

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Newspaper Media Representations of Athlete Experiences With
Eating Disorders

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in
Sport Psychology

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Abstract

Athletes have been found to be at a greater risk (13.5%) of developing eating disorders (EDs) compared to the general population (4.6%). Recently, media attention on athletes with EDs has substantially increased. Given the considerable role of the media in shaping our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours, the purpose of this study was to examine dominant discourses surrounding newspaper media portrayals of athletes with EDs. Data were collected using the NexisUni Academic database to search for newspaper articles from January 1, 2021 to June 7, 2022. We included 154 newspaper articles for analysis. We performed a critical discourse analysis to examine *what* journalists say about athlete experience with EDs, *how* such experiences are described, and how this constructs athlete identities (i.e., subject positions). Two key discourses were identified, each composed of underlying subject positions. The first discourse, *Who is to Blame for the ED?*, constructed meanings of who to hold accountable for the development of the ED. Within this discourse were two subject positions: *The Cautionary Tale of Women in Sport* and *Successful Athletes Return to Sport*. The second discourse, *Reproducing or Resisting Stereotypes*, centralized journalists' (in)accurate depiction of the complexities of living with an ED. Underlying this discourse were three subject positions: *Men are in Denial of Their ED*, *The (Hyper)Feminized Athlete*, and *ED Identity Versus Athletic Identity*. Findings reveal how journalists play an active role in (re)producing gendered and physical stereotypes about athletes with EDs, which highlights the importance of media guidelines to avoid the perpetuation of such stereotypes.

Résumé

Les athlètes sont à un plus grand risque (13,5 %) de développer des troubles de l'alimentation (TA) que la population générale (4,6 %). Récemment, l'attention des médias sur les athlètes souffrant des TA a considérablement augmenté. Étant donné le rôle considérable des médias dans la formation de nos pensées, attitudes, et comportements, le but de cette étude était d'examiner les discours dominants concernant la représentation des athlètes avec les TA dans les articles des journaux. On a utilisé NexisUni Academic pour collectionner les articles de journaux publiés du 1er janvier 2021 au 7 juin 2022. On a inclus 154 articles de journaux pour l'analyse. On a mené une analyse critique du discours pour examiner ce que les journalistes disent des expériences des athlètes avec les TA, comment ces expériences sont décrites, et comment cela construit les identités des athlètes (c'est-à-dire les positions des sujets). Deux discours ont été identifiés, chacun composé de positions de sujet sous-jacentes. Le premier discours, *Qui est à blâmer pour le TA?*, a décrit de qui tenir responsable pour le développement du TA. Dans ce discours, il y avait deux positions de sujet: *Le récit édifiant des femmes dans le sport* et *Les athlètes qui réussissent retournent au sport*. Le deuxième discours, *Reproduire ou résister les stéréotypes*, a centralisé la description (in)exacte des journalistes des complexités de vivre avec les TA. Trois positions de sujet sous-jacentes comprennent ce discours: *Les hommes sont dans le déni de leur TA*, *L'athlète (hyper)féminisé*, et *L'identité du TA contre l'identité athlétique*. Les résultats démontrent comment les journalistes jouent un rôle actif dans la (ré)production des stéréotypes genrés et physiques des athlètes avec les TA, soulignant l'importance des directives médiatiques pour éviter la perpétuation de tels stéréotypes.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Lindsay Duncan, for her unwavering support towards my pursuit and undertaking of a research topic that I am so passionate about. Lindsay – you have played a key role in my academic and personal growth, and I feel tremendously lucky to have such an amazing supervisor and mentor. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue my passions, and I can't wait for the next 4(ish?) years with you!

I would also like to acknowledge my committee members: Dr. Laura Hallward, thank you for introducing me to the world of research and for your invaluable mentorship over the past few years. Dr. Jenna Gibbs, thank you for your thoughtful insights and feedback throughout the stages of this thesis.

To my parents, Ping and Wei, and sister, Leila, thank you for your constant emotional support throughout my academic journey. Thank you for celebrating the highs with me, and for supporting me through the lows. I would not be where I am today, researching a topic that is so meaningful to me, without your love and support.

I would also like to thank my friends and the Healthy Living Lab crew for their guidance and support over the past year: Bradley Crocker, Jason Dellatolla, Laurence Bouchard, Marina Cummiskey, and Emily Pike – I have learned so much from each and every one of you! You have made grad school (and working in a windowless lab) an incredible experience.

Contribution of Authors

As lead author, Olivia Feng was involved in the conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, and all phases of writing this thesis.

Dr. Lindsay Duncan played an active role in the conceptualization of this study and assisted with the screening of newspaper articles during data collection, served as a critical friend during data analysis, and assisted with editing the thesis throughout the writing process.

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Figure 1. Visual representation of the article selection process.

Table 1. Summary of discourse and subject positions.

List of Abbreviations

ED: eating disorder

CDA: critical discourse analysis

Introduction and Literature Review

Eating Disorders in Sport

Eating disorders (EDs) may be defined as dysfunctional eating or eating-related behavior, leading to significant disturbances in physical health and psychosocial functioning (Fairburn & Harrison, 2003). Data show that globally, 218 million women and 57 million men are affected by an ED at some point in their life (Galmiche et al., 2019). EDs have been, and are still, perceived to affect only skinny, white, affluent, girls (Bruch, 1973). However, it is established that anyone, irrespective of weight, socioeconomic background, race and ethnicity, and sex and gender, can experience an ED (Sonneville & Lipson, 2018). Regardless of their demographic characteristics, athletes are among the population groups at greatest risk of developing EDs (Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004; Thompson & Sherman, 2014; Currie, 2010; Torstveit et al., 2008; de Bruin et al., 2011).

Given the intersecting biological, psychological, and sociocultural influences of EDs (Culbert et al., 2015), some argue that the term ED is a “dramatic oversimplification, as it takes complex conditions such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa and boils them down to their most basic behavioral symptom” (Papathomas, 2018, p. 99). Additionally, research on EDs has been traditionally grounded in post-positivist paradigms that utilize medical discourse (i.e., presenting EDs as a medical problem or pathology that can be cured with proper treatment focused on the individual). Research conducted on EDs in sport contexts have extensively examined ED symptoms (e.g., Currie, 2010), risk factors (e.g., Sundgot-Borgen, 1994), and prevalence in athletes (e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2009; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). However, this narrow and descriptive focus lacks insight into social processes at play, disregarding the complexity of how athletes develop and maintain dysfunctional meanings

around the body, food, movement, and identity (McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Papathomas, 2018; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012).

Reliance on medical discourses fails to acknowledge *why* and *how* participating in sport seems to put athletes at greater risk of developing EDs than the general population (McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). As such, qualitative researchers have advocated for methodological diversity to gain insight into the lived experiences of EDs (e.g., the emotional impact and psychological toll of living with an ED; Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012, 2014), as well as contributing social (e.g., coaches, family, teammates) and cultural (e.g., thin- and fit-ideals) factors (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Over the past decade, researchers have begun to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of EDs in sport by adopting various qualitative methodologies grounded in constructivist and constructionist paradigms. For instance, McGannon and McMahon (2019) and Papathomas and Lavalley (2014) conducted a narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of disordered eating in female athletes¹. Findings from these studies reveal how cultural constructions of a “performance narrative” (i.e., emphasis on “winning at all costs” through body self-regulation in sport; Douglas & Carless, 2006; 2009; McGannon & McMahon, 2019), intertwined with dominant societal gender narratives, play into the development and maintenance of EDs in these athletes. Tensions between this performance narrative and identity have also been reported in the literature. Using an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the disordered eating experiences of female athletes (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010), conflicts between the “disordered self” and the “athletic self” were observed to place significant amounts of distress on the athlete. Furthermore, these

¹ In my work, I refer to these athletes as “women athletes” as opposed to “female athletes,” given the focus on gender and its social construction (as opposed to biological sex). However, when referencing previous studies in the literature, I employ the specific term used by the respective author(s) to describe their participants.

conflicting identities have been related to body image in female/women athletes². In Markula's (1995) ethnographic analysis of women aerobicizers, these women expressed experiencing a contradictory relationship with body ideals. They described the tension between equating slimness with a firm, tight, and lean muscle tone, but not to the point of having built, bulky, and big muscles (Markula, 1995). Consequently, these women engaged in aerobic exercise to tone their bodies to become stronger yet paradoxically smaller (Markula, 1995). Similarly, Cosh and colleagues' (2019) discursive analysis of interviews conducted with female athletes involved in weight-focused or aesthetic sports reveal how these athletes often experience a phenomenon termed the female athlete paradox, where the muscular and strong athletic body conflicts with the opposing feminine ideal of slenderness and attractiveness.

Research exploring EDs has historically focused on females/women. However, this female/woman-focused lens (re)produces the assumption that EDs are a feminine issue (Busanich & McGannon, 2010) and, in the context of sport, that EDs are a feminine issue related exclusively to aesthetic sports (Papathomas, 2018). Grounding research in the female/woman experience also risks characterizing EDs as a “pathological condition that naturally exists *in* females more often than males,” rather than conceptualizing EDs as a construction of “socially agreed upon discourses concerning the body, food and exercise” (Busanich et al., 2012, p. 583). To explore the ways in which the body takes on meanings, and the ways in which these meanings shape particular body-related experiences, researchers have advocated for more investigations into the sociocultural construction of the male/man³ ED experience. Using a life history methodology, Papathomas and Lavalley (2006) conducted a series of interviews with a

² When discussing previous studies in the literature (i.e., not referencing a particular study, but discussing concepts related to gender and EDs among athletes), I use “female/women athletes” to signal that most research has used these terms interchangeably.

³ I use “male/man” to acknowledge that most research has used these terms interchangeably.

retired male athlete⁴ who experienced an ED. Findings from this study reveal how the performance narrative is not limited to female athletes in aesthetic sports, and that male athletes in non-lean sports are still exposed to societal and cultural weight pressures (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006). Supporting these findings are a series of narrative inquiries conducted by Busanich and colleagues (2012) and Busanich and colleagues (2014, 2016), where male and female athletes drew upon different socially constructed meanings surrounding the body, food, and exercise in their construction of a performance narrative, leading both to the development and engagement with disordered eating. Together, these findings highlight how society and sport culture circulate limited and gendered meanings about the body, food, and athletic identities, creating a breeding ground for EDs (Busanich et al., 2012; Busanich et al., 2014, 2016; Cosh et al., 2019; McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006, 2010, 2014).

The Influence of the Media

The media exists in a variety of forms (e.g., television, radio, social media, the Internet, books, and newspapers) and plays a considerable role in shaping our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours (López-Guimerà et al., 2010). Media analyses have been conducted in the sport context, examining a range of sporting phenomena, events, and experiences, such as the “team cancer” role (McGannon et al., 2012), elite athlete mothers (McGannon et al., 2015) and fathers (McGannon et al., 2018), concussion (McGannon et al., 2013), and doping (Alexander et al., 2019). A common finding across these studies relates to the media’s role in socially and culturally constructing the identities of the athletes under question. For example, in McGannon and colleagues’ (2015) examination of representations of Olympic athlete mothers in the media,

⁴ I refer to these athletes as “man athletes” as opposed to “male athletes,” except for when I reference previous studies in the literature. In such cases where I reference previous studies, I employ the specific term used by the respective author(s) to describe their participants.

the authors identified two contrasting constructions of identity: the *Athlete and Mother in Conflict*, where the woman seems unable to balance the demands of both motherhood and athletics, and the *Athlete and Mother as Superwoman*, where the woman appears to thrive within athletic and domestic spheres. Despite the sociocultural richness that can be extracted from the examination of media representations of athletes or sport phenomena, there remains a gap in exploring media representations of athletes with EDs.

Media analyses have been conducted on the broad topic of body image. These analyses explore how negative body image can develop in consumers of mass media through the creation and reinforcement of social norms and ideals (e.g., the thin- and fit-ideal; Benowitz-Fredericks et al., 2012; Levine & Harrison, 2004). More specific to sport contexts, the media's gendered construction of meanings surrounding the body and food may influence how consumers perceive athletes, as well as how athletes perceive themselves. For instance, Christensen and Deutsch's (2015) media analysis examining news coverage of women's sport highlights how the media accentuates female athletes' femininity and presents them as sexual objects. Such portrayals devalue women's athleticism and reinforces the patriarchal notion that sport, and sporting success, is associated with masculinity (Christensen & Deutsch, 2015). Similarly, McGannon and Spence's (2012) examination of women's exercise reveals how the media portrays gendered forms of exercise to construct a narrow version of the fit female (sexualized) body. These findings demonstrate how the media conflates appearance and sport performance, creating an "ideal" athletic female body that is tied to societal notions of the thin-ideal (Stoyel et al., 2021). Research on EDs has predominantly focused on females/women, though only a small body of sport psychology research has employed feminist cultural studies perspectives to examine EDs in sport (e.g., Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Kane et al., 2001; Markula, 1995). Using such

feminist perspectives to explore how female/women athletes construct meanings surrounding food, the body, and sport allows critical examination of how social practices (e.g., language) influence how people make sense of their experiences (e.g., how gender and body management practices can disempower women athletes' experiences and silence men athletes' experiences; Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Examination of how the media influences male/man athlete body image remains scarce; however, findings suggest that male athletes also draw upon dominant cultural images, messages, and texts from the media to create narrow meanings around the body that are grounded in hegemonic masculinity (Busanich et al., 2016).

While the aforementioned studies examined the media's influence on body image, media analyses have also been conducted on EDs in the general population (e.g., MacLean et al., 2015; Mondini et al., 1996; O'Hara & Smith, 2007; Shepherd & Seale, 2010). These media analyses illuminate the media's narrow construction of what EDs are and how they manifest, its role in sensationalizing EDs, and the little representation of who can be (and is) affected by EDs (MacLean et al., 2015; O'Hara & Smith, 2007; Shepherd & Seale, 2010). In the sport context, however, few media analyses have been conducted examining EDs in athletes. Of exception, McGannon and McMahon (2019) explored two female athletes' experience with disordered eating, as told in the athletes' autobiographies. Autobiographies, however, are first-person life writing stories, and thus the ability to gain insight into how external social agents (e.g., the media) portray athletes with EDs is limited. Moreover, the media's role in influencing the development of EDs has been examined to a far greater extent than the media portrayal of EDs themselves (Shepherd & Seale, 2010). As such, further exploration is needed to examine how the media constructs meanings around the topic of EDs among athletes.

The Influence of Newspaper Media

Despite declining circulations, newspapers (and their online versions) remain an important outlet for public information (MacLean et al., 2015). How news stories are constructed and framed can have a powerful impact on readers' understanding and perceptions of the importance of the particular issues being reported, especially when such constructions are presented consistently over time (MacLean et al., 2015). On a broader level, the construction of news stories does not represent a mere reflection of dominant cultural narratives; rather, such constructions actively produce or reinforce such narratives. Given that social constructions of illness impact how athletes experience and recognize symptoms, and how coaches, practitioners, and policymakers interpret and address these symptoms, understanding newspaper media coverage of EDs in athletes is critical to understanding public perceptions of the topic (MacLean et al., 2015; O'Hara & Smith, 2007).

Newspaper media also warrants examination because news outlets often received large budgets for investigative reports. In Canada, the federal budgetary financial resources for creativity, arts, and culture (which encompasses newspapers) totaled nearly \$500,000,000 in 2020-2021 (Government of Canada, 2020). Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian government dedicated additional recovery funding to Canadian magazines and community newspapers (Rusnell, 2020). Given the ability of newspaper outlets to carry out large-scale investigative reports, newspaper media possesses a degree of influence on policy-making decisions (Pan & Kosicki, 2001) and can bring to attention important issues that call for "public moral indignation" (Etterna & Glasser, 1998, p. 10). Furthermore, in terms of accessibility, examining online newspaper media allows for greater geographical reach, allowing broader exploration of differing sociocultural contexts.

Rationale and Purpose

Recently, newspaper reporting of athletes with EDs has substantially increased, nearly doubling from 644 articles in 2012 to 1170 articles in 2021 (LexisNexis, 2019). In late 2021, the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's top newspaper outlet (Agility PR Solutions, 2022), published a string of articles related to EDs in elite Canadian sport. Given this increased attention on the troublesome issue of EDs in sport, examining newspaper media representations of athletes with EDs can reveal what dominant societal ideologies and discourses are drawn upon when discussing this topic. An examination of newspaper media can also inform our understanding of how the identities of athletes with EDs are socially and culturally constructed, as well as the psychological and cultural implications of specific identities. However, although previous newspaper media analyses have examined EDs or disordered eating (e.g., MacLean et al., 2015; McGannon & Spence, 2012; Mondini et al., 1996; O'Hara & Smith, 2007) and other sporting phenomena (e.g., concussion, McGannon et al., 2013; motherhood, McGannon et al., 2015), no newspaper media analysis has examined the representations of athletes with EDs. In addition, no such media analyses have employed a critical lens to examine how the identities of athletes with EDs are socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine dominant discourses surrounding the portrayals of athlete experiences with EDs as presented in newspaper media, and how such discourses frame identity. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What content and types of discourses are being portrayed in newspaper media surrounding athlete experiences with EDs, and how does this construct athlete identities (i.e., subject positions constructed within the discourse)?, and (2) What are the implications (e.g., psychological, cultural) of such discourses and subject positions on athletes with EDs and/or sport culture?

Methods

Philosophical Assumptions

I adopted a constructionist paradigm to guide and inquire into my research questions. A constructionist paradigm assumes that truth or meaning is created through a person's engagement with the realities of the world (Crotty, 2003). Constructionism arises from a relativist ontology, wherein reality is multiple and shaped by each person's lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemologically, constructionism stems from a subjectivist and transactional position. This position assumes that knowledge is co-created by the researcher and the participant, through which each individual is subject to their own inherent biases of how they view the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In the context of newspaper media analyses, this co-creation of knowledge can involve multiple parties, extending from the athlete being reported on, to the journalist, to the researcher. As such, a constructionist paradigm assumes that meanings and knowledge are constructed and passed along through social contexts (Crotty, 2003).

Research conducted from a constructionist paradigm extends the focus from the meaning-making of the individual mind (i.e., constructivism) to the collective generation of meaning through discourse and other social processes and mediums (Schwandt, 1998). Thus, within constructionism, the "social dimension of meaning is at center stage" (Crotty, 2003, p. 57). Considering this social dimension, a constructionist paradigm was chosen to examine the social, cultural, and/or political dynamics, and power relations within such dynamics, involved in how the media portrays athletes with EDs. As opposed to seeking a single "truth" or "reality" of how newspaper media portrays athletes with EDs, my goal was to critically examine what meanings journalists associate with athletes and EDs, deconstruct taken-for-granted "truths" or assumptions about the ED experiences of women and men athletes, and how certain meanings

may be perceived as more (or less) impactful to readers depending on their lived experience, given that reality is multiple and mind-dependent.

Researcher Background

Researcher reflexivity, where researchers provide insight into their own biases, assumptions, and experiences, is a critical aspect to rigour and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Johnson et al., 2020). In the following section, I provide readers with some insight into my personal background and how my lived experience inevitably influences the interpretation and construction of the findings.

I am a born and raised Canadian who grew up with influences from both Western and Chinese cultures. Growing up, I spent 8 years as an artistic gymnast and dedicated nearly 20 hours per week to training. My self-identity was strongly tied to my athletic abilities, and my involvement in an aesthetic sport also caused my identity and perceptions of self-worth to revolve around my physical appearance, which had negative effects on my body image and eating behaviours. Moreover, being of a young age, the media contributed to my internalization of dominant societal beauty ideals, such as the thin- and fit-ideals. At the age of 15 years, I felt the physical and psychological demands of gymnastics exceed my capabilities. I quit gymnastics to take on track and field. Although my physical and psychosocial health had taken their toll due to years of dysfunctional eating behaviours, I normalized these experiences and believed I was just a “committed athlete.” However, soon after my transition into track and field, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and taken out of athletics to receive inpatient ED treatment. During my time in the hospital, I received treatment from nurses, a psychiatrist, and a psychologist. With the support of my treatment team, I was discharged from the hospital after nearly one month and spent the next two years in outpatient treatment. Since then, I have been in

active recovery and working towards building a healthy relationship with my body, food, and exercise.

Reflecting on my experiences, mostly of my adolescent years, I recognize how my self-identification as a woman in our society had socialized me into the belief of needing to conform to Western beauty ideals to be considered physically attractive. More specific to my Chinese-Canadian identity, seeing the media's overrepresentation of white celebrities and influencers led me to believe that if there were certain physical traits that I could not naturally manipulate to fit Western beauty ideals, then at least I could manipulate my body to fit the thin- and fit-ideals. I also experienced the female athlete paradox during my time as an athlete, which I believe was exacerbated since Asian cultures tend to emphasize slimness over appearing fit and toned to a greater extent than Western cultures. Moreover, my experience with medical treatment has contributed to why my research interests encompass the sociocultural influences of EDs. During my time in ED treatment, I received physical (e.g., weight restoration) and psychological (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy) treatment, which was integral to improving my physical and psychological well-being during my time in the hospital. Once I was discharged from treatment, however, I did not feel equipped to resist dominant societal narratives about food and the body (e.g., diet culture) and, in particular, navigate the sport environment, resulting in the loss of my athletic identity. My treatment experience has given me a first-hand account of how individual, medical-based treatment can address individual factors related to EDs, but if broader social influences are dismissed, these treatment efforts can be diminished. I do want to acknowledge that my experience with an ED came with a lot of privilege in terms of receiving a diagnosis and treatment, and that my journey is by no means the sole representation of an ED experience.

I am also a regular consumer of online news media, notably media related to sports and health, from Canadian and Western perspectives. My personal experience with an ED has led me to adopt a critical eye towards the media in terms of health (mis)information and the reporting of athlete wellbeing. Based on my lived experience, I believe that both sport culture and the media can pressure athletes to engage in ED behaviours. The extent to which such behaviours are normalized, both in sport contexts and in society more broadly, can have detrimental effects on the wellbeing of athletes.

Data Collection

Data were collected using NexisUni Academic database to search for full-text newspaper articles from January 1 2021 to June 7 2022. Newspaper articles were collected in reverse chronological order (i.e., 2022 articles were collected prior to 2021 articles), and data analysis occurred concurrently (i.e., analysis of the 2022 articles informed our decision to collect and analyze the 2021 articles). Both authors agreed that sufficient conceptual depth was captured within the 2022 and 2021 articles to do a meaningful analysis. Furthermore, the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 would have impacted both sport participation and eating behaviours in athletes. Given that our purpose and research questions were not created to explicitly explore this phenomenon, we decided to exclude 2020 articles from our analysis.

The search was carried out using the following search terms: (“eating disorder” OR “disordered eating” OR anorexia OR bulimia OR “binge eating disorder”) AND (athlete OR sport). We chose to include the terms anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating disorder since these are the three main ED diagnoses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, to acknowledge that symptoms and disordered behaviours can be physically and psychologically damaging in the absence of a

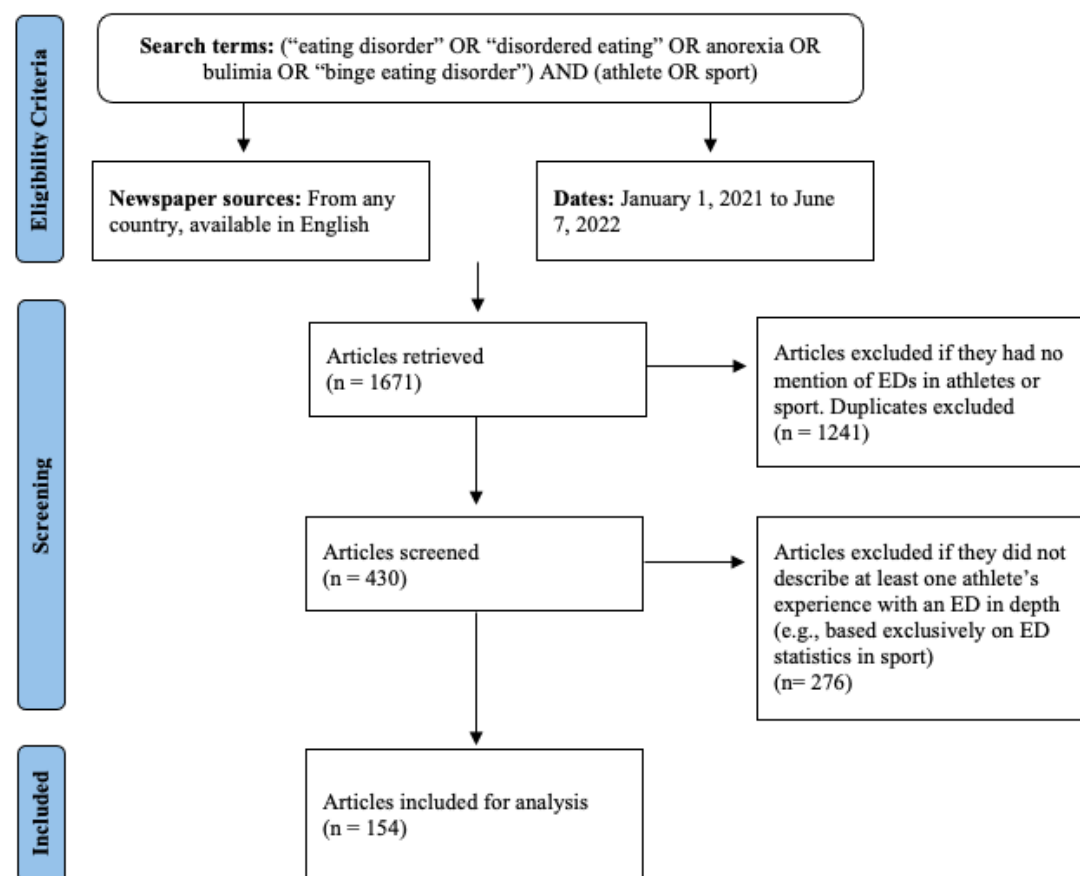
diagnosis (Chamay-Weber et al., 2005), as well as to consider any possible fear of disclosure from athletes about an ED to the public (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010), we also chose to include the term “disordered eating” in our search.

Articles were included for review if they (1) were newspaper articles published in print and/or online, (2) provided details of at least one athlete’s experience with an ED, and (3) were published in English or had an English translation available. We did not limit articles to a specific type of news outlet and were open to a range of serious or broadcast and tabloid or popular newspapers. Articles were excluded for review if they (1) did not mention EDs in the sporting context (e.g., centered around EDs in exercise or fitness settings), (2) were exclusively based on facts and/or statistics (e.g., articles centered around the number or percentage of athletes with an ED, articles summarizing scientific findings), (3) had minimal discussion on the thesis topic, or (4) were a duplicate of an included article. Two screening phases were conducted to determine our final sample of articles. During the first phase, I conducted an initial screening of the articles and excluded those in which I was confident did not fit within the eligibility criteria. Following this initial screening, 430 articles remained for possible inclusion. During the second phase, the second author and I independently conducted a screening of the 430 articles. Throughout this screening process, we periodically met to discuss what we observed within the data, challenge discrepancies in the inclusion or exclusion of articles, and further refine the eligibility criteria. For example, early in the second phase of screening, both authors agreed to refine the inclusion criteria to specify that articles needed to provide detail of at least one athlete’s experience with an ED, and that articles about maltreatment in sport, with minimal description of an athlete’s experience with an ED (e.g., simply naming an athlete who developed an ED), should be excluded. Following this screening phase, the 430 articles retrieved from the

first screening were reduced to 154 articles for analysis. Figure 1 depicts our article selection process.

Figure 1.

Visual Representation of the Article Selection Process



Note. ED: eating disorder

Critical Discourse Analysis

Adopting the term discourse to represent “all forms of naturally spoken talk, conversations, and texts of any kind” (McGannon & Butryn, 2020, p. 294), we performed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze our data. CDA focuses on the process and outcome of language, examining how linguistic strategies within discourse (e.g., vocabulary, wording, metaphors, and grammar) play a role in (re)producing taken-for-granted assumptions and

ideologies (McGannon, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The present study sought to explore how the social construction of phenomena (e.g., athlete experiences with EDs) and meaning (e.g., the identities of athletes with EDs) are influenced by practices dictated by social, cultural, and/or political discourses (McGannon, 2016).

The social construction of meaning is integral to CDA, where “people acquire a sense of identity and interpret the world from a particular perspective (i.e., subject position) by participating in discursive practices that allocate meanings to particular categories and images” (McGannon & Spence, 2012, p. 34). Thus, aligning with my philosophical assumptions, we felt that CDA was an appropriate methodology given the purpose and research questions of this study. Especially because EDs, ED recovery, and athletic participation are all heavily tied to the concept of identity in their own (but also interacting) ways (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010), we believed using a CDA to deconstruct how social practices create these identities would provide rich insight into tensions between these identities, and how such tensions might facilitate or impede ED prevention and recovery in athletes. Additionally, by focusing on the nuanced ways that discourse shapes subject positions, we can examine how the construction of certain identities are situated within the context of power issues (e.g., who gets spoken about in what way, and how might this structure social (in)action; McGannon, 2016).

Data Analysis

There is no fixed or prescribed way to perform a CDA (McGannon, 2016). However, to inform and guide our analysis, we employed a synthetic/eclectic approach outlined by McGannon (2016) and used in previous CDA media analyses in sport and exercise psychology (e.g., Alexander et al., 2022; McGannon & Butryn, 2020).

We performed our CDA in a recursive manner with both authors first reading and rereading the newspaper articles to familiarize ourselves with the data (McGannon & Butryn, 2020). I then began to highlight key terms or concepts that aligned with our research questions to examine the *what's* within the data (i.e., *what* is being said about athlete experiences with EDs), with a focus on vocabulary, wording, metaphors, and grammar (McGannon & Butryn, 2020; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Throughout the process of (re)reading, I noted (1) what discursive objects were discussed within the text (e.g., EDs), (2) what words, metaphors, or concepts were being used to describe such objects (e.g., *struggle with* an ED versus *fight* an ED), and (3) the social and behavioural effects of such descriptions (e.g., EDs as empowering versus EDs as disempowering), as outlined by McGannon (2016).

Once identifying the discursive objects within the text, I then sought to identify discursive subjects (i.e., how discourses construct subject positions, which form and frame identities; McGannon, 2016). Relating this back to the discursive objects within the text (e.g., EDs), here I examined how these objects were being *used* (e.g., were EDs framed as empowering for men athletes, but disempowering women athletes?) and how such use reflects and contributes to power dynamics within society. Throughout this process, I met regularly to discuss my interpretations with the second author, who served as a critical friend to challenge or question my interpretations. For example, when discussing how EDs were framed as empowering or functional for men athletes, the second author raised the point of men athletes being portrayed as in denial of their ED, which revealed the tensions of hegemonic masculinity in sport when a man athlete experiences mental health challenges.

Following these discussions, I proceeded with my analyses by relating the key terms or concepts associated with the discursive objects and subjects to broader sociocultural frameworks.

The purpose of this process was to identify and refine the discourses in an iterative manner, keeping in mind that discourses identified within a CDA should reflect power dynamics in order to be critical (McGannon, 2016). For example, I identified one category related to how hegemonic masculinity dominates sport culture. Within this category, women athletes with EDs were portrayed as too physically and psychologically weak for sport, and were personally blamed for development of an ED. In contrast, women athletes who returned to sport after an ED were described using terms that inferred aggression and toughness. I found that these categories reflected contrasting sociocultural meanings (within the overarching concept of hegemonic masculinity) and thus chose to reflect them as opposing subject positions. I then grouped these subject positions to form one overarching discourse of *Who is to Blame for the ED?*. During this process, I presented my interpretations to the second author, who acted as a critical friend to challenge, question, and refine the identified discourses and subject positions. Through an iterative analytical process, two key discourses were identified, each composed of underlying subject positions.

Theoretical Frameworks

No single sociological framework or theory drove our analysis of the data; however, the process of identifying and refining the discourses was facilitated by drawing upon certain broader sociocultural understandings, perspectives, and ideologies (McGannon, 2016). During the process of examining how journalists discuss discursive objects within the text (e.g., EDs), we noticed the dominance of medical discourse. This led us to question who did the journalist blame for the cause of the ED, and whether this medical discourse fed into the reproduction of physical ED stereotypes (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012). Reflecting on who to blame for the ED related our discourse to concepts of mental toughness in sport (i.e., Hughes and Coakley's (1991)

concept of overconformity to the sport ethic), which subsequently informed our identification of how athletes with EDs, particularly women athletes, were portrayed as lacking a certain degree of mental toughness, causing these athletes to “give into” an ED. Consequences of such portrayals of women athletes draws into critical feminist theory, where female/women athletes’ bodies may be perceived as flawed and more vulnerable to developing pathological conditions compared to males/men (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Employing feminist cultural studies perspectives also allowed us to contextualize and critically examine how gender, culture, and power relations impact the relationship between food, body, and sport for women athletes (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). For instance, Butler’s (1990) framework, which describes how femininity is constructed and reproduced in sport, provided a foundation to explore gender as a performative act, where, for instance, the social expectation for women athletes to appear feminine (e.g., through makeup and clothing or uniforms) results in gendered cultural expectations that journalists may reinforce through discourse. A feminist cultural studies framework also allowed us to examine the paradox of the female/woman athlete body, where participation in sport can be empowering but simultaneously disempowering and oppressive, as women are pressured to attain and maintain the ideal female/woman body (Markula, 1995; Kane et al., 2001). Concepts from objectification theory (Daniels, 2009) also facilitated our identification of how athletes with EDs are (hyper)feminized in newspaper media. Keeping our eyes open and drawing parallels to these frameworks allowed us to critically interpret the data and relate the discourses and subject positions to each other, as well as to broader sociological, ideological, psychological, and behavioural effects (McGannon, 2016).

Quality Standards

In line with my constructionist paradigm, I used characterizing traits to guide the collection, interpretation, and reporting of data as opposed to a predetermined or fixed list of criteria (Smith & Caddick, 2012). First, I demonstrated *transparency* by outlining my background, experiences, and assumptions; keeping an audit trail (e.g., Excel spreadsheets recording our inclusion and exclusion decisions, as well as decision discrepancies between authors); including direct quotations from newspaper articles within the reporting of the findings; and outlining the use of a critical friend. Second, I strived to provide *substantive contribution* by deepening our sociocultural understanding of EDs in sport through the adoption of a social scientific perspective to identify dominant discourses and subject positions. Third, I demonstrated *width* by not limiting articles to geographic location nor news outlet type (e.g., serious or broadcast versus tabloid or popular), as well as by not limiting the conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis of this study to one gender. Fourth, I sought *impact* by understanding how newspaper media plays an active role in (re)producing stereotypes about EDs in sport, and how such stereotypes hold psychological and sociocultural implications for various stakeholders (e.g., athletes, coaches, sport institutions, and policymakers). Finally, I demonstrated *coherence* by seeking congruence between my ontological and epistemological positions, research questions, methodology, and methods, in addition to using language throughout my writing that invoke relativist ontological assumptions to align with my stated paradigm (Poucher et al., 2020). I invite readers to consider my characterizing traits when judging the findings and interpretations of this media analysis.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine dominant discourses surrounding the portrayal of athlete experiences with EDs as presented in newspaper media. The articles included for

analysis were published in 88 different news outlets, ranging from tabloid or popular (e.g., *The Sun* in the United Kingdom) to serious or broadcast (e.g., *The New York Times*) sources. Most articles originated from Westernized countries (i.e., United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia) and focused on elite athletes either in weight- and leanness-focused (e.g., swimming, distance running) or aesthetic (e.g., gymnastics, diving) sports. The majority of articles were centered on women athletes' ED experiences; however, there was a notable presence of articles focusing on men athletes' ED experiences.

From our analysis, we identified two discourses: *Who is to Blame for the ED?* and *Reproducing or Resisting Stereotypes*. Underlying each discourse were gender-specific subject positions. Within the discourse *Who is to Blame for the ED?*, we identified two gendered subject positions: *The Cautionary Tale of Women in Sport* and *Successful Athletes Return to Sport*. Within the discourse *Reproducing or Resisting Stereotypes*, we identified three gendered subject positions: *Men are in Denial of Their ED*, *The (Hyper)Feminized Athlete*, and *ED Identity Versus Athletic Identity*. Table 1 provides a summary of our final discourses and subject positions. Each discourse and subject position includes direct quotations from the newspaper articles, and these quotations reflect various perspectives related to athletes with EDs (e.g., journalists, athletes, and health professionals). We present our interpretations of the implications of these various voices below.

Table 1.

Summary of Discourse and Subject Positions

Discourse	Subject Positions	Definition
Who is to Blame for the ED?	The Cautionary Tale of Women in Sport	Unlike men athletes, women athletes are portrayed as not being naturally built for sport. Women athletes with EDs are portrayed as physically and

		psychologically weaker than men athletes with EDs.
	Successful Athletes Return to Sport	Athletes who successfully make their way back into sport are praised, but it is the athlete's individual responsibility to make this return. There appears to be less of an expectation for women athletes to return to sport.
Reproducing or Resisting Stereotypes	Men are in Denial of Their ED	Men athletes are portrayed as in denial of their ED and disordered behaviours, often downplaying their experiences, whereas women athletes are portrayed as help-seekers.
	The (Hyper)Feminized Athlete	Both women and men athletes are (hyper)feminized, perpetuating aspects of emphasized femininity and the heterosexuality of hegemonic masculinity.
	ED Identity Versus Athletic Identity	ED recovery is framed as black and white, where the athlete is recovered <i>and</i> returns to sport or is unrecovered <i>and</i> quits sport.

Note. ED: eating disorder

Discourse 1: Who is to Blame for the ED?

The first discourse centralizes journalists' portrayal of who to blame for the development of the athlete's ED. We present three different loci of control for the origin or trigger of the athlete's ED: the sport system, the athletes themselves, or the ED itself. Examining the nuanced way in which journalists used either an active voice (i.e., when the subject of the sentence performs an action) or passive voice (i.e., the subject of the sentence receives the action) when describing who is to blame for the development of the ED reveals differences in where readers may perceive the ED arises.

EDs as a Systemic Issue

Some newspaper articles framed EDs as a systemic issue, resulting from harmful sport culture practices (e.g., prescribing athletes with target weights), body shaming comments from coaches, and/or pressures from the media. Journalists' descriptions of such practices are consistent with sport psychology research that has identified how certain aspects of sport culture, such as social agents (e.g., coaches, teammates), weight control practices (e.g., caloric restriction, excessive training, the use of prescription drugs), and disciplinary practices (e.g., public weigh-ins, skin folds; McGannon & McMahon, 2019), can put athletes "at risk" of developing EDs. Sport culture has also been described as an environment that circulates limited and particular meanings regarding food, eating, and sporting experiences (Busanich et al., 2012). Narrative inquiries into athlete experiences navigating the body, food, and exercise have shown how athletes are socialized into a culture of "just do it" (Busanich et al., 2012) or a "sport performance" narrative (Busanich et al., 2014; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014), where emphasis is put on winning and achievement, which in turn dictates athletes' wellbeing, self-identity, and sense of self-worth (Busanich et al., 2012). This narrative is often reinforced by verbal and behavioural pressures from social agents (e.g., coaches, teammates) who implement body regulation and dietary practices to control athletic performance (Busanich et al., 2012; 2014; Papathomas, 2018; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014; McGannon & McMahon, 2019).

Many news articles in the present study centered on athletes in weight- or leanness-focused and aesthetic sports, such as swimming, distance running, and gymnastics. This reflects research that has identified the "slim to win" narrative, where emphasis is placed on winning at all costs through body self-regulation with a focus on being lean in order to win (McMahon et al., 2012; McGannon & McMahon, 2019). McGannon and McMahon (2019) and McMahon et

al. (2012) describe the role of the media as a form of social pressure that reinforces the “slim to win” or performance narrative through media comments on athletes’ bodies. Emphasis on these various pressures, ranging from social agents within sport contexts (e.g., coaches) to the media more broadly, aligns within the Public Health Model, which reflects how psychological, health, and social problems result from the interaction between individuals and their larger environments, as shaped by familial, social, cultural, economic, and political factors (McVey et al., 2012).

Journalists condemned the sport system by using an *active voice on the sport system* and/or *passive voice on the athlete*. For example, journalist Remi Williamson from *Michigan Daily: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor* (United States, 2022) described the story of Mary Cain, an aspiring American middle-distance runner who was part of the Nike Oregon Project and, after years of physical and psychological abuse, chose to walk away. Williamson used an active voice on the system, writing how “*Nike and coach Alberto Salazar were starving female athletes and urged them to become thinner and thinner [emphasis added]*,” followed by a passive voice on the athlete, where “*Cain herself was pressured [emphasis added]* into doping and developed an eating disorder.” Similarly, an article from *The Daily Telegraph* (London, 2021) [unnamed journalist] about a British distance runner who quit the University of Oregon program used an active voice on the sport environment, where “*The environment, [the athlete] says, had pushed her [emphasis added]* to relapse into troubling disordered eating habits, including purging after meals after being asked to keep a food diary.” These examples showcase how journalists’ nuanced use of an active voice on the sport system in particular can shift the blame onto the sport system.

Research on the psychology of verb voice (e.g., the use of an active versus passive voice) shows that subtle cues in news reporting, or *how* the news describes social events, topics, and agents, can influence causal or blame attribution (i.e., who the blame for a negative event is attributed to) and readers' opinions on such events, topics, and agents. Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor (2008) examined "blame game" coverage in news media, or how news coverage associates negative events to different agents in an attempt to deflate, deflect, or diffuse blame from the assailant. In their study, the authors manipulated the verb voice in four news stories that shared one key agent. When an active voice was used on the agent to describe the event (e.g., "Mr. Berman, a railroad employee, parked the pickup on the track..."), participants more often perceived the agent as the cause of that event than when a passive voice (e.g., "The pickup was parked on the track by Mr. Berman, a railroad employee...") was used (Knobloch-Westerwick & Taylor, 2008). Research has also examined the effects of an active versus passive voice in news reporting on violence against women and sexual assault. Findings from these studies demonstrate how victim blaming (i.e., holding the victim, as opposed to the assailant, of the assault responsible) appears more in the presence of a passive voice because readers are able to dissociate the assailant from the action, thus diffusing the responsibility of the action to other social agents (Henley et al., 1995; Lussos & Fernandez 2018). However, journalists in the present study only used an active voice on the sport system in a small number of articles.

It's the Athlete's Responsibility

A larger proportion of articles blamed the athletes themselves for the development of the ED. Some articles, despite blaming the sport system for the development of ED, seemed to convey the message that although the system is troubled, athletes should be prepared for the inevitability of EDs in sport. In an article from *CE Noticias Financieras* (translated into English,

2022) [unnamed journalist], a former gymnast, who was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa as an athlete, expressed, “I do not want to give the message that elite sport is horrible, but there are people who perhaps should have more tools at a psychological level when practicing it,” inferring that some athletes, namely those who might be less mentally tough or resilient, should be better mentally equipped to avoid the development of an ED. Similarly, an athlete in journalist Elaine Tanner’s *The Globe and Mail* (Canada, 2021) article expressed how she “never felt a compulsion to be ‘thin’, but the insidious nature of high expectations and pressure to perform takes its toll on athletes.” Although not explicitly blaming the athlete, readers may perceive that it is the athlete’s responsibility to avoid the ED “trap.”

In other articles, journalists chose to not acknowledge the role of the sport system, attributing instead the development of the ED to some individual flaw in or weakness of the athlete. An article by journalist Maggie Astor in *The New York Times* (United States, 2022) about Christy Henrich, an American gymnast who died due to medical complications from starvation, emphasized how “it is now clear genetics play a role [in the development of EDs].” Astor described how “abusive or simply careless comments can be triggers, but some people are more susceptible through no fault of their own.” By stating how some people are more susceptible to EDs, whether genetically or psychologically, Astor utilized medical discourse. Readers may subsequently perceive that it is the athlete’s own biological or psychological flaw or weakness that is implicated in the onset of the ED. Similarly, an article by journalist John Walk in *LNP* (United States, 2022) sought out expertise from an ED counselor, who claimed that athletes who develop EDs are simply “driven, goal-oriented, and often perfectionistic people” who channel those qualities into maladaptive goals. Cormac Ryan, a Dublin hurler⁵ featured in

⁵ An athlete of the Irish outdoor stick-and-ball sport, similar to the sport of lacrosse.

journalist Jen Hogan's article in *The Irish Times* (Ireland, 2022), also spoke anecdotally about his vulnerability to internalizing body shaming comments:

Water off a duck's back for most people but, for whatever reason, whether it was just I was that bit more vulnerable mentally, [the body shaming comments] just stuck. And I just became really paranoid about my physical appearance, particularly when I was playing.

ED research grounded in post-positivist or objectivist paradigms that utilize medical discourse rooted in the pathology fields of psychology and psychiatry reduce EDs to individual factors or causes (e.g., perfectionism, low self-esteem), which risks characterizing the development of (and recovery from) EDs as an individual responsibility (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Papathomas, 2018; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012; Walsh & Malson, 2010). Consequently, journalists who construct their articles within such paradigms or discourses may cause readers to perceive that it is the athlete's own psychological weakness or biological flaw that is implicated in the onset of the ED. The medical model of science firmly follows ideas of reductionism, causal explanation, and prediction, where "blame" for a condition is put onto the individual, and where the individual (as opposed to the sport system) needs to be "fixed" through proper, often medical or psychological, treatment. Taking the example of perfectionism as a risk factor, arguments opposing the medical model acknowledge that it is the environment that makes this trait maladaptive, and dismissing such environmental factors turns a blind eye toward broader social influences. That is, sociocultural and environmental factors are often thought of as *reinforcing* an individual's "internal deficit" (e.g., high levels of perfectionism or low self-esteem), which ultimately leads to disordered eating and EDs (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). However, contrary to the assumption that these "internal deficits" act as "moderators" in the

relationship between sociocultural factors and EDs, sociocultural factors actually *create* these individual characteristics (e.g., thin ideal internalization; Smolak, 2012) and play a more direct role in ED development, which many journalists failed to acknowledge.

Many journalists used an *active voice on the athlete* when describing who to blame for the ED. When describing an American squash player's experience with an ED, journalist Michael Steinberger from *The New York Times* (International, 2022) wrote, "More recently, she revealed that she had battled an eating disorder for much of the previous decade, which was at least partly connected to *the pressure she felt [emphasis added]* as the standard-bearer for American squash." By using an active voice on the athlete (i.e., feeling the pressure), readers of these articles may perceive the agent (i.e., the athlete) as the cause of that event (i.e., ED) more so than if a passive voice was used (Knobloch-Westerwick & Taylor, 2008). Readers may then assume the athlete developed an ED due to a lack of mental toughness or resiliency, leaving the athlete prone to "feeling the pressure."

It was also common for journalists to describe the ED as a possession of the athlete, using terms such as "her bulimia" (journalist Michael Steinberger, *The New York Times*, International, 2022) and "her eating disorder" ([unnamed] journalist, *Sunday News*, New Zealand, 2022). Use of such language reinforces the idea of the ED being the athlete's personal responsibility. Moreover, some journalists extended this personal responsibility into a moral one by including quotes from athletes themselves where "I" statements would dominate. For example, an article in *Metro* (United Kingdom, 2021) [unnamed journalist] about former hurdler Colin Jackson included a quote from Jackson himself, where the heavy presence of "I" statements may implicitly shift readers to blame the athlete:

When I was training for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, I suffered with bulimia and

anorexia. I felt like I was overweight and eating too much. I had a job to do - to run as fast as I could. I convinced myself I had to be lighter to do it. I would go for days without food, maybe only having coffee, but still training. I felt that to perform at my best I had to be at my lightest.

Our findings are similar to those from Busanich and colleagues' (2012) narrative analysis of male and female distance runners' relationship with food, the body, and exercise, where athletes often positioned their eating within a moral discourse of good versus bad, drawing on "food rules" to control the body. Within linguistic strategies, McGannon (2019) also identified how "I" statements or the use of the pronouns "I" implicitly imply moral responsibility, which we argue ties to the ED to being a personal responsibility. Research has also shown how external agents can influence the moralizing of athletes' body practices. Cosh and colleagues (2015) examined the interactions between elite female and male athletes and an exercise physiologist during skinfold testing. They observed that the physiologist praised the athlete if a decrease in measurement had occurred, using phrases such as "good girl" and "keep it up." Such phrases are similar to Jackson's self-moralizing belief of having to "be at [his] lightest" to "perform at [his] best." In addition to how this moralization is reinforced in sport cultures, it is argued that such moralization of food and body self-regulation is normalized more broadly in society because of society's cultural shift toward the neo-liberalization of healthcare discourse, where emphasis is put on self-monitoring and self-control with regards to health and wellbeing (i.e., matters of individual responsibility; Brijnath & Antoniadis, 2016; Rose, 2014; Walsh & Malson, 2010). As a result, this ubiquitous normalization within public and social realms may mean that readers are more likely to internalize such neo-liberal health discourses and believe that this moralization is normal. Taken together, journalists utilized various discursive strategies to frame the

development of the ED as the athlete's personal responsibility. In particular, the heavy use of discourse rooted in the medical model framed the ED as the result of some biological or psychological weakness, shifting the blame from the sport system onto the individual.

ED as a Separate Entity

Some journalists chose to emphasize how the ED can act as a separate entity, one that is forced upon the athlete through no fault of their own nor the sport system. In journalist Maggie Astor's article featured in *The New York Times* (United States, 2022), she described gymnast Christy Henrich's experience with an ED as "a malevolent force separate from who she was and wanted to be." Astor also included past quotes from Henrich herself, where the gymnast described her ED as "a beast inside of me, like a monster" that "feels evil." In contrast, journalist Kristy Blake Knox from *Irish Independent* (Ireland, 2021) described Cormac Ryan's experience with an ED as feeling like "his eating disorder was his best friend." Living with a separate ED identity can be experienced as living with both an illness and an identity, where the ED can take on multiple subjectivities (Rich, 2006). Our findings support this experience of multiple subjectivities, where on one hand journalists described the ED as the athlete's "best friend," but "evil" on the other hand. These different subjectivities or meanings show how the ED can afford positive and empowering but also negative social positionings; the ED is seen as helping sport performance in some cases but hindering wellbeing and sport performance in other cases. Such positionings may also occur simultaneously and contradict each other, leaving the athlete to feel both empowered by the ED but also being aware that it is paradoxically destructive (Rich, 2006). Researchers that have examined experiences of ED recovery describe it as an identity journey (Conti, 2008) and advocate that separating the ED identity from the individual's personal identity is helpful in supporting recovery efforts (Dark & Carter, 2019; McNamara & Parsons, 2016).

This is because being given an ED label can hinder or limit self-expression beyond this label, and recovery entails separating one's identity from or creating a new identity separate from meanings created by medical labels and discourses (LaMarre & Rice, 2021).

Subject Positions

From the discourse above, gendered notions within who the journalist blamed for the ED (which predominantly blamed the athlete) led us to identify two opposing subject positions: *The Cautionary Tale of Women in Sport* and *Successful Athletes Return to Sport*. Within these two subject positions, we highlight the contrast observed between men and women athletes.

Subject Position 1: The Cautionary Tale of Women in Sport

On one hand, an overarching portrayal of women athletes with EDs is that they are not built for sport – something men athletes were depicted as naturally built for. When describing man athlete Harry Gripper, journalist Mary Harris' article in the *Kent and Sussex Courier* (United Kingdom, 2022) emphasized how he “excelled at many [sports] including rugby” since a young age. Men athletes were framed as more likely to normalize rigid or highly disciplined behaviour towards food. In fact, these athletes were portrayed as being able to manage their disordered behaviours, as EDs were never described in a way that impeded men athletes' sport performance. When detailing man bodybuilder Jimmy Smith's experience with an ED, journalist John Vargo in *The Star Beacon* (United States, 2021) even seemed to praise Smith's disordered behaviours:

Dedicated to healthy eating is the most intense training with only a 1/4 cup of carbohydrates in the morning. “This is the hardest sport because of the mental toughness with the nutrition, discipline, and you still have to go in there and kick a— with your training,” Smith said.

Journalists' alignment of ED behaviours to features of athlete virtuousness reflects Hughes and Coakley's (1991) notion of positive deviance and overconformity to the sport ethic (Papathomas, 2018). Overconformity to the sport ethic involves the strong or over-emphasis on norms and values within sport contexts, including sacrifice for the game, seeking distinction or achievement, taking risks and playing through pain, and challenging limits (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Woven into these cultural norms and values are gendered notions often tied to hegemonic masculinity, such as men are stronger and meant for sport (Kerr, 2022). Doping is an example of athletes' overconformity to the sport ethic; however, while doping can be perceived as trying to conform to portrayals of masculinity in sport (Coakley, 2015), EDs are not socially portrayed as "masculine," given the stereotype that EDs are a "female illness." Interestingly, in the sport context, Atkinson (2011) notes how even within male athletes who are exposed to thin discourses and engage in self-starvation (e.g., endurance male runners), their thin bodies are not problematized as anti-hegemonic representations of masculinity. Rather, the thin male body represents the pinnacle of control, discipline, and dominance and is linked to sporting success, to the point where the ED is not considered disordered eating, but rather *ordered* eating (Atkinson, 2011). Papathomas (2018) also notes that when disordered or dysfunctional eating behaviours do not hinder athletes' sport performance, this is considered a "functional ED." Adopting these ideas and terms, we can argue that journalists tended to portray man athletes as experiencing ordered eating or functional EDs, framing the ED as a positive asset to man sport performance.

In contrast, journalists often described how hardworking women athletes must be to excel in sport. However, this drive and ambition was always put in the context of the woman athlete not being able to manage disordered behaviours, to the point of having to seek professional help or step away from sport due to the severity of the ED. Journalist Jessica Halloran's article in *The*

Australian (Australia, 2021) framed Emily Seebohm, Australian swimmer, as unable to manage her ED. Halloran associated a negative connotation to Seebohm's "voracious" training and work ethic by describing how Seebohm "took on challenge of extreme weight-management with a vengeance," which resulted in an eventual ED. An article by journalist Brett Lackey in *Daily Mail* (Australia, 2021) detailing the development of Seebohm's ED used a similar tone: "She then applied herself to becoming thinner with the same focus and drive that had seen her rise to top of her sport." Historically, women have been socialized to have a different and "pathological" relationship with food compared to men (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). As such, attached to the phrase "female athlete" are take-for-granted meanings related to food, the body, and sport (e.g., participating in sport to maintain an athletic build that is "feminine"; Busanich & McGannon, 2010). When these taken-for-granted meanings are challenged, such as women pushing themselves and their bodies to the limit in sport, rather than working towards achieving a "feminine" build, feminist psychological approaches highlight how this causes resistance (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Our findings showcase this resistance through journalists' negative association between "female/woman athlete" and ambition. Western societies also construct a duality between the mind and body, where women are more often associated with the (sexualized) body, while men are associated with the mind (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Our findings extend this notion to the sport context, where journalists portrayed men athletes in a way where they also seem to be associated with the mind (e.g., mental toughness, discipline), while women athletes are associated with the body (e.g., weight management, striving to become thinner). In line with how journalists tended to associate women athletes with the body, analyses of Olympic coverage of male and female athletes reveal how female athletes receive fewer comments from sports media commentators about their strength and intelligence and more

comments about their physical appearance compared to male athletes (Christensen & Deutsch, 2015; Kane et al., 2013). Feminist theory refers to this objectification of the female body as the “male gaze” in media representations, which ultimately devalues and disempowers women’s athleticism (Christensen & Deutsch, 2015; Daniels, 2009). Such findings highlight the negative impact that the media can have on how women develop relationships with their body and food, as empowering girls and women to identify and deconstruct the gendered discrimination and sexist experiences they face is associated with decreases in body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Smolak, 2012).

Furthermore, women athletes were often framed as having “slipped into the clutches of an eating disorder” (journalist Fiona Thomas, *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 2021) or “[given] in to ‘an obsessive desire to control [their] weight’” (journalist Jenna Daly, *Emory Wheel: Emory University*, United States, 2022), causing their sporting career to be “derailed” (journalist Jenna Daly, *Emory Wheel: Emory University*, United States, 2022). For instance, an article written by journalists Grant Robertson and Rachel Brady in *The Globe and Mail* (Canada, 2021) about Taylor Ruck, a Canadian woman swimmer, compared Ruck’s experience with an ED as having “veered terribly off course.” By positioning women athletes’ work ethic in the context of not being able to manage the ED, and blaming the athlete themselves for the ED, journalists may have conveyed to readers that women athletes are not built for sport. Papathomas (2018) articulates that when disordered or dysfunctional eating behaviours do not hinder athletes’ sport performance, this is considered a “functional ED,” which we observed journalists associate with the man ED experience. However, once such behaviours cross the line into clinical ED territory, and athletes are not able to manage disordered behaviours (as women athletes were often portrayed by journalists), this is considered a “dysfunctional ED.” This fine line between a

functional versus dysfunctional ED also shows how there is a blurry conception or operational definition of mental toughness in sport, where the athlete is considered mentally tough if they overconform to the sport ethic, but is then seen as mentally weak if this strays into the territory of mental illness. By portraying women athletes as unable to manage the ED or as experiencing dysfunctional EDs, journalists drew upon gendered notions whereby the female body is inherently taught to be flawed and in need of surveillance and fixing (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). Thus, women athletes are in a way expected to overconform to the sport ethic in order to accomplish the impossible task of “fixing” their ever-flawed body, which normalizes or even encourages women athletes to engage in EDs as a way to showcase their femininity. However, this pressure sets women athletes up to be portrayed as falling into “dysfunctional ED” territory.

Within this notion of women athletes not being built for sport, journalists also reinforced the idea that women athletes “struggle” (journalist Maggie Astor, *The New York Times*, United States, 2022) or “suffer” (journalist Jonathan Humphries, *Liverpool Echo*, London, 2021) with the ED, consequently framing women athletes with an ED as too psychologically weak for sport. In contrast, articles about men athletes heavily reinforced the idea that men “battle” the ED (journalist Sam Cook, *Wales Online*, United Kingdom, 2022). Interestingly, when men athletes described their experiences in their own words, they described themselves as having “suffered” with an ED. Journalists’ use of words and terms associated with strength, power, and aggression to describe the man athlete ED experience shows how the performance narrative and emphasis on body self-regulation in sport is constructed within discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Busanich et al., 2016). These discourses and gender ideologies are perpetuated by social agents within the sport context (e.g., coaches, teammates), but also through media portrayals of toxic masculinity and patriarchal power in sport. Similar to journalists’ use of the term “battle” the ED

in the present study, when reporting on head trauma in the National Football League, journalists often upheld the masculine warrior narrative of the emotionally and physically impermeable (male) athlete (Anderson & Kian, 2012). Our findings about gendered language when describing the ED experience of women and men athletes may also reflect who do we (society) think should or is able to recover from EDs. That is, the ED experience and recovery seem to be portrayed as empowering for man athletes (“battle”), but disempowering (“struggle,” “suffer”) for women athletes. Journalists’ word choice parallel findings from Strobel’s (2022) examination of gender differences in ED recovery as portrayed in Tumblr posts and ED support group websites, where four different types of (gendered) recovery narratives were identified, each with their own thematic language: ecological (e.g., the body as an ecosystem, balanced, harmony); sickened (e.g., sick, ill, past, healing), abused (e.g., hurt, bully), and warrior (e.g., evil, attack, on guard). Similar to our findings, Strobel (2022) notes how only women used the first three narratives; men only used the warrior narrative. Thematic language within this warrior recovery narrative (i.e., words like attack, battle, fight, conquer, overcome) is consistent with dominant societal constructions of masculine characteristics, demonstrating the manifestation of toxic masculinity in such social spaces, perhaps due to the belief from these men that they are fighting a “feminized illness” that would challenge their masculinity (Strobel, 2022). Here, journalists were observed to uphold and perpetuate these notions of toxic masculinity, especially given that men athletes used words like “suffer” and “struggle” when describing their ED experience themselves.

Women athletes with EDs were also clearly portrayed as physically weak, with their experiences being described as “developing a debilitating eating disorder that took hold of her mind and body” (journalists Grant Robertson and Rachel Brady, *The Globe and Mail*, Canada,

2021) or having “spiralled into a near-crippling eating disorder” (journalist Jessica Holloran, *The Australian*, Australia, 2021). For example, notions of fragility and frailty arose when journalists reported the experience of woman tennis player Martina Trevisan and woman figure skater Yulia Lipnitskaya. An article in *Hindustan Times* (India, 2022) [unnamed journalist] described how “Trevisan's ever-decreasing appetite would barely be enough for her to stand upright for an extended period of time,” and another article in *The Independent* (United Kingdom, 2022) [unnamed journalist] portrayed Lipnitskaya as “a cautionary tale of chronic anorexia when she retired because of her struggles with the disorder.” In these examples, journalists’ nuanced use of gendered language (re)produces specific physical and gendered stereotypes about athletes with EDs. Previous analyses examining media sport coverage and news portrayals of women’s exercise have shown similar media representations. These analyses also highlight how the media portrays women athletes according to stereotypes that associate femininity with weakness, dependency, emotion, and submissiveness (Koivula, 1999; McGannon & Spence, 2012), often drawing upon discourses of such as “exercise as beautification” (McGannon & Spence, 2012, p. 35), which frames the female body as inherently flawed and weak and in need of help and/or fixing in order to reach societal beauty ideals (i.e., the thin- and fit-ideals).

Interestingly, only articles about women athletes included statistics related to the high prevalence of EDs in women. For example, journalist Remi Williamson’s article in *Michigan Daily: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor* (United States, 2022) included how “over 25.5% of female collegiate athletes reported symptoms of maladaptive eating during their careers in 2009.” Having journalists include statistics that make EDs seem common in women athletes reinforces the notion that women are not built for sport, while subsequently playing into the stereotype that EDs don’t affect men athletes. MacLean and colleagues’ (2015) analysis of

newspaper media coverage of EDs in males supports our findings, where the authors found that many news articles reinforced how EDs are less common in males through terms or phrases such as “normally associated with girls,” “seen as a young woman’s illness,” and “mainly affects teenage girls and women aged 16 to 25.” MacLean et al. (2015, p. 4) argue that such terms or phrases act to subtly perpetuate the stereotype that EDs don’t affect males, portraying EDs as “gender anomalous” for males.

Subject Position 2: Successful Athletes Return to Sport

Journalists used celebratory language to create a positive and inspirational depiction of women athletes who returned to sport. In his article detailing woman athlete Olivia King’s ED experience, journalist Joe Medley from *The Anniston Star* (United States, 2022) wrote, “In all of that, there was victory for a teenager who rebuilt herself after anorexia, resumed playing soccer and kicked her way to a chance to play the sport in college.” In addition to the imagery of the victorious woman athlete, journalists would explicitly describe the recovered woman athlete as a “warrior” or “fighter” (journalist Erica Tempesta, *MailOnline*, United Kingdom, 2022) possessing “a ferocious determination to beat the odds” ([unnamed] journalist, *Sunday Independent*, 2022) – language that is typically reserved to describe men in sport. The literature on the return to sport following EDs or during ED recovery is scarce, which provides a limited understanding of athlete experiences navigating this return to sport. For example, are athletes who return to sport following EDs expected to simply go back to overconforming to the sport ethic, or are people more compassionate (and accepting of self-compassion) among athletes who have made a return after an ED? A case report of a male and female athlete’s sporting experiences during ED recovery shows that, with proper support from an experienced multidisciplinary treatment team, ED recovery, as well as attainment of athletic goals, can be

achieved (Quatromoni, 2017). Despite such insights, the absence of sport-specific support within ED treatment programs leads athletes to lack confidence in their ability to navigate the sport environment and be concerned about potential relapse (Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni, 2014; Plateau et al., 2017). However, no matter the cause of the ED (drawing on the discourse of *Who is to Blame for the ED?*), journalists inferred that it is the athlete's responsibility to have "figured things out enough to get [their sporting career] back on track" ([unnamed] journalist, *Sunday News*, New Zealand, 2022). O'Hara and Smith (2007) identified similar findings in their media analysis of ED reporting in American newspapers, where journalists often wrote phrases such as the individual having "snapped out of [the ED]" rather than providing insight into ED treatment and recovery. Such statements place the onus on the individual to recover from the ED, tying such mentalities to the medical model where the ED is viewed as an individual pathology.

For men athletes returning to sport following an ED, journalists did not adopt the celebratory language used to describe women athletes; rather, they used neutral language, almost as if the man athlete's return to sport was expected. Contrarily, despite describing women athletes who returned to sport as "warriors" or "fighters," some articles insinuated that women have less of an expectation to make it back to sport following an ED compared to men. In *The Press*, [unnamed] journalist described runner Hannah Miller's return to competition after the toughest part of her ED as "never [having] set the world on fire as a collegiate runner," but who "enjoyed the team environment and kept improving her PBs over all distances from 1000m to 10,000m." Throughout the article, the journalist adopted a tone that seemed to question Miller's sporting ability and ambition:

She's young to step up to the 42.195km distance (or 26.2 miles, as she thinks of it), but adamant it's a challenge she can master. That's ambitious, given Miller has run only one

marathon in her life (a 2hr 38min 30sec solo effort at a windy Woodlands event in Texas in March) and will have to shave nine minutes off that time (2:29:30) to make it to Oregon in July.

Prior to 1970, women's sport primarily involved recreational and informal play activities (Gregg & Gregg, 2017). In 1972, Title IX, which banned sex discrimination in federally funded education programs and expanded opportunities for girls' and women's participation in sport, was introduced in the United States. Since the implementation of Title IX, girl and women athlete participation in sport has increased; however, despite this increased participation, the physical abilities of women are still questioned, as seen in media coverage of women athletes that focus on their appearance and body rather than their athletic capabilities (Christensen & Deustch, 2015). Taken together, journalists appear to create a double standard for women athletes returning to sport following an ED, where they are expected to do so but have their athletic abilities questioned when they do.

Discourse 2: Reproducing or Resisting Stereotypes?

Journalists, to varying extents and accuracies, aimed to inform or educate readers about what EDs are, how they can manifest, and what ED recovery can look like and mean. Although some journalists provided accurate information detailing the complexity of EDs and challenged pre-existing stereotypes, most journalists simplified what living with an ED is like and reproduced ED stereotypes.

Reproducing Stereotypes

Many journalists failed to acknowledge the complexities of EDs by reducing them down to their basic behavioural component – eating. For example, in his article featured in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia, 2022), journalist Phil Lutton described swimmer Lani Pallister's ED

as simply having “stopped eating.” Many journalists also framed ED recovery as solely revolving around food and weight gain. Journalist Mark Nesbitt from the *Telegraph Herald* (United States, 2021) indicated that swimmer Beata Nelson was recovered from her ED once “Nelson’s weight rebounded along.” In line with our findings, O’Hara and Smith’s (2007, p. 47) analysis of ED reporting in American newspapers identified that newspapers often presented the cause of the ED in “shorthand discussions of causality,” where the ED was framed to have a straightforward and single environmental (e.g., “troubled childhood”) or psychological (e.g., “she stopped eating”) cause. Shepard and Seale’s (2010) examination of ED reporting in newspaper media also shows that journalists’ use of medical terminology increased over time, referring to EDs using the key words such as “slimming disease,” “eating disorders,” “caloric restrictor,” “health/y,” “body mass index,” and “cognitive behavioural therapy.” The focus on medical discourse informs ED treatment and often dictates ED recovery, most notably for anorexia nervosa which has traditionally focused on weight restoration (i.e., using weight restoration as a marker for ED recovery or being recovered; LaMarre & Rice, 2015). By using language and descriptions positioned within the medical model, where EDs are centred around eating and weight, journalists in the present study provided little to no insight into the psychosocial aspects of living with an ED.

Specifics of ED Symptoms or Behaviours. Journalists often provided details of physical symptoms when describing the development of the athlete’s ED. In *The Globe and Mail* (Canada, 2021), journalists Grant Robertson and Rachel Brady described the worsening of India Sherret’s ED when “her hair started thinning, she blacked out during training and she began to suffer heart palpitations.” Similarly, an article by journalist Mary Harris in *Kent Sussex and Courier* (United Kingdom, 2022) included a personal account from athlete Harry Gripper.

Gripper detailed the physical consequences of the disordered behaviours he was engaging in, stating how his “hair was falling out” and his skin and teeth “were like an old man’s.” Some journalists dove deeper into specific details of the athlete’s disordered behaviours, providing information that many ED researchers and practitioners would consider harmful, triggering, and unnecessary, such as numbers about calories and weight (Logrieco et al., 2021). For example, in *MailOnline* (United Kingdom, 2022), journalist Erica Tempesta included the following when describing figure skater Gracie Gold’s experience with an ED:

According to Gold, her troubles with food began when she weighed herself in front of a coach and was told 124lbs was a ‘big number.’ She had never counted calories before, but the comment led her to search for weight-loss tips online, where she came across a post from someone who wrote about consuming 200 to 400 calories per day. Leading up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, where she helped Team USA win the bronze, she went from eating about 2,000 calories a day to meals consisting of one tomato and multiple cups of coffee.

Some journalists also chose to include the athlete’s meal plan during and after the ED. In doing so, journalists limited the portrayal of EDs to restrictive eating only and, once again, reduced the complexity of EDs down to the single action of eating. For example, journalist Sophie Norris from *Gazette Live* (United Kingdom, 2021), included former gymnast (and now bodybuilder) Alix Small’s meal plan during versus after her ED:

Alix’s Menu BEFORE:

- Breakfast: one slice of toast sometimes hidden away to avoid eating
- Lunch: Nothing
- Dinner: One potato and some plain Quorn mince

Alix eventually went days without eating.

AFTER:

- Meal 1: two bagels, two eggs, two bacon medallions and butter
- Meal 2: A packet of jasmine rice with chicken and peanut butter
- Meal 3: oats with whey, peanut butter and 350g fruit
- Meal 4: Coco Pops with whey, crumpets and jam
- Meal 5: Rice with 5% fat mince
- Meal 6: Burger and chips OR oats, whey and dark chocolate

Harmful media messages that reinforce cultural (Western) beauty ideals (e.g., the thin-ideal) often pressure individuals within society to conform to idealized standards, which can lead to consumers' engagement in ED behaviours (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Furthermore, in ED recovery, keeping the focus on the body and food can be ineffective or even harmful, as this continues or reinforces the preoccupation with the body and food (Swan, 2021). In our findings, journalists only seemed to frame EDs as involving restrictive behaviors. Although the “slim to win” and performance narratives are pervasive in sport contexts and cultures (Busanich et al., 2016; McMahon & McGannon, 2019), we question whether journalists chose to not describe binges, thus being selective of ED diagnosis. Society seems to have created a “hierarchy” of EDs (Mortimer, 2019; Walsh & Malson, 2010), where the type of ED diagnosis comes with some (false) indication of moral character. Anorexia nervosa is typically associated with control, willpower, hard work, and perfectionism; contrarily, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder are often associated with laziness and a lack of self-control (Mortimer, 2019; Walsh & Malson, 2010). Our findings show that newspaper media upholds such ED hierarchies and reinforces these false indications of moral character. When applied to athletes and the sport context, these

notions of moral character translate into anorexia being perceived as an indication of discipline (therefore “good” athlete) and bulimic symptoms and bingeing as a marker of the lack of discipline (therefore “bad” athlete). Supporting the latter case is Papathomas and Lavalée’s (2010) exploration of athlete experiences with disordered eating in sport, which revealed that athletes felt tensions between the disordered self-identity (defined by the athlete’s bulimic symptoms) and athletic identity (defined by characteristics like being competitive and committed). Similarly, de Bruin (2017) articulates how bulimia might be perceived as a threat to athletes due to the fear of being accused of lacking discipline.

Of note, articles that opened with specifics of the ED, such as descriptions of disordered behaviours and numbers depicting weight, were more often articles about women athletes. For example, the title of an article written by journalist Tita Smith in *Daily Mail* (Australia, 2021) about a woman athlete read, “Netball star weighed herself SIX times a day while battling a crippling eating disorder sparked by a coach telling her to lose weight when she was just 15.” Contrarily, articles about men athletes often opened with the athlete’s sporting achievements or standing. Journalist Olivia Buxton’s article about man athlete Colin Jackson in *The Express* (United Kingdom, 2021) opened with a line describing Jackson’s sporting accomplishments: “In his 17-year career as one of Britain’s greatest athletes he has won numerous medals and performed at elite championships around the world.” Such strategies seem to convey that it was the journalists’ intention to “hook” readers in with an intriguing opening or title about the specific (oftentimes medical or physical) details of the woman athlete’s ED. This particular discursive strategy aligns with how ED coverage in American newspapers often places such content in the “entertainment” section of newspapers, showcasing how journalists may see EDs as a source of “titillation” or a soft topic that belongs on the gossip page along with celebrity

scandals (O'Hara & Smith, 2007). Portraying EDs in such a light also simplifies and sensationalizes EDs to appeal to the emotions of news consumers (Sheppard & Seale, 2010). Consequently, having EDs marketed as more of a matter of “entertainment” for women athletes reinforces the objectification of women athletes and belittles their sporting achievements, perpetuating the assumption that EDs are a women's issue (while simultaneously perpetuating the notion that men athletes cannot be affected by EDs).

Focus on Physical Appearance. When describing the ED experience of women athletes, journalists often emphasized the physical appearance of these athletes. For example, in *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia, 2022), journalist Phil Lutton described swimmer Lani Pallister as “a vision of youthful, athletic excellence. She is tall, with long legs, strong, fit and confident. It's difficult to believe she could have looked in the mirror and seen anything else...” When describing the women runners in her article, journalist Jenna Daly from the *Emory Wheel: Emory University* (United States, 2022) wrote how “It is concerning to see so many talented and beautiful athletes struggle with a mental issue that spirals beyond their control.” In a similar vein, in his article about woman Paralympian Kadeena Cox, journalist Charlie Bennett from *The Independent – Daily Edition* (United Kingdom, 2021) focused on Cox's physical appearance, detailing how “On the podium, Cox, her hair dyed red, white and blue to match the British flag...” These examples showcase how journalists hyper-fixate on the woman body as opposed to these athletes' sport performance or ability. Readers may in turn internalize the stereotype that EDs are a vanity and woman issue. The female athlete paradox is a phenomenon often experienced by women athletes, where the strong and muscular body conflicts with societal ideals of slenderness and attractiveness (Cosh et al., 2019). By putting the emphasis on women athletes' bodies and physical appearance (often reinforcing society's thin-ideal and ideals of

femininity), journalists' objectification of the female body plays a role in creating and increasing tensions between the conflicting body ideals experienced in the female athlete paradox (Christensen & Deustch, 2015; Daniels, 2009). Moreover, how the media depicts athletes with EDs might have even more of an impact on consumers since athletes are thought to represent the epitome of physical health and fitness. In fact, research has shown that "role models" or public figures (including famous athletes) can have important influences on health-related knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in the public (Brown et al., 2003).

Resisting Stereotypes

Although a larger proportion of articles tended to reproduce physical and gendered ED stereotypes, some journalists resisted these stereotypes. These journalists widened the scope of conversations surrounding EDs beyond medical discourse, such as journalist Maggie Astor in *The New York Times* (United States, 2022), whose article detailed gymnast Christy Henrich's experience with an ED. Astor explicitly stated the falsehood of an individual weakness causing Henrich's ED:

After Henrich's death, many in the news media seemed to blame her for succumbing to her disease. They attributed her eating disorder to the judge's comment alone or to a lack of common sense on her part: "Irrational Obsession Consumed Her Talent, Her Life," read a 1994 Associated Press headline. The Los Angeles Times said that she "gave in" to anorexia and that "no one could save Henrich" because she "could not save herself." The idea that Henrich could have lived if she had only been stronger, experts say, is unscientific and harmful.

Other journalists emphasized how EDs are often rooted as a control mechanism. In *MailOnline* (United Kingdom, 2021), journalist Chloe Morgan included a description of orthorexia from the

BEAT organization, the United Kingdom's leading charity supporting individuals with EDs. The description moves beyond descriptions of the behavioural or physical signs of EDs, highlighting how orthorexia "is used to cope with negative thoughts and feelings, or to feel in control."

Journalist John Walk also titled his article in *LNP* (United States, 2022), "'Food is what I chose to control': Penn Manor varsity swimmer shares struggle with eating disorder." Furthermore, some articles discussed the complexity of ED recovery. Journalist and former athlete Corinne Arel's article, featured in *Massachusetts Daily Collegian: University of Massachusetts – Amherst* (United States, 2022), described how recovery goes beyond notions of food and eating:

Recovery is possible, and that's coming from someone who didn't think it was, someone that didn't want to try at first. While it's essential and probably one of the hardest parts, there is so much more to recovery than just learning how to eat again and fueling your body. Recovery is about finding your true self and falling in love with life again.

As opposed to framing recovery as only being about weight restoration (as portrayed in *Reproducing Stereotypes*), journalists challenged this notion and provided greater insight into the lived experiences of ED recovery. Qualitative researchers have offered insight into people's experiences of recovery, showing how recovery is a complex, nonlinear, and individualized process (LaMarre & Rice, 2021). Interestingly, in the present study, such portrayals of the complexity of ED recovery were predominantly supported by journalists with personal experiences with EDs (like the journalist here who is a former athlete).

Finally, some journalists used their voice to debunk ED stereotypes using credible sources. For example, in the *Irish Daily Mail* (Ireland, 2021), journalist Lisa O'Donnell featured an excerpt from Ireland's National Clinical Lead for Eating Disorders, Dr. Michelle Clifford, in her article about a man athlete's experience with an ED. Dr. Clifford explained how EDs are

“one of the most gendered mental health disorders,” where “the stereotype of someone with an eating disorder being young and female is incorrect and damaging.” Dr. Clifford then challenged physical stereotypes associated with EDs, elaborating that ““85% of people with eating disorders are not underweight. People can be underweight, normal weight, overweight.”” Research shows that consumers of print media tend to trust (or deem credible) health information published, sponsored, or authored by physicians (Freeman & Spyridakis, 2004). When journalists incorporate insight and opinions from healthcare providers to resist ED stereotypes, it could help to reduce misinformation and the perpetuation of such stereotypes.

Subject Positions

In our analysis of this discourse, we felt more dominance arising from the reproduction of stereotypes than the resisting of stereotypes. As such, our identification of the three subject positions below, *Men are in Denial of Their ED*, *The (Hyper)Feminized Athlete*, and *ED Identity Versus Athletic Identity*, reflect how different identities are constructed from journalists’ reproduction of gendered ED stereotypes.

Subject Position 1: Men are in Denial of Their ED

When describing the ED experiences of men athletes, journalists portrayed these athletes as having been in denial of their disordered behaviours for a long time. Journalist Jen Hogan from *The Irish Times* (Ireland, 2022) covered the story of man athlete Cormac Ryan, a retired hurler who developed an ED as an athlete. In the article, Hogan included numerous quotes from Ryan himself, where the athlete expressed how he was “in complete denial” of his ED and “kept telling [himself] it can’t be an eating disorder, this doesn’t happen to lads, lads don’t get this problem.” According to Ryan, this denial “delayed me getting help probably for two or three years,” reinforcing how men tend to avoid seeking help for mental health issues. Similarly, an

article written by journalist Kirsty Blake Knox in the *Irish Independent* (Ireland, 2021) about Ryan also included quotes from Ryan himself, where he described how he “slipped into [his] eating disorder so unknowingly,” mistakenly believing that he was “on the road to a ‘healthy life’.” Previous inquiries into the man ED experience have also shown how male athletes often feel embarrassment and shame in experiencing what they perceived to be a “female illness,” and that these feelings are more likely to be heightened in overtly masculine sports or sport cultures (e.g., football; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). Such feelings of embarrassment and shame can result in secrecy and self-concealment, which hinders the development of strong social support networks for the athlete (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). Journalists’ decisions to include quotes from men athletes themselves and use such first-person accounts can also implicitly heighten the sense of isolation regarding the person talking (Bishop, 2001), consequently perpetuating notions of toxic masculinity in conversations about mental health. Aside from including direct personal quotes from men athletes describing how they were in denial of their ED, some journalists used more implicit discursive strategies to perpetuate the stereotype that EDs are less likely to affect men. For example, in *The Australian* (Australia, 2021), journalist Jessica Halloran wrote an article about the issue of EDs in elite swimming. Halloran listed the names of swimmers who have spoken out about their EDs, but only included the specific type of ED for the man athlete, subtly reinforcing the idea that it is not common for men to get EDs: “Several elite swimmers, male and female, have spoken about their eating issues in the sport. They include high-profile Olympians such as Daniel Kowalski (bulimia), Cate Campbell, Leisel Jones, Emily Seebohm and Libby Trickett.” In contrast, journalists portrayed women athletes as being self-aware of the ED, choosing to actively seek help from medical professionals. In the same article written by journalist Jessica Halloran, she described how after “another day of starving,” woman swimmer

Emily Seeböhm “decided she had enough” and “called up a dietitian and made an appointment.” Women athletes were also portrayed as needing more social support from friends, family, coaches, and medical professionals compared to man athletes. Social support from these various agents is integral in ED recovery in athletes (Arthur-Cameselle & Baltzell, 2012; Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni, 2014; Papathomas et al., 2015). In line with journalists’ portrayals, research shows that women with ED symptoms are more likely than men to perceive the need (or be perceived to need) to seek ED treatment (Gallagher et al., 2021). For instance, within sport contexts, Quatromoni’s (2017) case study of two athletes (one female, one male) described two different treatment trajectories; the female athlete was referred to a psychologist and nutritionist by her coach, and was not allowed to compete until weight restoration was achieved. Conversely, the male athlete was never deemed medically ineligible to train or compete, but in fact pressured by his coach to lose weight while he was in treatment. Similar to the negative connotations associated with ambition and drive in the subject position *The Cautionary Tale of Women in Sport*, here, the initiative women athletes enact when taking charge in help-seeking may also be perceived as a weakness. Thus, journalists’ portrayal of this help-seeking tendency in women athletes could be reinforcing the assumptions that women are not built for sport.

Journalists used gendered language when reporting athletes’ experiences disclosing their ED to the public, framing women athletes as more emotional and vulnerable compared to men athletes. An article in *Sunday News* (New Zealand, 2022) [unnamed journalist] described how woman athlete Keeley O’Hagan shared her story with an ED, choosing to “open the book on a raw chapter of her life” and “baring her soul” in a story that is “raw, unfiltered and dripping with emotion.” In contrast, journalist Sam Cook from *Wales Online* (United Kingdom, 2022) simply stated how man cricketer Freddie Flintoff “briefly talked about his mental health.” This

dichotomy and gendering of narratives surrounding the body highlights how society associates masculinity with the mind, rationality, and order, and femininity with the body, emotion, and chaos (Gergen, 2001). In addition to being portrayed as denying the ED, men athletes were also framed as downplaying the ED when sharing their experience with others. In an article by journalist Aaron Greenaway in *The Western Mail* (United Kingdom, 2021), Tom Daley shared how he perceived himself to just be suffering from “a mild form of eating disorder,” despite acknowledging that he “has very much struggled with body image, and eating, and feeling guilty and shameful of the things that I eat.” As another means to downplay the ED, a man athlete featured in *The Times* (London, 2022) used self-deprecating humour to describe his experience living with bulimia. He describes how “Having a laugh about [purging] somehow made it acceptable,” adding that, “I sound like a walrus when I’m throwing up. Honestly, you could stick me on the top of a cliff, make me eat a cream cake and use me as a foghorn.” To support these gendered findings, Gergen (2001) articulates that narratives and meanings surrounding the body often encapsulate aspects of embodiment for women, whereas, for men, such narratives and meanings tend to disregard their physical beings save for remarks about their physical abilities in sporting or athletic contexts. Such constructions tie to hegemonic masculinity discourses in sport that view overconforming to the sport ethic as necessary for athletic success and masculinity preservation (Atkinson, 2011; Busanich et al., 2012; 2014; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). Given the feminization of EDs, male/men athletes may downplay their ED experiences for “masculine capital” and find their experiences hard to discuss or express (Busanich et al., 2012; 2014; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006). Maclean et al.’s (2015) analysis of newspaper representations of EDs in males reveal similar media portrayals to those from journalists in our study. The authors argue that, by portraying how shameful and difficult it is for males to seek

help for EDs, often having to “own up” to and “confess” the ED, males who seek help for EDs consequently risk being perceived as doing wrong or deviating from masculine norms.

Subject Position 2: The (Hyper)Feminized Athlete

Many journalists writing about women athletes' ED experiences included details unrelated to the athlete's sporting abilities, highlighting instead the athlete's femininity. Examples of such details include journalist Jessica Halloran's article in *The Australian* (Australia, 2022) about Emily Seeböhm, where Halloran framed the athlete as having been “in a fragile state” after “Having just come out of a tough relationship break-up at the end of 2018,” which Halloran implied to have caused the development of the athlete's ED. Journalists also chose to provide details about the woman athlete's children rather than focusing on the athlete's experience with an ED. Journalist Donald McRae's article in *The Guardian* (London, 2022), which covered the journey of British Paralympian Sarah Storey, overshadowed Storey's sporting successes with ideas of motherhood: “Now, with [Storey's husband] and her two children eager for her to compete in Paris in 2024, Storey is thinking of improving rather than retiring.” Moreover, in journalist Remi Williamson's article about nutrition in women's running, Williamson described three women runners who use their Instagram accounts to show “cookies, cinnamon rolls and banana bread” and how “you can still eat dessert and break record times.” Through nuanced gendered language, journalists associated women athletes with traditional female roles, such as marriage, children, and cooking. Connell (1987) argues that it is often assumed that there is just one set of traits that characterizes women and thus defines femininity (i.e., a unitary model of sexual character), which has historically related women with motherhood. Journalists drew upon this assumption when describing women athletes, which may consequently detract from women athletes' sporting achievements. Such portrayals therefore

actively reproduce societal power dynamics and patriarchal ideologies, where male power is reinforced through sport and the belief that women belong to more traditional feminine roles, not sport, is upheld (Busanich & McGannon, 2010).

This feminization was not only present within articles about women; articles about men athletes with EDs also tended to feminize them. In *Metro* (United Kingdom, 2021) [unnamed journalist], following the statement of how Colin Jackson, the “54-year-old former hurdler, who won an Olympic silver medal, twice became world champion and held the world record for more than a decade,” was a description of how Jackson “follows a regime of moisturising and long walks to ensure he never looks his age.” Similarly, many articles about diver Tom Daley also feminized him, highlighting how he is a “master knitter, having worked his magic on an Olympic-themed cardigan” ([unnamed] journalist, *Indian Express*, India, 2021), and “learning to sew” ([unnamed] journalist, *The Times*, London, 2021), describing how “Daley could quite easily be mistaken for a boy-band member. A shot of him knitting backstage at the recent Met Gala cemented his position as the Harry Styles of sport” ([unnamed] journalist, *The Times*, London, 2021). Articles about Daley also emphasized how he is “a champion for LGBTQ+ rights” and “married to screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, with whom he has a three-year-old son” ([unnamed] journalist, *Indian Express*, India, 2021). Journalists’ feminization of both women and men athletes reinforces the stereotypes that EDs are a feminine issue. Similar findings were identified in MacLean et al.’s (2015) analysis of newspaper articles discussing EDs in males, where articles also undermined the notion that EDs affect males by implying that only certain types of males (notably with regards to sexual orientation) are at risk. For instance, articles about heterosexual male athletes with EDs seemed to question these athletes’ performance of masculinity, as these male athletes are “expected” to fit into cultural masculine

archetypes (MacLean et al., 2015). Connell's (1987) gender and power theory describes how different socially constructed types of masculinities exist and that, at the societal level, there is an ordering of versions of femininity and masculinity. "Hegemonic masculinity" is constructed relative to subordinated masculinities as well as relative to women, and a critical feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, while subordinated masculinity is homosexual (Connell, 1987). Connell (1987) also argues that no "hegemonic" version of femininity exists, given that all types of femininity are constructed within the subordination of women to men; however, society clearly defines these types of femininity (e.g., marriage and childcare), which Connell terms "emphasized femininity." Based on our findings, we see that journalists draw upon discourses that uphold the subordination of women athletes and the marginalization of homosexual and effeminate men athletes.

Subject Position 3: ED Identity Versus Athletic Identity

This subject position involves the athlete's negotiation with their ED identity versus athlete identity. Journalists portrayed ED recovery as black and white, where the athlete is either recovered *and* returns to sport *or* the athlete is unrecovered *and* is no longer involved in sport. O'Hara and Smith's (2007) analysis of ED coverage in American newspaper media also found that newspapers more often depicted ED recovery in binary terms (i.e., an individual either has an ED or does not, so either recovered or not recovered). ED recovery experiences, however, are nonlinear and different for everyone (LaMarre & Rice, 2021). Research has demonstrated that ED recovery may coincide with sport cessation for some athletes (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2006), whereas in other cases athletes return to sport and are able to achieve sporting success again (Arthur-Casemell & Quatromoni, 2014; Quatromoni, 2017).

The Recovered Athlete. Here, journalists framed the recovered athlete as one who returns to sport and is in a better place now, both physically and psychologically. The athlete has overcome the ED, and, similar to the subject position *Successful Athletes Return to Sport*, journalists drew upon celebratory and inspirational language to convey the message that ED recovery is possible. However, journalists created gendered differences in what ED recovery can look like. Women athletes were portrayed as having separated their athlete identity from their personal identity, which was helpful in ED recovery. For instance, in *Sunday News* (New Zealand, 2022), [unnamed] journalist described that identity was at “the crux of what has often made things so tough” during woman athlete Keeley O’Hagan’s experience with an ED.

O’Hagan is now recovered and has returned to her sport of high jumping, personally stating,

I no longer see myself as Keeley the athlete. I am Keeley a person who does athletics.

When I was younger my whole world felt like it was based on my success as an athlete. If you've got this idea you can't be separate from being an athlete, you'll have an identity crisis at some stage because we can't continue with sport forever. It's important people understand success or otherwise in one area doesn't change who you are as a person.

Similarly, in journalist Rob Longley’s article about woman swimmer Taylor Ruck, featured in *Toronto Sun* (Canada, 2021), Longley included a quote from Ruck herself, where she attributes a large part of her ED recovery and return to sport to “Finding myself and how that relates to who I am as a person and not just a swimmer.” Evidence suggests that it is helpful for athletes to create an identity outside of athletics during ED recovery (Arthur-Camesell & Quatromoni, 2014; Arthur-Camesell & Curcio, 2018), as tying identity too tightly to the athletic one hinders the social development of the athlete (Quatromoni, 2017). During or following ED recovery, women were also portrayed as focusing more on what their body can *do* as opposed to what it

looks like. Journalist Nicole Huebner from *The Flyer News: University of Dayton* (United States, 2021) described how woman athlete Laura Bender's involvement in boxing and weightlifting following an ED allowed her to "shift her focus to being stronger and feel better about herself." Bender herself added that boxing helped her "feel stronger instead of focusing on being skinnier." Supporting such portrayals is Hockin-Boyers and Warin's (2021) exploration of the role of weightlifting in women's ED recovery experiences, which found that norms within weightlifting environments toward encouraging eating and weight gain can help the recovery process. Weightlifting seems to facilitate a transition in exercise motivation from performing exercise for appearance or aesthetic goals (e.g., attaining thinness) to strength and muscle building, allowing women athletes to access a sense of agency, power, and independence (Hockin-Boyers & Warin, 2021; McGannon & Spence, 2012). Busanich and McGannon (2010) articulate that female athletes are able to more easily resist dominant discourses of femininity when they are provided with multiple and a variety of discourses related to femininity. As such, sporting experiences that provide access to such discourses (e.g., more aggressive sports that challenge femininity, women pushing their bodies to the limit in weight rooms) can empower female athletes and support psychological wellbeing (Busanich & McGannon, 2010). However, despite this look into ED recovery and the recovered athlete, journalists provided no insight into any struggles the athletes might still have, reinforcing the black and white portrayal of ED recovery.

On the other hand, men who appear to no longer struggle with an ED still seemed to be in denial of their disordered behaviours. For example, in *The Times* (London, 2021), [unnamed] journalist described how diver Tom Daley "weighs himself every morning and still carries portable scales with him whenever he travels." The journalist offered no insight into any

struggles Daley might be experiencing, ending the article instead with Daley's possible appearance in the Paris 2024 Olympics. ED behaviours therefore appear to be normalized in men athletes, which may lead readers to internalize that this is what ED recovery looks like and means for men. Contrary to how women athletes' participation in more traditionally "masculine" sports is seen as resisting dominant discourses about femininity, we identify how men athletes may be limited in alternative discourses to draw upon when making sense of their relationship with food, the body, and sport. Because the performance narrative and body self-regulation are seen as athletic success, often tied to athletic identity, and are constructed within hegemonic masculinity discourses, male athletes are often socialized to engage in such behaviours to avoid having their masculinity threatened (Busanich et al., 2016). In Gallagher and colleagues' (2021) examination of gender bias in ED risk assessment in athletes, men athletes were more likely than women athletes to report weight loss attempts to meet their sport's weight or image requirements. Because hegemonic masculinity discourses are often woven into the performance narrative and athletic success (and concerns about appearance are often associated with femininity), men may be more likely to use athletics or sport to justify body self-regulation and weight loss attempts (Gallagher et al., 2021). We see here that journalists also succumb to such notions and normalize disordered behaviours in men athletes in particular, portraying these athletes as recovered despite the persistence of such behaviours.

The Unrecovered Athlete. Some journalists portrayed the unrecovered athlete as one still struggling with the ED and consequently having to cease their involvement in sport. By framing the challenges of living with an ED on a less hopeful note, these journalists gave the impression that ED recovery is not possible, and that sporting achievements once the athlete restores weight, health, and well-being are not possible either, despite research indicating

otherwise (Quatromoni, 2017). In *The New York Times* (United States, 2022), journalist Maggie Astor included the story of Christy Henrich in an article covering the topic of athlete maltreatment in gymnastics. Astor described how Henrich “developed anorexia and bulimia,” “left the sport in 1991 and died in 1994, at 22, from multiple organ failure caused by starvation.” Similarly, in journalist Jenna Daly’s article about EDs in women runners, featured in *Emory Wheel: Emory University* (United States, 2022), Daly detailed the story of Mary Wazeter, a former distance runner. Daly emphasized how Wazeter’s “promising career” came to an end after Wazeter “gave in to ‘an obsessive desire to control her weight, believing that being thin would help her run faster’ and attempted to end her life by jumping off of a bridge.” She went further to add how Wazeter’s “suicide attempt was fueled by years of comments made about her appearance and an anxiety of wanting to impress coaches,” and although Wazeter survived the jump, “she was permanently disabled and can no longer run.”

Journalists portrayed unrecovered athletes as having the ED identity tied too tightly to the athletic identity. In *Doncaster Free Press* (United Kingdom, 2021), journalist Darren Burke emphasized how Lisa Fouweather, a woman runner, did not believe her life was “worth or even capable of living” if she could not run. Burke added that Fouweather “has been in recovery for nearly three years since but still has never had a menstrual cycle, and has to be careful not to exert herself due to her low bone density,” which inserts notions of female fragility to this subject position of the unrecovered athlete. Similarly, a woman athlete described how, after having quit swimming due to an ED, the effects of her ED “still remained and followed me and they are still things I struggle with to this day” (Journalist Jessica Halloran, *The Australian*, Australia, 2021). Journalists’ accounts of the experiences of Henrich and Wazeter utilized lenses of pathology and medicine that seem to blame the athlete for not being recovered or choosing ED

recovery. Such accounts neglect the fact that athletes are often pressured into overconforming to the sport ethic and constructing an identity that revolves around sport performance and achievement (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; McGannon & McMahon, 2019). Journalists' descriptions of the enduring ED also beg to question if ED recovery is lifelong. McMahon and colleagues' (2012) exploration of the exposure and effects of Australian swimming culture reveals how body surveillance and regulatory practices during their time in sport (e.g., daily weigh-ins by team coaches and managers) had lasting effects on the athletes' sense of self and identity, including continued engagement in disordered thoughts and behaviours regarding food 10 to 30 years following their retirement from sport. However, research shows that it is possible for athletes to return to sport after an ED with the proper support (Quatromoni, 2017). There exist media guidelines on the reporting of EDs, one of which is to portray that making a full recovery from EDs is possible (Beat, n.d.; Everymind, 2021; National Eating Disorder Association, 2022). Research supports this, with studies showing that portraying or conveying the message that ED recovery is not possible is harmful and can hinder ED recovery (Arthur & Baltzell, 2012; Wasil et al., 2019).

In one specific case, journalist John Walk from *LNP* (United States, 2022) described the ED experience of a woman swimmer who had to take a season off swimming to “focus on her health.” Walk wrote that the athlete is still working at “keeping her eating disorder at bay,” and emphasized how the athlete has “opted to forego swimming when she gets to the University of South Carolina in the fall to pursue a bachelor’s degree in finance.” Within this portrayal of an unrecovered athlete, the journalist’s choice to focus on the athlete’s education and career may be perceived as diluting the athlete’s sporting accomplishments and aspirations. It is interesting to note how journalists’ portrayal of the unrecovered athlete only consisted of women athletes,

indicating that gendered ED stereotypes likely influence societal perceptions of which athletes possess the ability to return to sport. Such portrayals parallel Papathomas and Lavalley's (2014) narrative inquiry into a female athlete's ED experience, where the authors show how the athlete turned to different means and paths (i.e., academia and sport) to (re)align herself with cultural aspects of success and achievement when a certain path didn't work out. This "quest for narrative realignment" (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014, p. 692) comes through in journalists' portrayals of the unrecovered (woman) athlete, where when women athletes' sport performance is renounced, they often turned to an alternative academic or career path to realign themselves with cultural expectations and success and achievement. However, readers may take on the assumption that women cannot (or are not meant to) achieve success in sport, and thus must resort to find other ways of meeting societal expectations of success.

Conclusion and Summary

This study sought to explore two research questions: (1) What content and types of discourses are being portrayed in newspaper media surrounding athlete experiences with EDs, and how does this construct athlete identities (i.e., subject positions constructed within the discourse)?, and (2) What are the implications (e.g., psychological, cultural) of such discourses and subject positions on athletes with EDs and/or sport culture? Findings from our critical discourse analysis show that journalists' reporting of EDs among athletes drew upon a discourse of who to blame for the ED and a discourse of resisting or reproducing stereotypes. In the former discourse, the attribution of blame was largely the result of journalists either situating their article within the medical model, insinuating that athletes themselves were responsible for the ED, or the Public Health Model, which attributes blame to broader social forces within the sport system (McVey et al., 2012). We identified gendered subject positions within this discourse,

framing the ED as (dys)functional (Papathomas, 2018) depending on the athlete's gender, which ultimately portrayed women athletes as unfit for sport even when they make a return to sport following the ED. In the latter discourse, some journalists reproduced ED stereotypes by drawing upon medical discourses that focused on physical ED symptoms and behaviours. Other journalists resisted such stereotypes by focusing on the biopsychosocial nature of EDs. Gendered subject positions within the second discourse reinforced the paradox of the female/woman athlete body, where journalists' perpetuation of dominant discourses of femininity framed sport as an empowering yet simultaneously disempowering site for women athletes. Journalists also framed EDs as "gender anomalous" in men (MacLean et al., 2015) and upheld aspects of hegemonic masculinity by feminizing men athletes with EDs, which might influence who consumers perceive can (and should) recover from EDs. Overall, journalists drew upon mutually reinforcing gendered and physical stereotypes about both EDs and athletes in sport and reinforced gendered cultural expectations through discourse.

Significance

Media portrayals of EDs contribute to how EDs are socially and culturally represented (MacLean et al., 2015). In the case of newspaper media representations of EDs among athletes, representations influenced by gendered and physical stereotypes hold the power to feed into the assumptions and perceptions that people draw upon when understanding this issue in sport. For example, athletes may draw upon these socially and culturally constructed representations to make sense of their symptoms and experiences, while policymakers, coaches, and practitioners may draw upon these representations to decide upon (or not decide upon) appropriate actions or treatments. Although the increase in newspaper reporting of EDs in athletes may serve to increase awareness on the topic, how journalists frame the experiences of athletes with EDs can

ultimately impact the experiences, help-seeking, and ED recovery of athletes (MacLean et al., 2015). Thus, findings from this study hold several practical implications.

Firstly, the use of CDA can contribute toward media literacy by providing an understanding of how stereotypes about EDs are (re)produced through language in the media (McGannon & Spence, 2012). However, while our research was effective at deconstructing journalists' discursive strategies, this deconstruction serves as only one of the preliminary steps in the process towards media literacy. Nevertheless, our deconstruction and critical analysis of the discourses used to portray athlete experiences with EDs lends to our second practical implication, where we provide recommendations for media reporting guidelines on the topic of EDs, both broadly and in athletes in particular. Currently, there exist some guidelines regarding the reporting of EDs in the media (e.g., Beat, n.d.; Everymind, 2021; National Eating Disorder Association, 2022). These guidelines include considerations such as avoiding (1) the inclusion of specific weight, calories, or measurements, (2) detailed accounts of ED behaviours, (3) implying that EDs are lifestyle choices (i.e., blaming the individual), and including how (1) EDs do not always have physical symptoms, (2) it is possible to make a full recovery, (3) EDs hold both physical *and* psychosocial impacts (Beat, n.d.; Everymind, 2021; National Eating Disorder Association, 2022). However, based on the gendered stereotypes we identified in our findings, we provide a few additional recommendations. First, we encourage journalists to use more neutral language when describing athlete experiences with EDs (e.g., replacing “she suffered with an ED” and “he battled an ED” with “[pronouns] experienced an ED”). Second, we suggest that journalists avoid conflating or using language to praise the disordered behaviours of athletes, as this contributes to the normalization of EDs in sport. Overall, however, we observed many journalists use harmful discursive strategies that stray from the current media guidelines

mentioned above. Thus, we urge news outlets to put in place stricter publishing criteria, where journalists are required to comply with media guidelines to avoid perpetuating stereotypical notions about EDs in sport.

Limitations and Future Directions

The newspaper articles included in the present study originated primarily from English-speaking Westernized countries, such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Our examination of the social construction of discourse was therefore limited to a Western cultural lens, through which we acknowledge only certain races and ethnicities are represented. When examining social events, topics, and agents in the media, reporting bias may also occur, where consumers are only exposed to the experiences of athletes that journalists choose to write about (e.g., elite athletes who are already often exposed to media attention, women athletes with EDs since EDs are stereotypically thought to only affect women). Additionally, the methodology, methods, and results of this study reflect our (the authors') interpretations of the content within the articles. As such, we did not capture audience reception and perception of the implications (e.g., psychological, cultural) of the discourses and subject positions within this study.

Further research should examine the sociocultural constructions of discourses surrounding athletes with EDs beyond Western lenses (e.g., in Asian cultures) and explore how sport cultures and meanings surrounding the body, food, and exercise are formed in different cultural contexts. Future studies should also consider examining consumer reception and perception of newspaper articles in order to obtain more direct insight into how journalists' discursive strategies can shape the thoughts, assumptions, and opinions of the public. For instance, we observed a gendered finding within the discourse *Reproducing or Resisting*

Stereotypes, where articles about women athletes tended to open with a “hook” describing women athletes’ disordered behaviours and symptoms. Although beyond the scope and purpose of this study, does this helplessness or victim portrayal ignite public moral indignation to a greater extent, and thus is more likely to instigate public action, making it a better vehicle for public education? Such questions represent a fine line journalists must tread to avoid the sensationalizing and marketing of EDs, as this can affect how consumers perceive the importance or seriousness of EDs in sport. Moreover, in addition to examination of textual data, we believe that a visual analysis of the images within newspaper articles would provide additional insight into the construction of meanings surrounding how athletes with EDs are socially perceived, allowing for the illustration of a larger cultural picture of the sociocultural landscape. Finally, critical analyses of sport media coverage of athletes with EDs via other social mediums (e.g., television, sports broadcasting, and sport magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*) would further our understanding of what dominant discourses are drawn upon within media discussions concerning EDs in sport.

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