

**University of Alberta**

How Elite Canadian Female Singles Figure Skaters Experience The  
Girlification of Elite Women's Figure Skating

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation

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Fall 2011

Edmonton, Alberta

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to explore how the elite female Canadian figure skaters experience the women's elite singles figure skating events as events in which the majority of participants are young girls and young women with girlish figures (Kestnbaum, 2003). Through a lens of critical feminism, I further interpreted the interviewees' experiences within the structural rules that might sustain the young ages and tiny body types of the participants. I used semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) with ten former elite women singles skaters who competed within the Edmonton region. In my research project, I located their experiences within the larger context of structural rules within figure skating, both written and unwritten, that may contribute to the majority of participants being young girls and young women with tiny bodies. I focused particularly on the impact of the age restrictions that are placed on competitive categories. In addition, I explored their beliefs about the ideal body type for elite women's figure skating and their experiences with their own bodies.

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## **Acknowledgements and Gratitude**

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Pirkko Markula, for her guidance, expertise, commitment and feedback throughout my entire Master's degree. I would like to thank Dr. James Denison at University of Alberta, and Dr. Douglas Brown at University of Calgary for serving on my committee. I offer my gratitude to The Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at The University of Alberta for providing me with the opportunity to conduct this research, and for their continuous support for the duration of my Master's degree. I must thank my fellow graduate students, Andrea Mohora, Melanie Muise, Meghan Kennedy, Julia Dutove, Lara Fenton, and Iva Docekalova, who were always available to sit through a practice presentation, read a draft, answer questions, act as a pilot interview, or just listen.

Outside of academia, I thank my parents, Charles and Audrey Story, who have always been there for me. I extend my thanks to the Diamond family, especially my aunt, Diane Diamond, and my cousin, Dr. Kelly-Anne Diamond. My deepest gratitude is offered to my former figure skating coach, Dr. Hellmut May, who also became a dear friend. Dr. May took me on as a mature figure skating student after my twelve-year absence from the sport. His decision to take me as his student speaks highly of his character, because at the time, it was not common for highly reputable coaches to have "older" skaters as students. I extend a special thanks to my friend and fitness coach Dr. Linda Blade. Linda was a huge encouragement in the later part of my figure skating career, and she had invaluable academic advice to offer me in my pursuit of my Master's degree.

I must express a special thank you to my friend, Dr. Eva Guggenbichler, who always has unconditional acceptance and support to offer me. A heart felt thank you to all of the participants in this research project. It would not have been possible without you. Finally, I would like to thank all of my family and friends who have been supportive.

## **Introduction**

In this thesis, I am interested in women's singles figure skating at the elite level in Canada. I was an elite competitive figure skater who trained within the Canadian figure skating system, and I feel that I have first hand experience with women's elite figure skating. As a skater myself, I always found my sport at the elite level being somehow more suitable for girls than for mature women. My definition of elite here refers to a female figure skater who competed in qualifying provincial competitions. In reality, based on my own experiences, a provincial level figure skater, who is not placing at nationals, is not really considered elite in the figure skating community. With this in mind, I never competed beyond the provincial level in the qualifying women's singles figure skating events. Moreover, when I was competing in elite singles figure skating ("elite" as defined within the context of this document) I was not familiar with feminist theory and how it might apply to women's figure skating. However, I most definitely can recall how I felt about my age and my gender within the competitive and training structure of women's figure skating.

Although this research project is not a personal narrative, I feel that my own story as an elite female figure skater has value. My journey as a figure skater began at the age of four in Fort McMurray, Alberta. As a result of my location in Canada, I did not have access to good technical coaches until I was older, after I left Fort McMurray. Needless to say, I was "behind" for my age in my technical knowledge and abilities when I finally gained access to the good technical coaches that elite skaters should have. Thereafter, I remember feeling too old and

too “womanly” when I was training and participating in elite women’s events, specifically at the novice level at the age of sixteen. Furthermore, with regards to how I felt when I was competing at the junior level, I cannot comment, because my own competitive journey came to an abrupt halt when I did not successfully learn the double axel jump prior to turning eighteen years of age. The double axel jump is a technical element, that as a skater, I was required to execute successfully in my junior competitive test prior to competing in the junior singles events. I was required to pass this test before I reached the age of eighteen, because I had to be eighteen years of age or younger to compete in the junior events.

I can also recall feeling that I was being treated unfairly, as a result of my gender, when I was advancing through the competitive system. I felt this way, because the men’s singles skaters often seemed to have an extra year (age-wise) to pass their competitive tests. Sadly, I do remember feeling hopeless, because I bought into my coaches’ beliefs that I was too old to learn the double axel jump, or as one of my coaches, who currently happens to be a famous and successful female coach within Canada, put it, I “was too old to get anywhere”.

Additionally, as a former elite female singles skater, I should address how I felt about my body. Initially, as I was advancing through the competitive categories, I felt very comfortable and confident about my body. Unfortunately, this all changed when I was approximately fifteen year of age, and I was competing in novice. To this day, I do remember the first time that one of my coaches suggested to me that I was heavier than I should ideally be. I recall



arguing with him, because I did not understand how he could possibly be implying that I was “fat”. It was shortly after this coach’s suggestion that I was too heavy that I began to monitor how much I ate. Furthermore, it was not the last time that a coach suggested that I needed to lose weight. It is important to note that between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, my weight fluctuated between 107 and 117 pounds, and I am approximately five feet and two and a half inches tall. Moreover, after I retired from competition, I pursued academics, and it was in academia that I was introduced to feminist theory. What I learned about feminist theory in academia had a profound effect on me so that I returned to competitive figure skating, and I eventually passed my junior competitive test. In all honesty, I would say that this research project began when I returned to elite women’s figure skating, as a mature, autonomous woman, who was no longer unquestionably consenting to the oppressive ideology of masculinity. As a result of my return, I successfully executed my double axel jump in my thirties, and I passed my junior competitive test at the age of thirty-nine. However, even though I was able to execute the double axel jump, because of the age restriction, I would never compete in the junior events.

In summary, as a result of my own experiences as an elite figure skater and my insights gained from academia, I realized that as an elite female singles figure skater, I had been oppressed by the ideology of masculinity. Consequently, I became interested in examining whether or not other skaters’ experiences were similar to my own. To do this, I have organized my thesis in the following manner.

Chapter one discusses findings from previous feminist research that provides insight into how the elite Canadian female singles skaters experience the competitive and training structure of the women's events. Additionally, this chapter includes definitions and descriptions of key concepts in feminist critical theory, such as the ideology of masculinity, hegemony, patriarchy, institutionalized sexism, social closure, statistical discrimination, and embodiment.

Chapter two discusses my chosen method of inquiry, which was qualitative interviewing. This chapter provides reasons for my choice of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. It further explains my sampling choice, the ethical procedures for my research, the data analysis, and the validation of my research project.

Chapter three provides the findings from this research project. I present my findings through a critical feminist analysis and direct quotes from the interviewees. I further compare the interviewees' experiences with the previous research on figure skating.

Finally, chapter four concludes this research project. It summarizes the major findings from this research project and discusses the implications of the findings. In addition, I discuss the limitations of this research project and offer recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER I: Literature Review

Feminist sports sociologists continually conduct research with the intention of gaining insight into how female athletes experience the patriarchal nature of sports. Initially, in terms of exploring a sport such as figure skating, it may seem that patriarchy is not applicable, because figure skating is often perceived as a feminized sport (Adams, 2010, Hines, 2006). However, the notion of it existing and functioning as a patriarchal sport may be understood when considering, throughout this project, leadership positions within figure skating's governing bodies. Because figure skating is an Olympic sport, and scholars like Hargreaves have referred to the Olympics as being patriarchal, because men have total control by occupying the majority of positions within the governing bodies (Hargreaves, 1994).

Specifically, my aim is to understand how elite Canadian women singles figure skaters experience the competitive structure of elite women's figure skating. In this document, I have chosen to use the terms girlish and womanly, as opposed to prepubescent and adult females, because I am examining the socio-cultural aspects of women's figure skating, rather than the physiological aspects of their development. Feminist researchers claim that at the top levels of elite women's figure skating, the majority of the participants consist of young girls and women with girl-like figures (Kestnbaum, 2003; Ryan, 1996). There are at least two relevant aspects to consider in terms of how the elite female figure skaters experience this feature of women's figure skating. The first one is the actual competitive and training structure(s), consisting of the written and unwritten rules.

The second one is the bodies of the female skaters. The bodies of the skater can be understood in terms of their actual body sizes or how they perceive their bodies (body image). It is important to note that their body types, in terms of their actual physical sizes and chronological ages, are most likely closely related, since under normal circumstances their bodies are likely to become more womanly as they age. Furthermore, feminist researchers often claim that age often intersects with gender (Birrell & McDonald, 2000). Since it is my aim to gain insight into how the women singles figure skaters experience the women's events as being for young girls and tiny women, this research project will be framed with a critical feminist perspective.

In order to have a better understanding of how women's figure skating compares to the other figure skating events, I will explain the differences between the events (excluding synchronized skating). Within the context of the World Championships and the Olympic Games, singles skating is traditionally and currently a complex figure skating event. This is because it consisted of compulsory figures, the short program, and the free style program until 1990 (Hines, 2006), and like the pairs events, it currently consists of a short program and a free style program. It can be argued that the pairs and singles events are more athletically demanding than the ice dance events, because they involve the athletic jumps (Kestnbaum, 2003), although ice dancing is also complex and athletic. Up until the end on the 2010 competitive season, ice dancing continued to include the compulsory dances, original dances, and the free dances in the qualifying competitions that could lead to World Championships and Olympic

Games. Regarding the singles events, the men's singles events are different from the women's singles events, the obvious reason being the difference in gender. In addition, the men's and women's singles events do have some structural differences. This project will explore the developmental structural age rules, and it will briefly investigate a few other structural rules. The structural age rules ensure that elite figure skaters compete within certain age limits in their given categories as they are advancing through the competitive ranks and competitive categories, such as juvenile, pre-novice, novice, and junior. Most of these categories, if not all of them, either have or traditionally have had age restrictions placed on them. Moreover, I have pointed out some major differences that exist between the figure skating events that are included in the Olympic Games in order to show that the events are very different from one another. Men's and women's singles figure skating is a completely different sport from the pairs and ice dance events, especially when it included the compulsory figures as part of the competition.

Although I have gained insights as a result of my own figure skating journey, it is necessary to explore, as well, academic literature on elite women's figure skating. As in any research project, it is essential to know what the literature has to say about the phenomena. In order to stay true to this academic research tradition, I read through previous academic sports research and literature in order to gain an understanding of elite women's figure skating from the perspective of academics. After reviewing the literature, there does not appear to be much previous research that specifically focuses on the experiences of elite

women's singles figure skating within Canada. I will use the limited literature that discusses the experiences of elite women's figure skaters. Specifically, I will use one ethnographical study that explores the experiences of elite American women figure skaters (Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003), and one ethnographical study that focuses on elite women's figure skating in Canada (McGarry, 2005). Interestingly, a significant amount of previous research on women's figure skating discusses how the majority of participation in these events consists of girls (Kestnbaum, 2003), but there is limited research on how women figure skaters experience this phenomenon.

Relevantly, there is no previous research on how figure skaters experience the age restrictions in the competitive categories. Therefore, I drew from previous feminist literature that aims to understand how women experience the structure of other sports. This included how they experience written and unwritten rules and codes of conduct that have both been described as barriers to the participation of women in sport. Although not specifically on elite women's figure skating, there is some previous feminist literature that explores how women athletes in general experience their bodies in sport, which will be useful in meeting the objectives of this project.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research project uses a critical feminist perspective to explore and understand how elite Canadian female singles figure skaters experience elite women's figure skating as a girl's event. I will begin by explaining how theoretical terminology and concepts may be applied when using a critical

feminist theoretical framework. I will consider several key concepts used in the field, including ideologies, the ideology of masculinity, hegemony, patriarchy, and power inequity. Additionally, some feminist sports scholars describe and explain structural concepts and realities such as institutionalized sexism (McGinnis, McQuilla & Chapple, 2005), and I will address this concept in this research paper. Importantly, some feminist scholars discuss sexism in terms of statistical discrimination and social closure (McGinnis, McQuilla & Chapple, 2005), which I will also discuss. Finally, I will discuss girlification, physicality and embodiment. To initiate this discussion, I will go through each concept in detail and address how it potentially relates to women's figure skating.

### **Ideologies and The Ideology of Masculinity**

Ideologies are systems of beliefs in which certain concepts appear just and beneficial for everyone, but actually benefit only a few dominant groups (Markula, 2009; Theberge & Birrell, 1994). The male dominance that has been described in sport in general is made possible through ideological constructions (Birrell, 1988; Markula, 2009; Vincent, 2004). The ideology of masculinity provides an example of how a belief system is used to benefit a dominant group, and the literature claims that there are ideological constructs within sport that serve the purpose of maintaining the power of the dominant group of white males by oppressing the females (Birrell 2004; Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Markula, 2009). Historically, the ideology of masculinity supported the complete structural exclusion of women from sport. This effective use of the ideology of masculinity constructed scientifically proven biological differences between males and

females. This resulted in socially constructed belief systems in which women were regarded as inferior to men (Dabbario, 1994; Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyj, 1986; Vertinsky, 1994). Males were usually described as being stronger and therefore superior to females, and the females' complex reproductive functions were used to suggest that women were too fragile and were not suitable for sports (Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyi, 1986; Vertinsky, 1994). Furthermore, the females' main role in male-dominated cultures was thought to be reproductive, thus justifying their complete exclusion from sports based on biology (Lenskyi, 1986).

It may be argued, of course, that a material analysis of biological differences no longer applies to women in sport. For instance, Hall (2002) clearly indicates that women are participating in sports. They are most definitely participating in figure skating. Even though there are still some events for women that are not included in the Olympic Games, some feminist scholars agree that the ideology of masculinity no longer excludes women from participating (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). However, some feminist scholars do agree that the ideology of masculinity may still exist and function to subtly oppress females in figure skating and sports, like the ideology of masculinity that "girlifies" female athletes in the media (Daddario, 1994; Kennedy, 2001; Markula, 2009, Vincent, 2004). Furthermore, even though women are participating in sport, they continue to be excluded from the governing bodies of sport (Hall, 1996). For instance, as mentioned earlier, Hargreaves (1994) says that men have total control over the women's events in the Olympic Games. The literature specifically on figure



skating suggests that women are excluded from leadership positions in figure skating (Moore, 1993; Bianchetti Garbato, 2004). Bianchetti Garbato (2004) explains that women were excluded from international leadership roles on the International Skating Union (ISU) for a period of 75 years, and she claims that she was kicked out of her ISU leadership position. With regards to leadership in figure skating within Canada, Moore (1993) explains that Billie Mitchell was the first woman to lead the Canadian figure skating governing body from 1976-1978, and a man held this position for 63 years prior to Mitchell. Not surprisingly, women are also excluded from leadership positions in the governing bodies in sport that influence figure skating, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (Hargreaves, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994). More recently, Jamieson (2000) states, “in elite women’s athletics, it is largely white middle-class men who make significant decisions within sport organizations” (p. 148).

This examination of the literature provides evidence supporting the notion that Olympic sports and figure skating are still male dominated, and that men have total control over the sport of figure skating. I want to understand how elite Canadian female figure skaters experiences are affected by the ideology of masculinity. I intend to determine how the ideology of masculinity influences the structural rules of women’s figure skating, which are made by figure skating’s governing bodies. I am especially interested in the structural rules concerning age, which may contribute to the high number of girls participating in the highest levels of the sport. It may be argued that the notion of the majority of participants in women’s events consisting of girls and tiny young women is merely an

academic concept, and it may be questionable as to whether or not this is an actual reality in the sport. With this in mind, exploring how the elite female singles experience the competitive structure might provide insight into whether or not the concept of the majority of participants in the women's events consisting of girls is just speculation, a structural reality, or just a technique that media uses to trivialize the female skaters.

### **Hegemony, Patriarchy and Power Inequity**

It is useful to explore the concept of hegemony when attempting to understand the women figure skater's experiences with girls being the majority of participants within the women's events. Hegemony is commonly defined as a social theory which aims to understand social situations in terms of a dominant group having power over an oppressed group of individuals through the consent of both groups. Vincent (2004) specifically suggests that the dominant group in sport has traditionally been "socially elite, White, Western, heterosexual, able-bodied males" (p. 437). Interestingly, the primary modality of agreement with the prevailing power relations in hegemony is unquestioning consent (Hargreaves, 2003). This means that members of the subordinated group may not actually realize that they are not on equal terms with the dominant group, and they may even be unaware of their acceptance of this inequality. Hegemony exists when the domination of an oppressed group is regarded as naturally the way it is supposed to be, and it is perceived as common sense for things to exist the way they do (Birrell, 1989; Hargreaves, 2003; Markula, 2009). This way of being that is perceived as being naturally the way that it is supposed to be is constructed and

maintained through ideologies.

As apparent from the previous paragraph, hegemony theory has been used to deal with issues of power inequality and the inequality that is a consequence of this power inequity in sport (Birrell, 1989; Hall, 1996; Hargreaves 1994; Jarvie & Maguire, 1994; Markula, 2009; Theberge & Birrell, 1994; Vincent, 2004).

However, some of these scholars, such as Theberge and Birrell (1994) claim that hegemony is not sufficient in addressing gender inequality. This is because they explain that hegemony does not adequately address power within leadership in sport, such as in the governing bodies. Therefore, a feminist approach, in which it is common to investigate the gender inequities of power in leadership in sport, is necessary.

Patriarchy is a concept that may be used to address male dominance over females. Many sports scholars have discussed patriarchy in sport (Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1990; Markula, 2009; Theberge & Birrell, 1994). For instance, Hargreaves (1994) stresses that the Olympics provides a context in which the display of extreme male domination over females may be played out.

Additionally, there are historical examples of the ideology of masculinity being used to oppress and exclude women from participating in Olympic sports. For example, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern day Olympics, maintained that “‘Women’s sport’ was against the ‘laws of nature’ and ‘the most unaesthetic sight human eyes could contemplate’” (Hargreaves, 1994, p.209).

Although it can be claimed that this perception of women and sport is outdated, it set the stage for the Olympic Games. Additionally, this type of thinking, although

not as extreme, may be why some women's events continue to be excluded from the Olympics. For instance, Hargreaves (1994) claims that in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics there were 168 events for men and 73 events for women. The fact that the oppression of females occurs within the context of the Olympic Games is significant to figure skating, since figure skating is an Olympic sport.

Specifically concerning patriarchy and figure skating, the history of the sport clearly demonstrates that it was patriarchal in its beginning, as women were originally excluded from participating (Adams, 2007; Hines, 2006). In addition, Hines (2006) explains that England is the birthplace of figure skating, and this fact is significant in understanding the patriarchal nature of figure skating. Hargreaves (1994) describes England's sporting past as being patriarchal. It is logical to speculate that the sport of figure skating is not an exception to England's patriarchal past.

However, it is currently common knowledge that female participation in figure skating is higher than the participation of males, which does not seem to conform to patriarchy. When one further investigates this "truth", it happens that a higher percentage of females participating is found only in the lower levels of elite figure skating (Hines, 2006). Furthermore, the women female figure skaters may experience oppression within the competitive structure of figure skating, even though their participation is higher at the lower levels. Importantly, as previously mentioned, the ideology of masculinity prevents women from attaining equal representation on the governing bodies, which equates with power inequity.

Pirinen (1997) and Vincent (2004) explain that under hegemony,

hierarchical relationships exist, and one way that they function in sport is by creating women's events that are separate from the men's. These hierarchical relationships clearly exist in the singles events in figure skating. Contrary to this, Adams (2010) claims that figure skating is a unique sport, as women were once allowed to compete in singles events against men. She uses the example of Madge Seyers winning the ISU World Championships in 1902. Although this historical event did occur (over one hundred years ago), Hines (2006) suggests that it happened only because there was no rule in place to prevent it. He adds that after she won the world silver medal in singles figure skating, the ISU formally separated women's singles events from the men's singles events, and since then, men and women have never competed against each other in the singles events (Hines, 2006). Also, men and women have never competed against each other at The Olympic Games (Hines, 2006). In addition, Adams (2010) admits that after Seyers won a world silver medal, the women's event was thereafter (for a short period of time) referred to as the ISU Championships, rather than the World Championships. This fact may help to demonstrate that it was not desirable for the women to be equal to the men in terms of significant competitions, such as the World Championships.

The previous paragraph demonstrates how structural changes and rules were put in place to prevent women from being able to compete on equal terms with men. With this in mind, some feminist sports scholars suggest that issues relating to gender often intersect with other social factors such as race, class, age, and nationality (Birrell & McDonald, 2000). This is significant to elite women's

figure skating, because of the age restrictions placed on the competitive categories (Skate Canada Rule Book). My aim is to understand how women experience the intersection of age and being female. In addition, age is most definitely associated with the idea that the women's events consist of girls and tiny young women.

Given that we recognize that the intersection of social factors such as age and gender within the competitive structure of elite women's figure skating may be oppressive to the women figure skaters, it is useful to explore research that investigates the structural oppression of women athletes. A study on women's golf by McGinnis, McQuilla and Chapple (2005) serves as an appropriate guide for my study. This study compares the women's oppression in the structure of golf to their oppression in the work force. Hence, concepts such as institutionalized sexism are explored in the article.

### **Institutionalized Sexism**

McGinnis, McQuill, and Chapple (2005) define institutionalized sexism as the discrimination that women experience in male dominated structures. They add that institutionalized sexism does not necessarily exist as formalized rules, but as more subtle forms of discrimination that women have experienced while playing, for example, golf (McGinnis, McQuill, & Chapple, 2005). Importantly, they explain that in male dominated structures, institutionalized sexism functions to exclude women from participating equally with men. When they apply this concept to golf, they suggest that the exclusion of women from participating in golf occurs as a result of the barriers that women experience. They state,

“physical barriers to women’s integration into traditionally male sports are disappearing; however, profound social and psychological barriers and constraints remain” (McGinnis, McQuill, & Chapple, 2005, p. 313).

Furthermore, in this same study on golf McGinnis, McQuill, and Chapple (2005) indicate that institutionalized sexism occurs because there is a higher ratio of men to women participating in golf. Notably, they describe how golf was originally intended for the participation of males. However, they don’t completely attribute the fact that golf was originally intended for the participation of men as the reason for women’s barriers to golf participation. Importantly, McGinnis, McQuill, and Chapple (2005) stress that the structural differences, previously referred to as barriers for women, between men and women need not be remnants of the ideology of masculinity that traditionally functioned to exclude women. In addition, they do not attribute the structural differences resulting from the ideology of masculinity in the media. Nevertheless, they suggest that social closure and statistical discrimination function as barriers to women’s participation in golf, and they claim that they are a consequence of the higher numbers of men than women participating in golf (McGinnis, McQuill, & Chapple, 2005).

McGinnis, McQuill, and Chapple (2005) do not investigate how women golfers experience formalized differences in structural rules between men’s and women’s golf. In fact, this study does not mention any written structural differences in the rules between women’s and men’s golf. However, as mentioned earlier, this study on women’s golf explores how women golfers experience the social closure and statistical discrimination in golf. Therefore, it is

important to note that in this study, social closure and statistical discrimination are investigated with the understanding that they are not a result of formally written structural rules (McGinnis, McQuilla, & Chapple, 2005).

McGinnis, McQuilla, and Chapple, (2005) explain that “social closure is established when a social group, seeking to monopolize its own life chances, organizes itself against competitors who share some positive or negative characteristics” (p. 317). The authors claim that social closure is experienced when an oppressed group, based on their apparent characteristics, feels unwelcome. In the case of golf, the apparent undesirable characteristic is being a woman. Significantly, they explain how certain structural factors, such as the lack of equipment designed for their use and the absence of restroom facilities on the course, resulted in some of the women golfers experiencing social closure (McGinnis, McQuilla, & Chapple (2005).

McGinnis, McQuilla, and Chapple (2005) state that, in addition to the concept of social closure existing when there is institutionalized sexism, statistical discrimination also exists. They define statistical discrimination as an experience that the members of the oppressed group have due to ill treatment that is a result of the assumptions that are made by others about them. For example, assumptions made by others with regards to the effect of one’s gender on the quality of her performance in sports. They explain that when statistical discrimination occurs, individuals are not treated according to their own abilities. For instance, women golfers were stereotyped as being slow because of their shorter drives, and this may not be true. The authors continue to explain how women participating in golf



experience feelings of unworthiness as a result of stereotypes about them and other previously mentioned barriers that they experience (McGinnis, McQuilla, & Chapple, 2005). In summary, McGinnis, McQuilla and Chapple (2005) explain that the social beliefs that others have about the oppressed group in social structures, such as the social beliefs that occur in statistical discrimination, function to oppress.

Moreover, McGinnis, McQuilla, and Chapple (2005) claim that women generally must prove that they are worthy of traditionally male sports, such as golf. Furthermore, they add that there is often extra scrutiny on women's sporting abilities. Significantly, women golfers were more likely to drop out of golf when they felt unwelcome, undeserving, discouraged, and when they experienced social closure and statistical discrimination (McGinnis, McQuilla, & Chapple, 2005).

McGinnis, McQuill, and Chapple's (2005) study can provide important insights into how elite Canadian female singles figure skaters may experience institutionalized sexism in figure skating. Admittedly, the study on women's golf differs from the sport of figure skating, because golf is described as a male-dominated sport in terms of participation, whereas, figure skating is described by Adams (2010) as a sport for girls. It is important to note that McGinnis, McQuill, and Chapple (2005) explain that the concept of institutionalized sexism is significant in sports that were traditionally male-dominated, which does apply to figure skating. However, initially, it may appear that institutionalized sexism does not now apply to figure skating, because it is perceived as being a sport for girls.

Adams (2010) uses the term feminization to explain how figure skating is a sport that is perceived to be a sport for girls, rather than for boys. This perception is very accurate when one considers the lower levels of elite competition. Adams (2010) recommends that feminist researchers develop new narratives when researching women in figure skating. Although Adams (2010) suggests that feminist researchers develop new narratives, she mentions some differences in structural rules between the women's and men's events in singles figure skating. She lists some of these structural rule differences as specifically being the differences in the program lengths between the women's and men's events. Historically the men's long free skate program was five minutes in length, while the women's was four minutes. Adams (2010) also notes that the women competed in one event at the 1908 Olympics Games, while the men competed in two. Currently, the program length for the senior men's free skate program is four and a half minutes while the program length for the senior women's is four minutes (Skate Canada Rule Book, 2009). Adams (2010) states that "any number of small injustices let women know that they were still not the norm as athletes" (p. 228). Although my focus is not on the particular injustices that Adams (2010) mentions, my aim is to understand how elite female singles skaters experience these "small injustices".

Moreover, the mere separation of women's from men's events may be considered as an example of institutionalized sexism (Hargreaves, 1994; McGinnis, McQuilla & Chapple, 2005). In addition to institutionalized sexism existing in women's figure skating as a result of the rule differences mentioned by

Adams (2010) and as a result of separating of the women's and men's events (Hargreaves, 1994; McGinnis, McQuilla & Chapple, 2005), there are additional structural differences between the men's and women's events. For instance, there are differences in the age restrictions between the women's and men's singles events (Skate Canada Rule Book, 2009), such as the juvenile events.

To reiterate, in this research project, it is beneficial to determine whether or not the female skaters experience the structure of women's figure skating as institutionalized sexism. With this in mind, the concepts of social closure and statistical discrimination existing within women's figure skating are important to investigate. Examples of characteristics that may result in elite female figure skaters experiencing social closure and statistical discrimination when participating in singles figure skating might be their chronological age and body type. Clearly these characteristics are intersected with gender in women's figure skating. As well, there may be unwritten beliefs and rules about suitable ages and body types for the competitive categories, such as novice, junior and senior levels of qualifying competitions. There most definitely are written age rules for the elite female skaters (Skate Canada Rule Book, 2009). Therefore, the female skaters, due to the age rules, may experience social closure and statistical discrimination. Furthermore, the female skaters may experience them in the form of physical barriers and psychological barriers.

Additionally, physical and psychological barriers to women competing equally with men exist, as a result of the women's events being separated from the men's events and because there are differences in program lengths between the

men's and women's events. Regardless, I will not be investigating how the skaters experience the differences in the program lengths within this project, but I will focus on their experiences with the differences in age rules.

To continue with the discussion of women figure skaters experiencing barriers to participating in elite women's figure skating, it is important to mention again that figure skating was originally created for the participation of men (Adams, 2007). It is logical to speculate that sports originally intended for the participation of men have a structure that is more suitable for the participation of men. For example, McGinnis, McQuilla and Chapple (2005), state "participation in many sports, including golf, still appeals to masculinity because women by and large adhere to prescribed gender norms" (p. 315). To further add to this idea provided by these authors, Kestnbaum (2003) claims that there is a great amount of value placed on jumps and athleticism, which means that there are traditionally more masculine attributes within the women's events, and this may further support the idea of figure skating catering to masculine gender norms.

Interestingly, with regards to the current focus on jumps, Kestnbaum (2003) claims that currently, girlish figures are much more conducive to successfully performing the difficult technical requirements in elite women's figure skating, which may add to the events consisting of girls, even at the higher levels. As well, the structural age rules may be supporting the idea that girlish figures are favored over womanly figures in elite women's figure skating. Consequently, mature women may experience statistical discrimination.

Significantly, the ideology of masculinity may have contributed to social

beliefs about the undesirability of mature women participating in elite women's figure skating, and the age restrictions may enforce these beliefs. Interestingly, the age rules may be supporting the ideology of masculinity that shaped the primitive societal beliefs about what women's roles in society were believed to have been at one time, even though some feminist sports scholars claim that this no longer occurs in sports. The ideology of masculinity most definitely stresses the inferiority of women to men in elite women's figure skating. For example, Kesnabaum (2003) argues that womanly figures are not as suitable for jumping as male bodies are. Therefore, in elite women's figure skating, if the competitive training structure is designed to better suit young girls with girlish figures, older females with womanly bodies may feel as though they don't belong, and they will experience social closure and statistical discrimination.

Moreover, with regards to figure skating existing as a sport for girls, it is important to realize that feminist sports researchers have found that it is common for the media to trivialize or downplay the accomplishments of female athletes through the use of various techniques, like infantilising them (Markula, 2009). The media coverage of women figure skaters will be expanded upon later in this project. However, this previous research on the techniques that the media uses to trivialize female athletes, such as making them appear as girls or infants in the media, may provide insight into the actual perceptions of elite women figure skaters. For instance, they may perceive the women's events as consisting of girls, rather than consisting of mature women. Although, in this project, perception will consist of the skaters' perception, not the perception others have

of them. Also, later in this thesis, the lack of maturity and the youthfulness that Kestnbaum claims occurs in elite women's figure skating, will be connected to the leadership within the governing bodies. Additionally, I will address this connection to institutionalized sexism.

With the concept of institutionalized sexism in mind, an ethnographical study on elite women's figure skating in Canada by McGarry (2005) claims that the Canadian women are trained differently from the Canadian men as a result of the coaches' beliefs about gender. Specifically, she indicates that coaches treated the men with the belief that men should be aggressive in their techniques, whereas they treated the women with the belief that women should be passive and gentle in their techniques. Although, this study does not explore how the elite figure skaters felt as a result of how they were treated due to their gender, McGarry (2005) suggests that this difference in coaching beliefs and treatment towards the skaters would have an effect on the skaters' success in performing demanding technical elements. Furthermore, it is logical to think that their success in being able to execute the highly regarded technical elements would contribute to their feelings of worthiness to participate in the sport, which would logically contribute to their experiences with social closure. Crucially, this ethnography does not consider how age and gender may intersect. In my research, I will ask questions to discover how the interviewees felt about coaching beliefs like those described by McGarry (2005), and the how they felt about beliefs surrounding their body types and ages. I want to know if elite female skaters experienced negative feelings resulting from the intersection of their age, their gender, and perceptions

of their bodies. It is important to gain insight into how their experiences with these factors may have contributed to them retiring from competition prematurely.

After considering the possibility that elite singles female figure skaters in Canada may experience the structural age rules and other forms of subtle discrimination as being oppressive, it is important to once again, consider the theory of hegemony. This is because, according to hegemony theory, it is plausible that females may currently be unquestionably consenting to the institutionalized sexism and the potentially discriminating structural rules that commonly apply to women in sport. With this in mind, it is necessary to realize that under hegemony, members of the oppressed group are led to believe that their “failures” are a result of their own shortcomings, rather than a result of their oppression (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). This idea is important to elite Canadian female singles skaters because Kestnabaum (2003) explains that on a world and Olympic level, the Canadian women singles skaters have not been as successful as the men. I specifically intend to investigate how the elite Canadian women singles skaters perceive their successes and failures. I want to understand if their possible feelings of unworthiness, or similar emotions, have contributed to how they have chosen to pursue the sport after they retired from competition.

### **Structural Rules and the Increase of Girls in the Women’s Events**

It is necessary to consider the structure of elite women’s singles figure skating when analyzing the success of girls in the women’s events. One of the structural differences between the men’s and women’s singles events that has already been identified within this document is the differences in the structural

age rules. These structural age rules and the differences in age rules may contribute to the majority of participants of elite women's figure skating being girls. Hines (2006) clearly provides evidence that some of the competitive categories, such as the junior category, have had age restrictions placed on them (Hines, 2006). He explains that in 1969 the junior singles events had maximum age restrictions of sixteen and eighteen for pair skaters and ice dancers. I turned to a competition form for the 2010 local Skate Canada sanctioned "Wild Rose Figure Skating Competition" in Alberta to further understand the junior age rules. This form indicates that the current age restriction for both the men's and women's junior singles events is nineteen. The form claims that this is dictated by the ISU. While, in this specific example, the age rule is the same for both genders, this was not always the case. I was not able to locate the ISU rules about the age restrictions for the junior categories in the rules documents on the ISU website (ISU Website), but Skate Canada and the clubs within Canada seem to be aware of the junior age restrictions that are dictated by the ISU. As a result of my own figure skating experience, I am aware of the fact that some of the age restrictions for the men's and women's singles events have been different in the past. For instance, the Skate Canada rulebook currently indicates that the age restriction for the juvenile category is twelve for the females and thirteen for the males in the singles events. Interestingly, the same entry form that states the age restrictions for the junior singles events, states the junior age rules for the ice dance and pairs events. According to this entry form, the age limit for the junior men in the ice dance is twenty-one, while the age restriction for the junior women



ice dancers is nineteen. While the focus of this document is on the women's singles events, the current rules of the ISU for the junior ice dance events, outlines that the age rules for two members of the same pair team differs according to their gender. I intend to explore the differences in age rules between the women's and men's singles events in this research project (my interviews), which will assist me in understanding how the women have experienced them.

Additionally, some scholars have suggested that girls are more likely to attain success in the women's events, in terms of placing in high-level competitions, after the compulsory figures were removed from international competitions. The elimination of the compulsory figures from international singles competitions resulted in more emphasis being placed on the free skating events that required the skaters to have successful jumping abilities (Ryan, 1996). Furthermore, Bianchetti-Garbato (2004) and Hines (2006) explain that the structural change of the elimination of the compulsory figures from international competitions occurred in elite singles figure skating as a result of a decision made by leadership in the ISU. I will ask the former elite women singles figure skaters if they feel that the elimination of the compulsory figures contributed to the high numbers of girls participating and winning in the women's events. Importantly, Markula (2009) explains that the structure of traditional sporting institutions, which consists of policies, rules and regulations need to change if women are to be truly equal to males within competitive sport. Therefore, it is important to consider decisions made by the ISU concerning the structural age rules and other components of elite competition such as, free skating and the compulsory figures.

### **Girlification, Physicality, and Embodiment**

The terms girlification and infantilisation seem to be used interchangeably in previous feminist studies on the representation of female athletes in the media, and there are many studies on the infantization and girlification of women athletes in media coverage of women athletes (Markula, 2009). The two terms are most definitely concepts in feminist sports research that are closely associated with the age of female athletes. Furthermore, feminist scholars that have studied the media representation of female athletes claim that the techniques used by the media, like girlification, are used to subtly oppress the female athletes (Markula, 2009).

Although several studies suggest that the girlification of female athletes in the media occurs, they generally did not indicate that the elite female athletes were also young girls in reality. Even though this project does not focus on the representation of the elite singles figure skaters in the media, it is beneficial to consider it prior to continuing a discussion of the high numbers of girls participating in the highest levels of elite singles women figure skating.

The literature provides many examples in which a very famous and successful elite female singles figure skater, Sonja Henie, was girlified in the media (Adams, 2010; Feuer, 1995), and the literature specifically suggests that this occurred when she was a grown woman (Feuer, 1995). In addition, Adams (2010) explains that figure skating became a feminized sport as a result of the media's portrayal of Sonja Henie's success. With this idea in mind, it is imperative to consider the term "physicality".

McDermott (2000) suggests that the literature on physicality commonly

links physicality to male power and masculinity. As well, it results in the labeling of sports as male or female. In the literature, it is speculated that the manner in which Sonja Henie was portrayed in the media might have contributed to figure skating being perceived as a sport more suitable for females, with more girls than boys participating in it. As previously mentioned, this most definitely is a reality in the lower levels of the sport (Adams, 2010). Furthermore, Adams (2010) suggests that the feminization of elite women's figure skating, specifically of Sonia Henie, functioned to discredit her success in a sport where woman can perform and compete equally with men. In fact, the success of Sonia Henie is described by Adams (2010) as surpassing the success of any male in the sport, in terms of fame and recognition. Since the media's portrayal of Sonia Henie's success influenced the ratio of females to males participating at the lower level (Adams, 2010), it is important to examine the portrayal of Sonia Henie as a girl in the media in relation to the ratio of girls to women participating in the highest levels of the sport. Additionally, as a result of physicality being connected to male power and masculinity (McDermott, 2000), it is logical to examine the women's events as events for girls and the structural rules (unwritten and written) that are determined by the ISU. Again, men dominate sporting governing bodies, such as the ISU (Hall, 1996), which equates with male power.

Along with physicality, McDermott (2000) considers the concept of embodiment. Many previous feminist sports scholars have used this concept. McDermott (2000) claims that feminist scholars generally explore the phenomenon of embodiment in order to determine whether female athletes feel

that their bodies are a source of oppression. Furthermore, in a piece of information that is essential to this project, she states, “feminists have identified the female body as fundamental to women’s domination as it has been and continues to be a contested terrain upon which gender relations are played out” (p. 333). The structure of elite women’s figure skating seems to embody the ideology of masculinity that girlifies, and in turn, oppresses women. Interestingly, this structural reality concerning women’s figure skating may be demonstrating that grown women are not being subtly oppressed by the ideology of masculinity that occurs in the representation of female athletes in the media. Rather, it demonstrates that they are being completely excluded from participating in the highest levels of elite women’s figure skating. Since, it is common in critical research to connect social issues, such as oppression, to power, it is sensible to consider where the structural rules in women’s figure skating are made. As already mentioned, the ISU is dominated by men and the ISU makes figure skating’s structural rules, which appears to result in institutionalized sexism. To summarize, it is logical to speculate that the girlification of the women’s events is a visual display of gendered issues of power being played out. Furthermore, the lack of success of mature woman as elite singles female figure skaters may be related to the lack of mature women in the governing bodies, as mature women appear to be excluded from both of these areas in figure skating.

As mentioned earlier, the literature describes elite women’s figure skating as consisting of girls and very young women who, at its highest levels, have girlish physiques (Fabos, 2001; Kestnbaum, 2003; Ryan, 1996). Concerning the

term “girlification”, although it has been used to describe the media’s portrayal of female athletes as girls, I will now also use it when I am referring to the structural reality of women’s figure skating. The structural reality for elite women figure skaters embodies the ideology of masculinity that is found in the media representation of female figure skaters.

Kestnbaum (2003) perceives the trends focusing on youthful females, or in other words, women’s figure skating’s embodiment of girlification, as potentially being problematic. She states, “The trends toward younger skaters reaching the highest levels have led to voicing of concern both within and outside the skating community that the image of ideal femininity that skating rewards and so publicly represents is one of delicacy, immaturity, and dependence rather than power, maturity, and autonomy” (2003, p. 167). In addition to the portrayal of immaturity in the female figure skaters as being problematic, Kestnbaum (2003) and Ryan (1996), claim that there are other problems. They emphasize that the girlification of the women’s events results in the female figure skaters desiring girlish figures. Significantly, they suggest that the female figure skaters will go to great lengths to achieve this body ideal, and that their dieting methods are usually not conducive to health (Kestnbaum, 2003; Ryan, 1996). For instance, Kestnbaum (2003) states that “the desire to produce champions in elite women’s gymnastics also produces unrealistic and harmful notions that it is possible for adolescent young women to retain prepubescent body shapes while at the same time training as hard or harder than most adult athletes” (p. 167). Although this particular quote by Kestnbaum’s (2003) is about female gymnasts, she clearly

indicates that elite women singles figure skaters are also girls. She continues, “Such attitudes have led to incidences of life-threatening and career-ending injuries, eating disorders, and abuse by coaches” (p. 167).

Again, Kestnbaum (2003) suggests that the girlification of the women’s figure skating is closely connected with eating disorders. Although not conducted on an elite female figure skater and it involves only one athlete, a study by Jones, Glintmeyer and McKenzie (2005) offers insight into how the intersection of the influence from coaches and eating disorders may affect elite female athletes. This study demonstrates how an elite swimmer’s coach strongly influenced the swimmer to have a slim and aesthetically pleasing body. This elite female swimmer’s swimming career ended because of her eating disorder, bulimia nervosa. Furthermore, this female swimmer indicated that her eating disorder began as a result of her coach focusing on her body size and body weight. The authors explain that this swimmer’s body became “a source of humiliation for her” (p. 385), and this may be an important fact to consider in terms of elite female athletes, specifically in terms of elite singles female figure skaters experiencing social closure. Notably, women’s swimming has not been described as a sport that does not require extreme thinness (Jones, Glintmeyer & McKennie, 2005), or as being girlified, as elite women’s figure skating and gymnastics have been. As well, this study does not examine the possible intersection of eating disorders and career ending injuries that Kestnbaum (2003) mentions occurs. But, it has been suggested that weight has been and is an issue amongst most female figure skaters. It is my objective to address weight and

body types within the context of former elite Canadian female figure skaters. To summarize, the weight issues resulting from the girlification of the sport demonstrate that the skaters embody the oppressive ideology of masculinity that serves to exclude mature women.

I will now turn to a study specifically on elite women female figure skaters to further explore the possibility of the sport being oppressive to the singles female skaters. Grenfell and Rinehart's (2003) ethnography on elite American female figure skaters offers further support to the notion of elite women's figure skating being oppressive for the females and to the idea of it being a sport for young girls. This study clearly describes how the girls were subjected to what the authors described as being abusive training environments. The authors explain how the training conditions of the girls were similar to the conditions of working children that resulted in the establishment of child labor laws. It is logical to speculate that the skaters experience this training environment as oppressive, but this study does not provide insight into whether or not they are experiencing it as oppressive. In terms of the sport being a sport for young girls, the female singles skaters in this study were at an elite level, as one was practicing double axel jumps, and they were without a doubt, young girls. In summary, this study is effective in demonstrating that young girls may be experiencing extreme pressure and psychological abuse from parents, coaches, and trainers, and this possibly may be attributed to the girlification of the sport.

## Conclusion

Olympic sports are patriarchal in nature, and according to the theory of male hegemony, the dominant group, men, oppress the women. Although evidence of this is decreasing, as women's participation in sports is increasing, it continues to be demonstrated by the exclusion of women from the leadership positions of the governing bodies. This exclusion of women from the governing bodies, which make the structural decisions in figure skating and Olympic sports, may result in the continuation of formally and informally established structural discrimination towards women in sport. This structural discrimination may occur in the rules and policies of figure skating and Olympic sports and it may function to oppress the women.

In the literature, figure skating has been shown to be a complex and unique sport, when considering its patriarchal nature. This is because figure skating is viewed as a sport for girls, but it is an Olympic sport, which men control. Figure skating is also a sport in which history has demonstrated that women are capable of competing successfully against men at the elite levels (Adams, 2010). Significantly, the literature claims that formalized rules separate the women's events from the men's events in the context of the Olympics and World Championships in order to ensure that women are not able to compete equally with men after Madge Seyer's historical accomplishment. Furthermore, the literature demonstrates that it was the success of Sonia Henie, rather than the success of a man, that brought the sport of figure skating to the masses. As a result, Henie was often girlified in the media (Feuer, 1995), while she was in



reality a grown woman. In addition, Adams (2010) says that Henie was feminized in the media and Henie's worldwide success led to the sport of figure skating becoming hyper-feminized. She continues by suggesting that the feminization of figure skating may have served to discredit the accomplishments of successful female athletes, such as Henie. Therefore, the girlification of Sonia Henie in the media, like the feminization, may have functioned to discredit her accomplishments. To stretch these possibilities further, the actual structural girlification of figure skating may function to further discredit the accomplishments of successful female singles figure skaters. In addition, the girlification of the women's events may be a result of structural rules, such as the age restrictions placed on the competitive categories. Furthermore, scholars like Ryan (1996) suggest that the elimination of the compulsory figures from international competitions may have contributed to the girlification of the women's events. Moreover, the girlification of women's figure skating may have a significant effect on how elite female figure skaters experience their bodies. They may have a negative experience with their bodies, as demonstrated in the study on an elite female swimmer. In summary, the structural girlification, resulting from forms of structural oppression of the females in elite women's singles figure skating, may perpetuate the women's ideologically constructed inferiority to men. In patriarchy, the ideology of masculinity functions to oppress women and exclude mature, autonomous, grown women from participating in elite women's singles figure skating. Furthermore, it may function to exclude mature, independent women from the leadership positions in figure skating's

governing bodies. Therefore, in this study I will examine how girlification might be experienced by some elite women singles figure skaters. More specifically, I analyze how girlification might have impacted the skaters' experiences with their bodies and how structural constraints of figure skating might have shaped their experiences with skating.

## CHAPTER II: Methodology

The nature of the research question should determine the research design (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Patton, 2002). To explore my research topic, how elite Canadian female figure skaters experience the girlification of the women's events, I employed qualitative methods. According to Gratton and Jones (2004) "Qualitative research,... aims to capture qualities that are not quantifiable, that is reducible to numbers, such as thoughts, feelings, experiences and so on, that is those concepts associated with interpretive approaches to knowledge" (p. 22). Because numerical data and statistics would not offer a sufficient description of the skaters' experiences, a qualitative research design, thus, was the best approach to explore my research topic (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Patton, 2002). Social researchers often use qualitative research, because they believe that complex human interactions and relationship dynamics can shape and form reality (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Human interactions and relationships involve emotions and cognitive functioning, which can make them complex and difficult to quantifiably describe and measure. Therefore, a qualitative approach was particularly suitable for my project, as I planned to explore and understand experiences of girlification.

Unlike objective, quantitative research, where the researcher attempts to remain completely separate from that which is being studied, qualitative research is always subjective. "Subjective" means that there are unavoidable interpretations of the data by the researcher, which influences the results of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In qualitative research, the aim is to understand the construction of meaning through inductive inquiry (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

Inductive inquiry means that the researcher attempts to obtain an insider's perspective, which involves a certain level of engagement of the researcher with what is being studied (Gratton & Jones, 2004). In summary, my research aimed to obtain an understanding of how elite female singles figure skaters experience the girlification of the women's events. As a researcher, I assumed a subjective epistemology.

Researchers from several different paradigmatic approaches can use qualitative methods. A paradigm is defined as "...the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontological and epistemologically fundamental ways" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). The paradigmatic framework that I used for this research project is a critical paradigm. As Gratton and Jones (2004) state, "Critical theory emphasizes the relationship of social 'reality' within historically situated social structures" (p. 20). It is important to note that with a critical interpretive paradigm there is one reality, but individuals may differ in how they experience it (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). For example, some of the elite figure skaters may have negative experiences with the girlification of women's events, while others may not. Regardless of whether or not their experiences of girlification are negative or not, with a critical paradigm, they would all have operated within the same reality, such as the girlified events. Moreover, given that the women's singles events are more conducive to girls and young women with girlish figures, the female skaters would all have a different experience with competing and training in this system. Specifically, in my research project, I employed critical feminist theory to

demonstrate how figure skating continues to operate as a patriarchal system, through the use of structural strategies that girlify the women's events. I examined how the women skaters' experiences of girlification are situated within the patriarchal social structure of figure skating and how they are enforced through the ideology of masculinity. While many previous studies on the trivialization of women figure skaters in the media also used critical paradigms, they did not highlight the experiences of women figure skaters. Therefore, I intended to supplement this previous research by interviewing women skaters about their experiences with girlification in the patriarchal structure of figure skating.

### **Sampling**

My sample was a purposeful sample. Patton (2002) explains that a purposeful sample allows for information-rich cases in which "...a great deal about issues of central importance..." may be learned (p. 46). My sample consisted of ten former elite female figure skaters between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, who trained and competed within the Edmonton region. By interviewing ten individuals within this age range, I was able to reflect upon the diversity of experiences women from the different eras of figure skating within Canada might have had. The range in the ages of my sample reflects the different eras of elite women's competitive figure skating within Canada. For example, forty-five year old women would have competed in and would have practiced compulsory figures, whereas, eighteen-year-old skaters most likely would not have practiced figures, and definitely would not have competed in compulsory

figures. As mentioned in the introduction, within the context of this research project, an elite female figure skater will be any female figure skater, who competed in qualifying provincial competitions. “Qualifying”, means that the skater’s final objective is to participate in the Winter Olympic Games and World Championships.

Gaining access to the appropriate individuals for interviewing greatly influences the success of the entire research project (Amis, 2005). I had an advantage in terms of gaining access to my interviewees, because I am a figure skater. I already have a relationship with some members of the figure skating community. I contacted my sample by phoning or emailing them directly.

### **Interviewing as a Research Method**

As previously mentioned, I used interviewing as my method to examine and explain how elite female figure skaters in Canada experience girlification. Patton (2002) describes interviewing as an effective qualitative research method. As a critical researcher, I sought to understand how each individual experiences and interprets his or her reality (Amis, 2005), and as Amis states, “The most logical way to access these realities is to talk to people” (2005, p. 105), because ‘reality’ is understood as resulting from human interactions through the use of language (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Amis (2005) indicates that interviews offer a depth of information, which permits a detailed exploration of particular issues in a way not possible with other forms of data collection.

The standardized open-ended interviewing method was used in order to gain in-depth knowledge (Amis, 2005; Patton, 2002). Amis (2005) advises that

the questions delivered to each individual should have predetermined themes, but the nature of the response to each question is left open to the individual being interviewed. It is common to ask some open-ended questions at the end of this type of interview that are intended to serve the purpose of acquiring additional explanatory information (Patton, 2002). Through the use of open-ended questions, I attempted to understand and capture the perspectives of these elite female figure skaters without predetermining how they would respond (Patton, 2002). Interviewing allowed for an in-depth discussion of their experiences with the girlification of women's elite figure skating through explanation and elaboration. I developed the interview questions from the insight that I gained from reviewing the literature and from my own experiences as a figure skater.

Amis (2005) stresses the importance of establishing rapport with the interviewees. In addition, he states, "The interviewer needs to learn the language used by the individuals to be interviewed" (p. 116). Since I am a figure skater, and my interviewees are generally familiar with my own figure skating journey, the interviewees can immediately recognize that I speak the language of the figure skating culture. I had personally met my interviewees on numerous occasions, and I had established a level of trust and rapport with them. My personal involvement with figure skating might also have prevented some of the interviewees from openly sharing their experiences, because we generally know the same people. I attempted to overcome this problem by maintaining anonymity in this project.

I conducted the interviews face-to-face on an individual basis (Amis, 2005). I decided upon several locations for my interviews. In order to make it convenient for my interviewees, some of the locations for the interviews included their place of work or a café near their place of work or home. When I interviewed members of my sample, I recorded the interviews on a tape recorder and transcribed them after the interview (Patton, 2002). I obtained the interviewee's permission to record the interview (Patton, 2002). Prior to conducting the interviews, I conducted one pilot interview (Amis, 2005).

### **Ethical Concerns**

Most importantly, regarding the ethical concerns within this research project, I obtained ethics approval from the appropriate ethics committee at The University of Alberta prior to conducting the interviews. The literature suggests that the whole purpose of social science research is to improve the human condition (Kvale, 1996). A potential challenge of social science research is that it often carries certain risks in conducting research with humans. Therefore, the benefits of the research project must outweigh the risks (UofA ethical guidelines web page for research). However, the interview questions for this research project were designed in a manner that avoids this ethical concern. For example, my questions were low risk for the participants experiencing any emotional trauma. In addition, I ensured that the interviewee did not have to answer any questions with which they were uncomfortable.

Supporting the ethical concern of informed consent, Amis (2005) states, "the United Nations General Assembly in 1946 adopted the Nuremberg Code,



which stated ‘voluntary consent must be given by those involved in research projects’” (p. 111). I obtained written informed consent from all the key people that I interviewed. Informed consent should ensure that the participants are aware of the benefits and risks from participation in the research project (Kvale, 1996). The participants were able to voluntarily withdraw from the project at any time (Kvale, 1996).

Fontana and Frey (2000) discuss the ethical concern of “...protection from harm (physically, emotionally, or any other kind)” (p. 662). In this research project, the research questions were low-risk questions and it is unlikely that they harmed the participants. A published report of the research findings potentially can influence the relationships between the participants and other members of the figure skating community, the participants and Skate Canada, and the participants and the ISU. This is an ethical concern for this research project, because the interviewees’ relationships with their governing bodies and other members of the figure skating community might be negatively influenced and there may be negative consequences to their careers to follow. However, all attempts to maintain the participants’ anonymity, which is inherently an ethical concern, were taken to avoid this kind of scenario. I allowed the participants to choose their pseudonyms, because I was hoping that it would reflect some of the culture of figure skating, which I have experienced as being very humorous and entertaining at times. For instance, one woman chose “Fiona Flutz” (A flutz jump is an incorrectly executed lutz jump. In the skating community, there has been controversy over the technical correctness of Tara Lipinski’s triple lutz jump,

Tara Lipinski, being the youngest women's Olympic figure skating champion). Another skater chose "Axel Paulsen", who was the man who invented the axel jump.

It was made clear, in writing, that my committee members and I were and are the only individuals who will have access to the transcripts, and I am the only one to have access to the recorded audio-tapes. If an interviewee was a famous skater, she may have had concerns of privacy with others (me and the committee) having access to her private life. Furthermore, it stated in writing that I would not allow any other individual(s) to have access to them. The informed consent stated that I will keep the tapes securely stored, and that all of the interview material will be destroyed after five years. Hopefully, these measures taken will assist in dealing with privacy issues.

In order to address the ethical concern of reciprocity, which ensures that the researcher gives something back to the participants and their community (Tilley, 2007), I will give each interviewee a copy of the completed thesis. Secondly, I will provide other members of the figure skating community with opportunities to read the thesis, and/or provide them with the information gained from this research project. It may be suggested that the participants may welcome the opportunity to talk about their experiences as an elite competitive figure skater.

Therefore, the information resulting from this research project may serve to support necessary structural changes.

## **Data Analysis and Reporting**

Patton (2002) stresses that the ultimate aim of qualitative research is to provide a thick and rich description of the data in order for it to have meaning and significance in our everyday world. He continues by describing data analysis and interpretation as making sense out of what people have said, which involves looking for patterns. Ideally, it involves making connections between all that was said, and then integrating what was said (Patton, 2002). In summary, my data analysis for this research project included transcribing the interviews, identifying themes from the transcribed interviews, analyzing the themes, and then connecting the themes with ideologies and finally, with power (Patton, 2002). In order to identify patterns and themes, I had to be able to accurately interpret what my participants are saying in the data, because "...the purpose of each interview is to record as fully and fairly as possible that particular interviewee's perspective" (Patton, 1990, p.348).

## **Research Validation**

To ensure that I produced a research project of high quality, I used the seven-stage approach to validating qualitatively designed projects provided by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state, "...validation should not be confined to a separate stage of an interview inquiry, but rather permeate all stages from the first thematization to the final reporting" (p. 241). Their seven stages of validation are: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, validating, and reporting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To follow Kvale and Brinkman, I selected appropriate themes and an appropriate

theoretical framework for my research. First, to ensure proper thematizing, the theoretical framework of critical feminism is logically connected to the research question.

Second, my research design and the methods chosen for this project are appropriate for the subject matter and purpose of the study, as I have demonstrated throughout my literature review (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Furthermore, by following the appropriate ethical procedures I attempted to ensure that there were minimal harmful consequences resulting from this project. In addition, I avoided questions that could stir up suppressed negative emotions during the interviewing process. The knowledge production from this project tried to meet the criteria of being beneficial (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), because I made sure that there had not been much research like this prior to this project. Additionally, the intent for the results of this project is to validate them through “pragmatic validation”. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest pragmatic validation occurs when “...interventions based on the researchers’ knowledge may instigate actual changes in behavior” (p. 258). My aim is for the figure skating community to use the knowledge gained from this project and “...apply this knowledge through new social actions, thus testing the validity of the knowledge in praxis” (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 258). Consequently, discovering oppressive situations for the females within figure skating could result in positive changes for the sport.

Third, I tried to ensure that my interview process was done in the best possible manner. I met this criterion by balancing being sensitive of my samples’

situations in collecting the data that I need to answer my research question.

Furthermore, to ensure the quality of the interview process, I asked questions that were derived from academic literature and are from my own experiences as a figure skater. I consciously attempted not to influence how the interviewees responded to the questions.

Fourthly, I transcribed word for word, exactly what was said.

Fifthly, I interpreted the accuracy of what was said to the best of my ability and analyzed the interviews as accurately as possible. Fontana and Frey (2000) stress the importance of the researcher to remain reflexive in the data interpretation in qualitative research. They describe reflexivity as an awareness that the interviewer has about her capacity as the researchers to shape the results of a research project that uses interviewing as a research method (Fontana & Frey, 2000). I was reflexive in my interpretation of the data by going back to the participants to ensure that I had interpreted them accurately. It is important to be aware that research framed with a critical paradigm, like this research project, is openly biased; the researcher philosophically believes that there is one reality to be explored (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Since it is openly biased, it can be argued that the objectivity of the interviewer pertains to objectively investigating a subjectively designed research project (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Regardless of this fact, my aim was to meet the seven requirements.

The sixth step that ensures the quality of the project involves providing clear steps of validation. I accomplished this by addressing all the steps here individually. Finally, I made sure that my results were reported in a clear manner.

I checked this by having my colleagues and some members of the figure skating community read and comment on the reported results. Overall, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stress the importance of the moral and ethical integrity of the researcher in validating a research project throughout the entire project. (p. 248).

I was extremely careful of this throughout the entire project.

### **CHAPTER III: Results**

To initiate my analysis of how the elite women's singles figure skaters within Canada experience the women's singles events as events for girls, it is beneficial to understand if the skaters feel that girls and tiny young women are the majority of the participants in the events, as the literature claims. I asked all of my interviewees for their views on these claims, and all of them agreed with them. A couple of the interviewees suggested that there are currently elite women skaters who are exceptions to this description, such as Joannie Rochette and Cynthia Phaneuf. Interestingly, many of them suggested that in Canada the situation regarding the young ages and tiny sizes of the women is currently not as extreme as it is in many other countries such as the United States and some of the Asian countries. Triple Twist said:

Like I would say we are a good 3-6 years ahead, older than a lot of the other, some of the other girls, more the US though. I don't really think the Europeans are really, really young, like they're more our age. Asian, it's the Asian girls and the US.

Since I used a critical feminist perspective, my goal was to understand whether or not the elite women figure skaters experience this current structural reality of the women's events as being oppressive. There were numerous approaches that I took in my interview guide to determine this. One approach that I took was designing the interview questions so they would provide me with insight into how they experience their bodies while they are training and competing in elite women's figure skating. Specifically, I asked questions that helped me determine if they experience their bodies as being a site of oppression. Another approach that I took was asking questions on how their ages affected

their advancement through the competitive categories of novice, junior, and senior, because I wanted to understand if they experience aging as a negative and oppressive phenomenon. In addition, insight into how they experience certain structural rules and requirements, written and unwritten, was useful in determining if they contributed to a structure that favors the success of girls and tiny young women. As previously mentioned, examples of written structural rules are the age restrictions that are placed on the competitive categories, and I wanted to understand if they experienced these age rules as blatant institutionalized sexism. Another structural reality in the women's events is the amount of emphasis that is currently placed on free skating that is a result of eliminating the compulsory figures from international competitions. I designed the questions to assist me in understanding how they experience and perceive the elimination of the compulsory figures from international competitions, because as noted earlier, the literature claims that the decision by the ISU to remove the compulsory figures from women's international singles competitions resulted in girls participating and succeeding in the highest levels of the women's events. Importantly, the interview questions were designed to gain perspectives on how very recent structural changes in women's figure skating may maintain the structural reality of the sport being better suited to young girls than women. For instance, some of the skaters commented on the new judging system, and I asked some questions about how the new long-term athlete developmental model might affect the current structural reality. Through these questions, I hoped to understand how the ideology of masculinity shapes the elite women figure



skaters' experiences. Finally, I asked some questions that were directly attempting to explore how the domination of men in leadership positions on the ISU connects to a competitive structure designed for the success of girls. These questions on how the domination of men in leadership affects the women's events are critical in a research project framed with critical feminist theory, because critical feminism addresses the lack of women in leadership in sport and the oppression of women (Theberge & Birell, 1994).

### **Embodiment**

Many of the interview questions were designed in order to gain a better understanding of how the former elite singles skaters viewed and felt about their own bodies. The findings indicated that every skater, even if she was not obsessed with keeping her weight below a certain number on the scale, was always acutely aware of how her body needed to be a certain size and/or type. One skater, Flip Wilson, openly admitted that she struggled with bulimia throughout her competitive career. She said:

I can remember suffering from bulimia at 16, because I was doing everything I could to try to be what they wanted me to be and it didn't matter what I did or didn't do it wasn't going to happen (Flip Wilson).

The rest of the skaters did not label their eating habits as being actual "eating disorders", but most of the interviewees admitted that they did monitor how much and what they ate when they were competing. As one interviewee put it:

So, it's something that's sort of a always there. You don't ever not have it be there, and I think that anyone who says other wise is lying or just not lying but maybe not viewing it from that perspective that it makes that difference one way or another (Linda Loop).

All of the skaters seemed to know what the most desirable body type to have as an elite women's singles figure skater was. For example, an interviewee explained:

I was pretty preoccupied with my size and my weight. When I look back at it now, I was tiny, I was never overweight at all, but I was extremely preoccupied with it and always wanted to keep a certain weight. With that being said, I can also look back on it now, and say this is why they wanted me to be so thin, like the physics of it everything.... to be a good skater, you had to be that thin (Ina Power).

She later added:

It was so important to me to stay thin, but for me, certainly if you would have asked me this when I was 20, I would have had a different answer, but now when I look back, people weren't mean and they were honest and they were right. If I didn't maintain that body type I wouldn't have been able to do triples..... Perhaps, I shouldn't have been so hard on myself, but at the same time, the message could have been put across better. When it comes down to it you have to have a certain body type in order to be able to do the technical elements in skating (Ina Power).

However, Ina Power stated that the majority her coaches were not the ones who made negative comments or connotations about her body size. With regards to how the message may not have been put across appropriately in the past, one interviewee sarcastically explained:

I loved going to the provincial seminars where they used to do the body fat thing and they would do a chart and they would hand it out to everybody to see, and I was always usually second to the bottom as the heaviest, but I was also always known as one of the strongest ones, free skate. I was never teeny tiny ever, and I always had that issue and it was like overweight and you're this and that, and I loved the charts like it just...you then had the girls always snicker right.... the ones who were teeny tiny all the time (Flip Wilson).

Moreover, many of them claimed that their weight always fluctuated while they were competing. One interviewee explained:

In my sense of being small boned, and it showed either way if I was not eating well enough to keep the nutrition level and the energy levels and the opposite if you're overdoing it in that area (Linda Loop).

Every former skater that I interviewed began competing prior to them going through puberty. Some expressed how they tried to prevent puberty by taking measures, such as monitoring everything that they ate and working out to help them stay under hundred pounds, even when they were as young as ten, or by going to practice with their breasts taped. For instance one interviewee stated:

I will tell you a story, which will pretty much sum it up. So, I've never been a stick figure. I have always kind of had that athletic body type. I should have possibly done another sport. I don't know, but umm... So, I remember when I was 10 and started coming to this local club and I remember I was in grade 5 and I couldn't believe when I got to be 100 pounds, and I saw 100 pounds on the scale and I was like I can't believe I'm in the triple digits, this can't happen. I don't want this to happen kind of thing, because then I'm not going to be as good. Like it was very... I don't know why 100 pounds was set in my head like that was the end all be all weight that I needed to be. So, then all of a sudden I saw 102, 103, 105, I was like what is happening, right? So, right then in my head I made a decision that I needed to lose weight. So, I mean it had been a personal decision to do it, but I think it had been influenced by my coach and by other people around me, other skaters who always talked about their weight. So, I remember I lost 5 pounds, and I was now like 97 or 95 pounds and a coach came up to me, a coach that I highly, highly respected and she told me that I looked really good and really fit, and I should try and stay that weight. And this wasn't even my own coach it was someone who I.... (Axel Paulsen).

At this point in the interview, I interrupted her to ask her how old she was when this happened. She continued:

I was 10. I remember her telling me that comment and me thinking wow, I now need to stay 95 or 97 pounds, whatever it was, and thinking that's going to make it or break it kind of for me. It was strange, because before I'd come to this club, when I was skating in a small town, I mean I had probably thought about my weight, but I was like whatever... I'm fit and I can do whatever I want. I can do any jump that someone teaches me to do. It wasn't. I probably thought more about my fitness than I did about an actual number, but then as soon as I came to this club, and everyone around me was talking about that, and coaches were talking about that. I heard it from every angle, not necessarily about myself, but other girls saying...oh I'm fat, and I'm this and I'm that. I was like...well maybe I need to start thinking like that. So, it was the culture that created me to be, think about my weight crazy. So, that's when I was young and the first thought I remember about trying to be thin to skate. Then after that, those same years when I talk about the fluctuations, the 12-17 kind of years, numerous, numerous times a coach

would tell me I am fat or tell me you can't do that certain element because you are five pounds overweight or you know just comments like that that definitely cut to the core. Even to this day I mean, I have issues when I talk about my weight or I don't think that I have ever done anything not sensible about it but at the same time, it's always in the back of my mind....never feeling small enough.... never feeling thin enough.

Another interviewee said:

I just remember a time when I was about 15 going on 16 and I had some delayed menarche, and I just started getting breasts, and I was so embarrassed by it, and I didn't want anyone to know that I was maturing. So, I put on a sports bra and bought some duck tape, and I would go to the skating rink with my breasts duck taped over top of my sports bra so that know one knew that I had breast buds (Ina Power).

Kestnbaum (2003) speculates that female skaters are taking measures such as these. The fact that they were taking these extremes to stay small as they began puberty suggests that they believed that women singles figure skaters needed to maintain very girlish figures in order to be elite. Axel Paulsen, who tried to offset her own puberty, expressed how she had a great amount of trouble maintaining her triple jumps as she was going through puberty. She also felt that she did not fit the ideal body type after puberty, and had to work very hard to achieve and maintain the more ideal body type. Interestingly, she did explain that she was able to do her triples consistently after she was through puberty, but she described how she quit competing abruptly after senior nationals. I will expand upon this fact later. Generally, after the skaters went through puberty, they all felt bigger and heavier than they did prior to puberty, and they were more aware of their weight and body size after puberty. As a result, after puberty, most of them would often pay more attention to their caloric intake and work out routines than

they did prior to going through puberty. While these experiences are interesting, how are they perceived through critical feminism?

Once again, in a project framed with a critical feminist perspective, it is beneficial to understand how the skaters' experiences with their weight, body size and body type may have been oppressive to them. It was continuously stated how much focus most of them put on their body size, to the point where it received as much as or more focus than their actual skating did. At least a couple of them abruptly quit skating after making it through their last national competition in senior ladies, including the women who were mentioned previously, because they were so exhausted from trying to achieve and maintain the ideal body type. It is logical to speculate that their caloric and nutrient intake probably influenced the exhaustion that they experienced. Some of them could not even articulate to me how exhausted they felt. One of them tried to articulate how it was for her:

So, after nationals.....I even told my mom at nationals, just so you know I plan on quitting after this. Nobody really understood why I would quit after this if it's the highest point of my career, and I was like seeming to be getting better and better, I couldn't really, besides telling them I was burnt out, yet that being so cliché, I couldn't really explain how I felt, like how exhausted.... I was frazzled (Axel Paulsen).

Another interviewee tried to describe how she felt:

I was so tired, my body and my mind were just exhausted, and mostly my body to be honest. I was dragging myself to the rink every day trying to get enough energy to do it, and I, just my mind was exhausted from everything, but mostly the last year that I skated... I really..., it was a struggle year for me. So, it was a lot of mental, physiological, you know trying to overcome things, but yah just exhaustion, just like total exhaustion. And initially I just wanted to take a break, I just wanted, after Canadians, to take a break, and then the break just turned into..... I don't think I have it in me to work as hard as I would have to (Ulrich Salchow).

She continued:

Like I said, exhausted, I could not... I couldn't do it. I was so exhausted, and then when I took that break, when I actually did quit, when I thought it was just going to be a break, I thought I was going to take a break, and my body was going to totally refresh itself and renew itself. I really wanted to come back in my head at the beginning. I really wanted to come back, and try and reach my full potential, because I knew that I hadn't, but then when I thought about how hard I would actually have to work to do that I was just like couldn't. I was like, no I can't do it, but it was hard to know that like you want to do something but physically you don't think you can do it, that's tough. It was a big decision for me. Yah, I was so exhausted. I don't know if I, I don't know why, but I can remember my body literally being..., like some days I could barely pull myself in to a single axel, I was so exhausted, and it's not like you didn't get enough sleep before, the night before kind of exhaustion, it's day to day. Even now to this day, I feel like I'm a more tired person. Seriously, I don't know what it is, maybe there is actually something wrong with me, but I do I feel like I'm a more...I'll go run with my friends that haven't ever been athletes before, and I'm exhausted way before them. Like skating killed my body, no but... (Ulrich Salchow).

Additionally, they both expressed to me that prior to their last national competition, they were putting a great amount of focus on maintaining or decreasing their body weight. With this in mind, it is plausible that they were not taking in enough calories to meet the energy requirements of elite women singles figure skaters, and this may have contributed to their exhaustion. From a critical feminist perspective, the exhaustion that they experienced from trying to maintain a body type that they described as being unnatural for them can be oppressive. As mentioned earlier, it is common for members of the oppressed group to believe that their failures are a result of their own shortcomings rather than a result of their oppression (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). For example, Ulrich Salchow indicated earlier that she did not "have it in" her "to work as hard as" she would have to. She, therefore, blamed her own inability to work hard for her 'failure' to achieve her full potential. Also, a statement that is very important concerning the topic of this research project is when Sherry Spotlight says that there is a certain

age for the female singles skaters, eighteen, where they really consider ending their careers if they have not achieved their desired level of success yet. When one considers her statement, one needs to recall that feminist researchers claim that the ideology of masculinity functions to exclude women from sport in the context of the Olympics (Hargreaves, 1994). Again, the literature indicates that some feminist scholars agree that the ideology of masculinity no longer functions to exclude women from participating in sports (Theberge & Birrell, 1994). Ironically, this seems especially true for figure skating, because the literature describes figure skating as a feminized sport, and there are so many females participating at the lower levels of the sport (Adams, 2010). Furthermore, it is logical to initially assume that the exclusion of women from World and Olympic women's singles figure skating definitely does not occur, because women have their own events. However, it appears as though girls and tiny young women are included and participate in the elite women's singles events, but grown women with womanly and mature figures seem to be excluded from participating. Unfortunately, this reality about elite women's figure skating reflects how the masculine ideology assigns small, thin, girlish women as properly feminine to compete in women's figure skating.

Many of the interviewees said that their awareness of their bodies played a great role in their mental state while they were competing, because they were often very self-conscious about their bodies. For instance Axel Paulsen stated:

I do remember as you are getting older and your body is maturing and changing, I do remember feeling self-conscious, possibly, having more of a mature figure as you're going through those ages. Cause I do know people are noticing and people are talking right (Axel Paulsen).

This comment by Axel Paulsen may indicate how the women felt about their bodies may have played a role in their confidence or lack of confidence when they were competing. Two interviewees described how they had so much confidence when they were competing before their bodies changed. They made statements such as “I was winning every competition that I went into for a while when I was young and I had so much confidence” (Ulrich Salchow). One of the two women, Axel Paulsen explained “before my body changed, I could do anything that I wanted to skill-wise, and my coaches would tell me that I was talented enough to be the next star for Canada”. Both of these two women quit after nationals because they were too tired to continue training and competing when they were nineteen and twenty years old. In addition, they both felt that they quit prior to reaching their athletic potential, but they just could not continue due to the exhaustion they were experiencing.

The previous research suggests that members of the oppressed group often experience statistical discrimination (McGinnis, McQuilla & Chapple, 2005). To reiterate this notion, in this study on golf, the women would drop out of golf, because they were aware on some level that they were not conforming to the desired gender traits. To further recall, this article on women in golf demonstrates how with statistical discrimination there are characteristics that individuals may have that are unfavorable in sports, even if the beliefs about the undesirable characteristics are not true. Again, an example of statistical discrimination the women golfers experienced resulted from the belief that they were slow on the course, just because they were female (McGinnis, McQuilla &



Chapple, 2005). Comparably, the elite female singles figure skaters seemed to be aware that after puberty, they were not meeting the desired characteristics in elite women's figure skating, as they felt that they were too big, and therefore, experiencing statistical discrimination. However, none of the skaters mentioned that they felt unworthy of continuing on, as the women in the study on golf, but it is fair to say that since they felt too big, they probably felt unworthy to some degree. To further support this, it was quite common for them to think that they were fat, too muscular, or not the ideal body type when they were competing, when in reality they were and still are very tiny. Barbara Ann Sparkle described how she felt about her body when she was competing,

It was pretty good most of the time. I was kind of taller than most of the girls for a while which you know, you want to be a tiny little like gymnastics sort of size girl and I'm pretty muscular build but I wasn't where it was so bulky, that type of masculine muscle. So that was okay, felt pretty good most of the time, and then eventually other girls, some of them caught up to my height, not all of them though, I was still too tall, and then weight was usually good, but if anything every changed, my coach was quick to let me know, let me know if I had to start running more, or whatever it was (Barbara-Ann Sparkle).

This example demonstrates how her negative feelings about her body may have contributed to her confidence level when she was competing.

Moreover, many of the skaters mentioned that they must be small in order to successfully perform the necessary elements, such as triple jumps. As mentioned earlier, comments such as, "If I didn't maintain that body type I wouldn't have been able to do triples" (Ina Power). It was claimed numerous times that the women needed to be tiny in order to rotate fast enough in the air to complete three revolutions, and this is also what the literature suggests (Kestnbaum, 2003). An interviewee explained:

I fluctuated, and even two pounds for my height, 5' 1", it makes a big difference. I felt it, like it'd be a difference between you know rotating almost a ¼ of a turn in a triple or not (Triple Twist).

Sherry Spotlight stated "you know when you think about it you can't do 3 rotations when you're 40 pounds overweight, right so.....". Most of them held this belief, and it may also be a belief that is not necessarily true, especially if there are currently "exceptions" to this commonly held belief. There was one interviewee who said the following:

I was never told that I was fat in particular. No one ever told me that, but I can remember having discussions about.... Oh like you know the girls who are doing really good, you see how small they are, and you know the reason that they can turn three times in the air, is because they are this big. It was never ever for me actually, a direct you need to lose weight, and I know for some girls it was. I can't imagine how I would feel, but even those kind of discussions, you know look at the girls that are..., yah that's frustrating, because you think about it...there were girls that I can think of that could do the same things that were bigger, right. So why are these people saying oh you have to be small? Yah, it may be easier, but you don't necessarily have to be, right? Like there are girls that can do the same things that are bigger girls. I can think of lots of people, but yah I never really was told straight out that. So, I can't really tell you how I felt (Ulrich Salchow).

She continued:

The last couple of years it was more me on myself trying to..... looking at the other girls, thinking okay, and I really wanted to...., I can remember the last couple of years I was trying to lose weight, like always, always, always. It was also really hard, because I like to eat. It was really hard for me to lose weight even now, it's really really really tough for me. Some people I think they can just be okay I'm going to do this, but it's always been really really hard for me. I can remember thinking that I want and always trying to be, okay I'm going to go on this diet, or I'm going to try this, or do this, but with how active I was, I just couldn't possibly not like eat, because I would have no energy, I couldn't do it so. I tried though.

However, this common belief of needing to be tiny in order to excel in women's figure skating supports the tendency for coaches and skaters to value a tiny body without hips and breast. As one interviewee stated:

I mean, I had gone you know six years being able to do anything whenever I wanted to do it and then all of sudden I had hips and coaches....I shouldn't... Let me think about this for a second. I think a lot had to do with my body and why it happened and just you know hormone changes and things like that and even focus on skating. But yah, just the day to day fluctuations and emotions and coaches feedback and things like that about weight gain or about how you should be doing or what you should be doing, and things like that... (Axel Paulsen).

These negative beliefs about hips and breasts and needing to be tiny may be an agreed upon belief that is common to hegemony. If this is the commonly held belief, it supports the structure favoring young girls and/or young women with girlish figures, since it is obvious that the successful completion of triple jumps in the women's singles events is highly valued in competitions. Again, the ideology of masculinity enforces the notion that women are inferior to men (Dabbario, 1994; Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Lenskyj, 1986; Vertinsky, 1994). If the triple jumps are highly valued in elite singles figure skating and if men do in fact have an easier time with executing triple jumps for various reasons, such as strength and a narrower frame, this enforces the idea of men being superior performers to women. Thus, comparing women's performances directly to men's performances can function to denigrate women (Birrell, 1989; Hargreaves, 2003; Markula, 2009), as it functions to exclude women and ultimately maintain male dominance (Hargreaves, 1994).

All of the skaters that I interviewed felt that they quit competing prior to reaching their competitive potential, and it is appropriate to understand how their actual chronological ages entered into their decisions to quit competing. For instance, one interviewee explained why she quit at the age of eighteen:

By the end of my competitive career I was starting to feel as if I was getting old in the sport. I knew I could still skate, but I felt like it might be asked why am I still

skating after that many years as a senior if I'm not even at the top, and I also felt like I had reached an age where I should maybe be moving on and work full-time and not ask for my parents help to support me and my skating; I felt I should take on more responsibility (a different kind than training) and be more of an "adult". It was kind of like, "Well if I'm not the champion yet it probably won't happen since I'm only getting older (Barbara-Ann Sparkle).

In summary, if they were not feeling physically exhausted and too big for elite women's figure skating prior to quitting, most of them explained that they were feeling old and thinking that it was time for them to move to other things in life. An interesting future research project would be to investigate the retirement process of elite women's singles skaters in Canada and other areas of the world.

The interviewees often described how there was so much mental and psychological pressure from competing prior to them quitting, and none of them recalled this extreme mental pressure as being a positive and desirable experience for them. One interviewee had the following to say about how she felt towards the end of her career at eighteen with regards to competing, "It was hard mentally, and I wasn't quite tough enough at that point to deal with it and a tough coach, and so I wanted a little time away" (Barbara-Ann Sparkle).

Sue Spinner had the following to say about why she had a difficult time dealing with the pressures of competition, and interestingly, she connected her lack of mental strength competing with her poor eating habits:

Not taking care of myself throughout the year, like not eating properly. Then I was not strong enough to train. That had been a big factor, and also just being worried or psyched out all of the time. I didn't have the mental strength to deal with the competitions (Sue Spinner).

Another interviewee stated the following about her inability to handle the pressures of competition: "there were years that I was super prepared, doing my

programs every day before I left for nationals, in practice, and then I think it must have just been nerves or pressure, it had to have been” (Ulrich Salchow).

It was common for them to mention that they were always aware of the younger and more petite skaters who were coming up through the system while they were near the top, and felt a great amount of pressure from this reality. For instance, Ulrich Salchow explained:

The younger girls started coming, instead of always being the youngest, and then I wasn't, and that was sort of strange, cause I had always been, if not the youngest competitor, one of them throughout my whole skating career, from like pre preliminary up to senior, and then it started by the time I was probably 17, 18, 19, and there were girls coming in that were like 14 15, and then I sort of got anxious about it (Ulrich Salchow).

She continued:

Yah, just like, okay, stop my age right now. Like you feel like, like you get anxious about the fact that you are only going to get older, and you can see that the upcoming girls are only getting younger, and if I had still been in it now, like the girls are even getting younger and younger and younger. (Ulrich Salchow).

Furthermore, they often felt that the younger and smaller skaters coming up after them were valued more than they were regardless of how they were performing at nationals and/or international competitions. Some stated how they felt frustrated by aging, because they knew that “younger was better”. They described how the younger female singles skaters would be chosen over them to compete in international assignments despite what the results of competitions like nationals were indicating. Ina Power explained,

Certainly, when I went through it was when there was a big push towards finding young talent, and I was older, and I certainly felt like I wasn't given the same opportunities, because I was older, as the younger children coming up were... even despite how I was performing in the competitions, like nationals, and it was disappointing if you were a bit older, you felt that it necessarily didn't matter how

well you did or how hard you worked, you weren't going to be given those same opportunities as the younger girls.

Continuing with the discussion of how their feelings about their ages affected their careers, one skater explained that she felt that the psychological pressure that was a result of how she felt about her age during an Olympic year may have contributed to her actually not making the Olympics. She expressed:

Age would have played a little bit on that as I would have been, when I won Nationals, I was 18, the first Olympics coming up I would have been 22 and then 24 so...that makes a difference in how you think about competition and uhh athletics... (Linda Loop).

As she states, she was in her early twenties at the time. Additionally, she also suggested that she felt that she was not at the top early enough in her competitive career to be able to be comfortable with that kind of pressure, and she used the age of thirteen as an example of an ideal age to be at the top in order to gain experience. Furthermore, she expressed how she was not even being considered as a contender for the Olympic team one Olympic year because of her age, and she had been the only Canadian woman to win an international medal that year. Unfortunately, she also ended up quitting competing, as she felt that she must move on in her life. She explained how she felt peer pressure to quit, as she was getting up there in age, which is an example of social closure. To recall, McGinnis, McQuilla and Chapple (2005) define social closure as an experience that the oppressed group have when they feel unwelcome, based on their apparent characteristics.

She described how it was for her when she decided to quit:

It wasn't my best experience, because I almost felt like it wasn't my decision, like I wasn't sure, and yet I let all that outside influence dictate, but yes okay I guess I

should be sure, because everyone's telling me I should be sure, and of course it sort of... that's the year that all of the top girls retired, others that were like top eight in Canada kind of at the same time, we would have all been about at that age 22 to 25. Well...., it's sort of just..., well everyone else is too, like it would have felt weird for me not to so, sort of peer pressure, that's kind of a good word to use...Like all the peers I'm with are now moving on, so I guess I do too right... and the interesting thing is not a lot of conversation about it. It just sort of that was it like...., and I often, like I see my coach after..... and Oh you should have skated another year, but we didn't discuss that. It just seems odd to me that you say that to me 2 years later, 3 years later, 4 years later, whatever, and yet well, why didn't we discuss it... Was it my responsibility to come and discuss it? Was it his? Was it? Like it's just something that just sort of happened. You know very interesting (Linda Loop).

Since there was not really any discussion about her quitting with her coach, this could be an example of unquestionable consent that is normal in hegemony. It may have been that everyone was unquestionably consenting to the idea that it was time for her to quit competing and move on with her life. All of her peers were quitting, and she said that she felt peer pressure to quit. Furthermore, since there was no discussion about her quitting and she felt peer pressure to quit, she most likely did not feel welcome, which is social closure. In addition, she could not have felt welcome in the sport if she was not being considered as a contender for the Olympic team, as a result of her age. She also stated that she was still improving, and she was successfully learning new skills, such as the triple axel jump, just prior to quitting. It is still very rare for a female singles skater to successfully execute a triple axel jump. Moreover, the fact that she felt pressured to quit and she was not encouraged to continue, even when she was landing her triple axel, possibly indicates that the ideology of masculinity was successful in excluding her from participating as a mature woman. Furthermore, based on the comments of the skaters, it seems like many years of competing at the senior level

is necessary in order to feel comfortable with it, and that if they were competing at that level for too long it was perceived negatively.

Another skater, Fiona Flutz, described her feelings around the time that she decided to quit. She stated,

I didn't think it was really worth it anymore. I started to feel more alone, like in my senior year, because there is not as many people anymore, especially the club, there weren't any people like my age at all. That was a big part of it too, there wasn't anyone to motivate me anymore (Fiona Flutz).

Her statement indicates that other skaters her age at her club had already quit and moved on with life, and that she felt lonely. Fiona Flutz quit competing at the age of nineteen.

Another skater, Triple Twist, mentioned how she experienced her age when she was at the end of her competitive career as a women's singles figure skater. She claimed:

No one really said you are getting too old to learn that. I just had comments from people that would say wow, you're still at it or I'd hear that someone was saying ah yah she's still skating...I don't know what she's doing... she's wasting her time. People just stopped believing in me (Triple Twist).

Triple Twist quit competing in women's singles after a national competition at the senior level at the age of seventeen, and went on to excel in another figure skating discipline. All of the recently mentioned examples provide examples of social closure that the elite skaters were experiencing as a result of their chronological age, as it seems they all felt unwelcome in women's singles figure skating.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, the literature claims social closure exists with institutionalized sexism (McGinnis, McQuilla & Chapple, 2005).



Prior to continuing with a discussion on institutionalized sexism, it was beneficial to ask them about their experiences with skating-related injuries. How might the injuries that they experienced connect with other oppressive aspects of aging in elite women's figure skating? One skater claimed that a younger skater is more likely to injure herself just because she does not have the same kind of experience that a more mature skater has with her body. She suggested that a more mature skater is more likely going to listen to her body when it is trying to tell her to stop using it in a certain way because an injury is developing, and that skaters most likely learned this through their own experiences. She said:

You don't know your body at 16 as you do at 19, or 20 or 18 kind of thing. Like you don't, you almost can't read it...right, a little ache at 16, you don't take seriously, oh yah it will go away tomorrow, or whatever....right? Where, by 18, that little ache you know might progress and you get to the physiotherapist or get to the chiropractor or whatever you need to do to keep those little things at bay so that they don't progress, and adapt your training to that. You know from 13 to 16 you just go as hard as your coach tells you to go and just keep your mouth shut if you're hurt and that can obviously impact how much more that injury goes on (Linda Loop).

It makes sense that overuse is a problem in elite women's figure skating, because there is a focus on being young and achieving at a young age. The skaters are less likely to take time out to rest an injury or a developing injury from overuse if they are feeling such time pressures. Furthermore, many of the skaters who I interviewed admitted that they experienced injuries from overuse while they were a competitive figure skater. For instance, one skater explained:

I was pretty lucky, I didn't have any serious injuries. I just had little overuse, pounding down of some stuff that got sore, couple bad falls and just some misalignment or whatever, nothing that really kicked me off the ice for long or anything like that...just from the constant pounding. Nothing that's hurting me now, not yet (Barbara-Ann Sparkle).

Again, Kestnbaum (2003) claims that attitudes that promote the girlification of women's figure skating often result in injuries, eating disorders, and abuse from coaches. One skater, Fiona Flutz stated, "umm, I hurt my arm once... I don't think I broke it. I had a cast on it". Another skater explained:

I've had probably 4 concussions, I've been stabbed by somebody else in the leg with somebody else's blade, I have a couple of instabilities in my back, I tore my meniscus off of its attachment site on my tibia, and so that's something that's never going to go away, no broken bones or anything like that but mostly joint problems (Sherry Spotlight).

Additionally, with Kestnbaum's claim in mind, none of the interviewees mentioned experiencing physical abuse from their coaches. However, Fiona Flutz did provide some indication of how she felt about her coach:

I think that well I just think that I was afraid in a way of my coach, and that I felt threatened by kind of everyone around me, and it wasn't so much like it wasn't bringing the best of me. I was more afraid to fail than I was to achieve anything.

She continued to explain why she felt uncomfortable competing:

I think my environment had a lot to do with it. I think my ummm coach had a lot to do with it, and the specific way that I was coached, I don't think brought out the best of my competing. I think.

Moreover, while none of the skaters attributed their injuries as resulting from strictly monitoring their diets, Kestnbaum (2003), makes this connection. It was very apparent to me that all of the interviewees were skating as a result of their own wishes, as they all clearly expressed what their own personal goals were with skating. Many of them would admit that in some point in their careers they desired to compete in the Olympics. For example, Ina Power stated, "My original and ultimate goal was to go to the Olympics", Axel Paulsen said, "I always dreamed of Olympics and Worlds", and Sherry Spotlight said, "When I was

younger, I wanted to go to the Olympics”. Since many of them had these competitive aspirations, and they all seemed to be aware that age was not on their side, they would comply with the values of the competitive structure, which appears to value achievement at a young age.

### **The Structural Rules and Institutionalized Sexism**

It was apparent that most of the interviewees had high competitive goals, were dedicated to the sport, were hard workers, but none of them made it to the Olympics in elite women’s figure skating. Due to this fact, one must look for reasons for this. The literature claims that women in Olympic sports are often oppressed (Hargreaves, 1994). In their study, McGinnis, McQuilla and Chapple (2005) explain that institutionalized sexism exists in golf. A similar situation exists in figure skating, and it seems appropriate to understand how the elite women singles skaters experience structural rules, such as the actual age restrictions that are placed on the competitive categories. All of the interviewees were aware of the fact that there were maximum ages placed on at least some of the competitive categories of novice, junior, and senior. However, almost all of them seemed to have trouble recalling what exactly the age restrictions on the competitive categories were when they were competing. They tended to be aware that the age restrictions have changed over time and that they are still changing. There was almost a sense of confusion around this whole topic when it was brought up. Moreover, most of the interviewees felt that age restrictions were not a concern for them, because they were quite elite when they were very young, which actually reiterates what this thesis is attempting to address. For example,

Sherry Spotlight said “I was always one of the younger ones, as I usually moved up levels pretty quickly”. Generally, they tended to pay some attention to their actual age as they were approaching the end of their competitive career in the junior category, because they were nearing the age maximum of what most of them claimed was eighteen. If they had been fortunate enough to compete internationally at the junior level, they expressed how those international opportunities came to an end as they reached the junior age limit. The reason for this is that they would have to excel in the senior category in order to continue on with their international experiences. It is important to note that although most of the skaters recall the junior age limit for junior women as being eighteen, it has recently been changed to nineteen. The junior age restriction was definitely a concern for one skater, Sue Spinner, who surely knew that she had to pass her junior competitive test before she could compete in the junior events prior to her reaching the age limit of eighteen. Sue Spinner described how she always felt too old as she was advancing through novice and junior, because she felt like she was behind in her athletic development. She explained how the junior age restriction affected her athletic development “It limited my involvement in skating that’s for sure, because I had one year in junior and then I was too old, because I developed later than most girls I guess, or than girls that they want to see in that level.” She continued to speak to the topic of this research project:

I think as a skater, who stopped at 20, which is considered old for figure skating, but really young in my life, really, athletes peak when they’re in their 20’s in other sports so I feel that it is frustrating to have the age restrictions and the concept that we need to be young to be good, and it was just a damper on my training because of that environment and I think with changes, more people would be happy to stay in the sport longer and not be so discouraged at like 12 and 13

and have more people be active and involved in the sport for longer. I think that would be, I would really like to see that in the future of figure skating (Sue Spinner).

One world level skater commented:

I think in terms of overall development it's a good thing to be able to stay in categories for a length of time that you feel is necessary to develop your skills to the appropriate level and get the experience of the ability to be comfortable out there, right. I think that was a lot of my downfall. The nerves of just not being at that high level for that long of a time. You know and you don't think about it the first couple of years, cause it's so new and exciting and stuff. I know, I mean I would hate to see like somebody.... I think it's so personal. I don't think there is a point to have an age restriction, because if it's a personal thing, and you need more time to develop in a certain level, why shouldn't you stay? Just because you're a certain age stop and move onto the next one when you might not be ready, and that might just stop your career dead right... for some people that might be enough to push them over the edge of you know having a bad experience the first time into the level, you know I've seen that and heard that (Linda Loop).

Using a critical feminist lens, it is even more essential to examine how the elite women experience the age limits placed on the equivalent men's competitive categories. How might this affect the experiences of the elite women skaters?

The age restrictions placed on the men's and women's categories have a tradition of being different from one another. I initially approached this particular topic by trying to understand the level of awareness or the lack of awareness that the women skaters had around this fact. When I asked them what they remembered the age restrictions to be on the equivalent men's categories, they all explained that the men were given at least an extra year in categories such as the junior category. It is important to note that none of them could recall there ever being age limits being placed on the men's or women's senior categories. I then proceeded to ask them how they felt about the extra year that the men were given in the junior category and how this difference may have affected their competitive

careers. Ina Power simply exclaimed, “that doesn’t make a lot of sense does it? I am just trying to think of why that would even be.....”. The way in which she answered this question suggested to me that when she was competing, she aware of this difference in the age limits, but did not give it too much thought when she was competing, and it is normal to unquestionably accept oppression in hegemony. Another skater stated:

It is kind of interesting now when you think about it. Well, why really is it, right? Yah, like to be honest, I never, that is the first time I ever thought of it, I never have really thought about that before. Yah, why, why is it that way? Good point. I don’t really know how I feel about it, but I’m questioning why that is necessary for it to be like that (Ulrich Salchow).

She was a skater who had been given international assignments while in junior and quit prior to making it to the top five at senior nationals. She quit, because she was too exhausted to continue, and she felt that she did not reach her potential prior to quitting. One skater, who was also participating in junior international assignments said: “It didn’t seem fair when I was in junior, and I had to cut my junior competitive years down a bit. I think it should have been the same, but it’s always been like that” (Barbara-Ann Sparkle). Another skater had the following to comment on the difference in the age restrictions that are placed on the men’s and women’s events:

So, I think, I think it was sort of set within sort of a realm of sexism, not in terms of sexism but in terms of just a typical person’s development. Like a woman’s full capacity in athletics is twenty-two and a man’s is twenty-seven so....why not have them be able to go longer in a certain category, because they are not going to peak in senior men until, Brian Orser was 27 at the 88 Olympics, so that thinking I think (Linda Loop).

She felt that there may be the belief in figure skating that women peak athletically earlier than the men, like at the age of twenty-two. Although, in reality, do

women figure skaters really peak athletically at twenty-two or before the men do? It would be beneficial to explore the ages of Canadian women speed skaters or women hockey players who have competed in the Olympics in order to determine when they are peaking and winning medals. Furthermore, this particular elite figure skater quit competing at the world level when she was twenty-four, which was three years short of when a man apparently reaches his athletic peak in figure skating. It would be useful to understand how and what shaped her thoughts and beliefs about when men and women in figure skating apparently peak athletically.

To continue with a discussion of the structural rules of elite women's figure skating, Kestnbaum (2003) claims that the removal of the compulsory figures from international competitions has contributed to the high numbers of young girls and girlish-figured young women at the top levels of the women's events. Again, previous research suggests that it took time for the women to master the figures portion of singles competitions, which resulted in "older" competitors at the higher levels (Kestnbaum, 2003). Therefore, I began this particular inquiry by asking the interviewees what they thought about and how they felt about these suggestions that were made by the literature. Surprisingly, one skater immediately made the connection between the girloffication of the sport and the elimination of the compulsory figures from competitions in the early stages of the interview, prior to me asking for any reasons for the girloffication of the sport. She said:

I think when I skated, I think senior was more the 18, 19, 20 year olds, right, that's when they would kind of peak, where as now a lot of them are like 14, 15, 16, but the training's different, we don't spend all that time on figures any more...(Flip Wilson).

The majority of them felt that the elimination of the figures from competition contributing to the girlification of the women's events made complete sense. Kestnbaum (2003) also discusses the clothing that was culturally suitable for female skaters to wear while they were performing their figures. With this in mind, Linda Loop pointed out that when she practiced figures, she was more bundled up. In other words, she had more clothes on. She continued by expressing how when figures were skated there was not much focus on the aesthetic aspect of the sport in the figures, and figures used to be a significant part of the women's events. However, since figures are no longer skated in competition, it is difficult to know whether or not this fact would presently be true. Additionally, Linda Loop had more fascinating insights to add to what the literature claims about how compulsory figures have contributed to the girlification of the women's events. Unfortunately, she was in the height of her competitive career when the decision to remove the compulsory figures from the international competitions was made by the International Skating Union. She described how she lost all of her leg muscles and at the time she could not understand why that was happening to her. She said that she was left on her own to figure out what was happening to her, and she had to come up with the solutions on her own. Fortunately, she realized that she needed to spend more time in the gym, and she was able to rebuild her leg muscles. It is only now, after she has spent years reflecting on her competitive career, that she has connected the huge change in her body that she experienced when she was competing with the removal of the compulsory figures from her training routine. She stated:



It was like a poof they were gone like there was no discussion about how to adapt our training now that there is longer 4 or 5 hours of figures, yet you know you don't think of that as athletic feat, you're building your quad strength enormously. I lost....., I probably lost over a quarter of my power after figures were gone. My body shape just completely went to a girl shape cause I was no longer muscle building and nobody told us in the association, our coaches, nobody.... Well now we should do more in the weight room, but you know there wasn't yoga or Pilates or all that stuff then, but there would have been dance, more ballet, more something to take over those hours, they just thought of them as figures, they didn't think of them as any athletic feat, nor did you, it wasn't like you were sweating, you know oh my legs are killing, but when you think about a five hour stretch standing on one leg, there is a lot of balance and coordination, and body positioning, and flexibility to turn a certain way to make the turn. I mean there are just a million things you can think of it athletically when you think of it, but at the time, they just sort of disappeared off of the face of the earth, and at the same time all of the other countries were already developing skaters in a different way. We just went from figures and free skating to poof they are gone, and now just do more free skate. Like it was just sort of there was no guidance, which is now when I look back to the other questions well they want all these models. Well now I see where maybe they felt they went wrong and not guiding us better through that transition and now there is always going to be transitions they realize with any sport now, and things are going to change and they want to make sure that everybody sort of has a little bit of projection forward into those a changes that will come where as I guess learning from the past of what happened there (Linda Loop).

The removal of the compulsory figures resulted in Linda Loop experiencing her body as becoming more girlish (size wise) after she had already learned how to compete with a womanly figure and stronger frame. Another woman, Ulrich Salchow, had this response to the elimination of compulsory figures:

It's possible, like if, I know, in the past, even before I skated, I know that figures were the main thing, and free skate was sort of the side, the side thing. You worked on figures way more than you worked on free skate. Their figure sessions were maybe like two or three one hour sessions, and you did maybe 45 minutes of free skate, or something like that, so, the emphasis was on the figures..... (Ulrich Salchow).

Triple Twist exclaimed: "Oh, it's true, because they used to do figures for like three hours a day and so how are you going to get a ten year old to do that?" She continued: "I don't think some of them are great skaters because of losing

figures.....I just think they're great jumpers".

Although the elimination of the compulsory figures is perceived by the skaters as logically contributing to the girlification of the women's events, an actual empirical analysis of the average age of the women's Olympic medal winners<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that there is not much difference in the average age of the Olympic medal winners before and after the removal of compulsory figures from international competitions. Importantly, the results of this study do show that the skaters perceive the average ages of elite women skaters as getting younger and younger. Furthermore, there may have been an actual decrease in the body sizes and body weights of the skaters since the removal of the compulsory figures from international competitions, as experienced by Linda Loop, but not in the actual

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#### **Average Age of Women's Olympic Medal Winners**

Olympic Year	Average Age of Women's Olympic Medal Winners
1972	19
1976	19
1980	20
1984	19
1988	21
1992	21
1994	19
1998	18
2002	20
2006	24
2010	21

ages of them. If the body sizes and body weights of the elite skaters have been getting smaller and lighter, this may explain why the skaters appear to have the perception of elite women figure skaters as getting younger and younger.

Additionally, regardless of the fact that the average ages of the Olympic medal winners are consistent, the average ages are young.

Many of the skaters thought that practicing compulsory figures was crucial for the skill development of elite skaters. For instance, as a former coach, Axel Paulsen stated, “From a coach’s perspective, not having figures is I think a detriment to the skill development”. However, one interviewee, who does not currently coach, did not think that figures contributed to her skill development as an elite skater. She sarcastically stated:

I got really good at doing toe jumps with no toe pick. I did not enjoy them. I’m not sure they contributed a whole lot for me... I think I don’t think they contributed that much to me, because I hated them so much I never really worked hard on them (Ina Power).

Although her comment does reflect the humor of the culture of figure skating, she was the only interviewee who practiced figures who thought this about compulsory figures. One of the interviewees, who still skates at an elite level as a pair skater in her thirties, explained how she contributes her career longevity to the fact that she practiced compulsory figures. She said:

Personally, I’m very grateful that I was in that time, because I think that’s why I had such good basics, good run of the edge. I think it helped with my stroking, I think it helps with the way I do my elements, like the way I skate, and the way we go into things, like why I’m still going even (Triple Twist).

One interviewee, who currently coaches, thinks that her understanding of figures has resulted in her being a better coach. She stated:

I think as a coach, when I turned to coaching, I loved teaching figures, because I had to teach myself how to do figures. I remember saying to myself, God I wish I could go back and compete now, because now I understand how to do this and how to you know take a whole piece of ice and turn it into 24 patches. I didn't understand that until I had turned to coaching, and once I turned to coaching I got the concept really well, and I had a lot of kids do well in competition in figures after that, and I had coaches say to me well you were never that good in figures. I'm would reply, yah I know. So, I think that was probably one of the things that that really helped me as far as coaching went for sure (Flip Wilson).

Another structural change that a few of the skaters mentioned, in relation to the girlification of the women's events, was the new judging system. They made comments on this topic even though I did not have any questions designed around it. One of the skaters felt that the new system contributes to the girlification of the sport, because it places so much emphasis on the flexibility of women. She stated, with regards to the girlification of the sport and the code of points judging system:

I feel that it has become more that way, especially because of the code of points that is in place, because if you have a strong like woman figure you might not be able to contort your body into those flexibility positions, where as a young, like we see Korean and Japanese, that are like in their teenage years, and are able to like pull their leg up above their head, because of the code of points, it is definitely true and also just in general there is the perception that the women needs to look slim, and have nice lines and look light on the ice. I feel like that is definitely a good, an accurate portrayal of elite figure skaters, there are some exceptions but it has gone that way (Sue Spinner).

She added, "with girl figures dominating, like the way the judging system is set up and the fact that the figures are gone." Sue Spinner's comment brings another question and issue to the surface. The question and issue being, how does a tiny figure relate to flexibility? Her comment suggests that she believes that a tiny girlish body is more flexible than a mature, womanly body. Another skater felt that the new system values and emphasizes maturity. She said:

I think the system, having changed in the last 4 years, sort of promotes the gifts of an older and more mature skater. They would be able to make something out of that comparatively to a 16 year old, in terms of the style and footwork sequence and all the stuff, that's sort of in a mature sense, needing a lot of emotion. You know it's not just you skate as an upright stick, and look pretty. There's a lot of, there's a lot of quality given to an emotional performance that just wasn't there in the past years (Linda Loop).

According to her, the new system for judging free skating gives more credit to the quality of transitions, musical interpretation, and the portrayal of emotions, which is believed to more likely be performed by the more mature skaters. A logical conclusion is that when the figures were initially removed from international competitions and the new judging system was not yet being used, young girls were more likely to succeed at the top levels of women's figure skating than after the new judging system was implemented. This was because, with the implementing the new system after the removal of the compulsory figures from international competitions, elements other than triple jumps, such as the quality of the transitions, were given some value. However, it does not mean that the implementation of the new system has resulted in a structural resolution to the issue of the women's events being girlyfied. Fortunately, it may mean that there may be some exceptions to this structural reality. A good question to ask is how might the new judging system compare to when the singles events included the compulsory figures, with regards to the girlyfication of the sport?

I also asked the interviewees for their thoughts on the new Long-Term Athlete Development Model (LTADM) that Skate Canada, along with other sporting organizations within Canada, has adopted. I was particularly interested in how they felt about the "windows of optimal trainability" for developing

athletic qualities such as flexibility and how they felt about it being connected to chronological age. The “windows of optimal trainability” are the chronological age ranges that Sport Canada and Skate Canada have designed for figure skating to offer coaches, volunteers, and administrators guidelines for when the “ideal” times for developing certain components of athleticism are. For example it is recommended that coaches should focus on developing strength for boys between the ages of seventeen through twenty and between the ages twelve through fifteen for girls. However, the Skate Canada LTADM document states that ages are established in order to stay “consistent with age criteria established by the International Skating Union” (In Pursuit of Excellence: Skate Canada’s guide to Long-Term Athlete Development, p. 6). Since the model is designed to meet the age criteria of the ISU, it most likely promotes athletic development and achievement at young ages. With this in mind, are the “windows of optimal trainability” really about optimal training stages, or do they serve to keep the sport young?

It was interesting to hear comments from the interviewees on the “windows of optimal trainability” within the LTADM. Many of them felt that there must be some physiological basis for the “windows of optimal trainability”. However, most of the interviewees thought that in spite of the science supporting the implementation of the “windows of optimal trainability” for developing aspects of athleticism, the model could be detrimental and dangerous. One comment from a skater was “I think that that type of thing could be dangerous in a way... to force someone.... or really put those barriers on any person, I think it’s

dangerous” (Fiona Flutz). The following comment was from Linda Loop, a world class singles skater:

I think that the problem with that is that over the years that I’ve been involved in sport, which is now thirty-five, is some people will fit into the windows, but that doesn’t necessarily mean, because they’re in the window in this stage of chronological year, it doesn’t mean that the next jump up that they’re going to be there.... so do they correlate... they will somewhat and they’ll overlap. I think a lot of times, but in terms of I guess like I said kind of categorizing it so much, it’s a little bit detrimental really, because I see many really, really, really talented superstar-looking kids at you know 10 to 12 who have never done anything past that age and visa versa. You know you look at sort of an average or below average skater that just plugs along and maybe they’re too skinny as they’re 9 and you know they just haven’t developed and they started skating late or whatever circumstance of that person that private situation that’s happening you know they don’t hit that window. That doesn’t mean that they aren’t going to be the one that makes the leap to be the person so right... so..... (Linda Loop).

She continued:

I think it still has to become such a personal, almost private thing. To put everybody into these little categories and little groups of models, it’s sort of wrong, because time and experience has shown that most of the really good skaters wouldn’t have fit that model and even the ones that might have a little bit at the beginning have broken away from it anyway to become sort of their own way and their own training style or whatever. So, I don’t really think one way is right or wrong or I think its just sort of there to guide people and maybe for you know maybe the less experienced coaching staff that are in smaller towns you know it, I think everything is there to help, but in the long run, it’s sort of still that relationship of the trainer and the skater to you know come to grips with where they’re going and how they’re going to get there (Linda Loop).

Sherry Spotlight said, with regards to the “windows of optimal trainability”, “figure skating is such a individualized sport that you can’t kind of group it together like that”.

When considering these comments from the interviewees, it is necessary to be aware that the Skate Canada LTADM does state that this document is a guide and that not everyone will fit into it. I didn’t address the focus on the gendered differences that exist within the model and how the gendered differences might

contribute to the high numbers of girls participating in the highest levels of elite women's figure skating, which would have been a logical approach to take with critical feminist perspective. However, the comments that the women skaters made on age alone say a great amount about the dangers of categorizing the skater as they are developing. In summary, most of the interviewees felt that not much emphasis should be put on the new LTADM.

In this discussion on how elite Canadian singles figure skaters experience competing in the women's singles events, some of the skaters had positive experiences with training and competing. Sherry spotlight said "it made me a lot more mature than most people my own age and gave me a really good work ethic". Another, Ina Power, stated "I see what it did for me as far as teaching me to work hard and sacrifice to get somewhere and to achieve a goal". Furthermore, it was quite obvious to me that most of the interviewees, if not all of them, absolutely love the sport of figure skating. For instance, Ina Power said, "I loved skating". They all seemed to love talking about it, and their eyes always lit up as they spoke about it. For a sport that can be described as being so oppressive for the women, it is enlightening to realize that they still seemed to love it so much. Even the one skater, Axel Paulsen, who was adamant about not currently being involved with it or any other competitive sports, explained how much she loves figure skating. She exclaimed "Those were they very best years of my life". It is interesting that one can have such a love for something and not currently be including in her life in some capacity.



The last subject that I explored was how the skaters felt about how the domination of men in the leadership positions such as the International Skating Union (ISU). When I mentioned this fact to the skaters, all of them were unaware of this fact. Therefore, none of them had given any previous thought to how this fact might connect to the structure of elite women's singles figure skating, or how it might have connected to their own experiences throughout their competitive skating careers. They seemed to attribute some of the problems in elite singles women's figure skating, such as the high numbers of girls succeeding at the highest levels of the sport, with the actual judging of the sport. They did not seem to connect this fact of elite women's singles figure skating with the decisions and rules that were and are set by the ISU. For example, Sherry Spotlight explained: "I don't know if it has to do with the leadership, but it has to do with judging, because really the leaders don't have much say in who wins in the long run". Nevertheless, it is logical to speculate that that which is valued by the judges in elite women's figure skating is valued as a direct result of the regulations and the rules that are made by the ISU. For instance, the new judging system was designed and implemented under the direct influence of the ISU. However, once the skaters became aware that men dominate the ISU, many of them started to ponder what effect this may have on women's skating. Within a few minutes of contemplating this new information, many of them started to see how the structure of women's skating might be influenced by this fact. For example, many of the skaters could see how the junior age limit on women's figure skating keeps the events young and helps to ensure that the elite women figure skaters are young.

With regards to men in the leadership positions in the ISU and the junior age rule for the women's singles events, which, until recently, was eighteen, Sue Spinner said:

It restricts the amount of years that you can skate. Suddenly, like kids quit when their in their teens, when they could do it longer, because they see, oh I need a double axel before I am 18, if I don't have it by the time that I am 15 then it is too late. I think that it is really restricting on people's involvement.

Although, some of the interviewees felt that even if women were making the rules in the leadership positions, rules such as the age rules, would not be addressed differently. With this in mind, it is important to recall that in hegemony theory, the oppressed group may even believe the oppressive ideologies and they may even unquestionably support and enforce them (Birrell, 1989; Hargreaves, 2003; Markula, 2009). Interestingly, one skater stated that since young girls are succeeding in the actual competitive women's events, meaning that they place at the top, it might be less threatening to the men in power. She thought that girls and tiny women are visually not perceived as being mature enough to handle the pressure of an important leadership role. She stated:

You might be viewed, if having that type of body, if you were a person that did want to get into you know the business side of the sport, you might be viewed as a little girl, you're not a person that's capable of handling all the pressure on their shoulders, a tiny little thing is not capable of that in your mind, its sort of a visual perspective of what you look like to what you can do, and they're totally separate but maybe viewed like that from the man's perspective (Linda Loop).

However, one skater felt that women are involved in leadership on the ISU. She said:

It doesn't bother me that men are making the decisions, because there are women on the committees. We know men, that they're the leaders, but I think that's fine...I don't see any concerns (Triple Twist).

The fact that she thought that there are women in leadership on the ISU suggests that she is completely unaware of how her reality might be affected by the power at the top levels of the sport being held by men. In other words, she might be unaware of the male domination and consequent patriarchy in the ISU. On the other end of the spectrum, one of the elite skaters referred to the ISU as always being a boys club. Linda Loop said, "It's always been sort of a boys club." Even if the ISU is a "boys club", it may initially seem as though the ISU is too far removed from the local figures skaters that were interviewed to affect them. However, the ideology of masculinity is not specific to location, and can influence the experiences of the local female singles figure skaters. For example, written and unwritten rules in the women's singles events, successfully eliminates the elite female skaters as they reach a "womanly" age and develop a "womanly" body type. This elimination appears to be more of an impact of the ideology of masculinity that assigns girlish women as the ideal body type for women's figure skating, rather than a pure biological fact or training principle. Furthermore, while it is more difficult to perceive the unwritten rules as originating at the level of the ISU, it is certainly easy to see how the written rules are direct decisions made in the ISU.

## CHAPTER IV: Conclusion

In this study, I examined how elite women singles skaters might experience girlification. More specifically, I analyzed how girlification might have impacted the skaters' experiences with their bodies and how structural constraints of figure skating may have shaped their experiences with figure skating. I found that many of the skaters felt that their bodies were too big for women's figure skating, especially after they went through puberty. Prior to going through puberty, two of the skaters found it quite easy to perform the difficult triple jumps and often placed well in competitions. Some of the skaters took measures to offset their puberty after it began, such as monitoring how much they ate, working out more, and in one case, even taping her breasts. The skaters all seemed to be preoccupied with their weight, to the point that it often was a distraction from their actual skating. They were all able to define the ideal women's singles figure skating body as young, thin, and light. They were told numerous times to remain small or to lose weight, particularly after puberty. Many quit skating due to their changing body shape, and others quit because of their age. Some of the skaters acknowledged that the small body size is a necessity to perform the current requirements of skating. As a consequence, some skaters felt burnt out and exhausted from trying to achieve and maintain the ideal body type, which often resulted in them quitting prior to feeling as though they had reached their full potential. All of the skaters had ambitious goals while competing, but none of them made it to the Olympic level in singles figure skating. Accordingly, I also examined how possible structural constraints of the

competitive structure, the elimination of the compulsory figures, and male dominance at the leadership level of skating might have influenced the skaters' experiences.

Many skaters were aware of the age restrictions in certain categories, such as the age restriction in the junior categories, and they often experienced them as structural constraints. While they could not specify the exact age restrictions, these structural rules had an impact on their careers. In addition, when probed, the skaters did not see the necessity of having different age restrictions for women's and men's categories. Another rule change, the elimination of the compulsory figures, was perceived by the skaters as logically contributing to the girlification of the women's events. An actual empirical analysis of the average ages of the women's Olympic medal winners demonstrates that there is not much difference in the average ages of the Olympic medal winners before and after the removal of compulsory figures from international competitions. Importantly, the results do show that the skaters perceive the average ages of elite women skaters as getting younger and younger, and there may have been an actual decrease in the body sizes and body weights of the skaters since the removal of the compulsory figures from international competitions. One of the interviewees actually experienced a loss of muscle and power in her legs after she stopped training figures. Additionally, regardless of the fact that the average ages of the Olympic medal winners are consistent, the average ages are young. Overall, many of the skaters felt that practicing compulsory figures is very important for the skill development of elite figure skaters. Therefore, some of them believed

that participation in compulsory figures had given them a better foundation and understanding of figure skating. Some of them felt that training figures influenced their careers as coaches and their career longevity as skaters. In terms of new developments in coaching, all of the skaters felt that not too much emphasis should be put on the “windows of optimal trainability” within the new Long-Term Athlete Development Model (LTADM), because figure skating is such an individualized and personalized sport. Many interviewees thought that categorizing, such as in the “windows of optimal trainability”, might have negative consequences for developing skaters, but they claimed that the LTADM might be helpful for inexperienced and uneducated coaches to refer to as a guide. Finally, while the interviewees were very aware of rule changes, they were unaware that men dominate the most powerful positions in figure skating, on the International Skating Union (ISU), and were unaware of the impact of this on their experiences as elite figure skaters. For instance, one of the interviewees thought that the ISU consisted of women. When told otherwise, she felt that men making the structural decisions in the sport was unproblematic.

In summary, similar to previous feminist literature (Kestnbaum, 2003), my findings indicate that the elite Canadian singles female figure skaters experience the women’s events as being better suited for girls and young tiny women than for mature figured women. However, my research also indicates that the skaters experience the girlification as being oppressive. The girlification of the events resulted in the interviewees quitting when they reached a “womanly age” and/or developed a “womanly figure”. They often quit prior to them feeling that they

had reached their potential as elite figure skaters. In addition, my research offers further insights into the elite female figure skaters' experiences with the oppressiveness of the thin, young body shape, their awareness of the 'girlification', and also their awareness and acceptance of many of the structural constraints in figure skating. Consequently, the results of this study indicate that grown and mature women are excluded from participating in elite women's figure skating that is shaped by the oppressive ideology of masculinity that in patriarchal society privileges a certain body type. The results show that the oppressive ideology of masculinity enforces women's inferiority to men by placing great emphasis on triple jumps and by enforcing the belief that womanly like figures are not suitable for executing such jumps. This has resulted in chronological age restrictions.

This research provides evidence for the ideology of masculinity contributing to institutionalized sexism. The skaters experienced social closure and statistical discrimination as a result of their body types and their ages. They were aware of the negative attitudes that were attached to aging female skaters with womanly figures. Kestnbaum (2003) speculated that the girlification of the sport is problematic, because of the incidence of eating disorders, injuries, and abuse from coaches. Almost all of the interviewees skated while they were injured and were obsessed with their body weight at some point in their careers.

The findings also showed that threatening coaching techniques might not be effective. Many figure skating coaches are women and they seem to enforce these oppressive behaviors. It can be suggested that the women who are in

leadership roles (excluding the ISU), along with female coaches, unquestioningly accept the oppressive beliefs shaped by the ideology of masculinity, which shapes women's figure skating. In terms of coaching strategies and beliefs, it is worth mentioning that economics most likely strongly influences these, and this should be researched further. One obvious reason for them unquestioningly complying with oppressive coaching beliefs may result from them wanting to secure their coaching jobs. Significantly, the exclusion of grown, mature, and independent women from competitions at the elite level of women's singles figure skating may function to exclude them from the leadership roles in the ISU and therefore, maintain patriarchy in figure skating.

Seven of the ten interviewees, not including Fiona Flutz, Flip Wilson, and Barbara-Ann Sparkle, all trained at the same club within the Edmonton region as Canadian elite singles female figure skaters. Therefore, my findings strongly reflect the culture formed in this particular club. Even though I have not interviewed elite female singles skaters from other major Canadian cities, my educated guess is that similar results would be found. In addition, all my interviewees were white, and I did not explore issues of race, sexuality and class. Therefore, research that explores issues of sexuality, race, and economic background will add to the knowledge and insight gained from this project. In this study, I obtained my data through interviews. Other methods of qualitative inquiry, such as ethnographies, auto-ethnographies, and performance ethnographies could provide further insight into women's figure skating. Furthermore, some quantitative research might provide additional useful



information. For example, statistical data that determines the age ranges of when the elite women skaters end their careers and their reasons for their retirement could contribute important information to the current knowledge of elite female skaters' retirement. Future research investigating their retirement process, regardless of methodology, will be useful.

The role of the compulsory figures in elite women's figure skating in earlier years also should be investigated further. Therefore, questions such as the following are important to examine further: How much did the compulsory figures contribute to the skill development of the skaters and prepare their bodies for the more difficult elements in figure skating? Did the hours of training figures help prevent injuries more than the off-ice training that skaters do today? Additionally, based on the comments of my interviewees, it seems important to further examine how the new judging system affects the girlification of the women's events: Did including figures in singles competitions result in the singles events being more suitable for mature women than the new judging system does? Also, it is important to understand the necessity of age limits on the junior events in all figure skating disciplines: When do elite singles figure skaters peak? Why is the peaking age believed to be different from other sports, as mentioned by some interviewees? Why are there differences in ages of peaking and even development between men and women? Why do they appear in the new LTADM? Is the success of mature women more accepted in the pairs and dance events, because their success is achieved with a man?

The results of this study demonstrate that elite Canadian singles figure skaters retire, or are eliminated from elite women's figure skating when they develop a 'womanly' figure or when they reach a 'womanly' age. The findings further show that as a structural constraint, the age restrictions on the female singles category junior category are successful in eliminating female figure skaters. Some of the skaters are not at the technical level required to advance to senior by the time they reach the junior age restriction. While my interviewees may not have paid much attention to the difference in the age restrictions between the men's and women's junior events, and they may not have understood how it may have affected their skating careers while they were competing, they described this difference as being unfair. If they advanced to the senior category, they quit because they were feeling too old or were too exhausted to maintain the ideal body type for elite Canadian women's singles figure skating. This was despite the interviewees describing the ideal Canadian skater as being older than elite women's figure skating in Asia and the United States. I conclude, thus, that the ideology of masculinity that constructs a singular body type for elite women's figure skating functions to exclude mature, autonomous women from participating in elite women's figure skating. My results demonstrate that the ideology of masculinity serves to maintain patriarchy by excluding many women from Olympic sports through structural constraints.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Participant Demographics

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Age of retirement from singles</b>	<b>Highest level achieved in competition</b>
Linda Loop	White	22	Senior Worlds
Axel Paulsen	White	20	Senior Nationals
Ulrich Salchow	White	19	Senior Nationals
Sue Spinner	White	21	Junior Provincials
Triple Twist	White	17	Senior Nationals
Sherry Spotlight	White	18	Junior Provincials
Flip Wilson	White	18	Novice Provincials
Fiona Flutz	White	19	Senior Westerns
Barbara-Ann Sparkle	White	21	Senior Nationals
Ina Power	White	20	Senior Nationals

## Appendix 2: Information Letter



UNIVERSITY OF  
ALBERTA

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation

E488 Van Vliet Centre  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2H9

Dear Participant:

Title of the study: How Do Elite Canadian Singles Female Figure Skaters Experience the Girlification of The Sport.

Thank you for your interest in this study that aims to obtain a better understanding of how elite Canadian women singles figure skaters experience the structure of competitive figure skating. As I have previously mentioned to you, I am interested in how you experienced your age and your body type as you advanced through the competitive qualifying categories of novice, junior, and senior. Therefore, in this study, former women singles skaters will have a chance to talk about their personal experiences as elite women figure skaters. As a consequence of this study, administrators, coaches, and skaters may gain useful information to create a healthier training and competition structure for singles women skaters.

Your participation in this study will consist of an interview that will take approximately one hour. The interview will be audio-recorded. I will then write out your taped words exactly as you expressed them, in order for me to do a written research analysis. Instead of personal details, I am interested in general information regarding women's figure skating and therefore, information from each participant will be kept private. In order to ensure your privacy, I will use fake names in the transcripts and publications. In addition, all the interview material will be kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only I will have access. I will keep the interview material for 5 years after I have completed my Masters Thesis.

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Some of the interview questions may put you at a low risk for re-experiencing negative emotions resulting from your involvement in competitive figure skating. However, if you feel uncomfortable about answering specific questions, you can choose not to answer, and we will move immediately to a different question. You can also ask to have the tape recorder switched off any time during the interview. You can withdraw from the interview at any time prior to the results being written up, without consequence. You can request to see the interview transcripts to make any changes. You can also request to see any publications resulting from this research.

If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask me at any point. You are also free to contact me at the number provided below if you have questions at a later time. If you have concerns about this study, you may contact Dr. Pirkko Markula, who is supervising this research project, at (780) 492-7192. You may also contact Dr. Kelvin Jones, who is the Chair of the Faculty Research Ethics Board, at (780) 492-0650. Dr. Jones has no direct participation with this study.

Thank you for your participation in this project.

Sincerely,

Corinna Story (MA Candidate)  
Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation  
University of Alberta  
Phone: 780 718 8428



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### Appendix 3: Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF  
ALBERTA

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation

E488 Van Vliet Centre  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2H9

#### Informed Consent Form

##### Part 1 (to be completed by the Principal Investigator)

Title of Project: How Elite Canadian Women Singles Figure Skaters Experience The  
Girlification Of Elite Women's Figure Skating

Principal Investigator(s): Corinna Story

Affiliation(s) and phone number(s): Dr. Pirkko Markula, UofA, (780) 492-7192

##### Part 2 (to be completed by the research participant)

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence, and that your information will be withdrawn at your request?	Yes	No
Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you? Do you understand who will have access to your information?	Yes	No

This study was explained to me by: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to take part in this study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator or Designee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix 4: Interview Guide

### **Interview Questions:**

#### ***Figure Skating Background (Demographics)***

1. How many years did you skate and compete for?
2. What level were you when you quit competing (Novice, Junior or Senior)?
3. What was furthest that you advanced out of provincials (Westerns, National, Worlds/Olympics)?
4. How old were you when you stopped competing?
5. What did you want to achieve with your skating?
6. What was your ultimate goal?
7. What is your career focus now?
8. How do you participate in sports now?
9. In what capacity are you involved in figure skating now?
10. What was your greatest achievement(s) in figure skating?
11. How do you feel about this accomplishment now?
12. What was your biggest failure(s) or let down(s) in your skating career?
13. How do you feel about this failure? (how does this make you feel?)
14. Why do you think that this failure happened for you?

#### **Girlification**

1. The literature suggests that young girls and young women with girlish figures are the majority of the participants in elite women's figure skating. How do you feel about this claim?
2. In terms of age, how would you describe and explain elite women's figure skating in Canada and the world?
3. How did you feel about your body weight and body size when were training and competing?
4. In terms of age, how did you perceive your age when you were advancing through the competitive levels?
5. If you experienced a coach and/or someone else who was involved in your skating telling you that were too "old" or to "fat" to accomplish or learn something, how did you feel?

6. What do you remember the age restrictions in the competitive categories to be when you were in Novice? Junior? Senior?
7. How do you feel about the age restrictions on the competitive categories with regards to your athletic development?
8. How did they compare to the age restrictions of the equivalent men's categories when you were training and competing?
9. How do you feel about the age restrictions for the women's singles events being different from the men's?
10. How do you feel that this difference is justified?
11. What do you know about the new "Long Term Development Model"?
12. How do you feel about the LTADM?
13. How do you feel about the "windows of optimal trainability" being connected with chronological age?
14. What type of injuries have you had from skating?
15. Why do you think that you got injured? Explain why you stopped competing and/or skating?
16. What do you feel that the role of the compulsory figures was?
17. If you practiced compulsory figures, how do you feel they contributed to your skill development?
18. The literature claims that the removal of the compulsory figures from international competitions has resulted in young girls making up the majority of participants at the top levels sport. The claim is that the figures used to require so much time for mastery of them, which meant that mastery was achieved with age? How do you feel about these claims?
19. How do you recall your coaches and others involved in your skating focusing on your body size and body type while you were competing and training?

### **Embodiment**

1. What aspects of figure skating did you enjoy the most?
2. How did you perceive your body when you were competing?
3. How do you feel about you reaching your potential as a competitive skater before you quit?



**Leadership In Governing Bodies**

1. The literature claims that elite women's figure skating is totally controlled by men in the leadership positions in the governing bodies like the ISU and the IOC. How do you feel that the girlification of the women's event might connect with the lack of women in leadership positions on the ISU?
2. How do you feel the decisions that are made by the ISU (for example, the age restrictions and the current weight on the free skate program) influence the girlification of elite women's figure skating?
3. Do you feel confident enough in what you achieved in women's elite figure skating to serve on a governing body such as the ISU?
4. What else do you want to share with me about your experiences as an elite female figure skater in Canada that you feel is important to this research project?
5. Please contact me if you think of more information later that will contribute to this research project.