggle by feminists to contend with globalization processes, and this transcends the boundaries of immigration, race, class, sexuality, and the legacy of imperialism.\textsuperscript{151} Transnational feminism looks at the intersection of identity: sex, class, race-ethnicity, nationality, disability, ability, etc.\textsuperscript{152} China, as a developing country, opened its door to welcome global capital in the 1980s, which resulted in transnational communication and cooperation. Sports events, especially the Olympic Games as a global social activity, are one of the most efficient ways to increase interaction. Without a doubt, the process of information interchange from different cultures results in new issues. These issues may vary in culture, politics and religion. Researchers from both China and other countries contributed literature in English criticizing body politics, which relates to the social roles that different cultures have been endowing to their people. Bandya, Gorib and

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid
\textsuperscript{151} Mahler and Pessar, “Gendered Geographies of Power,” 446.
Jinxia noted in “From Women and Sport to Gender and Sport,” that researchers concentrated on examining transnational feminism in sports from multidisciplinary perspectives. For example, feminist scholar, Jennifer Hargreaves investigates it from different gender identities in sports. Not only global contexts but also geographic differences and cross points of international sports experience contributed to both shared experience of gender and different identity of the individual. That is, women athletes link their own feeling of difference and self-identity when participating in sports.

Transnational sports feminism requests sports researchers to rethink their Western theories and ideology when applying to women and sports in the Global South. For example, American feminism in academia frequently outputs irrelevant comments about geographic contexts and places outside America. Global capital exchange in sports also triggers expression for women’s practice in sports. Historically speaking, China, as a developing country, opened its door to welcome global capital in the 1980s, which resulted in transnational communication and cooperation. The local experience of historically, male sports participants, would not prevent women from playing sports as sports are perceived as anti-intellectual and unimportant to some degree. Since the Song Dynasty (960), an education program for the elite population in China stressed the mind. It overlooked the body, which contributed to the ignorance of sports in the select population as they had to pass the Imperial Competitive Examinations to become high-status people. This historical influence on sports contributed to Chinese parents having paternalist opinions that they did not want their children to be involved in sport because they believed “education is the way to a better life.” While in Western sports, sports were the male preserve. The power structure significantly impacts modern sports which

the middle and upper classes dominate sports in Western society, and women were excluded from sports. The reason is that the biological advantages of masculinity indicate male superiority in sports. Historically, to meet the needs of imperialism by the British upper class, they trained young men to be strong by practicing physical activity. The upper class also utilized the medical claim to exclude women from sports. 158 This historical background of social gender culture from Chinese and Western ideologies brought a unique identity to female athletes participating in international sports.

Transnational feminism engages connections and comparisons within different cultural contexts and people’s own lived experiences. In the meantime, sensitivity to the significance of the local community remains. 159 Sage articulated the impact of organized sports on gender, “organized sport has been a powerful cultural arena for reinforcing the ideology and actuality of male superiority and dominance; its traditions, symbols, and values have tended to preserve patriarchy and women’s subordinate position in society.” 160 In the 21st century, being physically attractive is more of an advantage for female athletes to find more financial support and advertising contracts in China. Gender inequality will continue to be a critical issue as state support is reduced in some sports and more female athletes need to find privately funded clubs or look for revenue from sponsorship. 161 Moreover, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was a collision between Eastern and Western ideologies. It was also a transnational sports event in the sport’s history of China and Western countries. Chinese media has been criticized for not dedicating coverage to help to achieve gender equality in China as the market-oriented economy challenged the tradition of gendered-neutral culture for female athletes and Chinese media portrayed them by gendered media coverage of sporting females. 162 Therefore, female athletes received more depictions in the media that referred to personal

158 Ibid, 223.
161 Ibid 33.
162 Xu, Billings, and Fan, “When Women Fail to ‘Hold Up More Than Half the Sky.’”
qualities compared with their male counterparts.\textsuperscript{163} Female athletes in China studied the model of Western female athletes and attempted to acquire sponsorship opportunities; however, they also struggled with the parallel issues and tensions of sexuality and masculinity from getting more revenue. Even though the increasing gendered and male gaze impact on gender inequality is framing Chinese female athletes, the tradition of having perseverance of spirit and the ability to have extraordinary achievements in international sports still make up their identity.\textsuperscript{164} The complexity of their own lived experience and the unique geographical culture built up female athletes’ social and feminist practice.

3.2 Methods

The participant-interview aspect of this multidisciplinary study was part of the research study entitled \textit{COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations: developing and disseminating adaptation strategies and resources for resilience and return to sport} funded by The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Engage Grants.

Method 1:

Instrument

In-depth semi-structured interviews were utilized to interview female athletes from China and Canada. A semi-structured interview driven by a series of open-ended questions and probes was used to obtain participant data. Questions structured around COVID-19-related protocols, barriers and adaptations were prepared for the interviews. The questions prompted the research participants to talk about their knowledge and experiences. Interviews contained four sections: 1. Pre-pandemic and current situations, including living arrangement, training arrangement, etc. 2. The impact of current health measures on training and competition and the frequency and intensity of training and


\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
competition. 3. Challenges (physical, psychological, cognitive, and social) that female athletes have encountered since the outbreak. 4. Expectations on returning to the normal situation of training and competition.

Interviews involved one-on-one Zoom interviews of female athletes at a national level in Canada to investigate what resources and strategies they are utilizing to adapt and to cope with COVID-19 in each country. The parallel method was applied to the interviews of Chinese female athletes; however, Tencent Meeting was used instead of Zoom for the sake of their convenience, this video chat tool is more common in China, which Chinese female athletes had access to it. Initially, for participants from China, authorities from National Sports Federation (NSF) were contacted, and they did consent to help recruit potential participants. Specific sports were identified based on their accessibility. The sports identified were Judo, track and field, and basketball. The criterion for sample selection includes (a) Team China female athletes, (b) can read and write in Mandarin, (c) give consent to participate and to have the interview audio recorded.

Team Canada athletes were also recruited for one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Connections to COC officers contributed to recruiting Team Canada athletes. The ‘snow bowling method’ was also an effective tool to contact more female athletes in this study to acquire detailed knowledge. Initial participants were asked to introduce and recommend individuals as future participants.165 Study participants would know other athletes who were in the situation to prepare for the Olympic Games and inform potential participants of the purpose of this study and how this study could benefit athletes in the future. Six Canadian female athletes, from both English and French speaking parts of the country, were identified for interviews. Their sports included three summer sports (to preserve anonymity the individual sports are not named here) from the Olympic Games. They were eligible to be a participant in an interview if they were (a) a Team Canada athlete, (b) able to read and write in English and/or French, (c) able to give consent to participate and to have the interview audio recorded. Six Chinese female athletes were identified for interviews. Their sport included three other summer Olympic sports. They

also were eligible to be a participant in an interview if they were (a) a Team China athlete, (b) able to read and write in Chinese, (c) able to give consent to participate and to have the interview audio recorded. The following tables summarize the participants.

**Table 1 Information of Canadian Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants from Canada</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Years on National Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Summer sport 1</td>
<td>4-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Summer sport 1</td>
<td>Under 23 team from 2010-2012 and joined the senior team 8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Summer sport 1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Summer sport 1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Summer sport 2</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Summer sport 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 Information of Chinese Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants from China</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Years on National Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Summer sport 4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Summer sport 4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Summer sport 5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Summer sport 5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Summer sport 6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>Summer sport 6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview guide questions sought to capture the personal attitudes, opinions, predominant perspectives, and successful and unsuccessful strategies and resources (See Appendix A). Building a comfortable discourse and understanding participants’ rights during the opening portion of semi-structured interviews was essential. The Interview Guide demonstrated that the purpose of the interview and study was to learn the coping strategies and adaptations that national athletes used during their preparation for the 2020

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Olympic Games. Background questions were the initial questions to know the basic information about athletes and their experience as national team athletes. Their current situation and the impact of the pandemic on athletes were the second goals of the interview. Questions in this section were more specific and asked after some trust was built from the interaction from background questions between the researcher and interviewees. Questions related to coping strategies being employed by athletes during the pandemic were emphasized with probing questions to understand responses and gain in-depth information from athletes if their answers were vague and uncertain. In the end, opening questions were used to tie back to participants’ narratives and explore further possible reflection. A comfortable closing question with respect to participants’ final thoughts allowed athletes to add information they perceived significant in the interview guide.

Analysis

The first step in analyzing the data was to compile the stories of the participants, examining profiles of the nature, benefits and challenges of their training and competition involvement with their profile of coping with physical distancing measures. The data analysis guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke were consulted where appropriate. The analyses focused on interpreting the participants’ experiences and any themes of change. Qualitative variations by gender and language were considered. This analysis involved going beyond a mere comparison of the experiences of, to a consideration of underlying factors, and in the context of, for example, female athletes, and the existing pandemic conditions, that are often unaccounted for in such comparisons. To interpret the new data, transcripts were read and re-read, and relevant components of the raw data were coded by a priori themes that reflect the interview questions. Subthemes that were

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167 Ibid, 50.
168 Ibid, 51.
apparent within each of the higher-order themes and suggested potential patterns were noted. The themes were analyzed, refined, and re-evaluated to ensure internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity such that commonality exists within a theme (and subtheme). Clear distinctions were established between themes. Each transcript was reviewed, and preliminary coding frameworks were established as recommended, where appropriate.\textsuperscript{171} Working together, the research team (Schneider & He) compared and contrasted the coding frameworks, discussing and resolving any discrepancies until consensus was achieved. The themes from each interview were analyzed together in findings and comparison chapters. Coded data contributed to the discussion of differences and similarities between Chinese and Canadian female athletes’ perceptions of barriers during COVID-19.

Research Ethics Review

The ethics application for SSHRC Partnership Engage Grants project was submitted to Research Ethics Board (REB) for review and was approved at Western University (See Appendix B). There was no intended deception or partial disclosure of information. Participants were fully aware that they are taking part in a study with an aim of understanding barriers and coping mechanisms and resources for female athletes. After approval, an amendment (See Appendix C) letter was submitted to indicate the parallel research and interviews with elite female athletes in China. It was indicated in the letter of information and consent (See Appendix D) that athletes could withdraw from participating in this research at any time they felt uncomfortable. At the end of each interview, a debriefing form (See Appendix E) was sent as end notes for athletes to understand one more time the true purpose of this study. However, the most challenging work in this study was the procedure of recruiting participants. The total length of the recruiting process took 6 months to find elite athletes willing to participate in this study. Some sports administrators refused to help straightforwardly because they did not believe athletes would answer the questions from the interview guide or perhaps did not want them to do so. Other people declined to provide connections as they had concerns about

\textsuperscript{171} Patton, \textit{Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods}. 
the topic of this study which evolved into COVID-19. They revealed quite frankly that
the COVID-19 pandemic brought athletes into a complex situation due to it being not
only a viral situation and protocols but was also being used as a political tool.

Method 2:

The rationale to ground comparative analysis of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Canada was as follows:

1. China had strict health measurements since the outbreak of COVID-19 cases were first reported. While the hysteretic nature of the spread of coronavirus in most Western countries resulted in Canada responding a few months after China, both to implement and to lift public health measures. These Canadian measures, such as social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and lockdowns, were not, and are still not, as rigorous as the implement in China. China is still implementing a dynamic zero-COVID strategy.

2. Physical conditions and the athletic state were (and are still in some cases) greatly impacted by enacting health measurements. Sports leagues and tournaments were shut down temporarily. No matter how long it lasted, the interval between competitions can have effects on athletes’ mental health and their resilience to RTS.

3. The Chinese government is centralized, and the official documents are macroscopic. In contrast, Canadian sports organizations are decentralized.

4. Both Chinese and Canadian female athletes have had greater performances at international sports events, which attracted more attention from the public.

Comparative analysis is a research method which allows researchers to compare and contrast data. The key feature of Qualitative Comparison Analysis is that it can assess complexity and analyze multiple cases.\(^{172}\) Canada and China are two countries that are affected by different political, economic and social systems. Therefore, to understand female athletes’ perceptions on how COVID-19 affects their original barriers, analysis

\(^{172}\) Rihoux and Ragin, *Configurational Comparative Methods.*
targeted multiple features and resources. The timeframe spans from January 2020 to June 2021. This time period encompassed when the outbreak was first reported in China and when mass vaccination was launched in many countries.

The public health measures change often and regularly according to the current situation of the pandemic in both Canada and China. Sports as a social activity is impacted significantly. Information on pandemic controls and health measures from the National Health Commission (NHC) and coping strategies, along with programs from the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC), have been collected to elaborate on how the COVID-19 regulations have affected sports. GASC is the official sports administration in China under the governing of the Chinese Central Government.173 The Chinese Olympic Committee (COC1) shares the same leaders as GASC. The analysis targeted collaborations between these three Chinese sports organizations and what they released to the public and athletes to help national athletes have fewer negative impacts during the pandemic. The Canadian Olympic Committee (COC2) is the main counterpart for the Chinese Sports Organizations due to the COC2 issuing a Game Plan program to support Team Canada Athletes. In addition, reports and notices regarding COVID-19 health measures from the Public Health Agency of Canada was integrated into the discussion of the Game Plan.

Method 3:

Alternative Method: Accessibility is an issue due to contingent situations such as power issues and local government policy. Qualitative social media content analysis was also conducted in this thesis in order to have insight, understanding, and knowledge of perceptions from Team China athletes. Under-representation and misrepresentation from traditional and online media trigger female athletes to represent themselves on their own social media accounts.174 Weaving raised the problem of SI, which publicized sexual

objectification and is a continuing issue. However, it is also important to note that the innovation of social media such as Twitter and Instagram provide alternative methods for athletes to represent themselves authentically.

Chinese Weibo (microblog) is one of the most popular social media networks in the Chinese Mainland and some countries and regions where people speak Mandarin. The total user base of Weibo reached 0.51 billion in 2009 since its establishment 2009. Chinese athletes share their stories and lives on Weibo. This portion of the research consulted the work of Lebel and Danylchuk for insights, who investigated athletes’ self-representation on Twitter, noting that social media tools are unique where athletes have control and share their own stories, thus providing an intimate feeling with followers.

The aim of this work was to analyze six female athletes’ Weibo accounts. These athletes were members of Team China who were preparing for the Tokyo and Beijing Olympic Games. Posts on these six women athletes accounts were from Jan 1, 2020, to July 23, 2021. Over this one-year and seven-month period, athletes experienced unintended changes in life and training. Thus, adjustments and arrangements for training for the Olympic Games have been considered primary changes. Following the health measures from the government and alternative plans from the National and International Sports Organization, how female athletes are coping with the global pandemic and what strategies they are utilizing remain unknown. Content analysis was applied to incorporate national health measures for public and sports-specified items if applicable. The media reports of some female athletes on Weibo are used as an example and were supplemented in the discussion section.

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3.3 Limitations and Delimitations

My social science and philosophy background in sports restricted my knowledge scope to only discussing my research from philosophy/ethics-based and socio-cultural perspectives. My own experience as a girl and woman who participated in sports in China may also bring bias to this topic. Biological or physiological research areas are not included in this study. Also, since English is my second language, interpretation of interview transcripts from Mandarin to English was challenging work. To have the most accurate understanding of interview transcripts, I invited peers in my research field who speak both Mandarin and English to review my translations. Power issues from both Chinese and Canadian authorities and officials are obstacles to accessing sources and participants.

Due to the nature of the COVID-19 environment, it was difficult to access athletes and related information. Thus, the availability of participants who were interviewed depended on the resources that I could access. This study does not compare athletes in identical sports, this was also due in part to accessibility challenges. Participants from China emphasized that their peers were cautious to indicate anything related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Canadian athletes who received interviews from SSHRC-funded research were compared to Chinese athletes. However, the interviewed players from China and Canada were from different sports. If there were more interviewees, the findings in this study would be richer and more diverse but given these were current Olympic athletes, it is really extraordinary that we got the interviews that we did. Athletes from China and Canada had both consistencies (similarities) and some profound differences within the discussion of barriers to COVID-19 due to health measures and the postponement of the Olympic Games. Therefore, gathering further in future studies on the knowledge of these barriers and how they dealt with them would be meaningful for future references.

Researchers Carolyn Zerbe Enns, Lillian Comas Díaz, and Thema Bryant-Davis, in the publication “Transnational Feminist Theory and Practice: An Introduction,” indicated that we should be self-aware to examine “how we consciously or unconsciously support
“oppressive patriarchal systems” when practising feminist theory. In regard to the reflexivity of myself as a researcher studying at a Western organization, and my interaction with participants from China, the situation might not have had psychological distance from my own personal experiences. Political tensions between female athletes and the community were understood when conducting this study and that meant to respect the cultural traditions and political favours. To provide a comfortable environment, I introduced my background as Chinese, graduating from a sports university in Beijing. Another important ethical principle that provided guidance was to avoid harming to these female athletes. The method and process of discussing COVID-19 was significant, and as a researcher, so was understanding that the participants’ political and cultural environments could contribute to how these female athletes recalled their reflections and added to the enrichment of the research data. As a researcher, my positionality in this study was acquiring valuable and meaningful data. I followed ethical principles in research to ensure voluntary participation and to keep confidentiality paramount. During the interview process, I provided follow-up questions to participants and asked for further explanation with respect to their feelings, especially with some participants who were not as outspoken. I aimed was to use my transnational experience and different perspectives to make the interviews and this study inclusive.

Chapter 4

4 Findings and Comparisons

This chapter focuses on analyzing and comparing the findings from this research, including emerging themes from semi-structured interview transcripts. Some of these themes include identifying athletes’ difficulties and adaptations during the pandemic, perceptions of discrimination that hinder female elite athletes’ RTS, and knowledge of resilience for Olympic female athletes who are supported by state policy and the National Olympic Committee. An in-depth discussion is in the conclusion on emerging themes. Features like barriers and coping strategies for both the Chinese and Canadian athletes are presented respectively.

4.1 Circumstances for Chinese Athletes

Before discussing themes that emerged from interview transcripts, it is useful to review some of the common features of elite female athletes in China. During the pandemic, they were trained in specified training centres either from their affiliated provinces or universities. This was arranged by the government to cope with COVID-19 restrictions. The first common feature is athletes were requested by Chinese sports teams to stay with their team and maintain excellent conditioning training. Chinese sports teams trained in different training centres locations. Due to the large-scale lockdown and severe outbreak starting from January 2020, they were locked down in the training centre directly:

P5: We were in a training centre when COVID-19 broke out, so we closed off right away……did not go home for Chinese New Year.

This decision also stemmed from the sports system in China, with sports governance being part of the political system. In this study, I will not discuss the political system and its impact on athletes. Instead, the circumstances that female athletes experienced during COVID-19 will be explored, depicted and compared with some Canadian female athletes. The second common feature, which is very significant for the purposes of this study, is

Chinese female athletes who trained in assigned training centres did not need to search for training facilities on their own. However, being assigned a training facility did not mean that these athletes were training smoothly during the pandemic with good training access.

The WHO gives advice and methods on how we can protect others and ourselves during the pandemic. This guidance includes: “stay safe by taking some simple precautions, such as physical distancing, wearing a mask, especially when distancing cannot be maintained, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowds and close contact, regularly cleaning your hands, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Check local advice where you live and work. Do it all!”

Therefore, staying in a wide-open area is a significant way to avoid spreading COVID-19. Interviewed athletes responded that they were not allowed to train inside of the gym, and they moved outside at the beginning of the pandemic. When the pandemic was at its worst, athletes were not allowed to train outside either:

P1: I trained very hard between 2019 and 2020. Because of the pandemic, we largely reduced our training frequency…… we trained outside of the gym, and the pandemic was getting much worse. Then we couldn’t even have trained outside……

4.1.1 Perceived Uncertainty and Unease

Chinese female athletes expressed their perceptions of the challenge as female athletes. Athletes explained the challenge for a female athlete is the recognition of the athlete herself. One athlete noted the only way to conquer the challenge is to surpass herself in her athletic career because female athletes may confront uncertain barriers:

P3: As a female athlete, the biggest challenge in my career is my own. If I can keep doing what I want to do and go beyond myself, I will win……

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The perception that physical conditioning was a barrier for women in COVID-19 as P4 figured those female athletes would need a longer time to adapt to normal training intensity:

P4: I have not met any serious problems in my career…… but compared to male athletes, our physical fitness is not as good as theirs. We have a slower time recovering……

Once everyone knew the delayed date for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games, players in some sports altered their training content and focus from competing to personal skills. The postponement of the Olympic Games brought a lot of uncertainty for these women. The new training plan was issued after the announcement of the recent celebration for the new date for the Tokyo Games:

P5: Because the training was following the rhythm of the Olympic Games…… we were at a regular (training) pattern when the COVID-19 outbreak started. Later, when they said it was postponed for a year, we turned out to practice personal skills.

It is interesting that some female players viewed the rescheduling of the Olympic Games as a relief because they got more time to hone their skills, meaning they had one more year to be prepared. However, they believed the unpleasant side effect of rescheduling the games for them was that they would be another year older. Every year there will be new players entering the highest-level of the sport who are selected to be on the national team. There are only a few years for female athletes to be competitive, and new players replace them often. The postponement was also a threat for women on the national team if they had an accident and injury during the year. They would be withdrawn from competing on the Olympic stage:

P5: I had more time to improve myself…… to enhance my skills. We prepared in a hurry before (postponement). We did not get enough time to cool down to improve me.
P6: Since the pandemic, I actually felt relieved… but… on the contrary, the impact of new faces and injury on me are the uncertain challenges.

Uncertainty about return to competition was at the top of their list of worries. Athletes had goals in their athletic careers. When the way to achieve their goals became uncertain, it decreased their determination, especially before the specific announcement of a deferred date for the Olympic Games:

P5: We did not have many changes in training, but all competitions were cancelled……

They also believed that female athletes usually suffer from worse problems than male athletes because females and males are different physiologically. Also, age is another point of difference in that elite male athletes would have more years to compete compared with women:

P5: Females probably have more barriers. Age, body condition, the period of golden age…… to compare these with male athletes, we are inferior to them. We also have many other things to conquer as well.

Some female players felt stress over time because of the threat of new players replacing them:

P5: More and more young blood comes into our team, and disturbance of injury.

Another challenge was whether they could overcome an existing injury and keep healthy for another year. Participants indicated that the decision-makers did not reduce the intensity of their training, but coaches switched the content of training from team technique and tactics to individual ones:

P5: Intensity was the same…… the training method and content had changed.
4.1.2 No Official Public Documents Targeting Athletes

No publicized documents for athletes for athletes to return to sports could be found, most likely due to the guaranteed support they receive. When searching on the Chinese government’s official websites and the website for the General Administration of Sports of China (GASC) under the news or significant information sections, there was no guidance specified for male athletes and female athletes that could direct them on RTS in the pandemic. The interviewed athletes provided information concluding that they were training either in their affiliated provincial athletic training centre or universities. Female athletes had corresponding provinces issuing documents to them; however, officials did not present detailed policy and guidance online. From provincial sports bureaus to the General Administration of Sports of China, directions are to sports events only. One of the interviewed athletes indicated:

Follow the issued documents from provincial government…… if we had athletes who prepared for Olympic Games and National Games in September, (we) would look out. Younger athletes must report to our centre when you go out and come back. Masks are required. We paid special attention to personal protection during the pandemic. Family members also could not visit us here in the training centre. We could not order take-out as well.

It can be observed that there are requirements and advice for athletes to meet and follow but when asked where to find the actual documents she mentioned:

I don’t know. You could check it online. It might be on the website. I was just focusing on my training……

Therefore, it is possible to come to the conclusion that these instructions are veiled from the public. There could be internal documents and mostly word-of-mouth information from managerial groups and coaches to athletes. Due to athlete isolation from health restrictions for protection from COVID-19 in the training centres, it is not difficult for Chinese female athletes to choose to just follow these instructions. According to
interviewed athletes, COVID-19 impacted them in some areas, such as regular training and mental health, but it was not severely hindering their lives as athletes. Sports administrations enacted strict health measures. Since April 2020, national and provincial sports bureaus started utilizing prevention and control protocols for sports activities and events. On the GASC website, instructions can be found, such as “The General Administration of Sport coordinated efforts to promote the guidance of COVID-19 prevention and Control, and Sports Leading Group on the orderly resumption of sports events” on May 29th, 2020;181 “Scientific and orderly resumption of sports events and activities to promote the resumption of work and production in the sports industry” on July 9th, 2020.182 This is guidance from a macro-perspective to recover sports events. Although they were proactive on female athletes to RTS, the content was general and unspecific.

4.1.3 Consistent Training Accessibility

Previous chapters mentioned the training centres were closed to the public since the outbreak, and athletes had isolated training. Chinese female athletes in national and provincial training centres had exclusive access to training facilities. However, strict health measures limited regular training in training centres. Most athletes trained six days per week before the pandemic. During the pandemic, some of them were training outside. When COVID-19 was severe in China, they had to stay at residences and had training sessions in the hallway to conform to national epidemic prevention regulations.

Female athletes indicated in interviews that health measures were strict in their specified training centres. They were isolated from outside to make sure they were safe. However, regular training was interfered with by rigorous policy, which disturbed athletes’ skills in their sports. P2 spoke that her performance was reduced to training her body strength only due to public health measures which did not allow athletes to train outside when the pandemic was severe before April 2021:

P2: ……we trained in the hallway in our residence. We trained too much. Because you did not have running, and it was just physical training. We did physical training and ran upstairs. The body was very stiff…… it lasted for two months. When we went back to normal training for one month, I ran in a first-grade level (ranking for athletes) in a test competition, but I am a master-grade athlete.

Also, due to being separated in their training centre, the activity they could do every day was limited to just training (no scrimmages or sparring matches) which made them feel tiresome and bored. The athletes always trained with their teammates before the COVID-19 pandemic. The worst of the outbreak for them resulted from them going out of their building,

P3: We did not have spare time. I trained every day. It was very boring. We could not even go downstairs (outside) when the pandemic was very severe.

Adverse effects from training isolation were significant during COVID-19. Athletes turned to focusing on training physical body/strength instead of practicing skills and tactics. Athletes concluded that their ‘stiff bodies’ from limited training opportunities that focused mostly on physical strength resulted in reduced performance. Athletes raised a related topic when identifying that they did not connect with the outside world, so they could not practice and engage in combat with other athletes outside of their centre for training. It broadly weakened competition skills. COVID-19 put training in a challenging situation when social distancing is required by public health measurements. Coaches lowered training intensity to reduce contact with other people. If athletes got injured in highly intensive training, they would be sent to the hospital. The hospitalization would advance the potential risks of catching COVID-19 for athletes and staff who spend time together in training centres.
However, some athletes demonstrated different reflections in that they gained plenty of time to improve themselves. Before the pandemic, they have packed schedules and tight timelines. Athletes might not have settled down and put in efforts to enhance basic playing skills. Positive aspects of training together in a particular location with security are noticeable as well. Athletes had a stable environment with in-person and face-to-face instruction from coaches. Athletes met fixed numbers of the same group of people every day. This reduced chances of contracting the virus.

4.1.4 Considerable Stress and Mental Health Issues during Isolation

Most of the participants in this study emphasized that they train six days every week regularly since they started training to compete. However, COVID-19 broke this uninterrupted training schema. For a period, they could train outside of buildings and/or along the hallway. This led to psychological problems and other negative influences, which became obstacles for female athletes to return to sport:

P1: Since I started training in sports, I have been training from Monday to Saturday…. six days a week.

COVID-19 largely disturbed Chinese female athletes’ training patterns, which increased pressure. Due to this interruption, at least one of the female athletes lost her opportunity to compete in the Olympic Games. Also, competitions were postponed and cancelled in China, as was the case in many countries, and athletes did not have scheduled competitions to demonstrate performance:

P2: ….. the pandemic has a great impact on our training. I came back from the US in 2019 (I trained in the US for a few months), and I had thought that I wanted to compete in the Olympic Games. In the winter training session, I trained myself very hard. GASC (National Administration of Sport of China) sent us to compete in the Asian Indoor Championship. Two weeks before the scheduled date to set off, we had

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183 Identification of specific sports and athletes is not possible without breaking anonymity.
been told it had been postponed due to COVID-19. That was a terrible blow to me. I wanted to prove myself at that time. I did not have a good performance in 2019. Many people felt I was a flash in the pan.

The impact of COVID-19 on Chinese athletes was enormous; however, including sports events, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic was fast and stable. Due to postponed competitions, athletes could not attend qualification matches for the Olympic Games. Athletes, therefore, lost opportunities to compete in the Olympic Games. Stress was identified as coming from concern younger players who have improved their skills and become top-level athletes, would take their place. They could replace the current players over the 1-year postponement. The so-called “golden age” was interrupted by participants who believe women have shorter years to sustain high-level performance than their male counterparts.

COVID-19 restrictions increased loneliness for female athletes. Some players restricted themselves from doing many things in athletics and daily life and it was complicated by concern about potential doping problems being a common issue in one particular sport involved in the study. They have already cut down many entertainment activities and social activities to avoid having the chance to be tested positive. However, COVID-19 exacerbates the situation of being alone. Athletes did not intake food such as pork and seafood anywhere other than their canteen. Coaches looked for games after training to assist athletes in getting relaxed but being in an isolated environment generated anxiety. Chinese literature suggested that since the mindset had changed after the announcement of the postponement of the Olympic Games, athletes should have one-to-two-month adjusted training schedules to rebuild confidence and relieve the mental workload. The restrictions made it hard to access family support which then made it difficult for athletes to release pressure. Family members were not allowed to visit athletes in person since the outbreak began. However, these other impacts like loneliness lasted for less time, and eased somewhat when China slightly stepped into the ‘back-to-normal’ era. Interviewees

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184 Yu, “Realistic Dilemma and Its Regulation of China’s Preparation for Tokyo Olympic Games During COVID-19,” 22. [Published in Chinese]
indicated that only a few months later, in the summer of 2020, they started to have moderate restrictions:

P4: The pandemic has been getting better since last June. Then we could go downstairs and go to catering. Our training centre is just above where we live. So, it is pretty convenient.

In the meantime, in order to reduce the chance of contact with other people from outside, takeout and other entertainment were prohibited:

P2: Family members also could not visit us here in the training centre. We could not order takeout as well.

Similarly, other athletes also stated their sleeping patterns had not been interfered with too much. However, athletes reported that their eating patterns had been impacted. Regular eating habits had changed for some particular athletes because they could not utilize catered food during the severe lockdown when more positive COVID-19 cases appeared in the city. These particular athletes also needed more energy to support their bodily needs, and athletes said that boxed meals for when they could not go out of the building left them hungry after training,

P4: I do not think my sleep was impacted because my life pattern was the same as before. However, my eating pattern had been influenced. We could go back to eat in catering later. Boxed meals were quite a few. I was on short enough food when I had a large amount of exercise.

Another athlete provided the same information on changing eating patterns:

P3: When the pandemic was particularly severe, we could not go to the canteen. We got boxed meals and brought them back to the residence to eat.

Even though they had less food from boxed meals in their bedroom at residence and could not eat in a good environment at catering venues, one of them was surprised she gained weight in the pandemic and felt she was fat because the training was less intense:
P4: “The change of body shape was I got fat…… because the amount of exercise was reduced from before.

Training centres were shut down and completely cut off from the outside for athletes during the worst period of the pandemic crisis in China, making isolation feel even worse. Athletes were not allowed to meet anybody, including family members and loved ones. Not to mention eating and shopping out of training centres. They stayed at the training centres and did not celebrate Chinese New Year for 2020 and/or 2021. Furthermore, to make matters worse from a mental health perspective, they had been told that the implementations of restrictive health measures will continue for years to come in China. Their training and competition will continually be impacted, which will also result in mental health issues for athletes in the future:

P3: For mental health, we were not isolated entirely before the pandemic. We could hang out and play outside. During COVID-19, we are totally isolated. If there is no significant situation or something you must do, you are not allowed to go outside…… we keep the policy. I did not go home in this new year.

Athletes realized mentality is the greatest challenge and mentioned that sleeping and eating patterns were disrupted. The change of routine and schedule triggered athletes to gain weight directly. However, athletes’ living, and training, schedules were renewed when the positive cases were reduced significantly in a short time. Then, they returned to the regular training scheme. Physical condition is of priority for Olympic athletes to prepare for the Olympic Games. Therefore, they believe there were no big changes because they lost weight quickly and maintained excellent physical condition once everything was back on the right track in the training centre. Professional trainers were also hired to give instructions on-site to achieve ideal physical conditions. Mental health is what participants were anxious about in isolated life. Also, living in isolation for a long time without in-person contact with other different players, friends, and family was detrimental for athletes. They pointed out their coaches found methods such as playing games in spare time to help them relieve stress:
P5: The big problem for every one of the mentality of the pandemic. Our coaches found all kinds of ways to relieve our isolated life condition. For example, we played some games.

P5: It lasted four months…… a significant challenge to my mentality.

4.1.5 Increased Injury and Risks

Injury and potential risks of injury were another significant theme in this study for female athletes. One of the sports involved in this study demands physical confrontation between opponents in competition, which makes it injury prone. Athletes paid extra attention to prevent themselves from getting injured during the pandemic:

P4…… We did not go out all the time during the pandemic from the training centre. You know…… we are competitive sports, and it is very easy to be injured. Also, you need to either throw or take down your opponent. We are afraid of getting an injury and going to the hospital. If you go to the hospital, you will need to get a Covid test first. It is trouble if someone breaks bones…… if athletes bring back Covid from the hospital, it will be a huge trouble for us.

To reduce the chance of going to the hospital and being exposed to a potentially dangerous environment, participants interviewed indicated that female athletes had less opportunity to practice or/and play against teammates and other athletes to build up fighting skills. Therefore, these athletes did not get sufficient training during a lockdown:

P4: The level of intensity for training was less than pre-pandemic. Now, some matches are returned, and we are increasing the level of intensity. There was less combat practice during the pandemic because [the sport] requires you to contact your opponent……

The resulting reduced connection opportunities meant less practice. Performance can be impacted dramatically due to decreased competition and fighting practice.
Another athlete also explained they communicated with other training centres before the COVID-19 outbreak and trained with different athletes:

P3: When there was no pandemic…… [this sport] is a sport that you have to practice with other athletes to improve and know where you do incorrectly…… so we went to other training centres very often. During the pandemic, we were closed in our own training centre and have not gone to train with other athletes. The connection between athletes had reduced.

For athletes who had an injury and were qualified for the Olympic Games, postponement of the Olympic Games was unfortunate for them because they had to find a way to balance their bodies between training for another year and avoiding getting injured again. Some participants in this study did not agree that COVID-19 had seriously hurt them. However, postponement would be a disaster for athletes who were originally dealing with a bad injury because they needed regular training to recover:

P5: For me, I don’t think COVID-19 has any direct impact on me…… the one-year postponement of the Olympic Games hit greater athletes with injuries.

One of the athletes revealed she gained weight when the outbreak began. That is in part due to the impact of a changing training plan. She mentioned she returned to average weight when pandemic conditions were improved because the first goal in preparation for Olympic Games was to regulate body conditions:

P5: I gained weight at the beginning of the outbreak…… but when the whole team got into the preparation condition, weight and body fat were the priority for us to control…… so there was no change.

4.1.6 Lack of knowing - Coping Strategies and Resources

Chinese athletes were not proactive in seeking coping strategies. They also were not aware of online resources which could assist athletes during COVID-19, including
official resources and other coping strategies. Ignorance and utilization of coping strategy were attributed to athletes not having enough spare time after training. Spending time swiping the screen was the choice for getting relaxation rather than searching for extra support. These athletes also assumed there were not many resources, such as policies and learning programs for Olympic athletes to access. At the government's expense, the uppermost consideration was the supply of living and training equipment fully provided by the training centre. Therefore, athletes also believe resources and policies for athletes’ resilience should be sought out and learned by the director and staff who serve athletes on site.

Although the most negative impacts occurred with regard to training, most Chinese female athletes interviewed did not believe that they confronted big challenges because they could access the gym and equipment and because they were living in the training centres. This contributed to athletes not needing to worry about living, eating and even training with a reasonable schedule. Procuring these arrangements were the duties of staff and leaders in their training centre,

P2: I do not see too many things about COVID-19 and the pandemic. Or you could say I do not pay attention to it at all……

When asking for coping strategies, participants interviewed from some sports could not name specific resources that targeted them and helped them to RTS. They also did not receive any copies of relevant policies from their affiliated provincial sports bureau. One of the participants indicated that she believed there were official policies online to help athletes, but she was not clearly aware of where or what resources could be found. Therefore, almost no external resources were utilized by the Chinese female athletes interviewed. Participants did mention following the provincial documents for COVID-19, but this was made known to them by the training centre management group. Following public health measures was the direct coping strategy for the pandemic, according to interviewed athletes:

P1: Follow the issued documents from the provincial government…… if we had athletes who prepared for the Olympic Games and National Games
in September, (we) would look out. Younger athletes must report to our centre when you go out and come back. Masks are required. We paid special attention to personal protection during the pandemic.

Training centres offered resources related to COVID-19 relief for athletes, such as webinars, but athletes did not consider their content helpful. In addition, athletes perceived official resources for athletes as being available, but they did not know the contents and where to find these resources and some athletes were outspoken and indicated they did not know any resources that could help athletes directly during COVID-19. Keeping a watchful eye on coping methods was not emphasized for Chinese athletes because they did not have great concerns about discovering solutions. The training centre provided resources for athletes to cope with training problems during restrictions for COVID-19. They had invited a physical trainer to live in their training centre when the situation got better in the summer of 2020 to help athletes keep strength for future resilience:

P4: During the pandemic, we had a special physical trainer come to our centre to help us train our physical strength. Because we must have a physical fitness test before a competition (to be qualified for competition), it lasted for a few months……um…… in last summer.

They also indicated that the only strategy they utilized was to protect themselves from the virus:

P4……I tried my best not to go outside. If I had to go, I would wear a mask. When I returned, I sanitized everything. I guess the best strategy is not to go out and have contact with others. Our schedule was planned by managers, and they provided all-around support.

However, most of the female athletes interviewed were not aware of online resources for athletes to help them through the pandemic from a mental health perspective. The first reason athletes were unaware is because they do not have much spare time beyond training to look online and search for specific documents and resources. Second, the
training centre supplied most of their essentials from living, eating, and disinfection products, which will be discussed in the next theme:

P3: I did not use any online resources. We were training every day. In our spare time, we just swipe the screen every day.

P4: There might not be too much policy. I am not very clear. These are things that our director needed to know. Our training centre provides us with masks and sanitizing products….. I did not hear any sources or resources.

4.1.7 Fully supported by government management

We can conclude from the above discussion that training centres protected athletes well. Comments from athletes illustrated that they did not need to be concerned about living and training in a pandemic. Due to this protection, athletes had easy access to training facilities. Some athletes could not have activities with other athletes and friends from outside because training centres were closed. They were supported by staff in their centre along with teammates under this strict management. Female athletes noted their sleep and eating patterns were not impacted negatively, but they did feel Covid strategies were too rigorous:

P1: My sleep and three meals were as usual. There was almost no influence on it. Because we were closed off from the outside, so the training pattern was exactly like before. The only thing is that we could not go outside of campus (where the training centre is located) casually, and other teams could not come to have training in our place as well. It was very strict management.

Some participants from China noted that they were not worried about the COVID-19 pandemic. They were secured by a guaranteed living environment:
P2: Our training centre did a great job. We did not need too many other things. Most of what I need is for training……. We listened to the managerial group…….

Another athlete felt the same that they were not afraid of COVID-19 because the government provided safety precautions. The sports system in China decided athletes only needed to focus on training, especially the national team athletes:

P5: In China, you do not need to be worried because the national team would arrange everything. We athletes just need to focus on training, and that is all.

Successful management at training centres during COVID-19 facilitated the athletes’ return to normal training schedules. The cost of achieving a safe environment was to decrease training intensity. Another important competition for athletes in 2021 was China National Games. It was postponed from August to September 2021, but athletes revealed their training was not interrupted too much:

P4: Now, I put all my effort into the National Games. It should have been finished by the end of August, but now it was delayed to the end of September. Before the pandemic, I trained from Monday to Saturday and had Sunday off. During the worst time of the pandemic, we had not changed it besides wearing masks when going out of our own room. We are not allowed to go out of the bubble and into the closed loop. So, we kept training during the pandemic.

Chinese female athletes in this research study raised doubts about the officials’ strategies from their training centre in regard to coping with COVID-19, and these athletes put their personal feelings at the top of their consideration. For these Chinese female athletes to express personal emotion was a sign that they realized and cared about their identity as female athletes. Furthermore, these athletes' positionality revealed they realized their
privileged status as female athletes who were provided training facilities and guidance from authorities. However, there was some vagueness in the description that Chinese female athletes expressed, in particular about the realization of the transnational inequities which were raised by economic exploitation and their functions in nationalism.

Chinese scholar Xu and his colleagues Andrew Billings, and Minghui Fan, in their article “When Women Fail to ‘Hold Up More Than Half the Sky’: Gendered Frames of CCTV’s Coverage of Gymnastics at the 2016 Summer Olympics,” argued that female athletes were the perfect role models who represented the country and Communist Party rather than as individuals in Chinese media, whereas personal emotion and attractiveness were largely neglected for a long time.185 Chinese official media adopted a different frame depicting female athletes’ emotions and attractiveness. The new framing strategies were attributed to the introduction of the market-oriented economy with “economic, political and cultural transition” in society with the negotiation of gender norms.186 “The professionalization and commercialization of elite development were like a double-edged sword” for sports in China according to Tien-Chin Tan and Barrie Houlihan, in their article “Chinese Olympic Sport Policy: Managing the Impact of Globalisation.”187 These authors argue that China kept its resistance and adopted more of a “reaching out” method to bring in global influences instead of passively letting global impact break-in, for which China has active management rather than a direct rejection of professionalism and commercialism.188 For example, after the open-door policy initially, China had incentives and encouragement for athletes to go aboard. However, many retired and active athletes represented other countries to compete. China has been very positive and enthusiastic about accepting and absorbing global influences due to the international resource of playing a role in China learning from the West. Thus, the impact of internationalism and

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186 Ibid, 169.
188 Ibid.
globalization was not a significant threat to China and did not affect its sports policy widely, according to Tan and Houlihan.\textsuperscript{189} China was aware of the impact of the Western influence in the post-colonial world.

Western media and researchers are usually concerned about human rights of Chinese sports and female athletes. However, transnational feminist theory, according to scholars Zerbe Enns, Díaz, and Bryant-Davis in their article “Transnational Feminist Theory and Practice,” reveals a reality that “feminists from the Global North continue to have significant power in defining which issues should receive attention and which agendas and forms of activism should be supported.”\textsuperscript{190} When discussing feminist issues, local perspectives are needed from the transnational feminist point of view.\textsuperscript{191} The construction of the national identity of China that relied on female athletes had been viewed as hegemonic gender discrimination, according to Xu, Billings, and Fan, in their publication entitled “When Women Fail to ‘Hold Up More Than Half the Sky,’”\textsuperscript{192} The national systematic sports system could help female athletes to gain personal international recognition in the process of building up national glory; however, loyalty and collectivist cultural values are were accepted by Chinese female athletes even though with the impact of Western mindset.

4.2 Self-representation of Chinese female athletes on Weibo versus Interviews

This last section summarizes emerging themes from semi-structured interviews of Chinese female athletes. It was easy to access training facilities because they were high-level/national-level athletes based in government-supported training centres. Limited interruption with strict health measures in all places in China contributed to the steadiness of living and training. Even though these female athletes did not receive information, did

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid, 142.
\textsuperscript{190} Zerbe Enns, Díaz, and Bryant-Davis, “Transnational Feminist Theory and Practice,” 16.
\textsuperscript{192} Xu, Billings, and Fan, “When Women Fail to ‘Hold Up More Than Half the Sky,’” 159.
not want to focus on knowing COVID-19-related information, and did not regularly search for coping resources, they reported a low possibility of mental health problems. They got in-person supervision when isolated in training sites. It was surprising that no public-issued RTS plan existed to guide athletes directly when searching on the GASC website. Internal private documents distributed to administrators are possible, but no athletes mentioned they knew this type of thing. Guaranteed support for training provided by the government, promoted the feeling of readiness to Chinese female athletes as a remedy for not having an explicit document for athletes.

This study involved six female athletes at an elite level who represented China in the Tokyo Summer Olympic Games and a scan their posts from the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak to the right before the Tokyo Olympic Games, which was identified as being between January 1, 2020, to July 23, 2021. This study is framed within qualitative research and analysis. Therefore, only the relevant contents from athletes’ posts on Weibo were discussed, and no statistical data was included. Since Chinese female athletes’ self-presentation is not widely recognized on Western social media and translated into English, this section looked at their posts during the COVID-19 pandemic and if they posted anything associated with their readiness to RTS.

UNESCO noted that beyond the pale of mega sports events, women’s participation accounted for 40% of all sports. In comparison, the media coverage of women in their reports was about 4%. In Chinese media coverage, female athletes’ physical appearance and attractiveness were the focus where femininity and emotionality were also emphasized. In contrast, scholar Chia-Chen Yu, claims, in “A Content Analysis of News Coverage of Asian Female Olympic Athletes,” that “male athletes are portrayed as valued, independent, muscular and powerful associated with performances.” Yu’s content analysis for media coverage of female athletes and women’s sport indicated that women with power and hard physical contact sports got less attention from the media.

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because the features of these sports which are achievement-oriented in tension with the expectation that Asian women should be tender and mild. Lebel noted social media is the dividing point between traditional front-stage performance of professional athletes’ image and backstage performance of lives. Self-representation strategies were also used by Chinese elite women in sports during the preparation for Tokyo:

195 Ibid.
### Table 3 Self-presentation of Chinese Female Athletes on Weibo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Age/Sports/Followers</th>
<th>Tokyo Olympic Games</th>
<th>Posted Date</th>
<th>Posts associated with COVID-19 (Training, coping strategy, thoughts etc.)</th>
<th>Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Zhang, Yufei/23/Swimming/1.64M** | 100 Butterfly Stroke#2  
200 Butterfly Stroke#1  
4*200 Freestyle#1  
4*100 Medley #2 | 2020/03/31  
200k views | A two-minute short training video with voiceover and English and Chinese subtitles.  
**Content:** “Everything becomes an unknown. Four months becomes to sixteen months. There is nothing we can do. There is frustration. I won’t stop.” | Total: 20  
COVID-19: 1  
Training:3  
Competition: 2  
Life: 7  
Sports related:6  
Commercial: 1 |
| **Gong, Lijiao/33/Hammer Throw/1.25M** | #1  
#1  
2021/01/05  
2020/08/03 | “My hometown Shijiazhuang is in a state of emergency. Because I am in preparation for Olympic Games, the only thing I could do is to encourage people in my hometown. There is no winter we can’t go through, and spring will arrive on time”.  
“Olympics has been postponed, but the dream never stops.” | Total: 27  
COVID-19: 2  
Training:00  
Competition:0  
Life: 4  
Sports related:15  
Commercial: 6 |
| **Yang, Shuyu/20/Basketball/2.59M** | #3 | | | Total: 16  
COVID-19: 0  
Training: 1  
Competition: 0  
Life: 12  
Sports related: 2  
Commercial: |
4.2.1 No significant discussion of COVID-19 on Weibo

Since the interviewed Chinese athletes were not very outspoken, I intended to analyze their Weibo content. The research found women tended to have commentary on their own...
life rather than run filter blogs on A-list blogs. However, Female athletes in China shared their personal life and retweeted many other posts relevant to their sports but were mostly screening negative emotions from the pandemic. Only one athlete revealed, “2020 is too hard. Forget about it. Swallow it. This is essential for the grown-up world!” She pointed out her concerns at the beginning of the pandemic even though she did not mention the COVID-19 lockdown. However, that was the most significant incident in the early stage of the pandemic in China. Social media derived a new word, ‘micro-celebrity’ and using social media is a style of self-representation to enhance athletes’ exposure and brand themselves. Chinese elite women in sports realized that and promoted those kinds of posts on social media, and that they also have the opposite effect if athletes voice extensive discordant values on social issues and have contrary expressions with sports officials. They included promotional videos with training clips to indicate they had faced barriers during the pandemic but were ready to overcome them. Some featured narratives from interviewed athletes were as follows: “everything becomes an unknown. Four months becomes sixteen months. Here is nothing we can do. There is frustration. I won’t stop.” Research showed that posts on social media have the opposite effect if athletes voice extensive discordant values on social issues and have contrary expressions with sports officials, organizations, and sponsors.

As celebrities in sports with public attention, Chinese elite female athletes set limits on their tweets and share positive information with their audience. Self-disclosure on Weibo is what traditional media cannot offer. A basketball player posted 12 out of 16 on her life, including street snaps, food, hobbies, and vacations, to increase intimacy with fans and

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show personality. Backstage self-presentation provides authenticity. Backstage self-presentation provides authenticity. Five female athletes had posted on sports-related activities such as group photos in training venues and retweeted from sports organizations’ official accounts. From these six female athletes who prepared and successfully competed in the postponed Tokyo Summer Olympic games, it can be concluded that they had a relatively smooth process and high resilience to return to sport. People can quickly and easily regret posting sensitive content on social media. Athletes all have real-name authentication. Therefore, comments on complicated issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to unexpected circumstances. Two athletes had encouragement posts to support Olympic Day and the hometown, which was in lockdown then. Still, the uncertainty of the pandemic stopped them from adding more comments and communication.

4.3 Findings from Canadian Female athletes

4.3.1 Limited Training Equipment with No Supervision

Canadian female athletes encountered training difficulties with shortages of equipment. They trained from home at the beginning of the pandemic to prepare for the Olympic Games. However, some athletes were training at the centralized training centre and some others were separated from teammates based on the time period and sports. For example, some sports federations from some sports provided equipment to athletes to train at home. When athletes returned to train in the regular environment, health measures resulted in causing unhygienic situations. No shower access after training gave rise to infection. Some athletes could not row due to getting infected. As a team sport, it impacted the consistency and intensity of training for the whole team.


P5 stressed they had many training camps before the pandemic. Although they had some competitions during COVID-19, they could not train together eventually. As some athletes from some sports practiced artistic routines outside the competition environment for four months without regular physical cues. She ran very long distances equal to two marathons a week because in-pool cardio exercises were no longer an option within the dramatic change of public health restrictions.

Canada’s women’s sports team is always competitive with outstanding performance in the Olympic Games. This study interviewed elite female athletes from different sports to learn about their situations in COVID-19. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada, athletes would train six to seven days a week and 2-3 times a day. One sport trained in a group in BC; however, during the pandemic, athletes were separated with a limited training environment:

P1: Most immediate was that our team was completely separated, so we're a team sport which means we see each other every single day and that's how we train, um so going from a big group environment to complete isolation, training in our back yards, on our deck, on bikes... so we were physically unable to do our sport.

In addition to training individually at home, athletes had to train on their own and buy their equipment to train with:

P1: ……but the same time more financial need because I needed to... provide all my own equipment and training things on my own……

Coaches could not supervise and provide instruction to athletes in person during forced isolation. Training with no supervision may risk potential injuries such as ligament rupture and muscle injuries and worsened sports performance.²⁰³ Team sports need to train together, which is impossible during the pandemic. Athletes took isolated rides

²⁰³ Sarto et al., “Impact of Potential Physiological Changes Due to COVID-19 Home Confinement on Athlete Health Protection in Elite Sports,” 1417.
through video chat. It was a challenge to athletes’ self-determination and self-discipline. However, participants found that getting companionship and sharing a training plan inspired each other.

During the Pandemic, some athletes had to maintain their training at home. Some national sports federations provided athletes with equipment to take home to their residences as best as they could. It was difficult to only train on land as it is a water sport. When training facilities opened back up, there were still a lot of restrictions in place, such as not being able to use showers after a practice. The team would do joint training in their residences on Zoom. The athlete found this helpful, and it helped with accountability. The athletes set up a home gym, often in the garage, with some cardio equipment that they had found or were given. Finding equipment to use was difficult and very limited.

Unguaranteed training time was another issue for Canadian female athletes. The P6 participant trained five days a week approximately ten times before the pandemic, and the frequency of training was dramatically reduced due to the private gym closures. During the pandemic, she could only do some platform training in her coach’s garage on uneven platforms even though even stable platforms are a necessity for her sport. However, one athlete indicated she was confident in training during the pandemic as she could access training equipment and her coach was with them. This is very different from other participants:

P4: I could pick up a bar and all my weights and they gave us a program be like if these are the weights that you picked up here are some things that you can do. So I had to be like creative and make my own weird little bench press set up but I had access to equipment like I could go pick up a erg. I could go pick up an indoor bike if I needed to, so I felt like I was able to train with all the equipment I needed. Um, so I think I had access to equipment so I had access to spin bikes, ergs and I could pick up weight equipment. I had access to.. my coach who was also on the island. He didn’t go back to [another province] so my coach and my teammate we're
on, so I had access to my own kind of training program and a weights program. So I felt very well supported in terms of my training. We're probably lucky with [our sport] that way, like, I like you could do so much cardio And it can still transfer over, so I felt very confident that we could do the right things throughout this weird time.

4.3.2 Enjoying training alone and having More Time with Family

Surprisingly, some athletes enjoyed training alone as they could focus on themselves. Athletes were in intensive training before the pandemic to prepare for the Tokyo Olympic Games. Therefore, they did not get enough opportunities to be alone and refresh their minds and bodies. Relationships between family members were improved due to athletes obeying stay-at-home orders. One athlete said it was her most extended period to live with her husband since they married. Top-level athletes usually travel around the world and concentrate on training. COVID-19 provides chances to unite with family to some extent. One participant found herself to be more motivated than she expected and enjoyed it more than she thought:

P2: I actually found it… Really enjoyable and I think for me to just see my fitness wasn't really fading and I was umm motivated to keep like I kept seeing the results and being like OK… You know what I mean. So yeah, I was very surprised by my ability to train by myself. I thought I'd be bad at it… End up actually quite enjoying it. For the time that I had it! I don't think I'd want it forever, but… I think I handled it well well I had it so…

Another woman athlete indicated a similar feeling even though she had to train from home. She enjoyed it because it allowed her to stay with her husband:

P3:……we were training on her own at home for a few months, and that was, You know, I was one thing, but like the whole world was going through it, so we just dealt with it and I actually found it quite
enjoyable because I got to live with my husband for the longest period of time since we've been married……

Another participant kept a positive attitude toward postponement because she believed she was still young and would love to stay with her teammates for one more year:

P4: And I felt like for me, I was very much still enjoying training, I was like in my head I was even like, OK, another year we have another year to get fitter like I didn't see it as, For me, I wasn’t like Oh my God, how am I going to do this for another year? I was like, OK, this is going to be look different, But I felt OK. This actually gives us another year together … so I was able to see it as like a positive.

4.3.3 Being anxious about the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the Olympic Games

Psychological distress was attributed to a feeling of uncertainty. Individual goal setting is an internal controllable aspect. Still, external barriers stemmed from public health measures and were uncontrollable.204 Athletes “have to pick up pieces for everything changed.”205 They needed to conserve energy to be concerned with strange things during the Tokyo Games. No one had a clear picture of what would happen until it happened. One athlete pointed she out was not worried at the beginning of Covid due to the fact that their training locations were isolated and they were still training until it was stopped completely:

P4: … We felt very disconnected from COVID, especially on the island because there was no cases on the island, we were able to train as normal. We were honestly operating as normal. Until it like it completely stopped so for us I remember.

Pressures of maintaining high performance for another year, and postponing their Olympic dreams, caused anxiety. In addition, dealing with COVID-19 pandemic-related issues burned the candle at both ends, potentially impacting their training effect and competency. COVID-19 added another “layer of thinking,” according to participants, and all the details could not allow athletes to turn off their brains and focus on training. The chances of getting the severe illness, spreading COVID-19 to close family members, and recovery effects are unknown aspects. Lack of experience in dealing with COVID-19-related consequences brings unforeseeable to athletes. Leading into Tokyo, the athletes found it difficult not knowing how the games would play out, making it stressful. There was uncertainty around the Tokyo games due to the postponement, and no one had a similar experience to draw on to help to cope. These athletes are pioneers in preparing for the Olympic Games under a global pandemic, but they had to figure out everything:

P1: I think that is something that's also interesting, is how I feel there's a lot of unknown still. Umm and maybe that's just how information is being passed to us by our high-performance staff. But I think a lot of us are still hesitant in asking questions and being a little bit confused how it's all going to run. And again understandable, no ones ever done this before. But I would love to be able to actually have a clear picture of what I'm heading into.

Uncertainty of performance among competitors also triggered anxiety. There have been no competitions since the outbreak, and athletes could not find where they stand. Athletes should not only be physically ready but also be mentally prepared. Therefore, not knowing the level of performance of their team and the characteristics of other groups reduced confidence for female athletes in Canada. In addition, extra drag and obstacles were interrupted while training for the Olympic Games. Another participant discussed how the impact of the unknown of how the games would move forward caused pressure. The training centre was shut down. Uncertainty around the training environment and the Tokyo Games resulted in increased anxiety. Postponement of the games was also the postponement of their dreams, and no one knew what could happen before the flame was lit at the opening ceremony:
P2: Yeah, I think at the beginning of the sort of pandemic and the lockdowns. The hardest part for me was the games being postponed an extra year and so on top of sort of dealing with… Um The stressors of being in the pandemic and the lock down and all of the things that that was bringing I was also struggling with this you know, my dream being postponed another year and would even happen even though it's being postponed like what what does it look like? because it was such an unknown and I definitely struggled… umm We shut down our training centre.

More unease came from the unknown of how to practice social distancing and what would the restrictions for them would be like in Tokyo. Participants indicated that not knowing what would happen in Tokyo made them feel stressed because they needed to prepare for this uncertainty:

P1: ……Just because I would prefer to know that everyone knows exactly what's going on, I can just turn my brain off and focus on my training and competing and so the added layer of thinking about all those details is a bit stressful. As well as thinking about. Umm How? How we're going to stick to our normal routines and coping methods during racing? Just because we I, we are hearing about umm… rooming and how it's going to be confined spaces and we won't be able to do things we normally do and ask the same of everyone who is going to have to deal with it obviously, but that is an added concern that I have had more recently and be like okay I have to prepare myself for that.

P2 also mentioned similar content: athletes had not attended any competition for a long time since all races were cancelled, and they had to change their mentality to prepare for Tokyo. She noted the team had not raced in two years going into Tokyo, so it was difficult to know where they stood in the field. In addition, due to the fact that there had been no competitions for them, they could not watch other teams compete and learn their habits and strategies, which increased the difficulty of preparation:
P2: …… In a normal Olympic year, you would have raced the year before and you would have also had a series of World Cups, another racing opportunities to at least gauge your speed when going into these games. Completely blind and umm that does change a little bit of my preparation for race, in that instead of being able to say all we know, GB has fast start and we know that this is the strongest part of our race and that kind of thing, that's an unknown.

Although some athletes enjoyed training alone at home, others revealed they were less motivated. For example, an athlete affected by other diseases such as mononucleosis found it hard to have overall positive effects by training from home. A feeling of hopelessness could describe what some athletes’ described when discussing training from home. The fun part that usually comes with training was eliminated compared to the pre-pandemic era. Another reason contributing to a reduction in motivation was less in-person interaction with teammates. Athletes had online group meetings, but primarily connection was individually based online via social media. P6 mentioned she did not find meaningful solutions to her loss of motivation.

4.3.4 Increased Injury and Risks

When training in person, athletes could not access showers or change rooms, causing unhygienic situations and making athletes change in parking lots. This situation lasted from 2020 Christmas until they departed for the Tokyo Olympic Summer games. As a result, athletes got infected from dirty water and could not row. An athlete explained:

P3: The biggest issue at that point was that they didn't let us shower, which is extremely unhygienic and disgusting. And they kept the no shower rule until like the first time we got to shower after a [practice] was at the Olympics. So that was insane to me like So unhygienic like you're worried about us getting COVID when were double vaxed but like we're going to have growths on her body from this dirty [environment] and splashing us and then we can't shower after and like we have had people
with cysts on their butts from in the Dirty water and not showering, and then they can't [practice] because it gets so infected……

Other challenges identified by some Canadian female athlete participants were related to eating and sleeping issues. These participants emphasized they gained weight from eating under enormous stress during the pandemic. However, after leaving the stressful environment, they lost weight in a short time, feeling better emotionally and with healthier eating habits:

P3: I gained some weight for sure. Umm, I don't know if it was. I did a lot of stress eating so it could have been that like for rowing there always like Oh yeah… but I definitely gained weight, which, like I've already lost 4 kilos in a month and a half of not being in that environment anymore and being happy and like eating healthfully.

Quotes from P5 had content about using basic equipment from her parents at home and joining new cardio programs including running and biking which were totally new to athletes. These changes increased negative impacts on joints. P6 confronted a number of injuries in her career. She required services from private health professionals. However, COVID-19 led to almost no availability at clinics, therefore, she did not acquire prompt and appropriate treatment from health professionals.

4.3.5 Mental Problems and Feeling Alone

Athletes who could not reunite with family members abroad from Canada had more severe mental health problems than other athletes. One athlete described it as “a bit of salt in the wound” when watching other teammates reassociated with their families on social media. These athletes were astonished at the everchanging pandemic, and hatred of the situation emerged. In addition, athletes needed to accept being alone and having no family gatherings. Some athletes did not see their significant families from 2019 Christmas until after the Tokyo Olympic Games due to the required five days quarantine if one were to leave the training site. Like everyone who needed to communicate on Zoom, interviewed female athletes felt they were mentally fatigued with overwhelming numbers of zoom meetings. The feeling of being zoomed out caused extra mental stress
during COVID-19. A positive aspect of being alone for Canadian female athletes was they realized the critical elements of life. Some of them became aware of their ability to self-discipline as elite athletes who could train themselves. Also, keeping a gym at home during a pandemic may benefit athletes to keep fit after their sports careers. After communicating with athlete friends from the same level and a wide variety of sports, interviewed athletes knew that all athletes from different sports were in the same situation and that they were not alone to be in a difficult time, which helped them cope with the pandemic.

Participants pointed out that training alone impacted their motivation because there was no direct encouragement from other teammates and coaches. Even though P1 enjoyed having her own schedule and did not train alone for a long time due to a disease, despair appeared in isolation:

P1: Psychologically, it was a lot. Umm I definitely notice there was decrease in motivation… and um perhaps even feeling a bit of like hopelessness and took away an aspect of um, fun that usually comes with training. But that being said I also did, enjoy, uh having an opportunity to, uh kind of train on my own schedule. I did enjoy that. Uh but then pretty quickly I was no longer training because I got very sick with mononucleosis, so I didn’t have a full effect that some athletes might have had, of training on their own for months and months.

Athletes got connected via cellphone applications to communicate and support each other. They used Zoom for group meetings, and athletes also joined individually with teammates via text, facetime, phone calls and tagging each other on Instagram:

P1: We did use, we used Zoom for group meeting. Um… but then other than that are more individual connection basis we would text or FaceTime or just pick up the phone and call each other and then occasionally also like tagging each other and things on Instagram.
Another athlete demonstrated a very different opinion--that she felt very supported because she was in team sport:

P4: I think for me, because my teammate was out here and my coaches out here. I live with my partner like I felt very supportive. I was an athlete who is like their own track athlete or like someone who's very individual sport like I would definitely, Maybe like do some kind of a connection like athlete connection for like people who are in individual sports to chat about what they are going through, like I don't know how I would do it if I was completely like kind of all my own doing my own thing.

However, family members’ lack of support and company was problematic during the pandemic. Due to the travel restrictions, some participants would not leave to unite with their families. Being alone and not being able to provide support for family degraded athletes’ mental health. It was also challenging to see other people reunited during the pandemic on social media, which made P2 more upset when she connected it to her situation:

P2: ....... I also found it hard for me personally getting out of struggling with was being so far away from my immediate family and not being able to go home because the borders were all closed and the airports in Jamaica shut down and my family works in tourism and obviously, with pandemic, tourism is pretty hit really bad, so I family was like struggling a bit as well, so I definitely found it hard not being with them or not being able to go home not that I would have gone home at that time of year anyways, but just the idea that I couldn't was like very hard for me. So seeing other teammates and families who were together on Instagram and social media I felt it was a bit of salt in the wound and um not that I wasn't happy for those people, but I couldn't help but feel a bit of resentment.

P5 also felt she received support from family and friends, and she communicated with her tier 1 (top-level) athlete friends from a wide range of sports. Therefore, when she knew
that all athletes, from these sports, were in the same situation assisted she coped with COVID-19.

When athletes went back to training in person, they were training with limited interactions with the rest of the team. Athletes could not see their significant others, and if they were to fly anywhere, the athlete would have to quarantine for five days. Also, athletes were not supposed to hang out with athletes who were not in their team:

P3: ……A lot of people haven't seen their families from Christmas 2019 until, umm Just now, after the Olympics, if they've been like living in different places than their families, so that was a big thing. They let you go home from Christmas, but if you did, you had the quarantine for five days……

Positive effects from being alone are rare but exist. P2 discussed she was better at being alone after a few months. The pandemic helped the athlete to be able to think about life after sport and how she would keep physical activity as a part of her life:

P2: It's weird like I just I didn't cut the corners that I thought I would, and I wasn't as challenging I actually found it… Really enjoyable and I think for me to just seeing my fitness wasn't really fading and I was umm motivated to keep like I kept seeing the results and being like OK… You know what I mean. So yeah, I was very surprised by my ability to train by myself. I thought I'd be bad at it… End up actually quite enjoying it. For the time that I had it! I don't think I'd want it forever, but.. I think I handled it well

P2: I always want to stay fit but outside this is the kind of stuff that I would want at home and that little home gym started think more about like things that umm I will do after sport to keep fit so that was kind of fun too.

Athletes provided some information on COVID-19 resources that they could access for mental health. To get more motivation, P1 did meditation and journaling with her
professional knowledge from her area of her academic major in university. Also, athletes would contact teammates regularly and share training programs. Interestingly, they trained together remotely via Zoom. It helped athletes feel they had a companion in training, and they also get motivated from training with teammates as they have the same goals, though they were physically isolated:

P1: Umm... I found for myself mentally, I did a lot of um meditation and journaling and that was just to deal with, stress and finding my own intrinsic motivation once again. So I found that that quite helpful, as well as, uhh Checking out of my teammates pretty regularly, and we would share our training programs and when we were able to um start doing things such as going on isolated rides together, just on a distance, but trying to still use each other as um training buddies as much as we could.

4.3.6 Financial Insecurity due to cancellation of competitions

Another critical finding is that Canadian female athletes confronted financial difficulties due to the cancellation of races and changes in life plans. Before the pandemic, athletes got extra financial support from attending competitions. During the pandemic, athletes are compelled to travel outside the country to compete. As a result, they have forfeited the opportunity to get funded by demonstrating at sports performances. Athletes revealed their national and provincial federations couldn’t do much to help the national team during the pandemic due to the lack of funding and resources.

On the other hand, cancellation and postponement of sports competitions changed living routines and plans, which caused financial problems. For example, athletes who used to sublet their house during the summer would not get income from rent to pay for house expenses during COVID-19. In addition, as mentioned in the above discussion, athletes had to purchase training equipment out of their pocket to practice at home. However, they received some support from national sports organizations. All the changes from the pandemic impacted the athletes’ financial stability.
As discussed above, the participants mentioned they had to provide their own training equipment at home. However, financial insecurity was far greater than before. Athletes no longer had an opportunity for extra funding through competition due to cancelled competitions. In addition, when athletes travelled before for the summer and could sublet their house, so they did not have to pay rent, and the saved rent money could cover other expenses. Although they had a less financial need from a travel perspective because everyone was home during the pandemic and not travelling, they did not have the option during the pandemic to sublet their house and so were met with other financial problems:

P1: …… And then on the same side, we no longer had the opportunity to get extra funding through competition. And normally when we travel for the summer, you can sublet your house and therefore do not have to pay your rent and then we get the months that were away everything paid for. So that definitely changed our budgeting during the year.

4.3.7 Need Support for Life’s Choices As A Woman

Postponement of the Tokyo Olympic Games is not a one-year delay for dreams and another year elapses in the athletes’ lives. For female athletes, life changes and choices can dramatically influence sports careers. A unique female athlete issue that developed from the pandemic postponement and extension of another year was fertility concerns. One method of coping with that that was identified was to freeze ovum or embryos. Athletes found no financial assistance from Sport Canada or their national sports organization when looking to freeze embryos, with their drug plan only covering 10% of what is needed to cover the costs. One interviewee emphasized her worries about the quality of her ovum because they start to decrease by age of 30 for women. This finding continues from the last one that if athletes came up with the thought of freezing embryos, they need to think about the money first. Some athletes do not have enough saved up, and athletes’ drug plans have a limited amount for drug coverage. Physiological characteristics decide that women can give birth in a specific age range and/or there is an optimal age to have a baby:
P3…… Like lots of people don't even think like, oh, the quality of my eggs might be decreasing past age 30 what’s going to happen. Oh, how much does it cost. Like even for me I was like OK… it cost this much to get my embryos frozen and then it was like oh wait, it costs equal that much to get the drugs to produce a lot of eggs and our drug plan covers $1000, of which I've already used a bit of for the year, so I had like 10% of what the total cost was covered by our drug plan which was like basically doubled the price of what I thought it was going to be, and a lot of people lot of athletes making the money we make don't have that kind of money saved up, so even if they're like OK, I want to do this now… They don't know how much it's going to cost. There is no support financially from Sport Canada or Rowing Canada, and then that just emotional support isn't there either. ……

For female athletes, if they are pregnant, it will pause their career, or they will leave the field forever. People could say many world-class athletes returned to sports after getting married and giving birth. We can name Serena Williams, Allyson Felix and many more. However, people did not realize that other sports out of the spotlight could not get enough sponsorship, funding, and pregnancy-exercise support, so returning to sport is not easy. Gwen Berry, a US hammer thrower, threw another point that people usually judge athletes with children. The question, “why aren’t you with your child?” comes to athlete-moms, and she also examined herself, “I could be home with my child…. Why am I doing these things and sacrificing my time for the sport that does not pay athletes well and does not care?” Giving birth is not a matter that women could have plans to a certain degree. Birthing date, delivery method, and puerperium recovery are usually over expectations. Canadian women runner Melissa Bishop-Nriagu shared her experience that lifting weight is not an obstacle soon after delivering her baby. Still, the most challenging part is recovering muscle capacity and the rebuilding period of it is slower than an injury.

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Therefore, female athletes must consider more about their life during the delay of the Olympic Games if they want to start motherhood in life and/or be pro-athlete-mom. One athlete pointed out her family plan was impacted by COVID even though she did not plan to have children in the near future:

P4: So for me, I didn't know if I was gonna compete after Tokyo or not, like I was very, who knows. And knew, I wouldn't have kids until I was like after 31-32 anyway, so that's why I did stay around. I still wasn't thinking about having children, but I am I be interested to get your research after 'cause I do think family planning definitely COVID, I can see in my teammates like completely through them, Like through a loop like egg freezing, like one after my team got her eggs frozen when the pandemic hit.

4.3.8 Sufficient resources with the unknown time commitment

When looking for resources for coping strategies some of the athletes knew of Game Plan, (an online resource developed in partnership with the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) and private companies) the official resource from the Canada Olympic Committee, and they used Game Plan on and off. Before the pandemic, some athletes attended seminars and activities, primarily motivational talks and the sharing of athlete experiences. Participants found Game Plan helpful. However, during the pandemic, some of these same athletes did not use Game Plan even though they believed there were resources that they could have found useful. The athletes noted they did not realize what resources were available until after it was too late. Still, more information and broadcasting of what is available to athletes and what benefits are included would be helpful:

P1: I think perhaps sometimes I don't realize what is available, and then I realized I realized later. So maybe a little bit more... uh broadcasting about what is specifically available for athletes and how they can benefit from it, because occasionally I would hear about it from a teammate later, and I would, oh that would've been really helpful if I had known, and if I'd known before I needed it so umm Actually better layout of what's available.

During the pandemic, one participant indicated that someone from Game Plan had reached out to her, and she thought it was about taking some business courses. The athlete was interested in attending class but did not have the capacity and it was not related directly to COVID-19 coping strategies. Some participants also saw emails on resolving mental health issues but did not engage in that at the time. Another participant found that Game Plan reaching out was worthwhile and that should be done more. Female athletes would like to see resources on family planning:

P3: Um, some something like family planning stuff early on would have been useful, like umm… and like bouncing a family with training or something like… that

However, another athlete pointed out that she preferred to have information directly from calling in herself rather than checking emails because many emails went into junk email boxes:

P3: I think them reaching out to me directly is very useful, like calling me on the phone and talking to me. Emails like nowadays, we get so many junk emails, and they send a lot of emails. So, it's just like I don't want to open all these emails. I don't have time to read all these emails, so I think the most useful thing was then calling me saying Hey, this is what we offer.

P5 and P6 shared ideas about using Game Plan and other resources. P5 reflected on the fact that she used career adviser services in Game Plan but did not take advantage of it
since the outbreak. P6 emphasized she realized through email that Game Plan and her sports federation offered a wide range of services, but the athlete did not believe in the necessity to use these resources.

Female athletes revealed an essential and unique topic regarding the biological significance of delaying starting a family in order to continue training and competing after the postponement of the Olympic Games. This is obviously not experienced by male athletes as they do not bear children. The examples identified by athletes included the case of, upon returning to training in person and arriving late due to procedures required for maintaining biological fertility, having to fight with team officials/coaches to give access to food cards the other athletes that already received. They felt that there are no resources for family planning or information for female athletes to know that procedures like freezing their embryos is an option:

   P3: ……But it's like never something that anyone talked to us about and I, like, found through separate resources that the quality of your eggs starts to decrease after age 30 and this is why you should freeze them and so… Um, No one really talked to us about that, so that would be something helpful to for us to know for at least the female athletes to know stuff like that. And like how to go about getting it done?

Canadian female athletes received sufficient support from the federal government and sports organizations for the most part. A later chapter will compare the differences in the government support for Chinese athletes. Athletes mentioned they encountered financial issues due to the cancellation of competitions, and they paid for training equipment out of their pocket to train at home. In addition, Sport Canada provided extra funding to athletes:

   P1: Yes, actually we did get umm some extra money eventually through umm Sport Canada they we did get extra funding. and then CAN Fund the athlete charity also was great.
However, athletes always focused on training and were passive information receivers. A participant mentioned there should be some other valuable resources for them, but they could not take the time to search for all helpful information. P1 would like to see career and education planning resources and thinks details on dealing with sponsorship deals would be beneficial. When considering if she would use a program, how much time it would take is a significant factor. Not knowing the time commitment beforehand made her less likely to use resources. A time estimate would be helpful:

P1: Yeah, very true, yes. So much information available that you can get overwhelmed and put aside and say I'll check it out later, but. Yeah, I. I know it's there; I just maybe take advantage of the fact that they're waiting and don't really use it.

P1 believed that her sport had reasonable resources. Female athletes met with the team sports psychologist every week. It is important to know their affiliated sports organization has weekly checks with a psychologist because these checks may not be available to other national sports teams:

P1: Hmm... I think realistically we're pretty privileged sport and that we do have a lot of resources available to us and we do have very great staff that are better on it. Umm... In providing those resources to us, such as we have a great sport psych. So, I found that that was incredibly helpful for me and I personally spoke with our sport psych weekly and that really helped me get through the challenges that I was facing.

However, other participants found management’s rules were not consistent with government rules which they felt were extreme and unfair. They indicated they should have followed the government rules rather than have followed the rules made by their sports administration:

P3: It was just a big political mess, and their rules were extreme. And talking to other athletes in other sports, they didn't have the same kind of rules. The mental stress of the last year was just like unbearable like just
even knowing if the games is going to happen and then that implementing all these crazy rules on us like we weren't supposed to get our haircut or anything like that before the games like. It was just like we were supposed to stay home and order groceries online and act as if we were in quarantine and it was. The rest of the world was not living like that, the other athletes were not living like that, so it's just like super frustrating to deal with.

Well-resourced federal management provided adequate help to interview athletes, such as sports psychologists. Along with the second and third waves of COVID-19, Sporting Canada realized the potential financial problem for athletes. They provided extra funding to aid athletes during the pandemic. However, rigorous rules implemented by their sports administration were a source of complaint by athletes because these rules were not following public health measures. Athletes believed these rules were insufferable, and it seemed there were performing quarantines. Another negative experience for P6 was that she learned decisions by the COC from the news, and communications were poor and always many days late between COC and athletes. It was not clear if the communication was to come through the national sport organization or not.

Wellness programs specified for athletes can be easily searched online. However, some athletes did not realize that, as P4 mentioned, she kept using what she used from pre-pandemic times even though she had a discussion with the Game Plan worker:

P4: Yeah, I honestly we didn't really have any in terms of mental health, Nothing online. I mean obviously there's like those apps like column and headspace that you could access like beforehand, which I definitely like had already used…The same like frequency like it didn't go out because I already kind of are using them, so I felt like I already had some of those coping strategies, but those are obviously like I would probably say to people, Like those kind of apps would be something I would use.

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208 Game Plan website: https://www.mygameplan.ca/
P4: I kind of wanted to start making plans so I use Game Plan in terms of like… Like actually they gave me some good advice, like how to connect with people on LinkedIn and when you do resumes like how to connect with someone before you submit it like things like that. Which I didn’t end up using because I'm coming back and I'm in school again, but I definitely like new that was a resource I think everyone on the row team was quite aware of those resources.

Therefore, athletes suggested having more advocacy of these resources because they did not have the time to find whether these resources are helpful or not. Some athletes would like to utilize the existing courses but do not have extra time. Game Plan and other relief programs workers contacted athletes, but one P5 female athlete pointed out directly that she did not feel the need to use services from Game Plan though she received many offers through email. Life planning is the part that these female athletes would like to know the most, but they did not notice any related resources. There were many helpful information sources available, but athletes had to consume time to search for it, which they usually could not commit to with intensive training and preparation for Tokyo. Time commitment is a significant variant for Canadian female athletes. Athletes prefer directly contacting these wellness programs like Game Plan and asking them what assistance they need. There are suitable resources for athletes, but they might not have taken full advantage of them. Assistance on a sports career, on education planning and on family planning seemed to be in high demand among participants.

The experience of Canadian female athletes during COVID-19 contributed to our understanding of the role of sports and the position of female athletes in Canada. The federal government had used sports as an instrument to enhance Canadian identity since the federal government passed the 1961 Bill C-131 Act.\(^\text{209}\) However, Myers and Doherty, in their article, “A Multidimensional Critique of the Sport Canada Policy on Women in Sport and Its Implementation in One National Sport Organisation,” noted that support for

men’s sports contributed to the limited participation of Canadian women’s in sports due the history of male dominance based on patriarchy. Creating an effective policy for female athletes was not easy because the most significant challenge was white men who were from “similar socio-economic, educational and sports background” governing sports organizations in Canada. These circumstances, which initially triggered the gender equity policy, hardly helped women in sports to overcome barriers. Now, women’s sports in Canada are more focused on enhanced participation over the lifespan and boosting capacity and interaction between stakeholders whereas Canadians’ aim was to acquire world-class results via ethical and fair approaches in high-performance sports according to scholars Alison Doherty and Ryan Clutterbuck, in their publication entitled “Canada,” in Comparative Sport Development. Therefore, political pressures for Canadian female athletes had less influence on their predominate training, living and well-being practices.

During COVID-19, Canadian female athletes in this study suffered more from post-colonial gender norms, such as concepts of femininity, and they encountered limitations to reproductive rights during COVID-19 as women. The feminist issue they encountered was an equity problem: they demanded benefits based on their needs rather than what was available to them. Scholars Kitayama, Shinobu, and Hazel Rose Markus, in their publication entitled “The Pursuit of Happiness and the Realization of Sympathy: Cultural Patterns of Self, Social Relations, and Well-Being,” claim that research demonstrated that with independent cultures in North America, people usually have good conditions for self-esteem and physical health. However, the findings from this study indicate that

211 Ibid.
female athletes were being treated unfairly and inadequately pre-pandemic, during the pandemic and post-pandemic. The literature review in this study demonstrated that “sport is the cultural sphere that is dominated by the values and relations of the dominant class, but it does not fully stop dominated classes from shaping and redefining sport in their own ways so as to meet their needs.”214 The culture of perceived sports as masculinity is not determined by COVID but derived from the historical development of sports as a social activity. Therefore, COVID-19 as a global pandemic was a flashlight for the pre-pandemic discrimination and was enlarged from gendering cultures for elite female athletes. Findings from this study show female athletes did not receive the specific attention that they deserved. More details regarding this, and the need for future research, are presented in the next chapter.

5 Conclusion, Discussion and Implications

The similarity and differences between Canadian and Chinese female athletes are summarized in this chapter. Female athletes from these two countries shared similar experiences of barriers during the preparation for Olympic Games during the pandemic, but COVID-19 also had a distinguishable difference in impact on them. In the discussion section, the possible solution to address the negative influences on female athletes are listed. The connection between pre-pandemic discrimination and in-pandemic barriers for female athletes are presented. This discussion can contribute to the governments and National Olympic Committees’ and national sport organizations’ refinement and development of programs for female athletes, as longer-term compassionate care for elite female athletes enduring the pandemic can bring a profound and lasting influence on their environment. The conclusion includes the provision of future directions and ideas for possible research that could be implemented to alleviate not only the impact of COVID-19 on women in sports, but also impact the subculture in sport specifically.

5.1 Comparison of Canadian and Chinese Female Athletes in COVID-19

Potential outcomes in the comparison between Chinese and Canadian female athletes are presented from a cultural relativism perspective. The analysis goes to athletes’ perspectives, living experiences and training barriers during the pandemic. Also, this chapter compares and contrasts athletes’ perceptions of discrimination that applied to them during the pandemic.

Generally, in comparison with Canada, COVID-19 was detected early in China. Also, China had effective control and a shorter outbreak period before Tokyo Games. Positive cases were controlled under a certain number due to strict health measures. The most common health measure was quarantine for people who travelled back from overseas or domestic people from high-risk areas. For example, people who travelled back from

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215 Please see the figure on page 5.
abroad were sent to hotels directly from the airport for quarantine in port cities. The following tables helps to lay out the comparison between the Canadian and Chinese female athletes.

\[\text{Reference: Fourteen days hotel quarantine and 14days home quarantine,} \text{ April 14, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/hudong/2020-04/14/content_5506701.}\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Similarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Enjoyed training alone at home. Trained on strength with no teammates.</td>
<td>Settled down and refocused on training. Concentrated on physical training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Separated from other family members due to quarantine requirements. Have not seen the family since Christmas 2019.</td>
<td>Did not go home for the Chinese New Year in 2020 and 2021. Could not go outside of training centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Support</td>
<td>Sports organizations and the federal government provided extra funding during COVID-19.</td>
<td>The government provided all training and living demands for athletes at the training centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Female athletes met significant challenges during COVID-19 for training and daily life.</td>
<td>Female athletes confronted barriers such as eating disorders, potential injury, and training accessibility. However, they do not believe they had big challenged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Athletes were outspoken and gave details.</td>
<td>They gave less information and felt some questions did not apply to their situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Planning</td>
<td>Revealed issues related to life choices such as fertility.</td>
<td>Did not mention much about life concerns out of sports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Athletes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>They had minimal access to training facilities-- no supervision or with supervision via Zoom.</td>
<td>Had limited access to training facilities at the beginning of COVID-19 but resumed using them soon. Had supervision on-site at training centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Problems</td>
<td>Due to current postponement, extra live expenses and no income for attending future competitions.</td>
<td>No athlete mentioned they encountered financial problems. Affiliated sports bureau pay salary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Received psychological guidance because the privilege of sports; is much more stressful.</td>
<td>Affiliated sports organization provided psychological consultant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping Strategies</td>
<td>Looked for coping strategies to get released from mental pressure. Have been contacted by athlete wellness plan staff; but not sure about the time commitment for using resources; in the public wellness program.</td>
<td>Not sure if there were coping strategies for athletes because athletes did not have to worry about training and living. Did not search for coping strategies; no public relief program and policy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 Comparison between Canadian and Chinese Female Athletes

Policies varied in different regions and provinces in China. Still, most of the quarantines lasted seven to twenty-eight days in hotels. Some cities with more positive cases required extra quarantine days. In addition, most places requested another seven days of self-assessment at home after hotel quarantine.\textsuperscript{217} Protection of Chinese athletes at training centres contributed to the minimum probability of being quarantined due to no contact outside. Athletes were not exempted from this policy, even though they needed to have the training to prepare for future competitions. Olympians who returned to China from Tokyo also had to practice for twenty-one days quarantined in the hotels.\textsuperscript{218} They were trained in the quarantine room because most of them had to attend National Games in September 2020.

Canada is entering the fifth wave until the end of 2021. Some Canadian athletes were required to have five days of quarantine if they travelled out of the training site before the Tokyo Games. Travel limits and quarantine policies are changing along with the pandemic in Canada. Athletes who competed in the Tokyo Olympic Games needed to stay at a Federal Government-authorized hotel when they returned to Canada until they were informed of a negative result of a COVID-19 test.\textsuperscript{219} This study does not discuss the pros and cons of the quarantine policy, but these health measures provide a comparison background.

5.1.1 Similarity

Some of the Canadian and Chinese female athletes interviewed in this study enjoyed training in isolation because they did not get chances to settle down and rethink their training before the pandemic because of the time-pressured situation. There was a focus by some in both countries to recharge and refocus-- athletes sneaked out of the intensive

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{218} “Chinese Olympian are home! The life in quarantine has surprised people online,” August 15, 2021, http://ex.chinadaily.com.cn/exchange/partners/82/rss/channel/language/columns/v0m20b/stories/WS61186715a310efa1bd668d5e.html
and high-pressured atmosphere, took a breath, and put effort into another year of training. Due to being isolated at home, Canadian athletes could not train with teammates. They trained alone to keep fit with the equipment they purchased. Even though Chinses athletes stayed together at isolated training centres, they mainly trained primarily for physical strength. Sports-specific training was weakened for both Chinese and Canadian female athletes. Athletes were suspended from training facilities, which would directly affect the training effect and consistency, and a lack of sport-specific fitness would raise a higher injury risk.\textsuperscript{220} Athletes indicated results from paused competition that their muscles were stiff. They had no idea of their performance levels amid opponents. Moreover, some little things had a significant influence on athletes from both countries, such as athletes could not take a shower after training, increased hygienic problems, and athletes would not feel satiated after having a boxed meal. These little things further impacted their training consistency.

In terms of family, female athletes from both countries missed celebrating the most important holidays (Christmas and Chinese New Year) with beloved family members for two years, which increased feelings of loneliness and potential mental health risks.

Both Canadian and Chinese athletes received relatively great support from the government. Individual sports organizations in Canada funded athletes for purchasing training equipment. Sport Canada also issued extra funding during COVID-19 to meet athletes’ financial needs. Chinese government supplied comprehensive training and living services at training centres.

In addition, the coding themes presented indicates that athletes who have been members of national teams longer have relatively better adaptation in both countries. Even though family plan and life plan constrained female athletes during the cancellation of competition and postponement of Olympic Games, their attitude toward COVID-19 were more positive and their resilience to keep motivation and persistence were stronger.

\textsuperscript{220} Bowes, Lomax, and Piasecki, 12.
5.1.2 Difference

Challenge

Greater differences than similarities are found between Canadian and Chinese female athletes. Chinese athletes encountered barriers such as eating disorders, injury, content changes in training and isolation life, etc. Still, athletes did not feel they had any significant challenges that could hinder their life and sports career. However, Canadian counterparts revealed difficulties in many aspects such as training accessibility, financial challenges, looking for resources, life planning as women, and mental health.

Response

Chinese athletes spoke and revealed less information than their Canadian counterparts. One of the Chinese participants responded straightforwardly to questions regarding looking for resources (e.g. discuss any coping strategies you find particularly helpful; discuss any coping strategies you tried that were not effective) that they seemed non-applicable to them because she did not even think about searching for coping strategy. She did not have a concern about her training and living. However, this athlete responded with closed answers during the interview. When asking follow-up questions to get more information, the athlete stated she did not have too much information to share.

Besides one athlete who did not provide much information during the interview, other Chinese athletes were also reticent and cautious compared to Canadian athletes. One athlete pointed out that because the COVID-19 pandemic is politically sensitive, athletes should “follow the command of the Party.” Other interviewees did not mention anything political but were cautious about discussing COVID-19-related issues. Although I (as interviewer) was introduced by credible people to these athletes, being physically abroad and affiliated with a Western research organization may bring up tension in Chinese athletes. In addition, elite athletes in China have rarely been asked questions related to coping strategies because they receive all-around protection and services from the government, as mentioned in the above discussion. Some accusations and discrimination of Western media against China and Chinese athletes stem from political purposes and
ideology. This media coverage caused athletes to be sensitive to COVID-19 discussions so as not to be giving rise to a misunderstanding. In addition, their daily lives were monotonous compared to Canadian participants, but Chinese female players were met with fewer problems during the pandemic.

Canadian female athletes were outspoken and spoke eloquently. They contributed longer answers, and their content was informative with more details. On the one hand, they did confront more barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic leading to many different stories to share. On the other hand, Canadian participants received aid from officials but still hunted for more coping strategies, creating solid reflections.

**Life Planning**

Another apparent discrepancy is that Canadian female athletes presented concerns about their relationship with their partners and life choices such as fertility. At the same time, the Chinese counterparts did not show interest in the topic during interviews. The sample of this study is small due to the nature of the qualitative research. Athletes from Canada who numbered over 20, consider their life after retirement from competitive sports. All Chinese interviewees in this study were relatively younger, aged 25 and below and did not have adequate plans outside of sports. In contrast, worried Chinese athletes turned to age and risks of injury during the extra year of the Olympiad. These elements could trigger change before the Tokyo games and increase uncertainty in sports careers.

**Training Barriers**

Supervision in training and accessibility of training facilities are two main differences between Canadian and Chinese female athletes. The problem of being away from teammates for team sports was that athletes could not play the sport. Athletes set Zoom meetings to train together and assumed they were on the same boat. They had no supervision from coaches when staying at home during lockdowns. The difficulties were also changing along with the changes in local public health requirements and the pandemic curve. Synchronized swimming athletes went to training camp with no

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221 Dong, *Women, Sport and Society in Modern China.*
schedule for returning because the plan kept changing. They participated in an online competition before the Tokyo Games without competitors and an audience. When COVID-19 broke out rapidly in China at the beginning of 2020, athletes were restricted from using the gym and other equipment at training centres and could only train outside in the hallway. Soon after setting up health measures and the pandemic was under control, athletes resumed using training facilities at their training centres. The privilege of staying at a place together for athletes, was having coaches living in training centres with them. Therefore, coaches could provide guidance. Some voices critiqued the zero-Covid policy in China, which increased the lack of autonomous life. However, they experienced greater training independence in the training centre bubble.

**Financial Problems**

Canadian athletes had worse financial situations with extra living expenses and no income from not attending competitions due to suspended competitions in the sports world. In contrast, no Chinese athletes mentioned they encountered financial problems. The Affiliated sports bureau paid a salary. There was also no rent for athletes to pay. Canadian athletes raised a critical issue of the financial burden of preserving fertility. It must be a concern for other women in sports who planned, or would plan, to have a baby in the future. Women’s fertility led to the realization of high expenses if they decided to do so.

**Coping Strategies/Official resources**

The Canada Olympic Committee issued systematic official resources, entitled Game Plan, to Olympic athletes preparing for the Olympic Games, while China did not have a publicized plan and policy for elite athletes. Game Plan was released on the Canadian Olympic Committee’s official website and provided a holistic approach to help national-level athletes manage uncertainty during the pandemic. Olympians were targeted in this plan, including various sections such as health, skill development, career, education, community, and webinars. For influential federal sports organizations, management organized training camps outside Canada for sports like synchronized swimming in Spain and Hungary to evade provincial and national health measures and restrictions. In
contrast, the less funded national sports federations could not arrange training camps or travel to tier 3 athletes who were not identified as the top level of the pyramid to escape from restrictions in COVID-19 even though they were qualified to compete in Tokyo. In terms of China, the General Administration of Sports of China has official information issues. The public information focused on the reopening of sports. It emphasized preparing for the Olympic Games during the pandemic and what to do to help sports return to normal to allow athletes to compete. Where there is no public relief program and policy for athletes to have references or resources, athletes in this study were thinking for a few seconds before responding to this question. However, there could be internal private documents for administration staff to view. When public health measurement took effect at the administration level, athletes did not need to seek other assistants. Canadian athletes looked for coping strategies to get released from mental pressure. They had been contacted by athlete wellness plan staff, but the time commitment was an obstacle to using resources. Chinese counterparts were unsure if there were coping strategies for athletes because they did not have to worry about getting into challenging circumstances. Therefore, they did not search for coping strategies. However, from another point of view, China had a shorter period of lockdown, public restrictions and earlier recovery for sports events, which indirectly assisted female athletes in returning to sports and preparing for competition.

5.1.3 Individualism and Collectivism

Scholars Shinobu Kitayama and Hazel Rose Markus, in their article entitled “The Pursuit of Happiness and the Realization of Sympathy: Cultural Patterns of Self, Social Relations, and Well-Being,” claim that North American cultural contexts view the ‘self as independent’ and that internal particularity decides people’s behaviours. Conversely, they also argue that Eastern Asian countries have ‘interdependent self-type’ without as much autonomy as independent self-type. Sports historian Heather Reid discussed in

223 Ibid, 120.
her *Athletic Virtues* about individualism and collectivism between ancient Chinese culture and the Greek philosophy that, “the observation has even been offered as an explanation for the relative absence of sport in Asian history: activities that select and exalt a single winner while causing those defeated to ‘lose face’ in public seem antithetical to the community orientation of the East.”224 Reid’s perspective and analysis is compatible with the culture of Eastern Asia and the image of Chinese female athletes who gained empowerment opportunities because they were competitive to win gold medals and glory for the nation, which could help China to “earn faces”. Female athletes portrayed as tenacious fighters in the media also contributed to their high performance in international competitions and winning glory for China -- “Chinese sportswomen have played a primary role in fulfilling China’s dream of becoming a superpower in global sports.”225 On the other hand, China has also adopted a more proactive method to bring in global influences and resources, of which China has active management rather than a direct rejection of professionalism and commercialism outright.226

The ideology of collectivism in Chinese culture was expressed in coping with COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China implemented collective coping strategies. China has been building mobile cabin hospitals and having regular PCR tests. People have to scan personal health QR codes on their phones to enter public buildings such as supermarkets, banks, hospitals, etc. Provinces and territories in Canada implemented lockdown and stay-at-home orders. Distinguished from China, Canada issued specific reasons for when, why and how people could go out of their homes, such as to exercise, to buy food and drinks, attend school and workplaces, etc.227 Even though Canada had changed and lifted the COVID-19 policy along with the curve of positive cases and

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225 Xu, Billings, and Fan, “When Women Fail to ‘Hold Up More Than Half the Sky,’” 158.
economic consideration, the principle of implementing the policy was based on essential individual needs.

COVID-19 is a timely issue, and circumstances vary with the development of this virus. The philosophical ideas and traditions of China and Canada impacted their decision-making toward COVID-19. This research study also contributed to the understanding that China emphasized maximum benefit for the community. The advantage was that female athletes isolated at the training centre had limited side effects from COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic during this research period. Compared with China, sports management is decentralized in Canada, and athletes suffer more from self-organized training at home. Independent coping strategies of Canadian female athletes stemmed from the tradition of individualism in Western cultures. Individualistic cultures underline the needs of individuals more than the group. Personal attitudes and preferences are valued in society. Therefore, Canadian female athletes had more autonomy during COVID-19. Reid also argues that the Ancient Western world also had the traditional collective views that “the success of individual athletes brought glory to their families and their city, and states, inspiring a sense of representation and service that overshadowed individual interests.”228 Now, modern athletes are still proud to be national team athletes but are allowed individual fame at the same time.

5.2 Discussions and Implications

5.2.1 COVID-19 Exacerbates Pre-pandemic Barriers for Female Athletes

IOC’s Gender Equality and Inclusion Report 2021 noted, “even amid recent improvements, and with ever-increasing support for female athletes everywhere, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the global fragility of gender equality gains.”229 During the pandemic, female athletes recognized multiple barriers to their athletic career, physical and mental health, and personal life. The deficiency of access to training equipment influenced their training pattern and social distancing implementation impacted: training efficiency; raised potential physiological risks from irregular training

228 Reid, “Athletic Virtue,” 22.
and competition; reduced their ability to keep a certain level of performance; increased mental stress aligned with sleeping and eating disorders, resulting in a slow recovery and RTS; lack of efficient coping strategy systems from governing bodies triggered less usage of supportive resources. In contrast to the numerous barriers they suffered, Canadian and Chinese female athletes achieved outstanding performances in the Tokyo Olympic Summer Games, similar to what they always accomplish on Olympic stages. Team Canada won seven gold medals in total, and five of them were from female athletes and teams.230 For China, twenty-five out of thirty-eight gold medals were received by female athletes or had female athletes in the teams.231 We could conclude they had excellent adaptation and resilience to the global pandemic from the gold medal results of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games; however, we could not deny that the priority of men’s sports weakened the adaptation of women to RTS early and smoothly. A report from the Centre for Sports and Human Rights in the UK demonstrated that the cancellation of women’s sports during the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the imbalance due to men’s sports starting to reopen earlier as the premier league would face financial issues to return funds to broadcasters if men’s matches were cancelled as a for-profit organization.232 In contrast, the women’s league, the Football Association is a governing body, which means female players acquire most of their income from ticket sales rather than get revenue from broadcasting.233 Women soccer players did not receive sufficient financial support combined with sharply declined chances for exposure to audiences and the public, whereas men did not struggle with funding. The pre-existing discriminations before the pandemic were exacerbated. When recalling the perceived masculinity in sports, dominant groups try to make their power reasonable and legitimate even though this hegemony is always doubted and challenged by the subordinate population.

233 UK Parliament, 6.
Moreover, people in decision-making positions paternalistically believed women’s performance in sports would not receive much attention from the public during the lockdown. Therefore, they assumed significant earnings from ticket sales were impossible and put female athletes in financially risky situation. Women had no right to choose what to do in the whole process and so lost the autonomy to determine if they wanted to compete; the reasons to block female athletes were not because of public health measures but sports administrators on their behalf. Coincidentally, female players withdrawn from the 2020 US Tennis Open dramatically exceeded their male counterparts on their initiative. Nineteen female athletes in total, twenty-four withdrawn cases were because of COVID-19 concerns, and women tended to stand by preventive requirements, which “women have higher levels of aversion to exposure” even though the prize money is identical between men and women in tennis grand slam.234

Girls’ participation in sports generally is also challenging in current situations for women in sports. A survey conducted by Canadian Women and Sport collected data from 5,000 Canadian families. It indicated that one out of every four girls who were involved in sports before the pandemic were not confident about returning to sport afterward due to reduced accessibility to quality sports programs and dropped self-assurance of skills and body images.235 The participation rate of girls’ sports may impact the future contribution of elite levels. Furthermore, financial issues will be a long-lasting problem for women in the wretched cycle if COVID-19 risk leads to girls walking away from sports, let alone competitions.

Female athletes have better adaptation than people thought to COVID-19. China and Canadian female athletes maintained a high level of performance in Tokyo. Even though both countries have traditions in which women have won more gold medals than their male counterparts -- keeping a confident performance for an extra year needs extra


determination from athletes. For female athletes who suffer from pandemic-caused circumstances, conciliating themselves to adapt to the new normal is essential to RTS. The researchers noted that the isolation is a window of chance for athletes to recover from pressure and injuries; instead, they are overwhelmed with athletic loads. The government considered potential risks and provided wellness and educational programs to athletes. However, we cannot deny that COVID-19 helped us to underline barriers to women in sports. Schneider and Hellal put forward some questions that can also be considered to elite female athletes in COVID-19, “were particular groups denied Olympic success and other groups unfairly given opportunities for Olympic success?” and “were the contestants at comparable levels of skill and fitness, playing at or near their best?” These questions need to be discussed elite sportswomen during COVID-19.

5.2.2 Addressing the transition period for female athletes

Nobody has faced a tragic global pandemic crisis like this since the 1918 influenza pandemic. The SARS outbreak between 2002 and 2004 only lasted for a couple of years and did not attack the whole world with long-term side effects. It takes time for the government and individuals to adapt to everything in the sophisticated global environment of the COVID-19 crisis. It is hard to see which public health measurement is the most efficient and which one is right or wrong. We human beings are still exploring and learning about this new coronavirus. However, living in COVID-19 is the new normal now. The sports world is like all other people skating on thin ice. How do female athletes embrace better adaptation and readiness to train and compete? How could they better adapt coping strategies? How do sports organizations and governments take action to have sufficient and targeted support?

Support systems for elite female athletes are in urgent need of improvement. Supports for female athletes aggregated on training resilience and living difficulties. With the continuous development of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus of helping could be expanded to female athletes’ life planning. Based on barriers that female athletes

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237 Schneider and Hellal, 197.
mentioned in interviews, a few suggestions are as follows for support systems to consider for improvement, but more research is needed to refine and add to them:

1. When men’s sports leagues and competitions have returned, women’s leagues and matches should be reopened. If there is funding for men to continue in high-level sports, there should also be money for women. The shortage of funding would be a long-term negative influence on female athletes to be active and competitive.238

2. The need to meet the specific needs of female athletes who suffered from life planning and family issues needs to be addressed.

3. Resistance training equipment should be placed in athletes’ personal living spaces for future consideration for future lockdowns.

4. Wellness reports, such as tracking sleep and nutrition daily, is a reasonable method to follow up on athletes’ mental health.239

5.2.3 What We Can Learn from COVID-19 for Future Crises

The uncertainty of everything in COVID-19 triggered an existential crisis for sportswomen. The existential crisis stemmed from Erikson’s identity crisis which engages a person querying their perception of self or place in the world; however, when people face new barriers and deal with distinct experience, identities vary and change.240 “Existential crises are confusing, and high-anxiety times when a person is trying to resolve and find the answer to this question: Who am I?” 241 Most of the participants in this study indicated they were feeling anxious about the postponement of the Olympic Games and other sports events during the pandemic as motivations were at a lower level. Butcher and Schneider’s discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations explained that the existence of only extrinsic motivation utilization actually reduces intrinsic

238 UK Parliament, 5.
motivation. Female athletes had reflections concerning existential meaning regarding their unease for training and living during the pandemic, on life choices as women, future sports careers, and achieving personal goals and finances. The inherent meaning and purpose of sporting life were challenged due to athletes’ inability to exhibit and transmit their hard training and perseverance not only to others but to themselves.

For future global crises, female athletes would confront similar socially constructed cultures toward gender. From a feminist perspective, elite sportswomen will keep doing what they have done to challenge structural restriction and ideological bias for inclusion in a male-dominated culture. Pursuing internal goods in spite of existential concerns may benefit female athletes to conquer global crises. In addition, IOC argued persistent and ceaseless gender biases need to be addressed by 1. Change attention to the “systems and norms” which have consistent gender inequality. 2. Taking comprehensive actions to assess and accommodate the sports system to become inclusive for all women meaningfully.

Integrating both internal motivations by female athletes and external shifts in the sports system, may better defend female athletes in future global crises.

5.3 Conclusion and Future Direction

This research is based on perspectives on female athletes’ adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic and barriers as they trained to compete in the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games. Responses from each athlete can be distinctive due to the experience of athletes’ resilience and what coping strategies they applied. Nevertheless, the unique character of this study was that Chinese female athletes who just competed at the Tokyo Olympic Games have been interviewed! This is something to celebrate. They expressed their experiences during the pandemic, indicated

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242 Butcher and Schneider, “Fair Play as Respect for the Game,” 14.
243 Peter C. McIntosh, Fair Play: Ethics in Sport and Education (Heinemann, 1980).
244 Butcher and Schneider, “Fair Play as Respect for the Game” 15.
suffering in training, and provided insights into how centralized training centres worked. Those were meaningful sources of English academic literature for future research. The comparison between Chinese and Canadian female athletes contributed to comprehending adaptation and resilience under various coping strategy contexts. Apparently, all participants encountered unforeseeable and differing levels of restrictions during the preparation for Olympic Games. All the coding themes identified were connected to each other because of the chain reaction of the difficulties that were encountered. For example, coding themes reflected training accessibility was the most common barrier for athletes. Then, inadequate training could trigger severe injury and slower recovery from injury. Injuries would decrease intrinsic motivation and enhance anxiety. The interweaving of these themes enriched the analyses. Moreover, the strategies that were applied to athletes were not efficient. They also need advocation from sports federations and national Olympic committees due to time-consuming problems. The Game Plan, with abundant online resources, was assumed to be helpful to athletes in Canada. However, athletes were from a broad variety of sports and suffered in inconsistent situations. To recall the last research question -- pre-pandemic barriers provided a “benchmark” for female athletes. This benchmark heavily relied on the current ideology for the definition of women in sport and from participation eligibility for the regular practice of sports. We cannot deny that society still prefers to utilize social norms to “inspect” elite sportswomen in all aspects of their lives with little respect for them as athletes.

More research needs to focus on gender differences in physiological considerations in the pandemic due to the high risks of being injured after returning to sports. Current research results noted that the vaccination side effects are more significant for women. The research found COVID-19 vaccination has an impact on the menstruation cycle. Although the change is reversible, the mechanism of menstrual changes after being vaccinated is under investigation, and some women with medical conditions are a
vulnerable group who need appropriate advice.\textsuperscript{246} How potential outcomes from menstrual changes impact elite female athletes to RTS are also significant. Vaccination as a part of COVID-19 adaptation is also a way of increasing an athlete’s resilience. Scientists may have limited information and scientific evidence to analyze and confirm the potential negative influences and their relation to female athletes. Quantitative statistical analysis of female athletes’ performance will provide a clear picture of side effects, and it may lead to future discussion of a dilemma for elite female athletes regarding vaccination and using medical treatments for COVID-19. Also, the above issues could be applied to Paralympic female athletes who confronted many more barriers than able bodies during the lockdown.

Future research may expand from this study to discuss how RTS policies and resources impacted different population groups and genders. The diverse populations can cause different resilience strategies in sports. Policies play a significant role in determining COVID-19 adaptation and safe return to sport among elite athletes. Coping strategies may also vary due to inaccessibility from local restrictions. Interviewing administrators can be an option when comparing policy-leading consequences to girls’ participation in the community and about the strategies local clubs utilized to deal with their excellences and weaknesses and how their work can be improved during turbulent times.\textsuperscript{247} Sports-related subjects and COVID-19 studies can employ the interdisciplinary approach to dedicate research to a broader field of studies. This thesis was a timely project and things are still changing in the world. Female athletes’ practical barriers could be changing all the time along with the public health measures and local policy during and post COVID-19. However, the effort to challenge the unbalanced gender culture in both the sports system and society will never end.


\textsuperscript{247} Doherty, Millar, and Misener, “Return to Community Sport,” 5.
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Toffoletti, Thorpe. “Female Athletes’ Self-Representation on Social Media: A Feminist


Appendix A Interview Guide

Interview Guide

**Information about these interview questions:** The interviews will be one-to-one (interviewer to athlete) and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking (“So, you are saying that …?”), to get more information (“Please tell me more?”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“Why do you think that is…?”).

**Introduction and Instructions**

Hello, my name is [One of Investigators]. I am one of the investigators for this study. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Just to remind you; We are looking at coping strategies and adaptations that are being used by Team Canada athletes in preparation for participation in the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games or the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games. We are interested in athletes’ experiences with physical distancing barriers, training adaptations (changes), social connectedness and overall well-being. We are also interested in knowing what resources you have found useful at this time.

**Confidentiality**

Before we begin the interview, I want to spend a few moments talking about confidentiality and to go over some basic ground rules:

Your views are welcomed and important.
Your views will remain confidential.
I may also step in if I feel the conversation is straying off topic or to clarify any of your responses
You can expect this interview to last about 45 minutes.

**Use of Audio/Video Recording**
As you will recall, audio of this interview will be recorded to increase accuracy and to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what anyone says.

All recordings and transcripts will be kept very secure, under lock and key, by the researcher.

Names will be removed from transcripts.

Only members of this research project will have access to the transcripts of this interview.

I’ll also ask that when using abbreviations or acronyms, you say the full name at least once to aid transcription.

**Interview** (boxes provided for potential follow up questions based on participant response).

**Getting to Know You**

**Background Questions**

**Past**

I would like to ask you some questions about who you are and your experience as a Team Canada athlete before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please state your age and your self-identified gender.

What is your sport that you compete in as a Team Canada athlete?

How long have you competed as a Team Canada athlete?

How often did you practice a week before the implementation of restrictions for COVID-19?

Where did you usually do your training before the pandemic?

Are there any barriers you have had to overcome as a competitive athlete in your career?

**Current**

I would now like to know more about your current situation during pandemic. Many people had to adjust their lives due to the strict COVID-19 pandemic protocols, such as quarantines, social/physical distancing measures, lockdowns.
What has changed now that the pandemic occurred?
In general, how has the pandemic impacted you as an athlete?

Many areas restricted non-essential business, such as gyms and training facilities.

Are you still engaging in the same level of training, if so how? If not, why not?

Coping Strategies being Employed During Pandemic

How are you coping with the COVID-19 pandemic?
Discuss any coping strategies you find particularly helpful.
Discuss any coping strategies you tried that were not effective.

Probes
a. Why were they helpful?
b. Why were they not helpful?
c. Where did you learn about these strategies?

Discussion
I would now like to discuss more about what strategies and resources you have used and/or are using to support you during pandemic.

Opening Question:

Are you using any strategies or internet resources or social media to help cope with COVID-19 barriers and/or challenges? What are they? How useful they are?
Mental health?
Training accessibility?
Financial support?
Social connections?
Others?

Have you heard of or used any athlete specific resources? If you have heard of any, have you used them?

Mental health?
Career? Resume and cover letter.
Education? Online courses.
Community? Athlete to athlete connections.
Monthly Webinars?
Have you heard of ‘Game Plan’?

If you have used it, was Game Plan or any other athlete resource helpful for you to cope with the restrictions and challenges during the COVID-19 outbreak? Discuss which part and what aspects are useful in Game Plan or other resource?

Mental health?
Career? Resume and cover letter.
Education? Online courses.
Community? Athlete to athlete connections.
Monthly Webinars?

What is not useful in Game Plan or other resource? What could be added to provide better strategies?

Mental health?
Career? Resume and cover letter.
Education? Online courses.
Community? Athlete to athlete connections.
Monthly Webinars?
Is there anything else that is relevant that we haven’t talked about yet?
What else do you need?

**Conclusion**

I want to thank you for sharing so much information about yourself and your experiences. I want to assure you again that this information will be treated in the strictest confidence. Thank you for your time.

At this time participant will be given a debriefing form and thanked for their participation.
Appendix B NMREB Approval

Date: 28 April 2021
To: Dr. Angela Schneider
Project ID: 11869

Study Title: COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations: developing and disseminating adaptation strategies and resources for resilience and return to sport
Short Title: COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations
Application Type: NMREB Initial Application
Review Type: Delegated
Full Board Reporting Date: May 7 2021
Date Approval Issued: 28/Apr/2021 17:08
REB Approval Expiry Date: 28/Apr/2022

Dear Dr. Angela Schneider,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WRUM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

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No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number HRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.
Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).
Appendix C NMREB Amendment Form

Dear Dr. Angela Schneider,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WRJEM application form for the amendment, as of the date noted above.

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REB members involved in the research project do not participate in the review, discussion or decision.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004) and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).
Appendix D Letter of Information and Consent

Letter of Information and Consent

Study Title: COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations: developing and disseminating adaptation strategies and resources for resilience and return to sport

Principal Investigator: Dr. A. J. Schneider, Ph.D., OLY.

Recruitment Email:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by a research team with the International Centre for Olympic Studies and the Sport and Social Impact Research Group at Western University. Through an interview, you are being invited to help expand our research and understanding of Team Canada athletes’ perceptions and experiences of: coping strategies, means of training adaptations and social connections, overall well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we are looking for feedback on awareness and use of any athlete resources or programs. You are eligible to be a participant in an interview if you are (a) a Team Canada athlete, (b) can read and write in English and/or French, (c) give consent to participate and to have the interview audio recorded. If you do not meet these criteria, you will be ineligible to participate at this time.

This Letter of Information and Consent form, a copy of which will be provided to you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something included here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask the research assistant. Please take the time to read this carefully.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to engage with the Team Canada athletes to determine how they are responding to pandemic restrictions to identify adaptations to training and coping strategies. You will first be asked to participate in an interview electronically (i.e., Skype or Zoom) (that will be recorded) with an interviewer, who will ask you questions about
your current situation in general. You will also be asked how current conditions (COVID-19 restrictions) have impacted you and how you anticipate you will return to sport?

**How long will you be in this study?**

There will be one meeting with the investigator for the interview and this will take approximately 45 minutes, however, there is no designated time and sessions may be longer or shorter based on participant’s answers. Participants may choose to stop or end the interview at any time.

**What are the study procedures?**

Participants will be interviewed (and answers will be recorded) by an investigator. Questions will place emphasis on your perceptions of coping strategies, access, equity, challenges, and the reintegration to sport training and participation processes. An example of questions are: “How are you doing sport specific activity and what barriers need to be addressed? How are you coping?”

**What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?**

Participation in this study will involve the disclosure of personal opinions that will be recorded; for example, physical, psychological, cognitive and social needs and challenges you may be experiencing, and this may cause you to feel slightly uneasy. The risks associated with the study are not expected to surpass the risks associated with daily life. We will make counseling services available to all participants.

**What are the benefits of participating?**

You may be helping to increase understanding, awareness and knowledge of the context of the impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for Team Canada athletes, in addition to developing strategies and resources to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable athletes. If you are interested, you can ask for the study results once they are available.

**Can participants choose to leave the study?**

At any time, participants can withdraw from the study and their information will not be included in the study if withdrawn during the interview process. Due to the anonymity of the participants, following collection, data cannot be removed upon participants request. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to participate in this study.

**How will participants information be kept confidential?**

If you decide to participate in the study, the information that you share will remain confidential. Personal answers and comments made will only be used to examine the research questions of this study. Only the research team will have access to your audio files and transcripts made during the interview process and these will be kept on a password protected USB device in a locked file cabinet in the ICOS university research center. Your personal information (e.g., email address) will only be used for initial contact to set up an appointment time. No personal identifiable information will be kept
or stored by researchers. Aggregated data stemming from this research may be presented at academic conferences and/or published in academic journals. Neither your name nor your contact information will appear in any publications stemming from this research.

This anonymous data will be stored electronically (consent form, word documents of transcribed interviews and audio recorded form) on a password protected USB device in a locked filing cabinet in the ICOS university research center until 03/2028. Once data has been transcribed into a typed document form, this information will be saved on a password protected USB stick and lock in a file cabinet in the ICOS university research enter. The research team will have access to this data. After the seven-year period, all electronic data will be permanently deleted, and any hard copies will be cross-shredded (03/2028). At no time will individual responses be reported.

Audio files will be deleted once the interviews have been transcribed. Participants will be given access to their transcribed interview through the OWL system at Western in order to verify their statements. Changes can be made to the transcript if anyone feels that their thoughts and opinions were not properly conveyed. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario’s Non-Medical REB may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

**Are participants compensated to be in the study?**

Participants who complete the study will receive $50.00.

**What are the rights of the participants?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. You may choose to withdraw from the study by emailing the research assistant or principal investigator, or by refraining from answering the questions.

**Contact:**

Dr. Angela Schneider of the School of Kinesiology at The University of Western Ontario

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**
Letter of Information and Consent

Study Title: COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations: developing and disseminating adaptation strategies and resources for resilience and return to sport

Principal Investigator: Dr. A. J. Schneider, Ph.D., OLY.

I have read the letter of information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. I agree to allow my interview to be audio recorded in order to help answer the research questions examined in this study. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

Researcher

Dr. Angela Schneider of the School of Kinesiology at The University of Western Ontario

__________________________________
Investigator’s Name, Signature and Date

__________________________________
Participant’s Name, Signature and Date

Study Title: COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations: developing and disseminating adaptation strategies and resources for resilience and return to sport

Documentation of Verbal Consent
You have previously agreed to take part in this research study at Western University. As a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers conducting this study will be participating in a zoom call that will take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

Like online shopping, teleconferencing/videoconferencing technology has some privacy and security risks. It is possible that information could be intercepted by unauthorized people (hacked) or otherwise shared by accident. This risk can’t be completely eliminated. We want to make you aware of this.

The research team will confirm your identity at the beginning of the call by asking a few short questions, OR we may ask to see a piece of government-issued ID, via video, during the session.

Video sessions can be conducted using your cell phone, tablet or personal computer enabled with a camera/microphone and internet connection. Do you have one of these devices available?

☐ No (If participant indicates, No, please provide next steps)

☐ Yes

To use zoom we need to send you an email. This email will include the instructions for how to log-in. For the session, please try to find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and use earphones if you can. It’s a good idea to test out the system a few minutes before the session to make sure the connection and sound are working. It is recommended that you use your home computer or personal device, and not a shared or work device to ensure privacy.

If using teleconferencing/videoconferencing technology and researchers do not have consent to contact participants by email:

Do we have your consent to send you information by email? The security of information sent by e-mail cannot be guaranteed.

☐ No (If participant indicates, No, please provide next steps)
☐ Yes. Email Address:

Please do not communicate personal sensitive information by e-mail. Email is not routinely monitored outside of work hours.

In normal circumstances, the research team would provide the study compensation after each visit, by giving it to you in person. You will still receive the same compensation for participating, even though you aren’t coming to Western University. However, we now would like to email or mail you $50 gift certificate, instead of having you come to the university. The security of information sent by e-mail cannot be guaranteed.

Would you prefer to receive the compensation by mail or email?

☐ Mail. Confirm mailing address:

☐ Email. Confirm email address:

The session will be video/audio recorded. This recording is for research purposes only. The recording will be accessed by authorized university personnel.

The recording will be transcribed by the university study team. This means that the words on the recording will be written out. When the recording is transcribed, any information that could directly identify you will be removed or changed. The recording will be destroyed after it is transcribed.

You or the research team can stop the session at any time, including if there are technical difficulties.

The rest of the information in the consent form you signed previously is the same. Do you have any questions?

☐ No

☐ Yes. Questions:

Do you agree to the study procedures we’ve discussed?
We would like to provide you with a copy of what we’ve talked about today, which will include your name, the study title and the other information you have provided over the phone. Can we send this to you by email or mail? Please note, the security of information sent by e-mail cannot be guaranteed.

☐ Mail. Confirm mailing address if not confirmed previously:

☐ Email. Confirm email address if not confirmed previously:

Please do not communicate personal sensitive information by e-mail. Email is not routinely monitored outside of work hours.

If you have questions, you can contact the researcher in charge of that study who is Dr. Angela Schneider at +1 (519) 661-2111 ext. 88527 & 88383. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or want to speak with someone who is not involved in this study, you can call the Office of Human Research Ethics (OHRE) at 519-661-3036.

Name of Participant __________________________ Date of Participant Verbal Consent __________

Name of person obtaining consent __________________________ Signature of person obtaining consent __________ Date __________
Appendix E Debriefing Form

DEBRIEFING FORM

Project Title: COVID-19 - Olympic athlete adaptations: developing and disseminating adaptation strategies and resources for resilience and return to sport

Principal Investigator: Dr. Angela. J. Schneider, Ph.D., OLY.

Thank you for your participation in this study. The purpose of this proposal is to examine Team Canada athletes’ perceptions and experiences of: physical distancing barriers, coping strategies, means of training adaptations and social connections, and overall well-being during COVID-19 pandemic. The second purpose is to translate our general findings to the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) in order to co-develop evidence-based strategies for adapting athlete resources and for developing a knowledge mobilization plan for enhancing the existing COC athlete resources. This is being carried out by conducting interviews with the principal investigator asking the participants’ opinions and personal experiences about how they are responding to pandemic restrictions to identify adaptations to training and coping strategies.

The results are confidential to the researchers and all results are published anonymously. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Angela Schneider at

Thank you,
Curriculum Vitae

Dongwan (Avril) He

Education Background

Ph.D. Candidate
2017—2022
School of Kinesiology, Faculty of Health Science, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario
• Social-cultural stream: ethics in sports, sports philosophy, and women in sports.

Certificate
2015. 09—2015. 10
International Olympic Academy, Olympia, Greece
• Post-graduate Seminar: discussed emerging issues about sports and Olympic Games.
• Attended seminars and lectures with postgraduate students from 26 countries and presented my master’s program project.

Master of Arts
2013—2015
Faculty of Kinesiology and Recreation Management, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba
• Worked with Dr. Sarah Teetzel.
• Master’s degree thesis: The Impact of Recent Policy Revisions Addressing Doping and Gender Rules on Women Track and Field Student-Athletes in China

Bachelor of Administration
2009—2013
Capital University of Physical Education and Sports, Beijing, China
• Majored in Sports Management

Professional Experience

Research Assistant
2020.01—2021.09
University of Western Ontario
• Responsible for completing and submitting Research Ethics Application and amendment to REB Board.
• Arrange meetings for research team members.
• Assist with the interview process, data analysis, and manuscript publication.

Teaching Assistant
2017—2022
University of Western Ontario
• Lead seminar for four terms in the course Professional Ethics in Kinesiology and Olympic Issues for Modern Times.
• Grade and mark presentations and exam papers in the course Professional Ethics in Kinesiology.
• Grade and mark in the course Olympic Issues for Modern Times and Fundamental Psychology in Kinesiology.

Intern

World Snooker Association, Beijing, China

• Translated official rules of Snooker game from English into Chinese.
• Dealt with office routines and set up communication with officials.

Publications


