

The beauty builder: A genealogical analysis of the production of female power and knowledge in artistic swimming

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Abstract

The study adopts a Foucauldian genealogical perspective to examine the transformation of gender discourse in artistic swimming. It highlights the importance of challenging the established gender norms and stereotypes in artistic swimming to promote greater gender inclusivity. By investigating archival documents and media coverages related to artistic swimming, the study unveils two discursive factors that result in the constitution of contemporary female-dominant discourse. First, male discourse has gradually diminished along with the development of the sport. Second, the continuous accumulation of female discourses concerning artistic swimming has produced genealogical knowledge aligned with female swimmers' physical and aesthetic traits. This knowledge ultimately contributes to the label of artistic swimming as a feminine sport and empowers women within its domain. The genealogical examination reveals the constructive nature and the production of the power/knowledge in artistic swimming and scrutinises the epistemological and historical antecedents of the prevalent stereotype surrounding the swimming pool.

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Introduction

Sport is a social activity that is not gender-neutral but rather gender-segregated (Anderson, 2008; Demetriou, 2001; Joseph and Anderson, 2015; Messner, 2002). This is to say that the physical traits of the two sexes are usually employed as the criteria to categorise which sports are culturally associated with sexual stereotypes¹ to be masculine and feminine sports. In return, sport is also associated with specific gender-related expectations (Lin and Chen, 2013; Sobal and Milgrim, 2019). For example, 'masculine sports', such as football, rugby and ice hockey, are usually more competitive for athletes and players are expected to illustrate qualities such as 'strength', 'fortitude', and 'toughness', which are physical traits traditionally associated with a male (Laslett and Brenner, 1989). By contrast, sports in which athletes are usually assessed based on their feminine features, including 'gracefulness', 'gentleness' and 'tenderness', are recognised as 'feminine sports', such as dance, rhythmic gymnastics and artistic swimming (Hanna, 1989; Jahanmir, 2016; MacDonald, 2014; Pringle, 2009; Scandurra et al., 2019). Furthermore, this idea has been produced, diffused, and practised as a common sense among diverse cultures and societies, resulting in the sexual segregation of sport (Barker-Ruchti, 2009). As a result, the established segregation of masculine/feminine sports develops a norm for people's sport participation. Correspondingly, these culturally entrenched categorisations often also hinder individuals who deviate from the traditional gender expectation of the typical participants of a given sport, particularly organised sports (Lucas-Carr and Krane, 2012). For example, the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) has not officially accepted men's rhythmic gymnastics.

While extensive research has explored the link between masculinity and sports (for examples, please see Dunning, 1986; Steinfeldt et al., 2012), there is only a small amount of literature looks at the relationship between women and sports that accentuates feminine traits, particularly those dominated by females (Jahanmir, 2017), even fewer critical analysis and reflections on the legitimacy of the discourse of female, feminised performance, and feminine sports (Lenskyj, 1991).

Artistic swimming, usually perceived as a feminine sport, provides a typical and informative case to examine the development of the gender stereotype associated with a feminine sport. The aquatic sport is labelled a radiant and graceful image, historically associated with established female traits (Jahanmir, 2016). Although it has long been associated predominantly with female swimmers, this aquatic sport was initially open to male swimmers, whose participation has waned through the transition of artistic swimming from a recreational activity to a competitive sport (Bean, 2005).

It is argued that the aforementioned elimination of men's events in, and the emergence of the gender stereotype of, artistic swimming provides us with an ideal case for the investigation of the development of female discourse² and the disappearance of male discourse³ in the sport because of its potential to further our understanding of the reason for which, and the mechanism by which, artistic swimming had been made into a gender-

isolated sport (at least before World Aquatics changed its rule in 2015) despite the global trend of gender equality in sport.

This study employs a Foucauldian genealogical approach to critically investigate the historical and epistemological conditions underpinning the development of the gendered stereotype of artistic swimming and to highlight intangible sexual politics or, more specifically, the power dynamics between females and males when participating in the aquatic sport. This is to say that the transformation of gender discourse in artistic swimming, our research object, is recognised as a lens directing us to reflect on the relationship between the historical discourse of artistic swimming and the production of the knowledge of the gendered nature of the sport. Through the study, the mechanisms of gender discourse in artistic swimming can be recognised as a typical reflection on the production of knowledge of the sport's sex stereotype, thereby filling the knowledge gap – how female discourse and the knowledge of femininity interplay and produce a feminine sport.

In other words, as we would argue, while artistic swimming has developed into a global sport that attracts women and supports conventional feminine sexuality and beauty, the female-oriented nature of the sport may lead to the marginalisation of others with diverse bodily experiences. Knowing and reflecting on the constructive nature of gender segregation in artistic swimming and its oppressive effect on male swimmers (and female swimmers, too) could hence enable and promote a 'knowledge renewal' in the sport and, potentially, in the discourse concerning gender in general.

Literature review

Artistic swimming has yet been a focal point of interest among scholars in sports sociology. Current literature concerning artistic swimming is primarily derived from areas with a closer relationship with natural sciences, addressing its psychological aspects as well as nutrition and medical issues associated with the sport (Betancout León et al., 2011; Fortes et al., 2013; Lundy, 2011; Robertson et al., 2014; St-Cyr et al., 2024; Vardardottir et al., 2024). These studies have focused on female swimmers and explore topics such as the body composition of prepubescent female athletes, menstrual disorders and eating disorders among high-performance female athletes, which are both necessary and serious. These academic endeavours have contributed to the development of the performance of female artistic swimmers. However, it is also worth noting that the studies focusing on female swimmers also prompt a deeper contemplation of how the 'knowledge' surrounding 'beauty' and 'correctness' in artistic swimming is constructed based on the physicality and experiences of these female athletes. The exceptional performance of female athletes is closely linked to 'scientific training methods' and 'rigorous dietary requirements.' Nevertheless, these very methods that lead to their success also increase their susceptibility to body image anxiety and eating disorders (Holt, 2020).

Aesthetic biases have been shown as a critical factor leading to social pressures on female athletes (Adams et al., 2005; Fink et al., 2016; Krane et al., 2012; Steinfeldt, Carter et al., 2011a; Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek et al., 2011b). For example, female athletes in aesthetic sports, such as rhythmic gymnastics, artistic swimming, and figure skating, are more prone to experience dissatisfaction with their body image (Whitten, 2021).

Meanwhile, males engaged in the aforementioned sports are often labelled pejoratively as 'sissy' or 'effeminate' (Evans and Davies, 2000; Haltom and Worthen, 2014; Polasek and Roper, 2011). Though the majority of current literature employs qualitative methods to explore the experiences of athletes of different sexes in aesthetic sports, none have yet been conducted from a historical or genealogical perspective to reveal how the historical development of a particular sport has led to the gradual dominance of one sex and the formation of mainstream societal aesthetic biases.

We would therefore argue that artistic swimming could be regarded as a valuable lens for the genealogical study of the development of gender knowledge in a sport because of the lack of genealogical studies in this area (Barker-Ruchti, 2009; Bridel, 2015; Cox and Pringle, 2015; Cox and Pringle, 2012) and the historical development of the sport per se, which is filled with discourse events related to gender, as discussed in the subsequent findings section.

Methodology

Notes on genealogy

Foucauldian theories have been extensively employed and appreciated in sociological studies of sports, as evidenced in a range of scholarly works, which, for instance, examine the mechanisms of the intertwined relationship between knowledge, power and discourse as well as the regulation and control of athletic bodies (Crocket, 2015; Hokowhitu, 2013; Markula, 2004; Markula and Pringle, 2006a, 2006b; Sawicki, 1991; Shogan, 2002; Thorpe, 2008). However, as Cox and Pringle (2012; 2015) observe, the specific application of Foucault's genealogical methodology within sports research remains relatively uncommon, while their investigation into the development of women's football in New Zealand provides an exceptional case.

Foucauldian genealogical analysis facilitates the interpretation of events by guiding researchers to delve into the various discourses prevalent before and during an event (Markula and Pringle, 2006a, 2006b; Markula and Silk, 2011). Eventually, it facilitates an examination of 'the struggles, displacements, and processes of repurposing out of which contemporary practices emerged, and to show the historical conditions of existence upon which present-day practices depend' (Garland, 2014, p. 373). In this context, genealogical studies seek to unveil the gender politics embedded in the development of the sport and the mechanisms by which female discourse takes the dominant position while male discourse, in contrast, is excluded in the production of the knowledge of artistic swimming.

It is notable that Foucault distinguishes the archaeological approach from the genealogical approach and contends that the former focuses on actual forms of subjectivity in specific historical contexts while the latter emphasises the processes through which these forms arise and change over time (Rose, 2011). This is to say that, for the investigation of artistic swimming, archaeological inquiry might, for example, explore the relative rarity of male artistic swimmers in certain historical periods compared to the celebrated performance of female swimmers. By contrast, genealogical inquiry investigates how and why female swimmers take the dominant position in

artistic swimming despite the historical restrictions on females' participation in aquatic sports (Knechtle et al., 2012).

A genealogical analysis is usually employed to understand our present reality and the forms of truth and subjectivity to which the present reality gives rise through investigating the processes of 'descent' and 'emergence' of a particular case (Foucault, 1984, pp. 80–86). The study of 'descent' involves identifying the unique aspect of a trait or a concept as a result of myriad events that they 'thank to' and 'against' (Foucault, 1984, p. 81) by focusing on the way in which discourses and bodies articulate social change within a period in history (Markula and Pringle, 2006a, 2006b). In this context, the study of 'descent' in our study investigates how female swimmers were constituted through scientific, media, and artistic swimming discourses that justified their embodied participation. In contrast, the investigation of 'emergence', as the second part of our study, embraces a study of 'a particular stage of forces' for the tendency of this case (Foucault, 1984, p. 83). More precisely, the analysis of 'emergence' focuses on the productive workings of power. In accordance with the definition of the two pivotal concepts of genealogical analysis, our study examines the historical workings and shifts in the relations of power connected to two types of gender discourse in the development of artistic swimming. The first is the marginalisation of the male voice, while the other refers to the accumulation of female discourse, which frames and eventually legitimises female dominance in the sport.

Despite the challenge, Foucauldian genealogical analysis is recognised as the most suitable approach for studying the dynamics of gender discourses in artistic swimming. In conjunction with the analysis of descent and emergence, this analysis is centred on how power is produced and shaped (Cox and Pringle, 2012). In this case, applying this method could illuminate the power struggle between male and female discourses at various historical stages, which arguably results in the current dominance of female discourse and the decline of male discourse in this sport.

It is argued that Foucault's (1972, p. 159) notion of the entanglement between power and 'all forms of knowledge' suggests not only the relation between the two concepts, which are crucial to and intangible in our daily life, but also the nature of power as an inevitable factor in both facilitating and constraining knowledge development. Therefore, the application of a Foucauldian genealogical approach, especially the concept of 'descent' and 'emergence,' in this study enables us to examine how female dominance in artistic swimming has been legitimised through the development of the female-only knowledge rooted in the sport's intricate but problematic practices – the power struggles between female and male swimmers.

Research data

Qualitative data from publications, media coverage, and websites of artistic swimming are collected to uncover the discursive factors that might contribute to the 'descent' and 'emergence' in the historical development of artistic swimming and the production of its gendered stereotype.

'Artistic swimming' and 'synchronised swimming' are employed as keywords for collecting data from various sources, which include publications, traditional media coverage of artistic swimming in different countries and a number of online platforms. The collected publications encompass both historical archives (for examples, please see Bean, 2005; Besford, 1971; British Swimming, 2023; Corsan, 1925; Day and Roberts, 2019; Syndor, 1998) and 'how to' books (e.g., Curtis, 1942; Daland, 2009; Fuller, 2016). Media coverage is collected from the UK, the USA, China and Japan (for examples, please see Kremer, 2015; Martín, 2023; Chen, 2006, 2016; Li, 2000; Xu, 2000; Zhang, 1994). Additional data is also collected from the websites of the International Olympic Committee (hereafter, the IOC), World Aquatics, and national governing bodies (hereafter, the NGBs) for artistic swimming in different countries, which offer insights into rules, athletes, events, the historical development of the sport in diverse context. Online material from forums and clubs such as Inside Synchro (a resource for artistic swimming), Aquabatix (specialising in innovative water entertainment projects), and Out to Swim (the UK's largest LGBTQ+aquatics club) also offers a variety of topics concerning artistic swimming.

The use of secondary data is in line with genealogical methodology, as Heaphy (2008) indicates that it enables a critical examination of the historical and discursive construction of knowledge and practices. By repeatedly reading through the research data, we have excluded irrelevant material, such as fixed routines or technical descriptions of difficulty levels of the sport. Instead, gender discourses, such as the ridicule of male swimmers and the praise of female swimmers, are kept and highlighted. Critical reflexivity is employed as an apparatus to understand and resolve uncertainties and awkwardness in the data (Ademolu, 2024). This reflexive process reminds us to regularly pose questions such as 'Why?' 'What if?' and 'So what?' to facilitate self-reflection and enhance analytical depth. Eventually, a comprehensive understanding of the secondary data is generated to underpin critical and complex discussions addressing the research question.

Through repeated readings of the qualitative data, there emerge two specific themes 1) the exclusion of male swimmers and 2) the development and eventual dominance of female discourse. The emergent two a priori themes explain our research objects and ensure the consistency between the research data and the theoretical foundation. Moreover, the themes achieve saturation at the data level and completeness of the theoretical categorisation (Morse, 2000). Data saturation suggests the sufficiency of our data for comprehensively understanding the research subject, while theoretical completeness confirms that this study is able to categorise research data into meaningful theoretical constructs.

Data analysis

Though Foucault offers methodological guidance, he neither provides a demonstration concerning the data analysis protocol nor elaborates explicit procedural guidelines for others to follow (Cox and Pringle, 2012). Nevertheless, our analysis, drawing on Foucault's (1978, p. 100) idea of 'the tactical polyvalence of discourse,' begins with systematically engaging with data by repeatedly reading the data to describe the content and characteristics of the discourse, for instance, what defines the feminine character of discourse in artistic swimming?

The analysis of archival documents and media coverage focuses on the linguistic side of the data, including vocabulary, wording, grammar, syntax, sentence coherence and rhetorical devices such as metaphors and similes. The subsequent intertextual analysis enables us to identify the thematic pattern developing from the material, for instance, how individuals interpret, utilise, and replicate the feminine discourse in artistic swimming with a focus on the production of gender knowledge of the sport.

The following step aims to reveal the role of discourse in the production of gender ideology by connecting each theme to a particular aesthetic bias in artistic swimming, which contributes to the construction of gendered power. This stage incorporates asking ourselves questions such as: *What dominant groups create power structures through these discourses? Who benefits from these representations, and who is marginalised?* (AC Sparkes, 2014).

Based on the constructivist ontology of the study, these questions are addressed by examining the coverage of artistic swimming events, the portrayal of diverse groups and the way in which these events and participants are framed. Drawing from Foucault's notion of 'descent' and 'emergence', the subsequent data analysis is centred on the production of power, concerning the two sexes in particular, in artistic swimming through looking at artistic swimming discourse, which influences the participation of male and female swimmers, within broader sociocultural contexts. Moreover, we also attempt to situate these findings within the broader sociopolitical movements that have shaped gender discourses, including the feminist movements of the 1960s, the LGBTQ+ rights movements of the 1970s, and recent efforts by the Olympic Games to promote gender equality. These interconnected discourses provide critical insights into the historical and social conditions that underpin the development of artistic swimming.

Methodological reflexivity

It is widely acknowledged that a researcher's background can introduce bias, potentially affecting the validity of data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). In this study, our limited experience in participating in artistic swimming poses a potential challenge to the epistemological rationale of qualitative methods, which emphasises understanding reality through the perspectives of participants in the phenomenon under investigation (Bukamal, 2022; Yip, 2024). However, it can be argued that the researcher's outsider identity is also a de facto contributor to the study, for it could foster our caution and sensitivity to potential issues, such as cultural insensitivities that insiders may overlook during data collection (Ademolu, 2024). Moreover, our outsider status may also enable us to be more careful in data analysis, in particular in refining our understanding of the jargon and terminology in artistic swimming. This deliberate effort not only enhances our understanding of the data but also strengthens the validity of the findings.

Findings and discussion

Two types of gender discourse are identified in the development of artistic swimming. The first is the marginalisation of male voices, while the second concerns the

accumulation of female discourse, which frames and ultimately legitimises female dominance within the sport.

The exclusion of male swimmers

Though artistic swimming is commonly labelled as a 'feminine sport', it was initially open to both sexes when it was introduced to society. Over time, nevertheless, male swimmers were gradually marginalised and eventually excluded from the sport as a result of two key factors: a) the official restriction on their participation and b) pervasive stigmatisation, which jointly contributed to gender segregation in artistic swimming.

The official restriction placed on male swimmers

During the first half of the twentieth century, male and female swimmers were all recognised and portrayed as eligible participants in artistic swimming. Katharine Curtis, widely recognised as the pioneer of artistic swimming, consistently presented the sport as a mixed activity, emphasising that it provided equal benefits equally for men and women alike (Jahanmir, 2017). In *Synchronized Swimming: An American History*, Bean (2005, p. 17) documents the first artistic swimming (known as synchronised swimming at the moment) event on 27th May 1939, as follows:

The competitive events were open to male and female swimmers, with no distinction... Routines are judged (only) on timing, style, difficulty and composition.

As indicated in the quotation, the inaugural artistic swimming competition in 1939 emphasised timing, style, difficulty, and routine composition rather than prioritising the gender traits of the swimmers. This is in line with the initial purpose of artistic swimming, which was identified and conceived as a mixed activity aimed at providing average swimmers with the opportunity to compete, enhance their sense of rhythm, and develop their swimming skills (Bean, 2005).

Despite the initial preference, a sexist account was then included in artistic swimming discourse and male swimmers were consequently barred from competitions:

The next year [1941], the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) swimming ruled out mixed competition, and until recent years, men had no chance to compete. (Bean, 2005, p. 20)

But when, the following year [1941], synchro was adopted as a sport in the US by the AAU, it took the decision to separate men and women. This brought it in line with all the other sports the AAU oversaw, in which men were not pitted against women. The AAU believed that it was not right for scantily clad men and women to cavort together in the water. (Kremer, 2015)

As stated in the quotation, it was the official discourse from the AAU that led to the segregation of the two sexes in artistic swimming when the aquatic pastime 'was adopted as a sport' in 1941. During the official sportification of artistic swimming,

the mixed competition was sacrificed, or abandoned if you like, because it was 'believed' by the AAU, which employed ethical discourse to condemn one of the main features of the sport as 'not right'. It is also highlighted by Kremer (2015) that such adoption of the AAU's ruling, despite contradicting the original feature of the sport as a mixed event, became normalised as an appropriate and necessary move that was in line with the AAU's aim of 'creating standards in amateur sport' (Seida, 1998).

Following the termination of the mixed events, men's participation in artistic swimming diminished due to the lack of sponsorship opportunities, which was largely concentrated on female swimmers, whose attractive physique and trendy swimsuits were considered more marketable (Whitney-Wei, 1992, p. 36). Eventually, 'with only minor competitor activity and absent any sponsor interest or bids for future men's competitions, the men's events simply disappeared' (Bean, 2005, p. 53). It was not until the Extraordinary Congress of FINA (now World Aquatics) in 2014 that mixed duets were approved in both the technical and free competitions, marking the first official recognition of men's participation in major events, albeit smaller-scale competitions such as the Men's Cup Synchro and the European Championships (FINA, 2017).

In December 2022, it was announced by World Aquatics that the IOC had granted permission for the inclusion of a maximum number of two men to compete in the team event of artistic swimming in the Paris 2024 Olympics (Gunston, 2023). Although the inclusion of these two male swimmers in the eight-person event is optional and dependent on the coach's choice, it is welcomed and pronounced by the owner of the International Olympic Movement as a watershed policy change 'enabling gender parity in the sport' (Martín, 2023). Unfortunately, no men competed in artistic swimming at the Paris Olympics, which though is known as the first gender-equal edition of the Games, where the 96 artistic swimmers from 18 nations competed, all were women (Dell'Anna, 2024).

The stigmatisation of male swimmers

Aside from the restrictions imposed by the official rules of the sport, which have been relaxed to a certain degree nowadays, men's artistic swimming is also constrained by a range of unwritten rules, in particular, the stigmatisation of male artistic swimmers. Similar to male ballet dancers, who are often heavily denigrated as effeminate, male artistic swimmers are not only viewed as peripheral participants in the female-dominated aquatic sport but are also socially portrayed and so perceived as contradictory to the stereotype of masculinity due to the sport's feminine (Alsarve, 2021; Kane, 1995). The 1984 *Saturday Night Live* sketch vividly illustrates the mockery of male artistic swimmers, portraying them as objects of ridicule, often labelled as 'sissies' or 'too feminine' due to their involvement in a sport predominantly associated with women (Gard, 2008; Mennesson, 2009; Rouse, 2008). In the sketch, actors Martin Short and Harry Shearer dressed in lifejackets, bathing caps, and nose plugs, performing an apparently ridiculous routine (Guest et al., 1984).

Furthermore, male swimmers are also confronted with stigmatisation rooted in entrenched gender stereotypes within artistic swimming. One of the earliest male artistic swimmers in China reflects on this experience, stating:

If you were a boy, you (are expected to) do things that boys should do; artistic swimming was considered a girls' activity, and if you did it, people would look at you strangely, not to mention that we were the trailblazers (of the sport) at that time. And everyone looks at you up and down with judgy eyes, thinking you are not a man.

In the quotation, the male swimmer recalls his experience of facing judgement from others, who undermines his identity as a man. This value judgement of male artistic swimmers is rooted in a) the traditional expectations of male role behaviour and b) the gender stereotypes of artistic swimming. It could be argued that the former imposes the label of the male swimmer as an 'abnormal' member of the sex group, viewing his behaviour as deviant, while the latter forges his identity as an alien participant within the sport. As one of the 'trailblazers' of male artistic swimming in China, his experience resonates Davies and Ramsay's (2024, p.1) comment regarding Bill May, the spearhead of men's artistic swimming in the US that 'It's not athletic ability which has prevented him from achieving that goal to date, but a far more fundamental issue: he's a man'.

To this day, the traditional and structural gender constraints, continue to profoundly influence the experience of male swimmers. Dennis Gonzalez, a 20-year-old who has won three gold medals at the European Championships, has been a target for homophobic attacks for years. Although Gonzalez ignores the attacks directed at him, he insists that he 'will not remain silent if ... the remarks of these homophobes affect the younger generation's decision to participate in or quit artistic swimming' (Zeigler, 2024).

Based on the experiences of the male swimmers discussed, it can be argued that their exclusion from artistic swimming is the result of both rule changes and social stigmatisation. The official discourse, such as artistic swimming rules, silences male swimmers and marginalises their individual experiences. Meanwhile, social stigmatisation further diminishes support for and appreciation of male participation in the sport.

The development and eventual dominance of female discourse in artistic swimming

In contrast to the diminishing voice of male swimmers, the female discourse has remarkably been reinforced throughout the development of artistic swimming and has eventually secured a dominant position in the sport. It is argued that, as demonstrated subsequently, there are four key discursive events through which the dominance of female discourse is established. Specifically, the first is the legitimisation of women's access to artistic swimming; the second refers to the idealisation of women's performance in the aquatic rhythmic routine; in the third event, artistic swimming is constructed as a 'women-only' sport; and the fourth and final event involves the dominance and diffusion of female knowledge and its influence.

The first discursive event: women's access to artistic swimming

Prior to the twentieth century, women were largely excluded from participating in water sports in both the West and the East. In Western societies, the Victorian female stereotype emphasised the social limitations, emotional sensitivity and medical vulnerability of women and eventually reinforced the barriers between female and aquatic sports (Vertinsky, 1987). In the East, particularly in China, women were ideologically conditioned to remain confined to domestic roles, adhering and obedient to male authority—be it their father, husband or, after the death of both, their son. Chinese women were also subjected to physically oppressive practices such as foot-binding, which contributed to 'hyper-feminised' female and their exclusion from physical activities (Fan, 1997). This is to say, women in both Western and Eastern societies were commonly framed, in both rhetoric and physical terms, as the antithesis of sport and viewed as incompatible with competitive, exhausting and dangerous pursuits.

The 1920s marks a significant watershed in the history of women's rights in the US. During that time, women not only became integral to the workforce in manufacturing industries (Social Security, 1942) but also achieved women's suffrage in 1920. Alongside these social-political changes, there was a transformation in societal consensus regarding women's participation in sport. For instance, it is stated in a sports magazine titled 'Physical Fitness for Business Girls' in February 1920 that

Physical education, especially when conducted in classes, develops a degree of good sportsmanship... Two evenings are given up to gymnastic work, and the third to aesthetic and folk dancing, in which many of the girls are becoming experts. (Jordan Whitney-Wei, 1992, p. 26)

In contrast to the aforementioned disapproval of women's involvement in sport before the twentieth century, the quotation depicts a different picture of girls in sport, who not only are entitled as 'experts' in physical activities such as gymnastics and folk dancing but also are portrayed as embodiment of 'good sportsmanship'. That suggests that the author accentuates the potential for women's participation in sports, those characterised by aesthetic qualities in particular.

It is interesting to note that medical science discourse is also employed as the endorsement of the change in the attitude towards women and sport. It is stated by George Corsan (1925, p.113), 'who did more than any single person to popularise swimming in North America during the first 25 years' of the twentieth century'(ISHOF, 2000), that

(w)omen are all frail and delicate, that speed and distance swimming put too much of a strain on women's heart. But, contests for women in fancy swimming avoid heart strain while adding spectator appeal to a beneficial activity.

Despite the contemporary criticism that Corsan's statement might attract – particularly due to his assertion of the negative impact speed and distance swimming on women, who are frail and delicate in his view, the Canadian water sports enthusiast not only associates women with a specific type of aquatic physical activity deemed physically beneficial but also introduces the concept of 'contests. This idea is contrastingly different

from the Victorian stereotype of women, even if it is limited to contests of ‘fancy swimming’, one of the bynames for artistic swimming, including ornamental swimming, stunt swimming, or water ballet. These terms, as we argue, underscore the cultural and aesthetic features of the sport as its defining characteristic.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there were a number of feminine features, for instance, *beautiful*, *dramatic*, *ornamental* and *entertaining*, accented in the artistic swimming discourse, by which the sport was recognised as a physical activity that prioritises water skills and teamwork over physical attributes like endurance and speed (Curtis, 1942; Syndor, 1998). Thus, it can be argued that the contest at the early stage of artistic swimming, or the ‘contests for women in fancy swimming’ as Corsan describes, shares the feminine quality that continues to characterise the sport today, albeit with less emphasis on the physical capability of female swimmers.

The accentuation of femininity in artistic swimming discourse is further evidenced in the campaigns spearheaded by the sport’s pioneers, who established the initial impression of it. Katharine Curtis, who is well recognised as a trailblazer of artistic swimming, introduced the sport to a great number of American universities (Bean, 2005, pp. 7–9). In 1923, she established one of the first collegiate women’s swimming clubs in America, the Tarpon Club (Allison, 2012, p. 19). In 1934, she founded ‘the Kay Curtis Modern Mermaids’, a group comprising over 30 swimmers from the Tarpon Club and other affiliations.

Both the floating routines and rhythmic swimming routines were performed to a twelve-piece band. The audiences, seated on both sides of the pool area, were estimated at more than ten-thousand people for each performance. The Century of Progress Publicity Division’s news release of August 24, 1934, [stated], performing ten complicated routines in perfect unison, thirty-five modern mermaids are revealing to patrons of the Lagoon Theater at the Chicago World’s Fair, the highly modern art of synchronized swimming. (Jordan Whitney-Wei, 1992, p. 36)

According to the biography of Katharine Curtis, ‘the Modern Mermaids’ not only left a lasting impression on ‘the ten-thousand people’ who witnessed the unique audio-visual spectacle but also presented this emerging and performative activity to a wider audience who had never experienced it through coverage by *the Century of Progress Publicity Division’s news*. The event featured various elements, including the ‘thirty-five modern mermaids’ and ‘complicated routines in perfect unison as well as the coordination between the rhythm of live music and performers’ moves. These aspects led the event to be described as ‘a highly modern form of art of artistic swimming’ by the reporter.

This event is also recognised as the debut of the term ‘synchronised swimming’, which was the previous name of artistic swimming and was created by Norman Ross, the live announcer during that night. This term subsequently became an umbrella label for a range of similar aquatic physical activities, such as water ballet and aquacades, which idealises the image of the mermaid – a figure commonly associated with feminine, elegance, graceful, cheerful, non-competitiveness (Syndor, 1998).

It is therefore argued that Curtis’ idea of Modern Mermaids was not only a commercial success but also a pivotal moment in the history of the sport because it legitimised

women's participation in artistic swimming by embedding it within the created rhetoric framework of the contemporary mermaid, a symbol that hints and resonated with the cultural and aesthetic ideals of its participants.

The second discursive event: the production of ideal performers

Evolving from its origins as a novel component of swimming classes in the 1930s, water ballet and aquacades were soon enthusiastically adopted by the public. In the United States, the popularity of the sport was significantly influenced by Esther Williams, a Hollywood phenomenon known for her appearance in a series of 'aqua musicals' films in the 1940s and early 1950s. Inspired by her performances, numerous artistic swimming clubs were established, and regional associations began to take shape (Bean, 2005, pp. 14–15). During the period spanning the 1940s and 1950s, women were gradually assigned the dominant position in artistic swimming as the ideal performers, which is a transformation recognised as the second discursive event in the historical development of the sport.

From 1940 onward, AAU undertook its significant endeavour to formalise artistic swimming as a sport rather than merely an aquatic pastime. Nevertheless, scepticism abounded regarding whether the water skills and choreography intrinsic to artistic swimming could be objectively evaluated. It was so commented by Pete Dejardins, an American Olympic diver and International Swimming Hall of Famer, that 'when the AAU committee tried to fit synchronised swimming into its competitive bracket, they hard to form some basis for judging...' (Bean, 2005, p. 26). Some even argued that artistic swimming should remain, at least primarily, as a form of performance and be kept away from competitiveness.

Despite the debate surrounding its rules and competitive structure, AAU-organised competitions provided female swimmers with opportunities to showcase their physique figure, water skills, teamwork and aquatic formation to the public. For instance, water ballet performers were depicted in two 1938 photographs in the *Chicago Tribune* in their paired stroking and floating formations. Accompanying the pictures, Stanley Brauning, a coach at Chicago's Madinah Athletic Club, remarked that:

One look at the lovely young women should convince you that [synchronized] swimming is a sure-fire beauty builder. The rhythmic exercise develops the streamlined well-proportioned figure. (Brauning, 1938)

In the quotation, a subtle yet powerful connection is constructed between the female physique and artistic swimming, which is identified as 'a sure-fire beauty builder'. Coach Brauning also highlights and specifies the physical benefits that women may receive from participating in the sport, in particular its role in developing their 'streamlined, well-proportioned figure'. More importantly, by identifying female swimmers as persuasive evidence for the aforementioned physical benefits, Brauning indirectly frames the female body as the ideal physique for the aquatic sport, which is often associated with feminine and glamorous swimming attire.

The effect of the feminine physique in the popularisation of the sport is also evidenced in the comment of Gill Van den Broeck (1959, p. 24), who views the annual tour as 'a

triumph of technique assisted by the girls' good figures, their spontaneous smiles and expert showmanship'. Taken together with Baruninger's comment, this emphasis on feminine qualities within the portrayal of artistic swimming reinforces the female body as the ideal physique of an artistic swimmer.

In essence, these discourses produce a body of knowledge producing the consistency between women and artistic swimming. Such knowledge not only reinforces the legitimacy of women's participation in artistic swimming – portrayed as a sport that refines female physique – but also renders a biological advantage to women, whose streamlined and well-proportioned figure would effortlessly convince the public about the benefit and beauty of the sport. Eventually, this feminine-centric narrative, which emerged during the second discursive event, underpins and amplifies the significance of women in artistic swimming and lays the foundation for their monopolistic position within the sport.

The third discursive event: the construction of a 'women-only' sport

Despite the aforementioned changes to the rules of artistic swimming, the AAU introduced another significant modification with regard to the sport in 1954, which diminished its artistic elements while enhancing its competitive nature. Consequently, those who were dedicated to the artistic dimension of the sport were driven away from the AAU and established the International Academy of Aquatic Art in response (Bean, 2005, p. 55).

At the international level, the FINA (1953) became involved in the discussions concerning the rules of artistic swimming and, in 1960, announced its own edition (Syndor, 1998). The FINA rules not only specified the sex of participants but also addressed a number of other issues, such as attire and competition format. Thus, the international governing body of aquatic sport effectively aligned with the AAU by codifying artistic swimming as female only, at least at the international level, with its official discourse in embracing the sport into its roster.

Since its inclusion in FINA's programme, artistic swimming has witnessed substantial development across various dimensions. These include a rise in the number of participants and organisations, the development of support for elite athletes, increased financial support, and a growing body of research (Hall, 2002; Kearney, 1973; Logan, 2012). This development has greatly elevated the skill level and performance of female swimmers. In return, outstanding female swimmers have also shared their experiences and expertise through publications such as *Coaching Synchronized Swimming Effectively* (Buskirk, 1987) and *Better Synchronized Swimming for Girls* (Chiefari and Wightman, 1981) alongside other means.

Meanwhile, there have also been a range of programmes launched by organisations such as FINA's Artistic Swimming Coaches Programme, the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women, and the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. These initiatives not only guarantee women's access to artistic swimming but also systematically reproduce a discourse regarding the sport's eligible participants (Besford, 1971; Gundling and White, 1988; FINA, 2021; Jahanmir, 2016; Kearney, 1973; Swim England, 2022; Syndor, 1998; Wen, 2007). In essence, these collective efforts, both direct and indirect, have produced a truth with regard to the eligible participants of the aquatic sport. In other words, this global

network of artistic swimming is thoroughly permeated by diverse official discourses and leads to a framework in which the knowledge of female exclusiveness and dominance in artistic swimming is pronounced, disseminated, institutionalised and eventually normalised. Women are consequently positioned as the rightful, if not the only, protagonists of artistic swimming.

In sum, it is evidenced in the third discourse event that a discursive network of a variety of discourses at both organisational and individual levels has forged the truth concerning the appropriate gender of the participant in artistic swimming through establishing a knowledge system that normalises female exclusivity within artistic swimming. Such a discursive network consolidates the dominance of female discourse by promoting and institutionalising the knowledge of female exclusiveness and, consequently, rendering it both legitimate and seemingly natural.

The fourth discursive event: the diffusion of artistic swimming knowledge

Artistic swimming made its Olympic debut in the 1984 Games, unsurprisingly, as a woman-only event. A total of 24 teams participated in the inaugural Olympic event with Japan as the sole representative from Asia, to which artistic swimming was introduced after World War II. Miwako Motoyoshi, the Japanese solo artistic swimmer, won the bronze medal for her outstanding performance (IOC, 1984).

Four years later, Mikako Kotani, who made history as the first female flagbearer for Team Japan at the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, secured two bronze medals in solo and duet events respectively in the Seoul Games (IOC, 1988). Mikako was soon idolised by the Japanese media and became a household name in Japan (Swimming World, 2024).

In 2001, Japan's duet team took home the gold medal at the 9th World Aquatics Championships under Masayo Imura, widely regarded as the 'Godmother of Japanese Artistic Swimming'. Imura's renowned high-intensity and precision-oriented training philosophy contributed to this success, reinforcing the association between training discourses, media narrative, and the portrayal of the female body and female experience in Japan (Takako Iida, 2010). Consequently, this discursive event further solidified the stable relationship between women and artistic swimming, which includes not only 'a sure-fire beauty builder' and Japanese mermaids but also the intensive and meticulous training that forged their glamorous and captivating beauty.

In 1982, China sent a group of young girls to Japan for a five-day artistic training camp in order to prepare for the 1988 Olympics due to the lack of a systemic training programme for the sport in China. Two years later, China established its first national artistic swimming team comprising 12 girls (Wen, 2007). Considering the female-exclusive identity of artistic swimming in Japan at the time, it could be argued that the sport was inherently labelled a 'women-only' one in China from its inception and remained so until the recent development.

Since then, artistic swimming in China has evolved into a potential contributor to China's *Olympic Glory Plan*, a state-driven strategic guideline for the development of Chinese elite sport. Elite swimmers are carefully selected, meticulously trained and polished, *or, perhaps more candidly, utilised* in accordance with the political task of the Chinese elite sport system: to win glory for the country. It is so commented by

Zhang Xiaohuan, the head coach of the Chinese national artistic swimming team, on the physical traits of her swimmers that

Huang Xuechen is strong and stands out as a distinctive solo performer; Sun Wenyan is diligent and has the best basic skills; Wu Yiwen and Chang Si excel in lifts, as the swimmer on top in the platform lift, with respective characteristics for Yiwen is slender and has experience in tumbling while Si is extremely limber.

Needless to mention Jiang Wenwen and Jiang Tingting, who are irreplaceable, like featured actors in a movie, they have slender and flexible legs, supple joints and God-given flexibility, which enable them to perform movements that are impossible for ordinary swimmers, and their petite feet speak for themselves in the water (Li, 2011)

In the quotation, Zhang details the ideal physique of an elite artistic swimmer, who is expected to be strong, slender and limber with long and flexible legs, supple joints and petite feet. She further elaborates on the way in which the 'ideal features' of female swimmers are utilised in artistic swimming to facilitate their extraordinary performance and fluid movements in the water. It is argued that the relationship between these physical attributes and the expected performance of female swimmers reinforces the stable association between the sport and the female physique because these performances, enabled and determined by such physical traits with female features, further stabilised the body of artistic swimming knowledge produced with this enduring connection.

Furthermore, the performances of female swimmers not only demonstrate, albeit wordlessly, their physical advantage in artistic swimming, particularly in terms of flexibility and artistry but also produce the general public's understanding of the sport in China. This understanding is largely constructed through a female-only portrayal of artistic swimming by Chinese media, which tends to utilise gender rhetoric, framing artistic swimmers with metaphors such as lotus, lily, mermaids, pixie, goddess, and other expressions deeply rooted in feminine connotations within the Chinese cultural context (Chen, 2006, 2016; Li, 2000; Xu, 2000; Zhang, 1994). These metaphorical accounts, widely witnessed in Chinese newspapers, establish a delicate yet powerful connection between the ideal artistic swimmer and traditional female image in China. More essentially, these vivid descriptions also reinforce artistic swimming as an inherently feminine sport by promulgating the female-exclusive depiction of the sport in China. This portrait, which intertwines with traditional female knowledge/power produced through the development of artistic swimming, subtly makes a web of dominant cultural discourse that perpetuates gender bias, thereby influencing men's participation in the sport.

In the cases of the development of artistic swimming in Japan and China, it can be argued that the stereotypical image of artistic swimmers, who seamlessly combine technical excellence with glittering smiles and stunning femininity, has solidified and unified the artistic swimming knowledge across both Eastern and Western contexts. The dominance of female knowledge in artistic swimming, as demonstrated in this fourth discursive event, could be recognised as a by-product of the modernisation of the sport. This knowledge has been systemically produced, disseminated, and adopted as shared understandings across events, organisations, and cultural groups.

Female ascendancy in artistic swimming despite resistance

The preceding sections provide a genealogical analysis of the production of the status quo in artistic swimming by examining the construction of female-dominant knowledge and the concurrent exclusion, marginalisation, and suppression of male discourse. Building on this foundation, we would like to argue that the dominance of female power/knowledge in artistic swimming is not an inherent characteristic but a historical construct. It has evolved in response to shifting temporal and spatial contexts, including changes in gender relations, and has gradually been framed and normalised artistic swimming into a female-exclusive domain.

This dominant female-exclusive knowledge profoundly affects both male and female swimmers. For male swimmers, it is embodied in their exclusion from international-level competitions and the imposition of cultural biases that discourage, or perhaps more candidly condemn, their participation. Female swimmers, on the other hand, are subject to shaping their bodies and identities, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in alignment with the dominant female knowledge embedded within artistic swimming, a process that legitimises and reinforces these norms in return.

For instance, ex-Olympian artistic swimmer Mikako Kotani notes that, while her photographs in Japanese magazines have played a significant role in promoting artistic swimming in Japan, they have simultaneously shaped societal consensus regarding the 'appropriate image' of an artistic swimmer (Japan Times, 2022). In this context, her image, which accentuates her feminine qualities, acts as a de facto apparatus for the objectification of female artistic swimmers. Such objectification not only reinforces the association between the female body and artistic swimming but also encourages, if not persuades, young female swimmers, at least in Japan, to model their bodies after Kotani's example. Consequently, this has led to a self-imposed cycle of excessive training, anxiety over physical appearance, and performance-related stress.

Despite the long-standing structural constraints, some male swimmers have maintained their pursuit of artistic swimming, constituting a challenge to the prevailing norms and creating opportunities for change (Blythe, 2023). Their efforts represent a form of resistance against the entrenched gender dynamics of the sport (Marmet, 2019). After the announcement of the inclusion of male swimmers in the artistic swimming event in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Kenny Gaudet, an American male artistic swimmer, so remarks

I want to be proud of what I swim and what I achieve. The more I show I can have better results, do more and be better... then I can advocate more and show this is why men can be in this sport and this is why we should be allowed to do these things, but it's still not fully equal to the point of men in [all] the events that we can swim' (McCarvel, 2022, p.1)

Gaudet further states in the interview that, despite recent strides towards greater inclusivity, significant inequalities between genders persist, particularly at the elite level. This is to say that the female power/knowledge continues to dominate, though some progress has been achieved through the resistance of, if not the rebels from, the other side.

It is also worth noting that additional forms of resistance have emerged from the LGBTQ+ community, where gender-inclusive aquatics clubs or artistic swimming teams have been established to offer comprehensive artistic swimming programmes for those seeking a welcoming and inclusive, rather than women-only, environment. Clubs such as Out to Swim⁴ and the Subversive Sirens⁵ illustrate these efforts, with the majority of their members are from the LGBTQ+ community. Central to these teams is a commitment to equality and mutual respect, irrespective of any difference in age, sexual orientation, gender, faith, ethnic origin, nationality, and other factors.

Notably, several significant but still limited tournaments have been organised, like the Pink Flamingo in Gay Games⁶ and the IGLA LGBTQ+ Aquatics Championships⁷. The increase in the diversity in artistic swimming discourse, embodied by these events alongside the clubs, represents a courageous challenge to the prevalent discourse and the stereotypical portrayal of the sport. However, such discursive practises remain relatively peripheral and precarious in comparison with the long-established feminine dominance and the taken-for-granted female-centric regime of artistic swimming.

Conclusion

This study examines the current predominance of women in artistic swimming and its association with shifts in scientific, media, and artistic swimming discourses. Transformations within scientific discourse facilitated women's entry into aquatic sports, while changes in media discourse fostered the connection between women's physiques and artistic swimming, enabling female swimmers to distinguish themselves aesthetically in the sport. Concurrently, developments in artistic swimming discourse have, for an extended period, systematically excluded men from participation in international events.

Guiding by the concept of 'descent' and 'emergence' of Foucauldian genealogical analysis, the emergence of each discourse event is accompanied by displacements and repurposing. These sifts have significantly shaped artistic swimming and have highlighted the historical conditions on which today's artistic swimming is contingent.

Moreover, these discursive practices have driven a transformation in the gender dynamics within artistic swimming, evolving from a period of shared participation by men and women to the current dominance of women in the sport. We contend that artistic swimming has provided a significant platform for women to demonstrate their athletic prowess and showcase their bodily artistry, which challenges historical constraints on female participation in aquatic sports. However, the resulting dominance of women within the sport has, conversely, led to the marginalisation of the experiences of men and other genders.

Thus, it is proposed that future research may investigate the formation and dissemination of discursive practices surrounding other genders in artistic swimming, and explore how these dynamics manifest in other sports. Such inquiry would contribute to a more inclusive understanding of gendered experiences and representations within sport.

Another area for improvement may include the inclusion of additional original sources that highlight the discursive marginalisation of men in artistic swimming. However, incorporating primary data collection to explore male marginalisation in this sport may extend beyond the scope and objectives of this study. Therefore, we suggest that

future studies look into the experience of male marginalisation in artistic swimming to further enrich the body of research surrounding this subject.

For now, however, it is sufficient to conclude that the merit of this study lies in its contribution to the knowledge about the gendered history of artistic swimming and the critical reflection on the need for cultural and practical change within the sport. It encourages further research into the experiences of diverse genders in artistic swimming and other sports, advocating for a more inclusive approach to participation and representation in sport.

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Notes

1. The term ‘sexual stereotypes’ is used within the framework of biological determinism, which asserts that gender differences ‘can be discerned through sex chromosomes, gonads, and reproductive organs’ (Zuk and Simmons, 2018, p. 121). The term ‘feminine stereotypes’ is preferred over ‘sexual stereotypes’ to emphasise that gender stereotypes in sports arise from the physiological distinctions between the sexes.
2. Following Foucauldian genealogy, ‘female discourse’ refers to a series of discursive practices centred on women in artistic swimming, which are associated with scientific discourse, media discourse, and the discourse of the artistic swimming event itself. These practices systematically and inherently produce the social stereotype that artistic swimming is exclusive to women.
3. Following Foucauldian genealogy, ‘male discourse’ refers to a series of discursive practices centred on men in artistic swimming, which are intertwined with regulations, notions of masculinity, and stigmatisation. These practices hinder the general public’s understanding of the value and significance of male participation in artistic swimming.
4. Out To Swim is an aquatics club for adults based in London, Brighton, and Bristol. Founded in 1992 by a small band of enterprising swimmers from the LGBTQ+ community, they offer a comprehensive programme for those wishing to enjoy swimming in a welcoming and inclusive environment. <https://www.outtoswim.org/>.

5. The Subversive Sirens are a Minnesota-based Synchronized swimming team dedicated to Black Liberation, radical body acceptance, equity in aquatics, and queer visibility. <https://www.facebook.com/SubversiveSirens/>.
6. In 1982, the Gay Games were born in San Francisco. By 1990, the Games included what would become one of its most popular events: Pink Flamingo, a show where serious, competitive swimmers let loose, get silly, and put on outrageous costumes to perform a hybrid of a high school talent show, drag extravaganza, party, Ballet show and synchronized swimming competition. <https://gggdl2023.org/en/disciplines/pinkflamingo>.
7. The IGLA Championships are the world LGBTQ+ aquatic championship hosted annually across the globe. Founded in 1987, the championships aim to create a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ athletes and allies to participate in aquatics sports and foster a sense of community through the love of water. <https://london2023.org/>.

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