



Unique or double standard to aging in sports? Case of retired gymnasts

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Abstract

The study aims to capture a socially constructed analysis of gendered media representations on retired Romanian gymnasts. The theoretical input discusses gendered representations, body projects, discursive tactics applied to gender within the context of sports, kinetic performance and contributions extracted from feminist critical discourse analysis. The overall approach views desistance, resistance and conformity as inextricably intertwined concerning gendered representations of sports participation. Discursive cues from the 20 selected media articles anchor meaning as points of reference for connecting ideas to broader networks of significance within an integrative analytical framework. The analysis of empirical findings dwells on discursive strategies for conformity and othering, empowerment and victimization. Media portrays women gymnasts in the post-retirement phase as de-centring from competition and assuming supportive roles that are thought as more becoming, typically feminine practices, whereas men are represented as remaining strong and competitive. From a somatic culture perspective, male gymnasts act more as role models for successful aging, being portrayed as maintaining desirable body attributes such as grit, strength, energy and vitality. In exchange, female gymnasts remain ambassadors of sports and community participation to physical exercise, but are expected to display disturbing or debilitating somatic signs of aging as negative repercussion of high-performance gymnastics.

Keywords

Gendered aging, double standard, physical self, gender subjectivity, critical discourse analysis

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Rationale – why is it relevant?

Artistic gymnastics is a flagship sport in Romania, based on the half-century tradition set by medal-winning gymnasts. Moreover, competitive gymnastics is atypical on account of the comparatively early age when professional gymnasts start and end their career. 22 is considered past the standard age for top performance for women, 25 for men (Litchfield & Dionigi, 2011), whereas other sports are more permissive towards performance at older ages.

Retired competitive gymnasts in their twenties are unexpected subjects of aging studies, and it is challenging to consider whether or not there is a double standard to aging in gymnastics in the post-retirement phase, as media discourse portrays retired male and female gymnasts. In the context of retired ex-champions, media has focused on the declining number of medals, by displaying statistics from the Romanian Olympic and Sports Committee.

There is an abrupt decrease in the number of medals in the latest editions of the Olympic Games, as well as European and World Championships. Out of a total of 307 Olympic medals in Romania's portfolio so far, 25 gold medals have been won by gymnasts (by far the most successful in terms of number of medals), followed by canoeing (19 gold medals) and athletics (11 gold medals) during 1976-2017 (COSR, 2017). Of the 25 Olympic gold medals, only one was won by a male gymnast (Marius Urzică, Sydney 2000), signaling a value gap between male and female gymnasts also present in contemporary tennis. Media signaled the **decline of Romanian gymnastics** when the female team did not qualify for Rio Olympic Games (R1). One stream of media content praises elderly gymnasts – both male (i.e. Marian Drăgulescu) and female (i.e. Cătălina Ponor and Larisa Iordache) for delaying retirement and proving longevity and sustainable performance in elite competition (R1, R8, R9), as the only metaphorically defined heroes to safeguard Romania's reputation

Media accounts state as **explanatory factors for the performance crisis** the deficit in leadership and organizational capacity, the skill drain of valuable coaches and gymnasts abroad, the lack of state strategy and investment, systemic under-budgeting that endangers the subsistence of public funded gymnastics clubs (Realitatea.net, 2016). This range of explanations is trending for other sports wherein Romanians reached top performance in past years and counter-performance at present, such as athletics, swimming or canoeing. The decline was anticipated, media claims, relying on Garcia Marquez's chronicles of a death foretold metaphor. Set against the background of crisis of Romania's emblematic sport, gendered representations of retired gymnasts are presented in the context of proposed solutions: community development and local funding of clubs, more promotion for increased selection basis for children, although recovery is predicted to be slow (Agerpress, 2016).

The study aims to discover how the gymnasts' retirement life-course transition is portrayed across media culture, to decipher the connection between gender and aging as media production prompted by cultural praxis. The following research questions ensue:

- Does media discourse on elite gymnasts' post-retirement exhibit **gendered aging** stereotypes?
- If so, what are the specific media means by which accounts of retired gymnasts showcase **gender-typed media representations**?

The **body project of enterprising self** implies the exertion of control through body practices viewed as permanent assignment. The aim is to optimize one's own body according to an idealized body image (Meuser, 2017). Individualized subjectivities turn into mainstream yet often reverberate back into subcultures shaped by gendered representations, whereas the aging narrative revolves on a dynamic continuum between decline and rebirth, change and homeostasis, authority, submission and resistance, empowerment and disempowerment (Meuser, 2017).

Empowerment defines in the general vocabulary the act, entitlement or endorsement of giving power, authority or agency to someone, so as that person can perform by free choice, and in sociology it refers to the ability of people to gain understanding and control over personal and social circumstances as to take decisions and engage in deliberate action (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010; Dionigi, 2010). Conversely, **disempowerment** designates the loss or denial of such ability and prerogative to make essential life choices (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Knoppers, 2006). Biographical and media discursive samples inquire about **gender appropriateness**, with an emphasis on gregariousness, cordiality, inclusion and involvement as features that play a key role in women's participation to sports, whereas stamina, resilience and physical attributes are essential for men gymnasts (Litchfield & Dionigi, 2011).

Gendered representations on women in competitive and recreational sports

Gender gap in representations on power and prestige permeate multiple venues of public life, from politics (Zamfirache, 2010) to sports. A stream of research in the sociology of sport (e.g. Iannotta & Kane, 2002, Hartmann-Tews, 2015) warns against **media narratives or meta-story of victimization of women in sports as debilitating rather than empowering**. Such features are present also in professional gymnastics photographs that construct **visual cues of ideal femininity** through body images (Carter, 2016; Weber and Barker-Ruchti, 2012). Visual discourse analysis investigates fitness, slimness, youthful vitality and elegance in movements, as bivalent attributes: aesthetical (as publicly legitimised beauty standard) and functional (as pre-requisite for gymnastics performance). From a macro-level intersectional approach empirically validated across social policy in Poland, discourses of aged gender and gendered age involve **one-dimensional, stereotypical attributions** that erode each other (Wilinska, 2010).

A qualitative critical textual analysis on Swedish media discourse on elite sports players concludes that **sports remains a bastion for the reproduction of gender inequality**, since media objectifies and sexualizes women elite athletes, even if Sweden is renowned worldwide as one of the most democratic nations also in terms of gender equality (Wanneberg, 2011). Gender stereotypes (e.g. women athletes expected to perform with grace and agility, whereas male counterparts associate with grit and

strength) and dichotomic views on attributes deemed as gender-specific permeate sports media discourse (Dumitru, 2014). Both male and female audiences are sensitive to **gender stereotypes in sports**, and they both favor text-and-image articles wherein athlete appearance is congruent with stereotypical appearance expected for the respective sport, as an experiment based on gender schemata theory indicates (Jones & Greer, 2011).

Intersectional approach to age-gender

A qualitative inquiry on activity motivation using means-end theory conducted with 79 women aged 60 to 92 years revealed distinct rationales for engagement in physical activities (Berlin, 2016). Hence, women engaged in sports-based leisure time focused on **psychological and social benefits** for their pastime, whereas women engaged in exercise-based leisure time were more inclined to provide **health and bodily fitness outcomes** as main reason for their time use choice. This distinction reflected also in the interviewees' construction of successful aging and age-gender identification tactics.

There is a need for a more complex **problematization and contextualized understanding of the intersection between age and gender**. In a social dramaturgical model, based on a focus group discussion, elderly women over 75 consider bodily meaning by adaptation to ageing as carrying on-stage and off-stage instances (Krekula, 2007). The anticipation of self-aging is gender-conditioned in the case of young athletes with an average age of 20 years (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007). They used narrative maps provided by their grandparents' accounts to anticipate best- and worse-case scenarios about old age and possibilities of maintaining physical condition. These **narrative maps were gender-specific**, inasmuch as male athletes projected an inevitable decline in control and independence, whereas female athletes mostly feared the loss of appearance.

Discursive tactics applied to gendered subjectivities

Women's retirement from gymnastics is associated, in the case of elite rhythmic gymnastics, with increased **corporal self-image depreciation, feelings of culpability on weight gain, decreased muscle mass and capacity for effort** (Stirling, 2012). Coupled with restrictive nutrition habits, **body dissatisfaction** appeared more exacerbated when former female gymnasts pursued a career in coaching. Possible explanations may consist of exposure to normative models about body image. In addition, a stronger sense of identification to a line of work that elicits constant remembrance of former physical performance at the expense of current subjective wellbeing may explain this post-retirement frustration.

Amplified body image sensitivity, eating disorders and unhealthy weight control behavior are more likely to occur in the case of retired gymnasts than performing gymnasts (Kerr et al, 2006). Obedience to a dominant gymnastics model emerges in the plots of narrative accounts belonging to elite artistic gymnasts and coaches. The **regulative and coercive function of this technology of the self** implies authority is pre-

emptive to autonomy and may result in debilitating effects on the construction of identity, on account of intensified disciplinary control (Barker-Ruchti, 2008). The authoritarian coach – gymnast relationship introduces the gendered controversy of abusive arrangement of power and exploitative training of young girls (Kerr, 2014), whereas discourse analysis does not question potential maltreatment in the training practices of same-age male athletes.

Discursive strategies enacted to **legitimize norms about active living** simplistically place the responsibility for fitness and health onto individual women, oblivious to the interplay of cultural overlapping influences (Nash, 2016). Within a context of increasing responsibility for one's own health, body image standards are still powerfully anchored in female gendered subjectivities. Thus, women feel the pressure to adhere to challenging, prohibitive health and anti-aging practices regarding nutrition, clothing, fitness or cosmetic treatments (Carter, 2016). It is still left to elucidate whether this concern with **disciplinary somatic control** echoes in media accounts of ex-sportspeople. Interpretive phenomenological analysis revealed 6 out of 7 elite female gymnasts who were interviewed had encountered **post-retirement coping difficulties** especially due to an identity crisis caused by **physical self disengagement** from competitive gymnastics at a particularly sensitive age marked by personality forging efforts (Warriner and Lavalley, 2008).

The new ways of “doing” older age challenge the psychological identity and social status associated to middle-aged or older women (Litchfield & Dionigi, 2011). Interview data with female members of a recreational field hockey club point out to recurring themes of competitiveness and performance, identity management, belonging and community. **Kinesthetic proficiency** necessary for acrobatics in artistic gymnastics is ambivalently interpreted as part of gendered subjectivity because it combines self-regulatory corporeal discipline with a vector of empowerment (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010; Dionigi, 2010). Discussions on empowerment through bodily competence surface in the case of female competitors to World Masters Games dedicated to seniors from the age group 50-90. Female athletes resist overriding stereotypes on gender and age, however their exceptional engagement in sports events inaccessible for most of their age group does not prevent them from upholding dominant cultural bias on youth and competition (Dionigi, 2010).

Feminist critical discourse analysis in sports

Hegemonic discourses frame ordinary women as nonsporting (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2011). Othering sportswomen also reflects in athletes' denied feminineness, whereas motherhood and physical exercising are seen as incongruent or even incompatible pastimes. Women are thus dissuaded from taking up or maintaining sports participation on the normative ground that they should devote their time outside work solely to family needs. Sport participation is framed across popular media discourse either as **egotistic pastime** that belongs to a symbolic realm of hedonistic, futile pleasures, or as ideal of juggling act according to which women can have it all: “*Good mums put their children's*

interests above their own and super-mums just do it all" (McGannon & Schinke, 2013, 184). Another media perception regards it as further distractor that unsettles the work-family balance – fragile as it is.

Discourses about gender division elicited by sport bring forth arguments about natural differences. In this line of thought, although sports is meritocratic, women are considered naturally, intrinsically and genetically programmed to fail (Knoppers, 2006; Knoppers, 1992). Beyond the "It's a men's world" cliché-argument, situated knowledge discusses a de-gendering trend across media accounts of sports. The **mainstream delineation between male sports activities (traditionally associated to strength, stamina, aggression and risk-taking) and female sports activities (correlated to grace, acrobatic rhythm, expression, elasticity, flexibility, coordination, balance, self-control, posture and body tension)** becomes blurry (Hartmann-Tews, 2015; Weber and Barker-Ruchti, 2012). A recurring pattern that critical discourse analysis unveils by course observation in the highly masculinized arena of football coaching is **organizational inertia and path dependency** in the reproduction of the idea that women are unconfident in their skills and therefore cannot hold leadership positions (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2011). Autocratic coaching is associated to male coaches and viewed as more effective to high-end performance than female nurturing, motherly supportive coaching style. **This ideology transposed to gatekeeping practices aims at status-quo conservation.**

Institutional dynamics points to practices of **othering female soccer coaches** seen as atypical and lacking authority to legitimize (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2008). The only available alternative to neutralize this organizational display of occupational gendering consists of **affirmative action within segregated women-only coaching courses**. Such separatist views held by self-proclaimed progressive and liberal soccer associations only strengthen a makeshift solution against inequitable treatment and non-meritocratic practices. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) pinpoints denial and rationalization as two central themes of gender inequalities. Women coaches are othered when media and organizational discourse frames and positions them as exhibiting self-learnt helplessness (Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2008).

Post-retirement experiences in other countries and other sports

In the case of contact sport athletes, a **violence-oriented mindset and behavior, as persisting occupational idiosyncrasy**, seemingly haunts these male combatants after retirement (Senecal, 2017). Thus, they feel frustration while longing for releasing aggression in socially accepted ways and engaging constantly in bodily contact. Cost et al (2015) explore the discursive context of **experienced transition of retirement** from elite sports in the case of Australian Olympic swimmers. Media exposes transition hurdles encountered by two Australian swimmers 7 and 5 years after retirement, as depicted by newspapers. Even then, former athlete identity is portrayed as sole status for these champions, excluding all other life projects and preoccupations. **Socio-cultural decontextualization** is recurrent in media accounts, as individual level precedes and overshadows all social environment and sport setting considerations (Cost et al, 2015).

Structural factors such as country-specific transition support programs funded by central and local governments influence retirement transition outcomes (Park & Lavallee, 2015). Individual interviews examined via thematic analysis revealed that **athletes self-rated their coping techniques in the wake of the retirement transition as poor, their readiness for retirement as low**, also in the context of low support received from what they perceived as a weak, relatively small-scale peer-based social support networks. Such precursors of post-retirement adjustment difficulty were present for both South Korean and Irish contact sport athletes. However, their career transition narratives brought into discussion the differential impact of sports policy and support program effectiveness within various ethnocultural backgrounds.

Method

Language reveals transfigured patterns of power relations, overarching ideologies and collective representations (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015). **Gender is an oxymoronic noisy silence in media discourse** that it discretely permeates (Brown et al, 2007). The current study aims to decipher, track and trace silent interstices on gendered subjectivities and implicit content across post-retirement media accounts of elite ex-gymnasts. The identification of silence throughout the process of **discourse interrogation** underlies the premise that what media discourse reveals about post-retirement prospects of elite ex-gymnasts is as important as what it suggests or implies, **what is explicit is as relevant as what is implicit** (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015).

Discourse studies deploy **sense-making strategies to scrutinize verbal, visual or multimodal content, structure, figurative schemata** and context with the purpose of mapping significance across factual and connotative idioms. Data analysis for this study relies on grounded theory driven by empirical evidence that it fits in frames through inductive reasoning (Brown et al, 2007). Discourse renders unintentional cues for deciphering patterns of thought and interpretive practices from a socio-constructive perspective (Gibbs, 2011). In the case of gymnasts' gendered subjectivities, it reveals the **social time of the body** (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015) through its gendered dimension. These somatic considerations are somewhat atypical, as gymnasts traverse one of the earliest recorded stances of aging, by retiring generally in their late twenties or early thirties. This methodological approach aims to harness **ideological processes of resistance to hegemonic power relations**. Media transposes this type of input in a specific **analogical language that is evocative and allusive** rather than straightforwardly denotative. Hence, the study draws on analogical language manifested by **comparisons, allegories, similes, metaphors, parables, particularization and exemplification** (Gibbs, 2011).

The heuristic function of figurative language acts as complexity reducer in problem-solving across contradictions, ambiguities or ambivalence involved in conceptual metaphors that depict aging gymnasts (Turner & Fauconnier, 2008; Kertezs, 2015). This methodological approach proves effective as a means to gain access to empirical situated knowledge that explains argumentative lines and sketches nested representations

(Kertez, 2015) on gendered aging in media reflection on post-gymnastics prospects. These nested representations are closed, restrictive categories that invoke the discursive arguments on empowerment and resistance, while streamlining gender stereotypes prone to exclusion precursors such as categorization, labelling and marginalization.

The employed method for the current study is critical discourse analysis (CDA). From the 20 selected direct sources for analysis, 7 articles are published in daily newspapers with national coverage, 4 on news portals, 3 in sports magazines, 2 in regional newspapers, 2 in business weekly magazines, one in a tabloid and one in a blog. All contributions target the general audience. The selection criteria for these publications are the issue period (ranging from 2005 to 2017) and the title that mentions post-retirement evolution of individual elite gymnasts (the latter defined as having won at least one title of Romanian national champion).

The total number of references documented for this media content is: 15 to male ex-gymnasts, and a comparable 18 – assigned to female ex-gymnasts. The references refer to 10 female gymnasts (i.e. Simona Amânar, Andreea Răducan, Maria Olaru, Sandra Izbaşa, Ana Porgras, Daniela Silivaş-Harper, Aurelia Dobre, Celestina Popa, Ecaterina Szabo, Vanda Hădărean) and 10 male gymnasts (i.e. Dan Grecu, Marius Urzică, Rareş Orzaţă, Bogdan Orzaţă, Răzvan Şelariu, Dănuţ Coşeru, Ciprian Vereş, Ionuţ Trandaburu, Vicenţiu Roman and Ovidiu Rugină). The mediatic arena is a site of meaning-making semiotic resources that produce communicative artifacts (van Leeuwen, 2005) regarding the media echoes of gymnasts' retirement experiences.

After collection, data was organized into thematic categories that are intrinsically coherent and hence used to illustrate conceptual points. The thematic categories inferred from the theoretical framework coupled with empirical content-driven evidence are the following: **empowerment, disempowerment, resistance, lifestyle, body image, physical self and professional trajectories**. The article texts were individually filtered and manually 'scanned' using this thematic typology to identify anchor-notions and statements that reflect media views on aging and gender across former gymnasts' post-retirement narratives. All article body texts were inserted in a master document where the relevant fragments were highlighted with various colors according to subsequent predominant categories that they illustrated. The ten excerpts presented in the Analysis of findings were selected for their semantic salience regarding the research questions.

Analysis of findings

Data suggests discursive objects like media articles are embedded in gender-specific power representations. Hence, they illuminate **ideological structures on gymnasts' gendered post-retirement aging** by means of an interpretative – more overt or more subtle - repertoire deemed appropriate for the occasion. As more subtle repertoires occur, there is an unsettling blind spot in recurrence of this gender biased representation. The analysis thus **deconstructs the site of social difference in the gendered ex-gymnasts tropes** that retell the age-old story of male supremacy. Media contributes to perpetuating gender stereotypes that in turn reinforce elite female gymnasts' status

inconsistency. From the mediatic lens, they have only the symbolic heritage of past glory to look forward to after retirement, whereas men enjoy happier prospects of professional opportunities.

Overall **body malfunction and progressive somatic deterioration** following are discussed exclusively in the case of female gymnasts. For example, one article about Simona Amânar, entitled “How a former world champion keeps in shape” (R8), reads:

“Right after I quit gymnastics, my muscles got swollen. I didn’t do anything to get rid of extra kilos. What’s more, if I get hungry at 3 am, I eat, I cannot say I have a regular eating schedule. Unfortunately, I never eat breakfast in the morning, because I don’t have time”

Anti-orthorexic **nutrition habits** such as impulsive eating late at night and constantly skipping breakfast are present in this account, whereas **dissatisfaction concerning her body image** is not mentioned as an issue of concern. The title of the article is somewhat misleading, as it mainly discusses the former elite gymnast as being out-of-shape due to individual habits regarding nutrition and exercising that this media account claims she assumes without exposing feelings of guilt or shame. Another account about an ex-champion, Andreea Răducan, discusses her **career prospects** as she decided to remain connected to gymnastics through coaching and enrolment in the Sports Academy in Timișoara (R5).

Media discourse impregnates emotionally first and foremost in the case of women ex-gymnasts, whose life occurrences before and after retirement are displayed as torments and tribulations: divorce, death of a close relative or medical problems form focal points for discursive practices addressed to affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014) hungry for behind-the-scene disclosure, and ex-gymnasts are equated to celebrities in terms of social capital, regardless of gender. Media discourse calls upon the affective public to witness autobiographical accounts of gymnasts’ eating disorders and maltreatment on the part of coaches (R11, E18), and these factors are interpreted as predisposing precursors of mental dysfunction in later life. These narratives that media disseminates rely on two autobiographical books authored by Maria Olaru (R14) and Andreea Răducan (R15).

In a portrayal of (self)victimization and disempowerment, media discourse recounts direct references to gymnasts’ traumatic experiences on grounds of their negative impact on female gymnasts’ post-retirement evolution on the long turn. Their post-traumatic status is double and ambivalent. On the one hand, media quotes Maria Olaru (R11, R14, R18):

Beating, whacking, slapping, smashing, whamming, thrashing. How many synonyms we have, and so many generations of Romanian boys and girls were educated by physical aggression. (R14, 31)

The text per se does not deal with the impact of these recounted experiences on one’s later psychological becoming, though. On the other hand, from a compensatory perspective, in a shifted discursive context, media also quotes Maria deploying a

discourse of empowerment and resistance through the development of sports-induced valuable competencies:

As former elite gymnast, I am used to discipline, a rigorous schedule, I developed mental resilience throughout multiple trainings and contests, I am familiar with both the sweet taste of victory and the bitter taste of defeat. Gymnastics consecrated me and all that I am today, I owe to sports. (R14, 47)

However, the only way for her to gain legitimacy in her resistance claims is an **othering strategy of positioning herself as outsider**: “*She will always remain an uncomfortable, blunt whistleblower revealing inconvenient truths*” (R18), assuming the public image of inadequacy by the risky self-proclaimed status as misfit and outcast. This status of ambivalence, lability, rebellion and intransigence was further endorsed by media accounts of Maria’s divorce (R21).

The following media account of the 2010 vault world champion Ana Porgras retiring at only 18 illustrates the discursive topics of physical self-helplessness and disempowerment:

“It’s a tough blow for the team coached by Octavian Bellu and Mariana Bitang, as Ana was one of the hopes for a medal at London Olympic Games, as well as important team member whose evolution would have raised significantly Romania’s ranking. Aged only 18, Ana Porgras became history in Romanian gymnastics. In pole-position for winning an Olympic medal at London, the 2010 world champion at beam **abandoned her dreams and the Izvorani training center to step into a normal life**. She declares: “I felt I couldn’t do it anymore, physically, I found it so difficult to come back after so many injuries. I couldn’t move forward! The seriousness of her voice suggests it was a long pondered decision, not a momentary whim. The event that contributed decisively to her choice was her last injury, last month: left elbow fracture” (R2)

Media discourse views the life of a professional female gymnast as exceptional, atypical and abnormal, casting doubt on the decision to pursue a sports career on grounds of the self-sacrifice, suffering and anguish that such activity implies. A notable exception to the widespread theme of somatic self-deterioration after retirement, media discourse comments on Sandra Izbaşa’s attractive appearance:

“Sandra Izbaşa looks incredibly and the thousands likes are just a proof that her image in a swimming suit is viral” (R3)

Reading between the lines, discursive practices imply **she looks good despite her gymnastics history, while men look good precisely because of gymnastics background**, such as in the case of Rareş Orzaţă and his involvement at Cirque du Soleil (R10).

Accidents, fluctuating results at the latest major contests and immense pressure eroded in time Ana’s confidence and self-assurance. Inside sources claim that behind this decision stood other reasons: “She could not handle the work style. She is a very sensitive child, which one has to approach carefully, with caution. She felt betrayed after the World Champions when one of her coaches told her she cared more about

fashion than gymnastics. Beauty, grace, talent and a great fragility are words that sum up Ana Porgras' sports destiny, ended prematurely. (R2)

Media enhances the double standard to ex-gymnasts' aging by an implicit **infantilization of female gymnasts**, still referred to in most text excerpts as “only children” whose sensitiveness and fragility casts a thick shadow of doubt on the rationality of their decisions. Meanwhile, male gymnasts, even at comparable ages, are referred to as fully-grown, responsible adults, or youth at the prime of both physical and mental capacity.

In terms of career evolution and professional prospects, media discourse exposes successful post-retirement projects of male gymnasts. **Entrepreneurial initiative** is evident in the case of conversions to performing arts, e.g. Cirque du Soleil and “Romanian Golden Team” that organizes artistic gymnastic and choreography shows. Discursive patterns track other gymnasts who work in performing arts, such as Rareş Orzaţă who works for Cirque du Soleil (R10). Marius Urzică founded “Romanian Golden Team”, a group of former gymnasts – male and female – who organize international tours of artistic gymnastic and choreography shows. Media discourses revolve around the high achievement potential of this business, by means of partnership with festival organizers e.g. Sibiu International Theatre Festival and famous choreographers and show directors e.g. Răzvan Mazilu. In the same analytical category of tracking professional prospects, pursued coaching career is recurring, as expected, for both genders. For Marius Urzică, coaching in Romania the male senior national team (during 2010-2014) preceded his departure to Qatar to train a group of junior gymnasts.

As **social capital markers**, media documents titles and state distinctions awarded to male gymnasts such as the National Order “For Merit” to the degree of Commander that Marius Urzică received in 2000, and the Order and Medal “Sports Merit” received in 2008. A similar account of coaching experiences and state distinctions is presented for Răzvan Şelariu (R10, R12). Also women gymnasts received state-issued merit acknowledgements such as medals, e.g. Cătălina Ponor and Larisa Iorache received “Faithful service” National Order in 2017, following the European Championship held in Cluj Napoca (R8, R9).

Concerning gendered orientations informed by ex-gymnasts' aging, a sharp, unequivocal antagonism appears. Media nested representations are one-dimensional in suggesting time is on male gymnasts' side, as both their career prospects and body image are promising. In exchange, discursive skepticism shrouds women's career prospects and body image considerations in an overall pessimistic outlook. As such, media discourse induces a time prospects typology: **women envisioned as future-adverse and men as future-embracing**.

Media discourse alludes to an invoked **gender segregation of post-retirement career prospects**. Hence, women seem to have more limited options for professional enhancement and are confined to low-profile coaching tasks (R10, R13), whereas organizational leadership and entrepreneurship opportunities are explicitly explored for male gymnasts (R18). Another noticeable trend consists of the radicalization and dramatization of terms throughout articles on female gymnasts. In their case, media

makes full use of metaphorical data, connotative content marked by a discursive context of emotional framing and psychological inferences. Conversely, male gymnasts are depicted using factual, denotative data and rational discourse. Discourse that has female gymnasts as protagonists tends to exacerbate, augment and extrapolate psychological assumptions – especially negative cues and subjective remarks based on fictive self-reflection, e.g.: “*She felt betrayed by her former colleagues*” (R20), “*She was disappointed and discouraged to find out that...*” (R3); “*The news was shocking for her...*” (R7);

Media discursive practices integrate a discussion on body deterioration due to intensive training and competitions, pointing to the idea that competitive gymnastics affects negatively life at later ages for women, and not for men:

It is evident that their [female gymnasts’] body pays a high toll after years of damaging training, tendons, muscles, ankles, bones are all badly bruised. This damage is irreversible and beyond cure – this is the prize to pay for all the hard work, self-discipline and earned medals. (R12)

Media mirrors the female body as consumed by intense efforts and strain, whereas for men the body is strengthened, the sports career capitalizes on health, longevity and wellbeing that convert the former gymnast into an inspirational asset. According to media discourse, men have a greater willpower to recover and learn how to age well, whereas their female counterparts are uncontrollably pre-determined to shorten their healthy life if they resort to performance gymnastics.

Conclusions, implications

Media discourse on former gymnasts’ post-retirement prospects is biased as gender-specific within the classical hegemonic positioning that endorses male superiority over female inferiority. The **apparently neutral, impartial language hides discrimination-prone traps that blur the boundary between difference and division**. Hence, the inter-gender differentiation of post-retirement media accounts opens up to a divisive discursive territory. A proliferating discursive domain consists of narratives about victimization and self-victimization, including the story-world of body decay, worn-out and torn-down stances of frailty, injuries, weakened bones and joints. Meaning-giving efforts illuminate some complexities and incongruities as to gendered thematic categories in media accounts of gymnasts’ retirement. Being an ex-gymnast is represented as limiting transformative potential for women, because media discourse considers it a normative, taken-for-granted obligation or *fait accompli*. In exchange, for men, personal and professional identification as ex-gymnast is portrayed as a question of personal choice that welcomes multiple status-roles.

All in all, the over-arching motives of struggle, suffering, pain, sacrifice and victimization are often portrayed in media accounts and auto-biographic narratives about female gymnasts. Conversely, such themes are totally absent in the case of men. Retirement is seen as disruptive change and liberation from pain and suffering, in the case of women, who are implicitly expected to finally become women, take along their

standard feminine functions ascribed by their cultural role as wives, mother and supportive, non-competitive observers. Meanwhile, for men the transition is portrayed as consistently smoother, as continuity rather than discontinuity. The focus on emotional distress and (self-)victimisation permeates recurrently both media and autobiographical accounts of female ex-gymnasts, but no reference appears in media discourse regarding male ex-gymnasts.

To conclude, post-retirement media representations testify to a double standard to aging in gymnastics. Hence, men seem to have bright prospects, whereas women are a priori vulnerable as they face the burdensome heritage of sport-related injuries and overall frailty. **The experience as elite gymnast comes as blessing for men, whereas for women it is haunting and debilitating.** Retired female gymnasts are considered victims of their choice to get involved in high-performance sport that they fall prey to and have to pay the price of while coping with a prematurely aging body.

Normativity associated to legitimate life-course options after retirement is stronger and more limitative for women gymnasts than for men gymnasts: **former women gymnasts seem to have a narrower range of post-retirement career options, compared to their male counterparts.** Also, in the case of women, media focuses on personal, family and lifestyle considerations, in a more restrictive frame of life-course options. **Professional reconversion is viewed as more problematic and challenging for women than men** after retirement from high-performance gymnastics.

Media depicts women as facing fast-paced bodily decay after retirement, and the transition is more arduous as they have to adjust to full-pledged career reconversion, whereas men can pursue a wider range of career options and can access professional pathways in their area of expertise based on physicality, strength, stamina and endurance, attributes of physicality that they safeguard after retirement. Within a metaphor of **sports arena as ritualized warfare within a null-sum game**, women are portrayed as defeated, whereas men - as triumphant.

The study assumes inherent **limitations** for a qualitative methodological design, mainly related to the risk of over-generalization or over-simplification of a complex, multi-faceted and evanescent reality. Indeed, there are media instances in which female gymnasts are praised for their post-retirement evolution (R3, R7, R12) and they are considered empowered to inspire future generations and develop promising entrepreneurship and sports leadership careers. Also, results are confined to the 20 media articles extracted from the sports magazines and mainstream newspapers. Hence, they do not reflect gendered post-retirement media perceptions valid for all Romanian press, nor for all gymnasts, and certainly not for all Romanian athletes in general. Also, the conceptual model and methodological design do not draw on important contributions, for instance from ethnomethodological studies of (age) identities that approach sense-making processes, identity construction and self- and other-categorization.

The corpus of articles depicts **biological and psychological rather than sociocultural explanations why former female gymnasts are expected to perform worse – somatically, psychologically as well as professionally - in later life than their male**

counter-parts, with rhetoric emphasis on the negative impact of practicing gymnastics inflicted on women, not on men. As practical implications, negative side-effects consist of young girls and their parents being dissuaded from taking up gymnastics due to **moral panic** that media discourse fuels. They can take for granted the assumption that women are fragile, sensitive beings that should not be exposed to high-performance arenas such as competitive sports. They can learn that vulnerability is typical for women, while power is genetically assigned only to men, and this distortion is diffusely perpetuated to nurture gender discrimination in sports.

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