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Swimming Through Ambivalence: The Paradox of Vigilant Coping in Female College Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Three decades of research into disordered eating in sports have revealed contradictory results, with athletes considered both at risk but also protected from eating problems. To contribute insight into the complexities of existing literature, this study examines how female college swimmers in the US experience food and their bodies in athletic, non-athletic, and digital media contexts. Drawing on 16 in-depth interviews, this study finds that these athletes experience contradictory ideals, especially in the domains of health and online self-presentation. When faced with such tensions, they often seek resolution through heightened discipline and attention towards controlling the body, a phenomenon that I call vigilant coping. While vigilant coping can provide some satisfaction and respite, it often exacerbates confusion and reproduces anxieties. As a result, a predominant strategy for resolving ambivalence becomes a source of additional distress around food and body. The women in this study show how athletic contexts contribute to the paradox of vigilant coping but also reveal creative ways of coping that go beyond vigilance. These findings are particularly important given the low success of disordered eating treatments and urgency towards improving preventative efforts.

Keywords: eating disorders; athletics; vigilance; coping; ambivalence

eating and why it remains a difficult syndrome to treat.

Participants revealed that health and online self-presentation were two domains that entangle competing discourses and values, thus producing contradictory forces that lead to experiences of ambivalence regarding their body. Faced with states of in-between-ness, participants commonly engage in vigilant coping, where they seek knowledge and strategies to improve their capacity to control their body. However, in a paradoxical twist, vigilant coping reproduces new contradictions that perpetuate a cycle of anxieties. This intriguing phenomenon is present in other contemporary contexts and behavioral disorders, where remedies for destructive behaviors become complicit in the circuits they were meant to treat. The women in this study show how athletic contexts contribute to the paradox of vigilant coping but also reveal creative ways of coping that go beyond vigilance. The term “vigilant coping” appears in literature to describe a psychophysiological state of alertness and preparation, typically with regards to the anticipation racial discrimination, and it has been adapted for the purposes of this paper (Hines et al. 2018).

This study also shows the productive value of ambivalence in understanding how women relate to their bodies. Ambivalence complicates dualistic binaries, revealing how oppositions often coexist and produce anxieties. For the women in this study, ambivalence describes a questioning state: Am I good? Am I healthy? Who do I want to be? Why do I want what I want? What are the best choices I can make in my situation? The answers to these questions reveal dissonant imperatives. The way these women cope with such contradictions can inform our grasp of the cultural pressures and discourses that produce disordered eating at ever-increasing rates. These findings are particularly important given the low success of disordered eating treatments and urgency towards improving preventative efforts (Berg et al. 2019; Linardon 2018).

The Contemporary Body

In a post-industrial capitalistic society, the body becomes the site for the naturalization of

Body dissatisfaction, a whirlwind of depreciation and shame, is an increasingly common phenomena experienced by many women in the United States (Galmiche et al. 2019; Tantleff-Dunn et al. 2011). In its most crystallized form, it manifests as eating disorders (ED) and subclinical disordered eating, which encompass body practices like diets, cosmetics, and fitness. Media is commonly cited as a primary cause for eating problems among young women (Huang et al. 2020). However, to say that conformity to the media-driven thin ideal produces disordered eating is a reductive understanding of eating problems. Rather than adhering to a unidimensional desire for thinness, women are well-attuned to the abundant pressures of contemporary realities and work hard to resolve competing ideals related to their bodies. Their behaviors and ideologies, including those deemed “disordered,” reflect a contentious negotiation process within a world containing contradictory norms of health, beauty, athleticism and femininity.

Athletes may provide a productive lens to understand the logics of disordered eating as well as the pressures that produce it at ever-increasing rates. Current literature contains contradictory findings about this population, showing that they are both at further risk but also protected from eating problems (Smolak et al. 2000; Thompson and Sherman 2014). Swimmers seem to transcend the binary of norm and pathology, demonstrating behaviors and ideologies that may be interpreted as pathological in one context and successful in another (Thompson and Sherman 1999). By examining how female college swimmers perceive and relate to their bodies in athletic, non-athletic, and digital media contexts, this study provides a new perspective on disordered

power. The formation of “docile bodies,” which are passive, subjugated, and productive individuals capable of carrying out tasks of modern economic and social life, is not a disciplinary process enacted through violence. Rather, as Foucault (1977) describes, discipline operates through a dynamic network that embeds power within habitual discourses and norms. Individuals are shaped to carry out the tasks of modern economic and social life, sustaining existing power structures through self-discipline and self-surveillance (Pylypa 1998). Due to the immediate observability of the body and the necessity of the body for meaningful self-presentation in intersubjective contexts, the body is a potent site for social control to operate.

Since power is internalized and performed by the body, the body becomes laden with meaning. One particularly salient force is the ideal of biomedical health. Dumit (2012) describes how the rise of medicalization, biotechnology, and direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical marketing has crafted a feeling of inherent illness. Individuals are compelled to pursue the elusive goal of health; however, the health-seeker must coordinate different streams of information and negotiate resolutions when facts disagree. Thus, “health” itself takes on a contradictory nature: it is an unstable, socially produced concept but is also perceived as quantifiable and morally objective. Layered atop “health” are other norms of femininity and fitness, which coalesce and become integral to the shape and perception of bodies.

We cannot understand the way bodies are created in the contemporary age without considering the rise of Web 2.0 applications, or digital technologies like social media that allow for large numbers of users to create, manipulate, and share content (McFarland and Ployhart 2015). By centering user-generated content, applications such as Instagram and Facebook provide new affordances that give rise to prosumption, a mode of being that enmeshes production and consumption (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010). Prosumption posits that certain bodies and lifestyles are attainable ideals with agency and capital, and it is driven by predominantly young female influencers who set a “cultural script” for everyday digital

media users to take up (Abidin 2016). Since the social media economy favors certain aesthetics, prosumers who embody heteronormative, Eurocentric attractiveness and particular ideals of femininity gain more attention and success (Duffy 2017).

The Ambivalence and Contradiction of Disordered Eating

Disordered eating, an intensifying modern phenomenon recognized as both a psychiatric and culturally constituted syndrome, is shaped by the context outlined above. Existing meta-analytic reviews of interventions for anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating disorder show either poor treatment efficacy or insufficient evidence for efficacy (Berg et al. 2019; Linardon 2018). This may be due to the contradictions inherent in treatment plans that utilize a linear approach (Saukko 2009). By setting up dichotomous absolutes (i.e., healthy/sick), treatment reinforces logics of control and autonomy that underlie the production of eating problems (Gremillion 2003). Because such logics are normalized and institutionally embedded, practitioners who seek to remedy disordered eating can unwittingly employ the very notions that prompted disordered eating behaviors in the first place.

Going beyond understandings of disordered eating as striving for thinness, critical feminist scholars suggest that the syndrome is an extreme expression of internalized socio-cultural norms (Gremillion 2003). Lavis (2018) analyzes anorexia as a self-care strategy: the disorder becomes valuable to young women, not as a secondary effect of achieving thinness, but as a central method of making it through an otherwise unbearable moment. Because participants related to anorexia in a protective and even friendly manner, they actively triggered their illness and sought out the numbness of starvation to help themselves get on in the world. Although anorexia constricts agency, it is necessary to recognize the disorder as a method for emotional regulation and for managing existential well-being (Lavis 2018). In this view, disordered eating is not an extreme pathology but a crystallization of cultural anxieties revolving around bodily control.

Bordo (2013) also takes seriously the socio-cultural causes of disordered eating, claiming that it is a means of acquiring personal agency and cultivating a docile body through hyper-accurate understandings of social attitudes and biological realities. Those with disordered eating do not misperceive reality but perceive it too well, becoming overly attuned to dominant cultural standards and following unspoken, intuitive practices that rely on socially shared knowledge (Eli and Warin 2018). To improve treatment outlooks for disordered eating, researchers have called for practitioners to be more sensitive to the many dimensions and politics around women's relationships with their bodies and selves (Saukko 2009). This is especially pertinent for athletes, who may show symptoms of disordered eating but remain untreated because the symptoms are interpreted as adaptive or positive in the athletic context (Thompson and Sherman 1999).

This study centers the concept of ambivalence to take up this effort and go beyond dualistic understandings of how women relate to their bodies. Ambivalence occurs when one feels an inclination for opposing ideals and behaviors at the same time and is described by Smelser (1998) as a powerful, persistent, and anxiety-provoking feature of the human condition. As a sociological concept, ambivalence is increasingly salient in the analysis of postmodern predicaments, where anxiety and security coexist, risk is assumed, and uncertainty proliferates (Smart 1998; Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011). Ambivalence has long been present as a central concept in psychodynamic psychotherapy and psychological anthropology as well (Holder 1975; Throop 2003).

Scholars have not only described how people feel under conditions of ambivalence but have also situated ambivalence within the contemporary political economy, demonstrating that it is structurally shaped and socially produced by consumer capitalism. In her ethnography of compulsive gamblers, cultural anthropologist Natasha Schüll (2006) shows that technologies of consumption and technologies of care are interlinked in Las Vegas. For her interlocutors, machine play and

therapeutic assemblages (i.e. medication, therapy, exercise, message boards, 12 step programs, etc.) are mutually reinforcing self-modulation techniques. For example, prescription drugs meant to counteract anxiety are incorporated into machine play instead of replacing it. This shows how remedies for destruction can become complicit in the circuits they were meant to treat. Technologies that create harm and interventions that people draw on for care may use the same kind of logic and keep people caught in the cycles, without a clean break away from the former. The result is a perpetual state of ambivalence, where it is impossible to seek remedy without encountering poison. Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism also describes how efforts to cope with and resolve ambivalence can reinforce the very conditions that produce ambivalence. When certain desires become an obstacle to flourishing, striving to satisfy those desires puts people in a cruel bind.

Schüll (2006) and Berlant (2011) direct our attention to the productive potential of uncovering ambivalent logics, which may provide insight into why current literature simultaneously shows that athletes are at a higher risk for eating problems but also that they are more protected compared to non-athletes (Smolak 2000; Thompson and Sherman 2014). Swimmers are an interesting sub-population of athletes that embody these contradictions. Historically, studies have shown increased risk among swimmers for eating problems because they participate in a leanness-demanding endurance sport that requires revealing sportswear (Melin et al. 2014). However, Smolak et al. (2000) performed a meta-analysis that indicated no significant difference between swimmers and non-athletes with regards to risk for eating problems. After over two decades of work, researchers in this field acknowledge that quantitative research focusing on prevalence and putative risk-factors is falling short of grasping the phenomenon at hand (Papathomas and Lavalée 2010). The contextual details provided by qualitative, ethnographic data are needed to reach alternative insights into eating problems among athletes. By centering the lived experiences of female college swimmers, this study attempts to bring such insights to the fore. The following

sections will examine how and when ambivalence around the body arises and what strategies participants use to resolve such feelings. This is followed by a discussion of how strategies like vigilant coping can either reinscribe or go beyond original anxieties.

Methods

Participants in this study included 16 undergraduate females, aged 18-22, from 12 American universities. All participants were collegiate swimmers at the time of participation, competing for university teams governed by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA); eight belonged to Division I programs and eight belonged to Division III programs. All self-reported as active users of Instagram, defined as opening and engaging with the application every day. Four participants were international students, three were racial minorities but not international students, and the remaining eight were white.

Participants completed 45-minute semi-structured interviews over Zoom for which they were compensated \$25. The interview protocol included questions about participants' background and questions about athletics, eating, body image, and Instagram use. After each interview, field notes and memos were written regarding interview content and interactional dynamics. Using a grounded theory approach, interviews were coded iteratively. Each round of coding prompted new theoretical questions and called upon different categories of literature, with ambivalence, vigilance, and resistance emerging as the most salient themes.

Data analysis was informed by my positionality as a female collegiate swimmer and my experiences with disordered eating in athletic contexts. I was motivated to pursue this work because I observed complex contradictions in my own and my teammates' behaviors. My experiences facilitated participant recruitment and built trust during interviews and afforded me a deep understanding of participants' contexts and the pressures, stresses, hopes, and desires that they face on a daily basis.

Findings

For participants, ambivalence is a state of in-between-ness and an actively felt condition of contradictory tension. There is a sense of un-belonging as they experience normalizing pressures which are often at odds and never fully realizable. Two major themes, health and online self-presentation, are entryways to explore participants' bodily ambivalences.

Ambivalence with Health

As Dumit (2012) describes, modern biomedicine and pharmaceutical companies have created a perception of health as an insecure state that requires constant maintenance. As disease categories, medications, prices, and insecurities increase, health becomes a moving target that changes with new research and market practices. Given such precarity, it is reasonable that participants frequently invoked the concept of health and were highly preoccupied with being rational and responsible health-seekers. However, ambivalences arose as they grappled with an environment where health claims are posited as objective and certain yet are often changing or subject to contradiction. The topic of diets prompted participants to address how such complexities localized around their relationship with food. They explained that diets can be "good as long as you do your research" and "dieticians recommend it as being healthy" but can also become "really detrimental" and turn into "a bad process" if one seeks out incorrect information or becomes overly obsessive.

Additionally, many spoke of "maintaining" their "system," a process that required proper "fuel" and a good "balance" of inputs (food) and outputs (work/exercise). Sienna answered that she had never intentionally tried to lose weight but had done "cleanses":

My body was really unhealthy and I just needed to, like kind of reset the way that I was putting food into my body...nothing that was set out to lose weight. Just things to kind of clear up my body and restart.

Another instance of "input" control that mirrored Sienna's "cleansing" rhetoric was Sasha's decision to stop eating red meat to make herself "feel better." Similarly, Kristin

committed to a vegan diet after doing “a lot of research with health” and coming to the realization that her body “shouldn’t and probably can’t process animal proteins and animal fats.”

However, narratives of the body as a system requiring close maintenance were complicated by simultaneous recognition of the body’s uncontrollable nature. Too many factors were at play, from “metabolism” to “DNA” to the way muscle and fat arrange differently on different bodies. This constellation of variables forms the concept of “body type,” which participants thought of as genetically determined. Multiple participants mentioned that it was unrealistic to compare themselves to someone else with a different body type, and Molly emphasized the importance of being cognizant of this truth:

I think people don’t realize that body type plays a huge role... If I stop swimming and only work on lean muscle, my body will still be bigger...I will gain weight. Somebody won’t exercise and won’t gain weight just because of their body type.

Because it was perceived as unchangeable, body type constrained the desire to control the body’s machinery and worked against the idea of bodies as endlessly malleable. Thus, ambivalence arises because participants see the body as unchangeable in many regards, while simultaneously encountering health and science technologies that render the body as infinitely alterable.

Beyond the general directive to be responsible health-seekers, participants have also adopted an acute awareness of bodily health due to their involvement in athletics. Participants operate at a different standard of “health,” directing marked attention towards their body and scrutinizing their proprioception, muscle tension, and fatigue. This is demonstrated by the concept of being in or out of “shape,” a subjective state of athletic ability that goes beyond typical understandings of health (i.e. a swimmer can identify as healthy but “out of shape”). Participants must also make connections between behavior outside the pool and swimming performance, since even subtle changes in weight and muscularity alter how

athletes feel doing their sport. Participants were highly aware of how certain foods made their bodies look and feel, and thus modified their eating behaviors to make targeted changes. For example, Tammy faced performance pressures in college that led her to question her food choices and body shape. Faced with similar questions about her body, Emma began meeting with a nutritionist “to nix foods that were not good for my body for training.” In a more extreme case, Ruby describes a college coach that mandated weight loss and restricted her diet, intending to improve her health and performance. Because these women’s bodies are integral to their achievement in the pool, they and their coaches are motivated to engage with their bodies in ways that will craft the most successful athlete.

Ambivalence emerges in several ways in relation to health-related norms and practices. Participants are compelled to know and to act on that knowledge in service of the healthiest body; however, this project of health-seeking becomes ambivalent since knowledge and facts about/around health are contestable. Swimmers normalize their bodies to a rigid standard of health and athletic shape but simultaneously believe that many types of bodies can become successful at the sport. Additionally, participants have keen awareness of their bodies and operate around a standard of “athletic shape” that goes beyond standard fitness. Swimmers become ambivalent about the athletic standard of health they have come to adhere to, both valuing it and finding empowerment through it but also feeling pressured by its high demands and long-term unsustainability.

Ambivalence with Online Self-Presentation

As digital natives growing up alongside the rise of Web 2.0 technologies, participants demonstrated astute understandings of social media, the attention economy, and prosumerism. Amanda provides context on the online reality of young adults:

On social media, everyone posts the pictures that they look the best in... you’re not going to pick the picture where you look bad. So when everyone is just seeing people at their best, and

you think that's what they always look like, I feel like that creates a really toxic environment. That is the nature of social media: posting the picture where you're posed in a certain way, you look really skinny, or your hair looks really good. On top of that, a lot of people do or have used editing, which just creates a fake person. I think that's really toxic to see a lot because you feel like you need to live up to these standards or do these really cool things to make your Instagram look good.

This comment brings to light the unending, cyclical nature of consuming in order to produce oneself, and producing oneself in order to consume more. In this way, the social media user is never enough as she is. Not only can she "look better" and "be cooler," but standards and trends constantly change, so she also must keep up with a moving target.

As research in this area becomes popularized, there is increased awareness about how media affects young women's body image. Given this knowledge of media effects, participants often push back against the pressures of the prosumer attention economy. Amanda, who enjoys watching fitness videos, explained that she is "refocusing" the way she perceives those videos to reduce upward comparisons. She chooses to engage with "body positive and healthy, positive people" on social media who have helped think more about strength rather than aesthetic appearance. Others like Amelia and Tammy noted an increase in "ads being no longer just the social standard of pretty." Rather, plus sized models or "normal, regular looking people" are making appearances on billboards, magazines, and online shopping sites. These shifts are buoyed by the entry of feminism, self-love/care, and body positivity into the popular imagination. While these movements are often co-opted from marginalized groups to support mainstream normativity, they nevertheless expand ideas of what is normal and beautiful, catalyzing not only more inclusivity in corporate advertisements but also an evolution in user-generated content to prioritize perceptions of "realness" and "authenticity."

However, in mediated contexts, the discourse of "realness" is laden with ideology related to commercial success and traditional feminine perfection. Content and content-makers who purport "authenticity" convey an aesthetic that is defined against high fashion magazines or mainstream fashion models; however, their claims about being "ordinary" or "relatable" to their audience veil hierarchies and inequalities. For example, many fashion bloggers who brand themselves as aesthetically and financially accessible are only able to make fashion their career due to financial assistance from family, and their "effortless" or "everyday" looks require substantial time, capital, and skill (Duffy 2017). Sasha described a new trend on her social media feeds, where "some people will post a video standing up straight in the mirror and also kind of sucking in, and then eventually they'll transition to what they actually like—not actually, but like a different perspective of it." She said content like this brings her "back down"—"down" in the sense of being down-to-earth and unpretentious. Sasha's example of "down-to-earth" content represents an effort at resisting normative beauty standards on social media, but may remain "harnessed to neoliberal and post-feminist expressions of self-branding, entrepreneurship and feminine agency" (Genz 2014). Online self-promotion that requires significant labor and self-discipline is now masquerading as easygoing self-expression and casual reality.

The slippery discourse of "realness" has created new pressures that overlay traditional pressures to achieve normative beauty. Now, women must not only look beautiful by popular standards, they must also remain unaffected by those standards. Makeup, hairdos, and poses should embody effortless, candid ease, and enhanced photos cannot appear to be heavily edited at all. Online guides instructing women on how to achieve outward nonchalance admit that "often the most 'effortless' looking styles take the most work to create" (Turner 2021). The pressure women face to police their body and self-presentation as well as their motives and intentions is heightened by the virtual sphere. Tammy stated that seeing pictures of other women on social media led her to want to work out harder, but that this meant her "motivation to work out was probably not

always the best, cause it was like I need to lose weight or you know, I feel fat.” Her desire to work out in response to “feeling fat” is antithetical to the discourse of an empowered, authentic woman, which causes newfound ambivalences. Not only is her body too large, but she is also not “feminist” enough to be beyond caring. When asked to reflect on her motivations to post on Instagram, Amanda also explains these competing pressures. On the one hand, Amanda is compelled to post pictures that will be received well. To do so, she must consider the thoughts and preferences of her online audience and portray her body to be appealing in an influencer-driven attention economy. On the other hand, she is also compelled to act from a place of confidence. The impossibility of resolving both pressures creates ambivalent tension. Be perfect but real, effortless but seamless. Monitor not only the norms and your self-presentation in relation to the norm, but also your intentions. Take care of your looks but take care to be properly empowered too. Additionally, ensure that you fulfill these norms in a manner that is visible and well-displayed on your online profile.

The finding that women are in a bind of contradictions is not new, but this section shows how health and online self-presentation specifically entangle desires for control and self-surveillance to place participants in ambivalent binds. The idealization of certain body shapes operates alongside the understanding that one’s genetically determined “body type” is constrained. Scientific and technological tools seem to enable infinite improvements to the body, but the actual potentiality of one’s body for change remains ambiguous. Furthermore, idealized body shapes are contradictory in and of themselves, producing confusion since strength and thinness drive different behaviors. There is the taken-for-granted goodness of pursuing health alongside the precarity of health as an unstable concept. The possibility of overdoing health to the point of toxicity and poor mental health looms large, with no clear line on when things become “an issue.” Lastly, there is the desire to be beautiful and validated by normative standards alongside the desire to transcend gendered norms considering feminist self-love and body positivity movements.

Vigilance: A Coping Mechanism

To manage the uncomfortable ambivalences described in previous sections, participants applied vigilant effort towards their bodies. Participants spoke of being “cognizant,” “super aware,” “conscious,” and “careful” about food behavior, weight, and physical appearance. “Being more careful” meant different things for different people. Sasha meant “strict eating” without “cheat meals;” Kristin meant “getting smaller” by doing cardio; Ruby meant going on a “water diet,” or sipping water between every bite of food; Amanda meant eating fewer carbs; Jo meant getting “enough exercise” and being in a “calorie deficit;” Sienna meant cutting out sugar from her diet; Tammy meant eating in a “balanced and conscious” manner. Vigilance evokes a sense of constant calibration: once a desirable physiological state is achieved, it must be continually maintained or improved upon.

A crucial component of vigilant self-surveillance is daily structure, which was eliminated for most participants during the Covid-19 pandemic. This caused Amelia to “freak out” for a few weeks during quarantine. Before the pandemic, she “would bring lunch to campus” or “have like a premade meal at home,” enforcing a comfortable and sensible schedule. As life shifted to virtual spaces, she found herself at home on the computer, distressed by the loss of familiar structure. Amelia reached out to her nutritionist for help:

I got back on a schedule and like, surprise, surprise, I was able to, like, get healthier, and stop breaking out again. So it was kind of like, you know, I kind of let myself go for a little bit because I lost that structure, which is really frustrating at first, but especially being at home, you know, I wasn’t used to being home for that long.

Amelia’s ironic use of “surprise, surprise” indicates that she perceives an obvious connection between a vigilant calendar and an embodied sense of well-being. It is not surprising for her at all that the loss of a set schedule would cause her multiple problems, including weight gain, break outs, and psychological distress. Amelia loosened her grip and it seemed like all hell broke loose. Her solution was to place new constraints on time

and behaviors and to tighten with vigilance once again.

Bodily vigilance allows participants to inhabit an ideal state of “looking good” and “feeling good.” Participants described not just satisfaction from looking at their mirror image but also improved mood and energy levels, more confidence, and a sense of self-efficacy. For Amanda, vigilance (like making sure to eat healthily and exercise) directly impacted her self-perception the next day, as if her physical body image held the memory of previous behaviors. Amanda admits the physical manifestation of vigilance was indirect and, in her head, but the imagined impact was real nonetheless since it shaped her self-perception. Additionally, vigilance works against the fear of slipping and “letting go of everything.” “Letting go,” similar to “being careful,” meant different things to different participants. It often referred to an embodied state, like the “freshman 15” or Ruby’s exaggerated fear of “gaining 60 pounds after swimming ends.” However, “letting go” also seemed to connect with more existential fears of unbelonging. For many participants, to be safe, wanted, employable, and financially secure were precarious states. Vigilance could often enhance participants’ belief that they were doing their best as student-professionals, becoming closer to flourishing and taking charge of their lives and futures.

Athletic Vigilance

The participants in this study may be particularly attracted to vigilant coping due to their background as competitive swimmers. All describe the sport as a defining aspect of their lives, having dedicated substantial time, energy, and resources to athletics from a young age. The sport of swimming is particularly effective in teaching vigilance because of how it embeds the individual within a team environment that maintains and encourages discipline. Malika explained that the “60-ish people” on the team

are “always kind of in my life...you’re just kind of around them a lot.” Echoing this sentiment, Kristin said the team is “really involved” like a family, and “kind of consumes your whole life with recruits and all the little obligations that you have.” With this proximity, the individual swimmer becomes subsumed within a larger unit guided by coaches, who control and shape her through observation, planning, and disciplining. By internalizing team norms and conforming to them, the athlete benefits physically and psychologically; for instance, she may feel comfort from belonging to a team and satisfaction from swimming faster. Thus, this group of participants has learned to valorize vigilance and associate it with achievement.

The necessity of vigilance for athletic success may create a tendency for participants to be more likely to cope with other aspects of life in the same manner. This results in a cyclical phenomenon that drives participants towards vigilance (Figure 1).

Vigilance thus becomes increasingly integrated in how participants handle things like eating. For example, Alice and Siena both connected dessert with subpar athletic performance and tried to reduce sugar intake before important meets. By “toning down desserts” to swim faster, both women explicitly connected bodily vigilance outside of the pool with enhanced performance in the pool. Besides dessert and sugar, there were many other domains where participants calibrated towards maximum athletic performance by being “super aware,” “conscious,” and “careful” about their bodies. In this way, swimming provides an *outlet* for vigilance and serves as a *reinforcer* of vigilance.

Reproducing Ambivalence

In many ways, vigilant efforts were protective of participant’s well-being by providing horizons to organize their lives. At the same time, there were critical contradictions within vigilant coping that kept participants in a bind. To understand why vigilant coping can lead to looping anxieties for these women, we must connect vigilance to the ambivalent moments they arise out of.

First, let’s examine contradictions from health-related ambivalences. Molly began tracking her diet through My Fitness Pal over

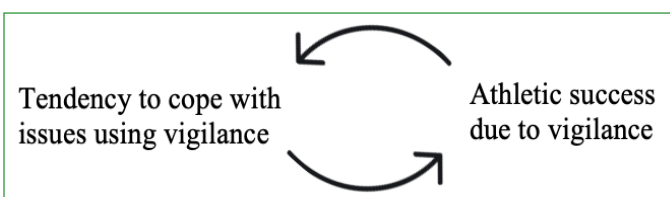


Figure 1: Athletics can serve as both an outlet and reinforcer of vigilance.

the summer. She said it was “cool” to know exact nutrition information from the app and used the data to stay under a calorie limit. However, she eventually quit the app because performing data-driven vigilance around her food choices became taxing: her mood soured and she felt “quicker to anger and frustrated” because she wasn’t eating sufficiently. Similarly, Tammy began a food log during the Covid-19 pandemic to “take control.” However, she also stopped after data-driven food vigilance made her feel stressed. In these instances, vigilant coping through self-monitoring of food tracking produced undesired distress, reproducing the contradictions that necessitated coping in the first place.

The same pattern occurred with other efforts of discipline around food. Amelia, for example, felt pressured to cook healthier recipes by a roommate in college. At the same time, she described having close friends with eating disorders and is thus “cognizant about eating” to ensure “I don’t get to that position because it really makes your life miserable.” For Amelia, vigilance around healthy eating is complicated because it holds the potential to slide into pathological eating behaviors. A different participant, Emma, was also pressured by a swimmer roommate who would “go on dieting trends” and do “juice cleanses”:

It was really hard for me to room with her when she was going on those [diets] because we do the same sport. Why are you dieting? Do I need to do that? No, no, I don’t. But then I’d be like, do I? I got in this bad habit of checking my weight all the time.

In this case, a peer’s vigilant efforts at healthy eating produced anxiety, self-doubt, and maladaptive behaviors, what Emma calls “bad habits,” regarding food and body image. Emma’s situation confirms Amelia’s concern about over-vigilant coping leading to new kinds of distress and disorder.

Next, we can examine online self-presentation and its related ambivalences. Young women interested in gaining socio-cultural capital on Instagram face pressure to present themselves as a “natural,” “real,” and “authentic” individuals who nevertheless adhere

to normative expectations for beauty and femininity. Dalia felt these pressures acutely due to her desire to become an influencer and make money from Instagram. She was particularly struck by the reception of one post where she was wearing a bikini, which received substantial attention. Dalia wasn’t sure why people liked, sent, or saved her picture, but she wanted “to be talked about” and felt that the numbers gave her confidence. She explains her feelings clearly:

I mean, 178 people send this to others. They care, you know? And I- and I care. I think the more that people care, I care more. I think that’s how I get affected...when I see this many people have something to say...people have opinions. I’m going to pay attention, I’m going to be careful. I’m going to do this the best way. It might be silly, but yeah.

Her status on Instagram and her experience that “bikini pictures definitely have a huge power” led her to become increasingly “careful” with her posts. To improve her success in a digital economy where attention is measured and serves as capital, Dalia monitors her feed closely and is vigilant with selecting, editing, and posting photos of her body. This goes to include posts or stories that Dalia is tagged in: “I care about how I look, I’m not gonna lie. I wouldn’t cry about it if I look really bad, but...sometimes I’m like, ‘Hey, can you delete that? I look horrible.’” Her vigilance makes sense given her goals and the fact that content on social media “just stays forever.” Impression management in a complex, digital world with ever-changing rules and a collapsed audience requires substantial work.

However, coping through vigilance reproduces anxieties in this scenario. Dalia knows that other women edit their photos to produce “unreal bodies” and participates in similar editing techniques to compete on Instagram. This has led her to also edit pictures of herself that she doesn’t post because she prefers to see herself that way. Thus, the vigilance Dalia used to cope with prosumer culture on Instagram has become an integral part of her self-perception, leading to what Dalia calls “a little bit of body dysmorphia.” She also admits that Instagram has made her “really

conscious" of her weight, and that her struggles with weight and food "go hand in hand with Instagram." In this way, coping with online self-presentation pressures through vigilance exacerbates new anxieties, perpetuating a sense of ambivalence and requiring further vigilance in an unending cycle.

Interestingly, ambivalences are also created in the realm of swimming, which was described earlier as both an outlet and reinforcer of vigilance. For participants, this occurred when the practice of competitive swimming became impossible (due to injury, off-season, the Covid-19 pandemic, and/or graduation). Sometimes ambivalence was short-lived, resolved by the prospect of physical swimming resuming, but in the case of a career-ending injury or graduation, the conditions producing ambivalence are more permanent and generate lasting concerns about eating behaviors and body abilities. Mabel states that after college, "I definitely want to stay fit. I don't want to become overweight." During the Covid-19 pandemic, she took a break from working out and found that she was still content. This makes her nervous, "like oh god I might not work out after swimming." It is telling that Mabel's self-reported contentment turns around to make her nervous. We can understand this paradoxical twist by considering Mabel's valorization of vigilance, built over a decade in athletic contexts. The elite athletic standard of discipline remains present in how participants relate to food and their bodies, even when they are no longer inside the athletic context. Mabel feels as though she must continue to cultivate discipline and redirect it towards "being better about calories" and "actually caring" about eating healthy food.

Others also indicated ambivalence regarding the end of swimming, especially in the context of food and the body. Kristin noted that in season, "it's hard to like, let your body go," since there are "goals and expectations for performance." The pandemic caused her to think more about not being an athlete anymore, which is "weird" and makes her concern for "letting go" of her body increasingly acute. This fear was shared by multiple others, including Ruby who half-jokingly said that she's worried she'll "gain 60 pounds a year after swimming." Jo also said that the end of

swimming will make her "a little more body conscious," and planned on resolving this concern by finding a new form of exercise. These comments show how athletic vigilance, which results in a sense of belonging, empowerment, and meaning, can also result in the (re)production of ambivalent anxieties.

These findings undercut any clear or easy distinctions between norm and pathology or between adaptive and maladaptive coping. Vigilant coping as self-care easily slides between the two dualities. Alice, for example, claimed that she eats when she's hungry and does not have a bad relationship with food. However, if she were "going out" and "gonna wear a bikini," she would skip a meal and not eat despite being hungry. She perceives herself as someone who "can't speak to a bad relationship with food," and her behavior does not warrant a diagnosis or intense medical attention; however, is it true that her behavior is adaptive and supportive of her flourishing? Eve's experiences with weighing herself provide another example. She grew up in an all-female household with two sisters and a single mother whose values "definitely aligned with female empowerment." However, little dialogue occurred around food and weight, which were "quiet elephants in the room." For a time, Eve would sneakily and obsessively weigh herself at home. Eve said she had never been diagnosed with anything, partitioning herself and her experiences with food from the pathological. Like Alice, Eve's lack of diagnosable pathology does not necessarily indicate the presence of healthy and adaptive behaviors. On the contrary, Alice and Eve's vigilance towards their bodies reproduces contradictions that may run counter to their well-being.

Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism becomes useful here. A relation of cruel optimism arises when participants exert vigilance to resolve ambivalence, but then become newly anxious and must commit to further vigilance. In many cases, participants understood that a vigilant response to ambivalence produced warped perceptions. They believed that their vigilant behaviors could be "pathetic," "sad," "unmeaningful," and "toxic," recognizing that their own desires and normative frameworks could serve as obstacles to their own empowerment. They

problematized the ideal of thinness but hoped to be thin nonetheless; they recognized that diets are rarely effective but participated in them nonetheless; and they agreed that there must be more discussion around these issues but admitted my interview with them was one of the first times they had spoken about their own body image. Contradictions produced ambivalence, and contradictions remain in the new norms emerging in efforts to resolve ambivalence.

Resisting Vigilance with Awareness, Acceptance, and Pleasure

While vigilant coping and its paradoxical reproduction of ambivalence are major findings, this study also finds that participants demonstrate creative coping strategies that go beyond vigilance and in some cases, actively resist vigilance. Weitz (2001, 670) defines resistance as “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination.” The “ideology” in this study’s context is the belief that vigilance directed towards the body can resolve various ambivalences. The “subordination” is how vigilance reproduces ambivalence, binding participants in situations of anxiety. By rejecting and challenging the impetus to control the body and materialize power through bodily appearance, participants find viable alternatives to vigilance through awareness, acceptance, and pleasure.

Mabel, for example, demonstrated an acute awareness of her peer’s distress from vigilant coping. Mabel saw how behaviors like strict eating habits reflected deeper, existential anxieties that cannot be resolved through further vigilance. Mabel was also attuned to the gendered nature of the issues in this study, expressing concern that men are increasingly facing the same pressures and distress. She observed that both men and women around her are “watching what they eat and they’re very aware, very careful... Just so controlled, so self-disciplined.” By becoming conscious of these patterns around her, Mabel saw the futility of vigilant coping and did not fall into similar patterns.

Participants were also able to resolve ambivalence and neutralize the pressure to exert vigilant control by “accepting” their

bodies. Concepts like body type, genetics, and metabolism were often used to make acceptance possible. Amanda says she has “kind of let go of the certain body type ideal” because “not everyone is going to look that way. Like, just biologically it’s not really possible.” Mabel described a similar belief, leading her to adopt a relaxed attitude about her bodily appearance:

However I look is gonna be how I look. That’s not gonna change from me editing my photo on Instagram or wearing a bunch of makeup. People know how I look, you know? I’m not gonna change anybody’s thought of it, not that I want to either- so kind of, ‘it is what it is’ sort of mindset.

She recognizes that she can modify her body and its presentation (both online and offline) through certain means but concedes that her body “is what it is.” The “it is what it is” mindset was embodied by Emma and Malika as well, neither of whom edits the photos they post on Instagram. Both claimed that editing was unnecessary, since they accept the way photos look and don’t feel like they ought to be modified.

Participants’ involvement in swimming helped reinforce acceptance of their bodies. Michelle explained that there is less pressure for swimmers to look a certain way, “because you can be short and be really fast and be tall like me and be pretty fast too.” Thus, athletic spaces provided new norms with which to perceive the body that were typically more forgiving than the norms of feminine beauty. Through the lens of athletics, Emma could see each part of her body as beneficial for her success. She expressed gratitude for her body and perceived her body in a generally positive manner. Jo had a similar sentiment: “I would like slimmer thighs, but I also understand that I’m an athlete, and I need my muscles to perform well.” Interestingly then, swimming is both a method for enacting vigilance but also a method for loosening ideals and recognizing individual differences.

Pleasure and self-love were other strategies that countered the control-oriented rhetoric of vigilant coping. Rather than focusing on

maximizing well-being and mitigating risk, participants focused on behaviors that brought comfort and joy. For example, Amelia, Tammy, and Ruby found pride in lifting achievements, reveling in the functional capacity of their muscles. Emma found enjoyment in wearing comfortable clothes, which helped her navigate pressure to dress in a normative manner. Emma moved away from vigilance by centering her attention on bodily comfort:

I really try to visualize myself as a whole person. And I'm not the biggest fan of the area, right above my hips, just because it's...a little fatter. But then again, it's okay, because I love the rest of me...It's a part of me and I love me, so gotta love that too.

Emma integrated self-love with awareness and acceptance, demonstrating remarkable resilience as a result.

Other participants who adopted an inward-turning focus paid attention to “feeling good” and “having fun,” which prompted them to avoid triggers such as the scale, two-piece swimsuits, or certain social media accounts that made them feel insecure. They also actively included inputs that made them feel supported and uplifted, such as family members, peers, and positive social media accounts. By prioritizing their needs, valuing their abilities, and putting themselves in spaces with minimal judgment and comparison, some women found new, more enjoyable strategies of resolving their ambivalence. These strategies correlated with less anxiety, self-objectification, and obsession. “Consciousness” and “care” about the body, indicators of vigilant coping, decreased when participants focused their efforts on resistant coping. Mabel summed up her feelings succinctly: “Yeah, once you just jump off the train of caring about that, it's just so much better.” At their best, awareness, acceptance, and self-love produced confidence, positivity, and appreciation and helped participants derive a sense of agentic empowerment, steering them away from the anxieties of bodily vigilance.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that female college swimmers reside in a context that

encourages coping through vigilance. When faced with contradictory ideals that pull their bodies in different directions, this group of women resolve ambivalent tensions by seeking control. Although vigilance can provide some resolution, it often exacerbates confusion, heightens ambivalence, and reproduces anxieties. As a result, a predominant strategy for resolving ambivalence becomes a source of additional ambivalence. This study shows how athletic contexts contribute to the paradox of vigilant coping, serving as both an outlet and reinforcer of vigilance.

The paradox of vigilant coping becomes acutely problematic when applied to the context of disordered eating, which is an increasingly common experience among women/athletes (Thompson and Sherman 2014). Due to the nature of the health discourse and the risk-based biomedical model, practitioner's treatment and advice are often interpreted as additional prescriptions of vigilance. However, because disordered eating is an extreme form of vigilance itself, treatments for disordered eating unwittingly reinforce the cultural and ideological norms that constitute the syndrome in the first place. Importantly, the women in this study show how awareness, acceptance, and pleasure are productive ways to go beyond vigilant coping. These concepts may be useful to explore further with regards to coping and disordered eating treatment.

Additionally, this study reinforces the productive potential of ambivalence in the social sciences. By looking outside of the normal/pathological with female college athletes, we can reach new insights about the pressures that produce disordered eating and body dissatisfaction at ever-increasing rates. If we are to account for the complex politics around women's relationships with their bodies, we must incorporate concepts like ambivalence to make space for nonbinary experiences and uncategorizable affects.

While offering insight into the dilemmas young women face with regards to their bodies, this study is limited. The women included in this study represent a unique constellation of contexts and identities. More research is needed to understand if and to what extent

their experiences with ambivalence, vigilance, and resistance are generalizable beyond the population of female college swimmers. Additionally, there were no examinations of male athletes or race or class-based analyses. Future research should include other populations and pay attention to different forms of ambivalence and coping in an intersectional manner.

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