



Mother runners in the blogosphere: A discursive psychological analysis of online recreational athlete identities



Kerry R. McGannon^{a, *}, Jenny McMahon^b, Christine A. Gonsalves^a

^a Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada

^b University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Qualitative research on physically active mothers has shown that recreational sport may allow women to resist good mother ideals that often constrain exercise. The purpose of this study was to extend this understanding in a socio-cultural context by examining how recreational athlete mother identities were constructed within one form of new media - blogging.

Design: A qualitative approach grounded in discursive psychology was used to theorize athlete mother identities as subject positions constructed within particular discourses circulated within a blog.

Method: Critical discourse analysis of 30 stories and 177 reader comments from the North American online running community *Another Mother Runner*, was conducted. Visual data analysis of 102 images accompanying stories also contextualized the textual meanings of discourses and subject positions.

Results: Two primary discourses were identified: *discourse of transformation and empowerment* and a *discourse of disruption and resolution*. Subject positions constructed within these two intersecting discourses were *role mother/advocate* and *resilient mother runner*.

Conclusions: This study extends discursive psychology literature in sport and exercise psychology as well as media work on athlete mother identities within sport psychology into the realm of the internet and identity construction.

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Physical activity participation has been shown to decrease for mothers due to good mother ideals and gender ideologies (i.e., expected behaviours based on cultural values and norms) that hold women primarily responsible for care giving at the expense of prioritizing exercise (Hamilton & White, 2010; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005). Despite physical activity decreasing for mothers, a small body of qualitative research on physically active mothers has shown that recreational sport may allow women to resist good mother ideals and gender ideologies that constrain exercise. In this regard, recreational sport pursuits such as snowboarding (Spowart, Hughson, & Shaw, 2008), surfing (Spowart, Burrows, & Shaw, 2010), distance running (Bond & Batey, 2005) and swimming (Evans & Allen-Collinson, 2016) can serve as outlets of self-identity renegotiation for mothers. In turn, the cultural meanings that suggest women place motherhood and family needs above their own physical activity participation desires and

goals, are reconfigured so that physical activity (i.e., sport) is included. In the case of recreational sport research findings, some women viewed sport as a time out from family responsibilities, allowing self-identity expansion into athletics. Support from partners and family was crucial for realizing recreational sport pursuits, which are tied to well-being and happiness and to add identity dimensionality (i.e., women are not defined only as mothers, but also as athletes, with sport intertwined with motherhood) (Bond & Batey, 2005; Spowart et al., 2008, 2010). This research has also shown that women are aware of good mother ideals and want to live up to them. In these cases, some women have difficulty negotiating sport time and an athletic identity in combination with motherhood, due to guilt associated with a good mother identity (Bond & Batey, 2005; Evans & Allen-Collinson, 2016).

Qualitative research on elite athlete mothers echoes the complexity of cultural narratives concerning motherhood and sport. Elite athlete mothers negotiate sport pursuits successfully in some case by viewing being a mother identity as adding life perspective after falling short of performance goals (Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012). Other elite athletes may retain 'melded'

* Corresponding author. School of Human Kinetics, Laurentian University, Canada.

E-mail address: kmcgannon@laurentian.ca (K.R. McGannon).

athlete mother identities to demonstrate excellence in both sport and family realms (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Some athlete mothers may experience psychological distress due to internalizing good mother ideals and/or cultural expectations that mothers “do it all” perfectly (i.e., motherhood and athletics) (Appleby & Fisher, 2009). One line of inquiry useful to learn more about the socio-cultural context of motherhood and athletics is research exploring media representations of elite athlete mothers. The study of media representations is influenced by sport studies research, which has shown the media to be a source of cultural representation and circulation of meaning of athletes' identities (see Millington & Wilson, 2016) and how athletes view themselves as they navigate identity constructions and associated meanings within media narratives (McMahon, McGannon, & Zehntner, in press). Centralizing the study of media representations within sport psychology aligns with calls to expand research within sport psychology to advance understandings of self-identity as fluid and socially constructed within socio-cultural context (see McGannon & McMahon, 2016; McGannon & Smith, 2015).

This notion of self-identity as fluid and culturally constructed is grounded in social constructionism due to relying on a socially constructed view of meaning and practice which centralizes language, narrative and discourses in the construction of who we are (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith, Bundon, & Best, 2016). In turn self-identity is conceptualized and theorized as the product of individual, social and cultural narratives and discourses (e.g., media narratives), which interact to create particular meanings and associated behaviours related to identities (Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith et al., 2016). From a social constructionist perspective, self-identity is thus viewed as a discursive and narrative accomplishment, rather than reduced to mechanisms within the mind, as with mainstream sport psychology conceptions (see McGannon & Spence, 2010; Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016).

Central to making the link between self-identity, experiences and behaviour is the concept of a subject position (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Wetherell, 1998). People acquire a sense of self-identity and interpret the world from a particular perspective (i.e. subject position) by participating in language practices that allocate meanings to particular categories and images (e.g. good mother, female athlete, athlete mother). Identities are then ‘positioned’ in relation to particular storylines articulated around categories and images and people may have particular psychological experiences associated with that world view (Davies & Harré, 1990). Research in sport and exercise psychology exploring self-identity from this perspective is indicative that there are psychological (e.g., enjoyment, distress) and behavioural effects (e.g., exercise participation, withdrawal from exercise) linked to the subject positions people take up within particular discourses (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). The concept of a subject position thus shows the potential for change as people can resist how they are ‘positioned’ to experience the world and who they are differently if they have additional narrative and discursive resources at their disposal (Cosh et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016; Wetherell, 1998). When some discourses and social and institutional practices are more prevalent and dominant, expansion of narrative and discursive resources (and implicitly certain identities and behaviours) is more difficult (McGannon & Smith, 2015; McMahon et al., in press; Smith et al., 2016). In turn, some identities are subverted or marginalized, thus discursive practices and identity representations often found within sport media have ideological effects which reproduce unequal power relations (Cosh & Tully, 2014; Cosh et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2016).

Four studies in sport psychology grounded in social

constructionism on elite athlete mothers and their representations in the media further illustrate the value of studying media narratives. McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, and Schweinbenz (2012) focused on British marathon runner Paula Radcliffe's two pregnancies in the March 2008 and October 2010 issues of *Runner's World* magazine. Paula's mother and athlete identities were explored as socio-cultural creations shaped by narratives (i.e., the *Runners World* stories). Paula's identities were constructed within a *redemption narrative* which drew upon gender ideologies which position motherhood as women's true calling and road to happiness, with being an elite athlete positioned as not fulfilling enough. Within a *redemption narrative* two identities emerged within the stories: *athlete and mother as one* which reinforced athlete identity and performance accomplishments; or *primarily a mother; athlete as secondary* which downplayed athletic accomplishments in favour of good mother ideals. Cosh and Crabb (2012) explored news media representations of Australian water polo player, Keli Lane, who was convicted of murdering her baby in order to reach the 2000 Olympics. The media narratives that positioned Lane's identities as an ‘athlete’ and a ‘mother’ again relied upon good mother ideals and high performance sport values, forcing women to choose between motherhood and athletics. By drawing upon a high performance sport discourse, Lane's identity of ‘elite athlete’ was portrayed as singular within the media accounts, and the combination or ‘melded’ subject position of ‘athlete mother’ who manages both sport career and motherhood was not considered. Discourses such as these may continue to render motherhood and a sport career as incompatible or unmanageable for elite female athletes.

A third study by McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, and Busanich (2015) also explored news narratives of 10 elite athlete mothers representing Team USA in the 2012 Olympics within the context of narratives and identity meanings formed within them. It was found that athlete vs. mother identities were constructed within a narrative of *motherhood and athletics as a transformative journey*, which downplayed athletics. By constructing athlete and mother identities as incompatible, women were again portrayed as having to choose between athletics and motherhood by virtue of how their identities were positioned as primarily mothers. An athlete and mother as superwoman identity constructed within the *transformative journey* narrative also partly allowed women to resist and reconcile a conflicted identity, providing narrative resistance to these identity meanings. In this case, the meaning of ‘good mother’ was reconfigured to mean that athletic performance is enhanced by being a mother and vice versa, allowing athletics and motherhood to be positioned as compatible.

Finally, McGannon, McMahon, Schinke, and Gonsalves (in press) explored news media constructions of identities of tennis star Kim Clijsters in relation to her comeback as an athlete mother to win the 2009 US Open. A *fairy tale come true* narrative was identified as constructing comeback meanings linked to two identities: the super mum and the golden girl. These identities fed into a limited meaning of Clijsters' tennis comeback, downplaying athletic accomplishments in favour of normative ideals for female athletes (e.g., appearance, marriage, good motherhood). When a super mum identity was positioned as compatible with sport within the *fairy tale come true* narrative, possibilities for athlete mothers were expanded in terms of opening up enhanced physical and mental performance and identity dimensionality that was compatible with motherhood. This study again highlights the complexity of meanings tied to cultural narratives that may prioritize women's identities as mothers and wives over athletics, but also show possibilities for the co-existence of athletic identity, sport success and family for women.

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