Teaching Empowerment Through Sport: An Analysis of Fast and Female

By

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Abstract

This project is about Fast and Female, a community-based girls’ sport organization, that focuses on empowering girls through sport. In this thesis I produce a discourse analysis from interviews with six expert sportswomen and a textual analysis of the organization’s online content – including its social media pages. I ground my analysis in poststructural theory as explained by Chris Weedon (1997) and in literature that helps contextualize and better define empowerment (Collins, 2000; Cruikshank, 1999; Hains, 2012; Sharma, 2008; Simon, 1994) and neoliberalism (Silk & Andrews, 2012). My analysis in this project suggests that Fast and Female develops a community through online and in-person interaction. This community is focused on girls’ sport and empowerment, but, as the organization is situated in a neoliberal context, organizers must take extra consideration in order for the organization to develop a girls’ sport culture that is truly representative of the desires and needs of the participants rather than implicit neoliberal values. It is important to note that Fast and Female does not identify as a feminist organization. Through this thesis I argue that Fast and Female teaches girls that sport is empowering – but, while the organization draws on “empowerment,” a term often used by feminists, it promotes a notion of empowerment that teaches female athletes how to exist within current mainstream and sporting cultures, rather than encouraging them to be empowered female citizens who learn to question and challenge social inequity. I conclude my thesis with suggestions for Fast and Female to encourage empowerment in spite of the current neoliberal situation. I also offer a goal-setting workbook that I developed to encourage girls to set goals while thinking about their communities rather than just themselves.
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List of Abbreviations

CAAWS  Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity
WSF    Women’s Sport Foundation
NGO    Non-governmental Organization
GO     Governmental Organization
WNBA   Women’s National Basketball Association
MBA    Master’s of Business Administration
BC     British Columbia
US     United States
FF TV  Fast and Female Television
COC    Canadian Olympic Committee
Chapter 1

Introduction

I stopped cross-country skiing when I was 15. I stopped because the friendships I had developed at a younger age had started to come apart, and the prospect of winning and the fear of losing had started to become too stressful. I stopped cross-country skiing because it became less and less about skiing and more and more about being the best and about my fear of not winning.

As I became more discontented with cross-country skiing, Fast and Female was launching into the Alberta cross-country skiing environment. Started by a group of female athletes, Fast and Female is a non-profit organization that aims to keep young girls, like I was, involved in cross-country skiing and sport at large. Fast and Female hosted its first event in 2005; I would have been 14. At the time, I knew about Fast and Female, but I was not entranced by the organization. The organization’s pink and friendly representations of sport did not resonate with me. I was not in sport to showcase or celebrate my femininity. I did not like the colour pink, and I would have found drawing attention to my girliness really uncomfortable. I was in sport to be the best I could be; it was a personal competition.

Fast and Female’s fun loving pink representations of sport could not have been farther from what I thought was fun or interesting or worthwhile about sport, and yet Fast and Female was interesting and attractive to so many other girls. Six years later, when I was 21, my parents were still talking about Fast and Female’s events and people and projects. When I looked up Fast and Female’s website and Facebook page, it was as
enthusiastic and pink as ever. Its stated goal is to use sport to empower girls. I had become interested in the organization because I was confused about an ultra-pink or feminine approach to sport.

My curiosity got the better of me, and here I am, four years later, 25 years-old, and I see that Fast and Female’s representations of girls’ sport, and its work to empower girls through sport are valuable. I chose Fast and Female as the focus of this project because the organization is the outcome of a group women coming together to fix a problem that they saw in their community. When deciding on a thesis project I was starting to sort through feminism, and peeking at ideas about activism, and I was looking for something I could learn from, something that maybe other academics could learn from too. I thought it was awesome that athletes from Canada’s women’s national cross-country ski team had put their heads together to try to solve a problem that larger governing bodies had over looked. These women have achieved something tangible to try to keep girls in sport (Fast and Female, 2015a) and to address the kinds of troubling stereotypical representations of femininity that we see in media more generally (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015). Fast and Female is a good focus for a case study aimed at considering girls’ empowerment through sport. Through this thesis I argue that Fast and Female teaches girls that sport is empowering – but, while the organization draws on “empowerment,” an idea often used by feminists, it promotes a notion of empowerment that teaches female athletes how to exist within current mainstream and sporting cultures, rather than encouraging them to be empowered female citizens who learn to question and challenge social inequity.
Overview of Fast and Female

Fast and Female is a not-for-profit, non-governmental sport organization with a mission to inspire and empower girls through cross-country skiing, biathlon, and summer enduro-sports, like mountain biking. It was created in 2005 by Chandra Crawford, who was a member of the Canadian Cross Country Ski Team, and an Olympic gold medalist in 2006. She is now completing a Master’s degree in Business Administration at the University of Calgary. Over the past ten years Fast and Female has grown into an established part of the sporting communities in Canada, the United States, and Australia.

The organization hosts active events to convince girls to stay involved in sport. The organization’s mantras are “Spread the love: Get as many girls as possible hooked on a healthy and active lifestyle” and “Dominate the world: Rejoice in the possibility of being leaders in all we do” (2015a). The main tasks of the organization are sharing photos and media about women in sport, and putting on events that are hosted by Fast and Female “ambassadors” and “sport experts.” The ambassadors are elite level female athletes. The sport experts are women who are often former athletes, who are now associated with sport in some other way, be it as part of their jobs or through coaching. Fast and Female is more concerned with keeping girls in competitive and organized sport rather than unorganized recreation (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015), however, in the organization’s online messaging there is some ambiguity in how Fast and Female presents its focus on sport versus being physically active. The organization’s work is meant to inspire girls to be physically active, and to see the ambassadors and other elite and competitive women in sport as role models.
Fast and Female has an online presence through its website, fastandfemale.com, and through its social media platforms on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. In August of 2016, Fast and Female has more than 9300 followers on Facebook (Fast and Female, 2016a), 3800 Twitter followers (Fast and Female, 2016c), and 2500 followers on Instagram (Fast and Female, 2016b). On her personal website Crawford says that Fast and Female reaches 2000 girls annually through their events (Crawford, 2016).

Organizations Focused on Girls’ Sport Programming

Fast and Female is not the only organization working in Canada or the United States that focuses on community programming and events for girls and sport. Some of these organizations are provincially or city based, some are for-profit, and some are not-for-profit. Some of these other organizations include: Girls Inc., based in the United States with programming in Canada (Girls Inc. 2016); Girls in the Game, based in Saskatchewan (ICP Sport Management, 2016); Edmonton Girls Hockey Association (Edmonton Girls Hockey Association, 2016); Sole Girls based in British Columbia (Sole Girls, 2015); Alberta Girls Baseball (Alberta Girls Baseball, 2016); Whitehorse Women’s Hockey Association (Whitehorse Women’s Hockey Association, 2016); and Sport Manitoba’s Women in Sport Programming (Sport Manitoba, 2016). A variety of girls-only summer camps are also available through Canada. Additionally, cities in Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan host annual “Active Like a Girl” events that get girls out doing different types of physical activity (Kretzel, 2015; Prince Edward Island Women’s Institute, 2016). An American organization, ZGiRLS, was promoted by one of
my interviewees, Holly Brooks, for having a really well put together curricula (H. Brooks, personal communication, June 3, 2015; ZGirls, 2016). What sets Fast and Female apart from other groups is its not-for-profit status, its multi-sport focus, specific brand, and multi-nation programming and organization coverage. But all of these organizations claim that accessible and thoughtfully tailored programming has the potential to unlock beneficial health and leadership aspects of sport for girls.

Organizations Focused on Girls’ and Women’s Sport Research

In addition to organizations that are only concerned with girls’ sport programming, there are groups that are also or solely concerned with research on girls’ sport. Fast and Female draws upon and shares these other organizations’ knowledge. Organizations with national profiles, like the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), the Women’s Sport Foundation (WSF, 2016), and the Tucker Center, both based in the United States, help inform the public about issues pertaining to girls’ sport. These three organizations, specifically, work to provide accessible information to the public, and encourage curiosity with regards to research about girls’ and women’s sporting experience. The three organizations are not so interested in creating or providing their own programming, like Fast and Female does, as much as they are interested in promoting research and education on girls and women in sport, and community based girls’ sport programs.

CAAWS has opened up Canadian conversations about girls’ and women’s sport that very clearly include a consideration of things such as gender differences in sport,
homophobia in sport, women who influence sport, women and girls of all ages that participate in sport. CAAWS also provide information and workshops relating to girls’ and women’s sport (2013b). CAAWS’ mission statement describes the organization as “the leading organization that educates, promotes and collaborates to support a sport and physical activity system in which girls and women are actively engaged” (2013b).

The WSF mission statement states that the WSF is “dedicated to creating leaders by ensuring all girls have access to sports” (2016). The WSF goes about accomplishing its mission by publishing large amounts of research, funding community programs that work to involve girls with sport or physical activity, and by hosting awards for organizations and women involved with sport (WSF, 2016). All of the WSF efforts are posted on their website and the research or position papers that the organization features or published itself are publicly available and written in very accessible ways.

The Tucker Center, an American organization that comes out of the University of Minnesota, focuses on research about girls and women’s sport and physical activity. “The Tucker Center is an interdisciplinary research center leading a pioneering effort to examine how sport and physical activity affect the lives of girls and women, their families, and communities.” (Tucker Center, 2006). The Tucker center is focused on increasing the amount of sport and exercise research that is focused on girls and women. The organization has three interests: 1) “collaborative research” that takes an interdisciplinary approach to “issues, challenges, and opportunities within sports contexts;” 2) “research that counts” in ways that directly benefit women’s, girls’, and their communities’ sporting experience; and 3) “education: through community outreach
and civic engagement with a lecturer series and publicly available or widely disseminated educational materials” (Tucker Center, 2006).

These three organizations all reference reasons why organizations focusing on women’s and girls’ sport and exercise are necessary. All three organizations discuss the importance of thoughtful sport programming for girls. CAAWS states on their homepage that “84% of adult women DON’T participate in sport” (2013a), and as a response to the question “Why does the organization exist?” the WSF website says that “only 25% of girls are getting sufficient physical activity to combat the development of chronic disease” (WSF, 2016). The Tucker Center also emphasizes the importance of this research by simply stating in their information brochure that “most sports-related research has focused on men” (Tucker Center, 2006). These three organizations all encourage and support the kind of programming offered by groups like Fast and Female.

**Significance of Study**

This thesis comes at a time when many companies promote healthy living and empowerment through sport and fitness products. These advertising narratives pose health, fitness, and human bodies as the important things people should be concerned about and they link these things to empowerment. Especially for women and girls, ideas about fitness or sport and empowerment keep coming up together in advertisements, in government promotions, and in girls’ extracurricular programs.

The idea that women and girls need to be more empowered through sport is fostered by advertisements put out by companies trying to sell something to women or
girls. So many people and companies have been using this term, empowerment, without a concrete explanation of what it means, or of what a process of empowerment might consist of. When companies or politicians or girls’ program organizers suggest that women or girls need to be empowered, they are drawing on the base assumption that, in comparison to men and boys, women and girls are somehow lacking, that women and girls need products and programs to help them achieve the same level of social confidence that men and boys are assumed to already have. We never hear of products or programs designed or marketed to “empower” men and boys.

Fast and Female is an organization that aims to empower girls through sport. When I asked the organization’s founder, Chandra Crawford, about why Fast and Female uses sport as a vehicle for empowerment she said this,

My firm belief is that sport is the strongest and best tool we have at our disposal to use as a vehicle for empowerment for females, and the reason for that is physiological … you just feel completely different after exercising. But, I’m open to all the different ways that females can feel empowered and feel belonging… like of course I think that music and drama, like fields where you’re performing, can be positive in that way. And of course dance, which is physical and also combines things in self-expression, is really powerful. But um, yeah my background is sport and the benefits of sport are so great that I really get frustrated when girls miss out on them… Sport is a really good vehicle for personal development, for leadership, for bouncing back from failure, so it has all these benefits. So, it’s a good vehicle because of its benefits of exercise, you feel strong when you exercise and you feel like your body is useful, which counteracts negative body image stuff, but I also think that it’s a really good vehicle for a lot of personal development and I hate when girls quit, because they miss out on that. (personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Here Crawford suggests that sport is empowering for girls because it is a great space to feel good in one’s body, and to develop a positive body image, leadership skills, and resilience. In using Fast and Female as a case study, I can consider how
different, but connected, ideas inform the organization’s structure, media, and understandings of what empowerment means. Fast and Female is an example of a grassroots organization trying to do the world good, but it can also be seen as a cultural point where multiple ideas around empowerment and girls’ sport culminate.

**Problem Statement: Empowerment and Fast and Female**

The notion of empowerment has a rich history within different political movements and discourses – from the women’s liberation movement, to the black rights movement (Simon, 1994), to current day politicians advocating for women’s rights on International Women’s Day (March 8 in 2016) (Trudeau, 2016). Now, Fast and Female itself does not say it is a feminist or a political organization, but its materials often use the term empowerment. This practice, of using the term ‘empowerment’ for something that is claimed to be apolitical, is common. Different types of programs and products use the term empowerment (and forms of ‘girl power’) in their advertising and marketing (Staudt Rai, & Parpart, 2002), to help make what companies and organizations are selling or promoting more attractive in a consumer market that is increasingly aware of gender inequality, feminism (Hains, 2012; Zeisler, 2016), and social movements. This “empowertizing” (Zeisler, 2016) environment in the context in which Fast and Female was conceived and established – an environment where women’s and girls’ inequality has become portrayed as a problem that can be fixed, frequently, by having individuals buy their own empowerment (Hains, 2012),
When I interviewed Crawford for this project, she described the beginnings of Fast and Female by saying,

Chandra: …the general overview of female empowered sport – I think it was pretty strong, in amateur sport. And in Olympic sports… I didn’t have a lack of role models, I didn’t have a lack of opportunities, and um, did not suffer for lack of motivation or teammates or anything like that. It was more that Fast and Female started to try and give the next generation similar opportunities to the ones I had. And I think things were on a noticeable decline in my specific sport in the mid-2000s.

Flurry: So, the specific thing was that it eventually started to decline?

Chandra: Uh, yep, so although my peer group seemed strong and on track, we could not locate the next wave [of female athletes] that was right behind us. So I was 21 and I didn’t know why there wasn’t any 18-year-old [girls trying for junior national team or looking to challenge our national team spots]. (personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Crawford further describes what she and her teammates considered when thinking up Fast and Female:

… we were just seventeen and we were like “Wow, it really sucks that kids aren’t active, it really sucks that the obesity rate is on such a climb…” And at that time, in like, say, 1998, the headlines in the media were all about the increasing incidence of childhood obesity and the simultaneous reduction of Phys-Ed time for kids. So just as, like, even as teens we just thought, this is – terrible! So we wanted to go into schools with a program we were going to call “Skiing is cool.” So we drafted that up and that that was probably what was conceived to become what was later Fast and Female, ‘Cause over the next few years we would notice, “Ok, there’s actually a really crazier problem in sport which is that girls quit way more than boys,” and my teammates and I …we were just kind of talking about it over training sessions, and at camps, and we decided to do something about it. So we – um – we worked together to build it into our training camp schedule. (personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Crawford, and her teammates, identified a problem, a difference between how things had been for them and how things had become. Where there was once a rich and encouraging environment for women and girls in their sport, there was now an environment in which
girls started to drop out of sport at increasing rates that were higher than the rates for boys, in which physical education classes were being reduced in schools and the media was raising concerns about childhood obesity.

The idea that girls drop out of sport more than boys through adolescence is supported by Government of Canada surveys. The Department of Canadian Heritage produced a report in 2013 discussing Canadians’ sport participation in 2010. The findings in this report reflected that the gender gap for sports participation had widened from 15 percent in 2005 to 19 percent in 2010 in favour of males (Heritage Canada, 2013, p.18).

A graph titled “Sport participation rates by age and sex” shows that just under 40 percent of females and about 70 percent of males, aged 15-19, participate in sport (Heritage Canada, 2013, p.18-19). These percentages change as the age range increases. Sport participation in the 19-24 age range was just under 20 percent for females and approximately 65 percent for males (Heritage Canada, 2013, p.18-19). From adolescence to young adulthood there appears to be about a 20 percent decline in female participants and approximately a 15 percent decline in male sport participation (Heritage Canada, 2013, p.18-19). Researchers, parents, girls’ sport program administrators, and coaches are concerned about this decline and these gender differences.

**The Project**

In this thesis I work with interviews and a textual analysis of Fast and Female’s online content to create commentary about what Fast and Female appears to be teaching girls and young women about sport and empowerment. I was interested in questioning
the common sense ideas that I see Fast and Female working with – specifically that pink represents girls and femininity, and that sport is inherently good and empowering for girls. I draw upon literatures about sport, empowerment, and neoliberalism to inform my work. I conduct a discourse analysis of the ideas promoted by Fast and Female. As I mentioned earlier, throughout this thesis I argue that Fast and Female does teach girls that sport is empowering, but while the organization draws on empowerment, the notion of empowerment that it promotes teaches female athletes how to exist within current mainstream and sporting cultures, rather than encouraging them to be empowered citizens who learn to question and challenge social inequity and to seek social change. As an appendix to this thesis, I have designed an empowerment workbook that is available to the organization and others. I designed it as a practical tool to help encourage people’s community awareness and engagement as they set personal goals for themselves (Appendix A).

**Purpose Statement**

This thesis questions the common sense notion of empowerment that is often linked to sport for girls. I aim to learn from a community-based non-governmental organization, Fast and Female, and to contribute to the work the organization is doing in constructive ways. To accomplish this, I consider how Fast and Female has promoted girls’ empowerment through sport, and what the implications are of the meanings and representations Fast and Female uses to convey its messages online to its followers.
Research Question

How and what does Fast and Female teach girls about empowerment?

Analytical Framework

I have been largely influenced by poststructuralism throughout this project. Poststructuralism is a social theory that aims to “address the questions of how social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class and race might be transformed” (Weedon, 1997, p.20). Poststructuralism accounts for the plurality of meaning by considering language, meaning, and subjectivity as un-fixed factors that contribute to the construction of a historically and culturally specific social reality (Weedon, 1997). Scholars who use poststructuralism focus on how language constitutes meaning and social reality, and constructs our sense of self (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). I employ a poststructuralist perspective for this project, focusing on the term “empowerment,” as the term is contextualized by a rich history of social action and political theory (Cruikshank, 1999; Simon, 1994). In this project I focus on understandings of empowerment and how one current organization incorporates the term into programming, branding, and other messaging.

Poststructuralism is useful for thinking about the multiplicity of discourses. I engage with poststructuralism to consider the role of language in constructing understandings, meanings, actions, and power relations in everyday life. Using poststructuralism to approach this project affords me the chance to consider multiple
approaches to empowerment. A poststructuralist perspective helps me think about the possible multiple meanings and discourses that shape Fast and Female events and materials. Poststructuralists view discourses and power relations on a spectrum, rather than as dichotomous positions (Weedon, 1997). The conflict within and between discourses should be historically contextualized; it changes through history (Weedon, 1997). A poststructuralist framework provided the organizing principles necessary to help me to understand the complexity of intertwined discourses and power relations in the materials that I studied.

In using poststructuralist theory, I hope to honour the work that Fast and Female does by honing in on how different ideas and discourses impact girls and women. By combining a feminist lens with a poststructuralist lens I can maintain my emphasis on gender, and other social inequities related to (or that intersect with) gender stereotypes, stigma, and the oppression of women, while allowing myself to consider ideas, including ideas about gender from a perspective that emphasizes variation and fluidity in instances where a dichotomy might otherwise typically be encouraged. This project has benefited from an analytical approach that recognizes multiple meanings and constitutions of many discourses that impact and are impacted by Fast and Female, and their focus on empowerment.

**Chapter Outlines**

My aim for this project is to question the term empowerment as it is linked to girls’ sport. This project is not about whether or not Fast and Female empowers its
participants. This project is about how Fast and Female’s work contributes to and is impacted by contemporary popular discourses of empowerment. My own interest would be to make “empowerment through sport” about helping girls to become physically competent and also socially conscious and prepared to act to challenge inequity. My analysis in this project suggests that Fast and Female does develop a community through online and in-person interaction that is focused on girls’ sport and empowerment, but, as the organization is situated in a neoliberal context, extra consideration needs to be taken by organizers in order for the organization to develop a girls’ sport culture that is truly representative of the desires and needs of the participants rather than neoliberal values that seep into sport culture.

This project is organized into the following sections. In Chapter Two I describe and reflect upon my approach to discourse analysis of online texts and interviews. In Chapter Three I review literatures addressing empowerment and neoliberalism to help inform my analysis of Fast and Female’s online content in Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven. In Chapter Four I present material from my interviews with Fast and Female’s sport women. In Chapter Five I analyze testimonials from Fast and Female community members that the organization has chosen to showcase on its website. In Chapter Six I focus on representations of empowerment, sport, and femininity produced by Fast and Female. In Chapter Seven I focus on the online engagement of Fast and Female participants through the organization’s program promotion and social media interactions. In Chapter Eight I conclude my project with an overview of how Fast and Female contributes to meanings of empowerment, and a consideration of other meanings they may want to include moving forward.
Chapter 2

Methodology

In this project I am trying to learn about empowerment in relation to the work of Fast and Female. How is empowerment understood by scholars and sport experts? What is its link to sport? How has Fast and Female been influenced by popular discourses of empowerment? How has the organization represented empowerment? There are two components to my research. First I analyze online content from Fast and Female’s website and social media. As part of the analysis of online material I focus on representations of empowerment, sport, and femininity. I then focus on attempts to engage Fast and Female participants online, through the organization’s program promotion and social media interactions. Second, I analyze transcripts from interviews I conducted with six women involved in Fast and Female. I will discuss each of these components in turn.

Textual Analysis

My textual analysis provided the foundation for three chapters of this thesis. In Chapter Five I analyze testimonials of Fast and Female to consider what girls and parents consider valuable about the organization. Chapter Six covers an analysis of Fast and Female’s website in order to determine how the organization articulates and is influenced by discourses of empowerment. Chapter Seven focuses on Fast and Female’s social media and online promotion, and interactions with their followers. I aim to determine
how Fast and Female is shaped by and actively shapes a particular discourse of empowerment.

For the textual analysis portion of my research I used screen shots to document Fast and Female’s website, Facebook page, Instagram profile, and YouTube channel; I also took notes in a research journal. I looked for what type of language and larger ideas Fast and Female was drawing on to promote itself and sport for girls. I also looked for what kind of connections might be made from clicking a picture that said one thing, but took the viewer to a different page on the website (e.g., an image with “Join the movement” inscribed on it took me to the organization’s “shop”). I looked at every page on the Fast and Female website in March of 2015. I did not include links to Fast and Female’s sponsors, but I did follow links to external websites that contained profiles of Fast and Female ambassadors and sport experts. In March of 2015 I reviewed every Facebook post, tweet, Instagram post and YouTube video the organization had available at that time.

I was overwhelmed by the amount of data that I collected. I collected upwards of 300 screenshots of the website and of Fast and Female’s social media pages. I found it valuable to take screen shots during my initial review of the website and social media especially because a year into my project, but before my documented screenshots, Fast and Female’s website completely changed; it was rebranded from a pastel pink, purple, and blue, to an unapologetic magenta. Even though I felt like I had too much information to consider and include in my analysis, I did not include everything that might have been included in my data collection. For example, I only considered YouTube, Instagram,
Facebook, or Twitter comments and replies when they specifically addressed empowerment or Fast and Female’s structure. I did not take into account Fast and Female’s LinkedIn profile because that social media profile lacked anything novel when I compared it to Fast and Female’s other online platforms. I also paid only minimal attention to the rebranding of Fast and Female. I made the choice to consider how Fast and Female is now, rather than how it was before, because I did not want to bring theories of branding or the reasons why brands go through change into this project. Further, I do not consider news stories from the media in my textual analysis. When I have used media references in this thesis it has simply been to provide context for the Fast and Female organization. This thesis reflects my understanding of the relationship between popular discourses of empowerment and the work of Fast and Female. It is not about how others, like journalists, or participants even, understand the Fast and Female brand and community.

Many of the things I omitted would be useful in an analysis of the Fast and Female organization, but the exclusion of these items from my analysis was an attempt to make my research and analysis more manageable. It is hard to know what kinds of data to include or exclude in a project such as this. But, once I had begun to develop an argument from my data, it was easier to see what material would be the most useful for the argument I was making. I also made decisions about what to include or exclude on the basis of advice from my committee at my proposal meeting, and from my supervisor along the way.
Interview Analysis

I carried out six interviews that resulted in the discussion I present in Chapter Four. In Chapter Four, I look at how the sportswomen associated with Fast and Female think about Fast and Female, empowerment, sport and femininity, and about goal setting as a strategy for empowerment that has been used and promoted by Fast and Female. The knowledge that these women have offered to this project has been invaluable in helping me to formulate my arguments.

To set up my interviews I spoke with personal contacts to gauge their interest, and then I looked on the Fast and Female and Cross-Country Canada (Canadian cross-country skiing governing body) websites for contact information for people who might have been interested in being a part of my project. I sent out emails, voicemails and used the “contact me/us” form on websites to establish initial contact with potential interviewees. I contacted approximately 15 people. I sent out one reminder email to people who did not respond. Six people agreed to be interviewed.

I interviewed people over video Skype or on the phone. I recorded the interviews on both my computer, using Microsoft’s voice recorder, and my phone using the android voice recorder. I also took notes during my interviews. My interviews lasted between 50 to 90 minutes. My interviews were fairly structured, driven mostly by my questions rather than the direction that evolved in the conversations. I asked all of the women similar questions about their history in sport, their opinions of Fast and Female, and what they thought about empowerment and girl-centered sport. A list of my general interview questions can be found in Appendix B.
My transcripts were between seven and 12 single-spaced pages. As a means of organizing my data, I printed out copies of my interview transcripts and cut them into useful or noteworthy quotes. I labelled each cut-out with a general theme and with the name of the interviewee and then I organized them into sections based on the content of the quote. From there I organized my analysis chapter by ordering sections and then the quotes that would be useful.

The six women I interviewed were: 1) Chandra Crawford, the founder and president of Fast and Female, who was also a business student; 2) Gail Niinimaa, a member of Biathlon Canada, former junior national team coach, former biathlete for Canada, sport expert listed on the Fast and Female website, and a textile conservator for the Glenbow museum in Calgary, Alberta; 3) Madeline Williams, former Olympian, Chair of Cross Country Canada’s Women’s Committee, Fast and Female ambassador, and lawyer; 4) Joanne Ross, the director of programs at British Columbia volleyball, former volleyball Canada athlete, and an expert listed on the Fast and Female website; 5) Holly Brooks, Fast and Female ambassador (USA), former Olympian and member of the American cross-country ski team, and Master’s student; and 6) Interviewee Six (whose name is being withheld), a former high level athlete, a prominent coach, and an expert listed on Fast and Female’s website. Each of these women have extensive involvement with sport. It was interesting and productive for me to hear about their practical knowledge about sport for girls and women, and to consider their ideas through the lens of feminist theories of girl-centered sport and empowerment.
Practical Notes on my Qualitative Methods

I have learned much about qualitative research throughout this project. Moving forward in any research I do in the future, I would keep in mind the following things:

1. Do not be nervous about asking questions or for help from a supervisor, committee member, or colleague.
2. Do not be afraid to start researching.
3. Practice interview questions, and then practice them again – I should have practiced much more than I did. I did three practice interviews, but my practice interviews lacked the professionalism I needed during the interview for the practice to be productive.
4. Approach interviews as conversations, rather than question and answer periods.
5. Transcribe immediately. There is probably a better program than MS Word to code and sort textual and interview data.
6. Do not be afraid to start writing the analysis of the research findings – it will change as part of the writing process.

I tried many things to help me analyze and think about the interviews and textual analysis that I completed for this thesis: I walked a dog while listening to interviews; I spoke with housemates and colleagues and family members about my arguments and ideas; I tried to pull together a mind map of themes and conflicting ideas. In the end, writing my ideas down in mock drafts of chapters was the most helpful – this is how I formed arguments and finally understood how different themes and discourses related to and conflicted with
each other. The process of writing brought me to a place where my arguments finally felt put together.

Ethics

I obtained ethics approval for this project from the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board. I found the experiences of previous Master’s students invaluable in completing my ethics application. To obtain ethics approval I needed to describe my project and create and submit an email script, interview guide, consent form, and letter of information. I also needed to complete the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics. A copy of my letter of approval from the General Research Ethics Board can be found in Appendix C. I did not need to obtain ethics approval for my textual data collection and analysis as all of the online content I reference is in the public domain.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

For this project I have gathered my data to write a Foucauldian discourse analysis. Researchers use Foucauldian discourse analysis to piece together the ways that texts, images and institutions construct social truths or facts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rose, 2012). Foucauldian discourse analyses suggest how perceived facts or truths might have an impact on people’s, organizations’, or governments’ actions or beliefs (Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In a discourse analysis, researchers are looking for patterns of power that people associate with different ideas (Kvale &
The ideas that people put the most stock into become dominant discourses that ultimately alter how those people evaluate and participate in culture (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I employ this research methodology because I wanted to understand how and why and in what ways empowerment became a notion that popular organizations, like Fast and Female came to utilize and contribute to. A Foucauldian discourse analysis is useful in identifying the cultural ideas that shape Fast and Female’s relevancy, especially when, or if, Fast and Female also contributes to those same ideas (e.g., empowerment). A Foucauldian discourse analysis also works well with the poststructuralist framework that has influenced my reading of the materials I studied.

Norman Fairclough suggests that there are two crucial points underlying Foucauldian discourse analysis. Other writers, including Kendall and Wickham (1999), Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), and Rose (2012) stress these same points. First, Fairclough argues that it is important to recognize “the constitutive nature of discourse – discourse constitutes the social, including ‘objects’ and social subjects” (1992b, p.55 as cited in Mills, 2004, p.133). In order to consider what important influences affect how girls’ empowerment and sport is produced and taught, I consider Fast and Female as an object that has been defined by discourse. I also consider the ways in which Fast and Female contributes to the continual constitution of discourses (e.g., through its online messages) that, in some way, go on to inform the organization’s followers. In identifying discourses, I can better understand why things are the way they are and how things might come to change for the better or worse of the overall Fast and Female project.
Second, Fairclough argues that a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis emphasizes, “the primacy of inter-discursivity and intertextuality – any discursive practice is defined by its relations with others, and draws upon others in complex ways” (Fairclough, 1992b, p.55 as cited in Mills, 2004, p. 134). Inter-discursivity and intertextuality contribute to a layering of understandings that result in a richer understanding of a subject. There are a few central ideas that Fast and Female has been built upon, and being able to uncover how these ideas accumulated over history is useful in understanding why they are important for Fast and Female to respond to or build upon. In this sense I can consider the intertextuality between cultural ideas – for instance, between the ideas of empowerment, sport, and Fast and Female. I can better understand the messaging that Fast and Female puts out by considering how different objects or ideas within the messages interact with each other. I can better understand how the individual messages of Fast and Female come together to develop meanings around the organization, and in how they come together to define girls’ empowerment and sport. In considering intertextuality, I recognize that Fast and Female’s online platforms are connected, as are the responses and photos from Fast and Female’s followers. These connections show how Fast and Female contributes to discourses, and is affected by different discourses.

It is important, when doing a Foucauldian discourse analysis, to consider what is seen and said, but it is also important to consider what is missing – what remains unseen and unsaid (Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mills, 2004; Rose, 2012). This would call attention to that which is excluded from a cultural text. For
example, in an overview of Canadian sport media coverage I might notice a lack of reporting on women’s sport stories. Calling out this exclusion could provide important context to all of the awesome sport coverage of men’s accomplishments. Here it is important to draw upon many cultural texts focused on the same subject. By building up an amalgamation of cultural texts and ideas I can see a layering of various patterns that come together around the subject.

Kendall and Wickham (1999) encourage analysts to consider culture and discourses as amalgamations of meanings. Thinking about Fast and Female as a part of the amalgamation of meanings around discourses of empowerment and girls’ sport allows me to conceptualize Fast and Female’s role in developing a culture around girls’ sport in the larger Canadian sport context (Crawford, 2015). Further, considering cultural texts and patterns as amalgamations around Fast and Female encourages me to think of Fast and Female as more than one definite thing. These amalgamations change. Like a teleidoscope, which is a kaleidoscope that depends on its surroundings to create the mosaic the viewer sees, considering Fast and Female in new ways and from multiple perspectives will show me different patterns and relationships and connections from what I originally thought I was seeing. Considering amalgamations of cultural texts and meanings allows for a greater appreciation of the organization’s possibilities and range of understanding – a more detailed consideration of what Fast and Female is and does.

**Reflexivity in Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

Reflexivity in discourse analysis is crucial. Being reflexive means that a researcher would acknowledge their own preconceived opinions or common sense ideas
related to the research topic. A reflexive researcher is self-aware and understands that their written words contribute to existing discursive formations (Rose, 2012). Being reflexive also comes into play when disclosing one’s perspectives and biases in research, which, for instance, might shape one’s active choices about what texts to include in the discussion. Engaging reflexively with my research also means recognizing that my analysis is only one interpretation of the discourses I am looking at and that it is shaped by my current position at Queen’s University as a Master’s student, my history competing in cross-country skiing and engaging with or being aware of the Fast and Female community in Alberta, my identity as a feminist, and by my whiteness, relative economic stability, able and strong body, and otherwise normative femininity. Different researchers would choose different evidence and would emphasize different things. No single researcher or analysis can uncover “truth” (Rose, 2012).

In her book about visual methods, Rose (2012) suggests that analysts should try to forget about their preconceptions about the materials they are working with. At first, I found this suggestion counter-intuitive. Should I try to forget my initial understandings of something (which are probably based on my own preconceptions), or should I be reflecting upon them? My preconceptions have certainly been formed within the context of the sport and gender discourses I am considering, so should I not be thinking about my preconceptions and how they contribute to my understanding of specific discourses? Rose (2012) clarifies her position and describes the balance between forgetting completely and considering preconceived notions when she writes:

As Foucault (1972:25) says, pre-existing categories ‘must be held in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively, of course, but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show
that they do not come about by themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known and the justifications of which must be scrutinized’. (p. 210)

This quote emphasizes both the importance of not only questioning my initial assumptions and trying to make them seem bizarre, but of trying to understand where they came from. Rose’s (2012) position lends clear support to my intentions to be self-reflexive in order to understand how I come to, and play a part in, the discourses I have aimed to study.

**Moving Forward**

In the next chapter I review literature that focuses on empowerment as a democratic theory, girls’ empowerment, and neoliberalism. Bettering my understandings of these areas of knowledge has helped my discourse analysis by offering me perspectives from which to view my data that I would not have otherwise known about or thought of. Through my literature review I try to begin to conceptualize the “amalgamation of understandings” around sport and girls’ general empowerment that have culminated to a particular point in history in a particular place– a point where the Fast and Female organization is thriving in a number of countries and involves a number of sports; a point where the term “women’s empowerment” is readily applied to a variety of products and projects, from girls’ sports to women’s makeup to economic programs targeted at women in developing countries.
Chapter 3

Literature Review

In this chapter I review literatures concerned with empowerment and neoliberalism, governance, marketing, and sport and physical activity. These literatures will inform my analysis of how Fast and Female articulates empowerment in a sporting context. Further, these literatures provide context for the amalgamation of cultural ideas that support and encourage Fast and Female, and other programs that promote girl’s empowerment through sport.

Empowerment

Empowerment is understood differently in different contexts. In popular discourse, empowered people are usually seen as confident, successful, motivated people who are productive and contribute to mainstream society, as opposed to people who challenge the status quo. But for political and cultural theorists, who consider neoliberalism in their work, efforts to promote empowerment can be seen as: a strategy of governance (Cruikshank, 1999; Sharma, 2008); the development of individual and community agency in order to impact government and social norms and barriers (Goodkind, 2009; Collins, 2000; Simon 1994); a process of gaining physical competence (Limmakka, 2011; Theberge, 2000); or as parts of projects or products that fail to include critical intersectional perspectives (Hains, 2012; Rauscher and Cooky, 2015).
In my reading I found that the term “empowerment” is not used in academic literature or in everyday life to say just one thing, and so a single definition in this thesis would do an injustice by simplifying a really complex idea. In her book, *The Empowerment Tradition in American Social Work: A History*, Barbara Levy Simon talks about how the history of empowerment (and ideas that eventually led to what we now call empowerment) informs social work practice (1994). Simon (1994) identified many ideas that contributed to what became “empowerment” including: early religious beliefs about an “inner light” and the goodness of people (p.35); guilt and blame associated with personal accomplishment in systems of merchant and industrial capitalism (p.36-37); Gandhi’s concept of *Hind Swaraj*, or an idea of self-determination where Indian people learned to rule themselves and then endeavoured to persuade others to also rule themselves (p.139); and political ideas from anarchism, socialism, and Marxism (p.39-42). My purpose in this section of the thesis is to unearth some different ideas around the concept of empowerment. A richer understanding of the term empowerment from Simon’s book and from the work of other scholars has informed my understanding of “empowerment” and my analysis of how Fast and Female frames its programming, and girls’ sport programming in general, as empowering. For this project I aim to enrich my understanding of both empowerment and Fast and Female; in order to do that I need to consider how ideas of empowerment are shaped by neoliberalism.
Neoliberalism and Empowerment

Empowerment and neoliberalism are intricately connected. Generally, neoliberalism is a political and economic ideology that emphasizes individual action and responsibility through the free market, discrediting collective efforts and minimizing the responsibilities of government to ensure equity amongst citizens. Neoliberalism is the ideology that, in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s led to the gutting of the welfare state. Neoliberalism manifests in people’s, groups’, corporations’, institutions’, and government’s actions, choices, judgements, policy decisions, and practices. With this emphasis on individual responsibility governments encourage non-governmental organizations to establish empowerment programs to help citizens to be more successful in society. Such programs put the onus for being a productive member of society back on the individual (Cruikshank, 1999). Individual responsibility is an expectation of people living under neoliberalism, and companies and programs take advantage of this expectation to advertise their products. In her book, The will to empower: Democratic citizens and other subjects, Barbara Cruikshank (1999) argues for a different notion of empowerment. She writes that in a neoliberal society, citizens need to be empowered to put the onus of creating a fair and equitable society back on governments (Cruikshank, 1999). In her book about Black feminist theory and political action, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, Patricia Hill Collins makes a similar point saying that citizens need to be empowered under neoliberalism to hold governments and organizations accountable for exploitative and oppressive acts (Collins, 2000).
Sara Goodkind addresses the way in which empowerment and neoliberalism are connected when she talks about “commercial feminism” in her article about gender-specific sport programs for girls in the juvenile justice system in the United States (2009). Goodkind refers to commercial feminism as the “intersection of neoliberal ideas about the individual with feminist ideals” (2009, p.400). She says that “commercial feminism is characterized by its focus on the individual, self-reliance, and personal responsibility for change” (Goodkind, 2009, p.397). Individual change through self improvement programs or products, rather than the betterment of women as a community, is what commercial feminism promotes (Goodkind, 2009). Goodkind connects neoliberalism to commercial feminism arguing that:

…the individual change promoted by commercialized feminism is not only for the purpose of creating personal satisfaction but also is intended to create citizens who will regulate and govern themselves… In other words, what is packaged for women to use to make themselves happier and more confident will also shape them into the kind of citizens needed for the successful functioning of the neoliberal state. (2009, p.400)

Goodkind argues that neoliberalism’s impact can be seen in how people think of the problem of women: where it was and could be thought of as “outside of the self (e.g., patriarchal society)” to where it is seen, as “within the self (e.g., low self-esteem)” (Goodkind, 2009, p.401). The concept of commercial feminism that Goodkind (2009) outlines in her article advances a critique of neoliberalism and individual responsibility quite similar to these put forward by Collins (2002), Cruikshank (1999), and Aradhana Sharma (2008).

David Andrews and Michael Silk’s (2012) anthology of neoliberalism and sport have heavily shaped my understanding of how ideas of neoliberalism might be at play in
my project. As an ideology, neoliberalism values individual effort and accomplishment through the free market, it distances the government from programs intended to create equitable livelihoods amongst all citizens, and it creates alternative strategies to accommodate the issues that the state is no longer responsible for (Silk & Andrews, 2012). I originally thought of empowerment as dichotomous, either or, good or bad, collective or individual – but after reading Andrews and Silk, I think differently. Ideas about empowerment are varied and how empowerment is thought of as a personal quality or as a process has me wondering about the difference between the normatively successful and empowered female athlete who follows her training program and is awesome at her sport, and the empowered woman who stands up against unfair treatment at work. One form of empowerment enables girls and women to be successful within the system, and the other enables girls and women to question the current system. Can programs focusing on empowerment, while situated in a neoliberal context, foster individual empowerment without blaming individuals for the outcomes of structural or societal inequalities? Can Fast and Female empower girls to be successful and to question the status quo?

**Empowerment as a Strategy of Governance**

In the 1960s, social programs and political reformers emphasized empowerment as a tool of resistance to mobilize and politicize the subjugated poor (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 67; Sharma, 2008). Specifically, Cruikshank talks about empowerment as part of a strategy to battle poverty and to challenge the direct influence of the state (1999). Simon
(1994) talks about political reform centered on empowerment including civic movements such as the women’s movement, the Black Power movement, the Gay and Lesbian liberation movement, and the Disability rights movement. She goes on to talk specifically about the Black Power movement, as Martin Luther King “considered the civil rights movement’s greatest achievement to be what … [he] called the ‘new sense of somebodyness’ that it instilled in its participants” (Boyte, 1984 as quoted by Simon, 1994). Simon (1994) attributes this notion of ‘somebodyness,’ and a pattern of civic disobedience that Martin Luther King encouraged as advocacy against racial segregation and discrimination, as empowering people to put pressure on government.

In the 1980s, with the rise of neoliberal ideology, the State and social influence became more vilified, and empowerment became more popular as a goal of government sanctioned programs (Cruikshank, 1999; Sharma, 2008). As Cruikshank (1999) writes, empowerment as a political strategy was taken up by politically left activists and politically right governments as a “technology of citizenship.” Empowerment as a technology of citizenship means that ‘empowerment’ could possibly be used by the people or by governments. People could use empowerment to hold governments accountable for social injustices and inequities. Governments could use empowerment programs as a way to encourage and discipline individuals into being productive and contributing members of society. Politically left activists wanted to empower subjects as political citizens who could take stock of their political position in society (Cruikshank, 1999). Politically right organizations and government institutions used the concept of
empowerment as a way to put the responsibility of social welfare programs on individuals (Cruikshank, 1999).

In her article on commercial feminism, neoliberalism, and empowerment, Goodkind (2009) interrogates the simplistic and superficial definition of empowerment within neoliberal sporting contexts that has recently been taken up by western government and development institutions. Goodkind (2009) argues that promotion of empowerment through sport programs perpetuates and helps establish or construct normative discourses and expectations around capitalism, class, race, gender, age, and size. The institutions that Goodkind (2009) analyzes are government based, and not grassroots community organizations like Fast and Female. However, her conclusions remain relevant. She analyzes girls’ programs (put in place and mandated by a municipal judicial system) that attempt to shape disadvantaged girls into good neoliberal citizens.

Aradhana Sharma (2008) is also interested in questioning how activists and scholars perceive and promote empowerment within neoliberal contexts. In her book, *Logics of Empowerment: Development, Gender, and Governance in Neoliberal India*, Sharma tries to negotiate the contradictions that she sees in government oversight of a non-governmental women’s empowerment program that aims to educate women about small business in India (2008). The ensuing contradictions of this arrangement result in a tenuous understanding of empowerment that is both part of a feminist consciousness of collective empowerment and also as neoliberal strategy for development and governance (Sharma, 2008, p.189). Women who participate in the NGO that Sharma studies are developing a feminist consciousness about their place in their immediate cultural climate,
while also being made into good, economically productive, neoliberal citizens (Sharma, 2008). According to Sharma the concern about empowerment as a tool of governance is seen when organizations pursuing empowerment become “…implicated in broader neoliberal processes, despite [their] creative approach to empowerment and [their] feminist goals of gender equality and just social transformation” (2008, p.192). The concern Sharma (2008) has is that the programs that employ empowerment as an aim can potentially “…serve as vehicles for turning women into law-abiding, disciplined, and responsibilized citizen-subjects (Cruikshank, 1999)” and ultimately Sharma suggests that government sponsored empowerment programs “…deradicalize [program participants] and bring them in line with normative civil society” (Sharma, 2008, p. 195). The result of her analysis of the NGO/GO empowerment program leaves Sharma calling for a “constant vigilance when engaging in the politics of empowerment, on the ground and in theory” (2008, p.199).

As part of a sports community that is located in the global West, I think it is crucial to consider that Fast and Female’s representations and promotion of empowerment will be informed and influenced by neoliberal ideas. I find Sharma’s (2008) discussion of empowerment within a neoliberal context useful to consider as I contemplate how sport institutions might be employing empowerment as a tool of governance (for example, to increase retention of individuals in sports) and what the implications of this might be.

In her book, Cruikshank (1999) was primarily concerned with the question: “How does the will to empower work; how are individuals empowered, transformed from
apathetic and powerless subjects into active, participatory citizens?” (1999, p.3). Ultimately, Cruikshank argued that the will to empower sought solutions to political problems “in the governmentalization of the everyday lives of citizen-subjects” (1999, p.123). Cruikshank argued that empowerment, as a governing strategy, works in two ways – by enabling citizen’s action, based upon the subjects’ interests or desires, and constituting a citizens’ inaction as negligent (1999). Constituting people’s actions as appropriate or negligent cleanly links this rendition of empowerment with neoliberal values of individualism, accountability, and resentment of social welfare.

**Girl’s Empowerment as a Marketing Discourse**

Scholars writing in the area of popular culture describe a different history of the notion of empowerment. Rebecca C. Hains argues that empowerment is a concept that has seeped through consumer culture as a lifestyle brand through music and television (2012). In her book, *Growing up with girl power: Girlhood on screen and in everyday life*, Hains draws on examples such as the Powerpuff Girls and the Spice Girls to grapple with contradictory messages and ideas around femininity and empowerment (2012). Corporate empowerment messages often suggest that girls can do anything if they look, act, and participate in society (by consuming products) in a specific (and feminine) way (2012).

Hains (2012) details a history of the notion of empowerment that grows out of the Riot Grrrl Movement in the United States and the more recent commercialization of empowerment and girl power through different corporate franchises (2012). In her
analysis, Hains makes it apparent that in the Riot Grrrl era, during the 1990s, girls worked to empower themselves by creating their own version of culture, and by making their own space in society where they could voice their own critiques of larger notions of capitalist, consumer culture that tried to dictate oppressive and diminutive forms of femininity (2012). These critiques were largely expressed through music – bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile expressed their distaste for patriarchal power and normative femininity through song lyrics and by dressing in ways that presented non-normative forms of femininity.

By the 1990s, when American media were portraying American versions of the Riot Grrrl movement as a problematic version of femininity and girlhood, the popular American contingent of Riot Grrrl stopped communicating with the media and eventually faded from public consciousness (Hains, 2012). Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, the Riot Grrrl movement fit in well with Britain’s punk rock culture and eventually, with the formation of the Spice Girls and their girl power-centered brand, the music industry capitalized on selling what Riot Grrrl music activists had been producing for free. In her book, Hains (2012) discusses the influence of the Spice Girls on girl power – ultimately finding that the representations of girl power, or empowerment for girls, which were started as something that encouraged girls’ creation of their own culture and their own ways of being, were eventually appropriated and repackaged as a part of consumer culture. Empowerment became a product that girls, and their parents, were sold. Rauscher and Cooky (2015) see the relationship between the Riot Grrrl movement and the Spice Girls as connected with post-feminist narratives. Rauscher and Cooky argue
that the Spice Girls and the commodification of girl power diminished the production and legacy of feminist consciousness in girls of the 1990s era (2015).

Hains’ (2012) understanding of girls’ empowerment is useful in this thesis because she sheds light on how something that seems like a useful, practical idea at its onset can easily morph from benefiting subjugated groups to upholding capitalist interests. Hains (2012) shows the history of ideas about empowerment at a pivotal point, on the one hand the ideas position citizens in a way that enables them to question dominant structures of power, and, on the other, the ideas convince citizens that they gain empowerment from the things that they buy. Both Cruikshank (1999) and Sharma (2008) talk about the importance of considering the politics of empowerment critically – to question whether the notion of empowerment is being used to establish political resistance in favour of the subjugated, or if empowerment is being used to produce “rational, economic, and entrepreneurial” actors (neoliberal subjects), and ultimately forward an inequitable status quo (Cruikshank, 1999, p.68; Sharma, 2008, p.199).

Empowerment as Transformative Processes

In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues for a politics of empowerment that requires action on a social level (2000). In her chapter, “Toward a Politics of Empowerment,” Collins (2000) argues for the development of individual and community empowerment through individual and group consciousness and intentional consideration of multiple axes of power. In her work, Collins (2000) details how a politics of empowerment continually works to dismantle oppression on institutional and
interpersonal levels. Collins writes “becoming empowered requires more than changing the consciousness of individual Black women via Black community strategies. Empowerment also requires transforming unjust social institutions that African-Americans encounter from one generation to the next” (2000, p.273).

In her discussion of empowerment, Collins (2000) argues that both individual and collective consciousness are useful and complementary; and by themselves, each is largely insufficient for developing strategies against oppression (p.275). Further, Collins suggests that “a dynamic consciousness is vital to both individual and group agency” and that consciousness should not be thought of as a fixed entity, but as something that is “continually evolving and negotiated” (2000, p.285). Collins suggests that when people working for social justice think about unjust power relations they should embrace “a paradigm of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, as well as Black women’s individual and collective agency within them” (2000, p. 273). Further, Collins (2000) suggests that women should be thinking critically about what counts as knowledge. Collins (2000) writes that “Offering U.S. Black women new knowledge about our own experiences can be empowering. But activating epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and that enable us to define our own realities on our own terms has far greater implications” (p.274, emphasis in original).

Empowerment through sport. Sport scholars who have paid attention to how politics can be inscribed on and performed through the body have considered how empowerment could be recognized through the bodily process of physical activity. In her chapter on gender and sport in The Handbook of Sport Studies, Nancy Theberge (2000)
details how, in the nineteenth century, young boys’ were thought to be empowered by physical education programs in an arduous and harrowing process that imbued boys with Victorian notions of morality and manhood as they developed into war worthy men (2000, p.323). Theberge (2000) refers to Jennifer Hargreaves (1994) to demonstrate the “connection between physicality, sport, and the construction of gender” (p. 323). Hargreaves (1994) writes “The acquisition of strength, musculature and athletic skill has always been empowering for men, whereas for women it is valued far less and in some cases is denigrated” (as quoted by Theberge, 2000, p.323). In contemporary culture, empowerment is not frequently referred to in discussions of boys’ or men’s sport. Theberge goes on in her chapter to state that “It is important to recognize that the sense of empowerment through sport is not universal experience for males” (2000, p.323). Theberge (2000) argues that “empowerment” in boys’ or men’s sport comes from the achievement of an idealized masculinity – a heteronormative hegemonic masculinity of domination that not all boys or men can or want to meet. This is a very different understanding of empowerment than what I see in the work of Collins (2000), Cruikshank (1999), Sharma (2008), and Simon (1994) who all consider empowerment for bolstering people’s civic liberties. Theberge (2000) is pointing to the history of men’s sport as a vehicle for making (certain) boys and men more powerful over others. Theberge writes that games that were intended to instill “competitiveness, toughness and physical dominance” in boys were eventually taken up by women and girls in physical education classes, after the bizarre Victorian notion of female frailty had been –partially–dissolved (Theberge, 2000, p.322). Since Victorian times, girls have continued taking physical education in schools. Regardless of this integration, there is still a popular call
for girls and women to participate in sport programs and physical activity to become empowered (a call for empowerment that, these days, is generally missing for boys).

In an article considering empowerment as something female graduate students gained through physical activity, Liimakka (2011) presents a different, more current, understanding of how sport might be empowering for girls and women. She argues that a greater appreciation, acknowledgement, and awareness of what women’s bodies can do through exercise and how women come to be themselves within their bodies during physical activity leads to their individual empowerment. Liimakka (2011) considers multiple definitions of empowerment, including what it means to her, and what it means to other critical feminist Foucauldian scholars. She describes her own views of empowerment as “a social and bodily process that fosters power in women for and through bodily action and redefinition of the body” (Liimakka, 2011, p.442). Liimakka (2011) describes empowering processes and experiences as those that make women feel “more powerful” or “less alienated and insecure” about their bodies and their “bodily world relation” (Liimakka, 2011, p. 442). Liimakka (2011) contextualizes her position, writing that “feminists drawing from Foucault, Bourdieu, and physical feminism” define empowerment as “through the mind’s or body’s resistance to the existing power structures” (p.443). Her view is related to “the feminist phenomenological approach,” which focuses on “transformative processes of the individual body experiences” (p.443). In her article, Liimakka (2011) suggests that scholars’ have different definitions of “disempowerment,” and different ideas of what might constitute a solution to this problem. Liimakka (2011) recognizes the complexity in which “empowerment” can bee
considered. Yet in considering empowerment as a general outcome of physical activity, she does not explore the possibility that people might feel empowered in one area of life while feeling disempowered in another.

As I mentioned above, Theberge (2000) argues that all males do not get a sense of empowerment through sport. Theberge (2000) acknowledges that a boy’s empowerment through sport can be an ongoing and harrowing process consisting of elation and depression as he learns how to receive and acknowledge success and failure. This complex and contradictory process is quite different from the process described by Liimakka (2011). She suggests a fairly linear process of empowerment through physical activity, gaining physical strength, and becoming familiar with what one’s body is physically capable of. Comparing these two stories, it seems it is easier to become an empowered girl today, than it was to be an empowered boy in Victorian times. This comparison, and the complexity of Theberge’s (2000) definition of empowerment makes me question the validity, longevity, and depth of current “empowering” activities for girls and women in the empowerment activities run by organizations like Fast and Female.

**Conclusion**

Theberge’s (2000) discussion of the history of gender in sport makes plain that through physical education boys were strengthened and empowered, not because they were previously seen to be disempowered, but because they were becoming men. Boy’s coming into power was not taken for granted – the physical education system in schools developed physical activities for boys to *practice* their *continual* empowerment and
domination over each other (through sports) (Theberge 2000). This kind of continual model of empowerment is not possible to developing one-off program interventions. What is it about practicing sport that is thought to be empowering? Must someone practice sport for years to finally be considered “empowered”? What is it about empowerment that may, or may not remain constant through non-sport situations? These are all questions that beg for a concrete definition of what empowerment is, and that is the issue of this thesis – how can a program promote empowerment as a process, or quality, or accomplishment that captures the history and complexities of the term? What is the best definition of empowerment for programs to use?

Many corporations, organizations, and programs have taken up the task of “empowering girls” to lead successful lives within current societal structures. Mary G. MacDonald argues in her chapter in Sport and neoliberalism: Politics, consumption, and culture that the marketing for the WNBA has used themes of empowerment to build audiences and secure profits (2012). This version of empowerment is not meant to enable them to perform or think in resistance to dominant, pre-existing (and often denigrating) discourses. As Goodkind (2009) argues, the empowerment or development of girls and women, in the context of neoliberalism and western culture, is often meant to produce good, feminine, neoliberal consumer citizens who go on in their lives to be productive and useful to the state and the free market (without challenging current discourses, and therefore strengthening gender inequality). Programs situated in this neoliberal context may assimilate alternative gender expressions and histories of hardship within mainstream western culture, while still failing to question and address the “common
“sense” ideas that sustain the global plague of gender inequality (Kearney, 2009; Rauscher & Cooky, 2015; Staudt, et al. 2001).

In this project I am concerned with a relatively localized understanding of how the global phenomenon of neoliberalism has affected understandings of empowerment that are being used in a sport program for girls. My concern with popularized notions of empowerment as girl power, is that with each way I turn my head, I see a new desire for girls to do more, to be more, to embrace more – admirable aims, but aims that nonetheless fall flat when taken with a wary consideration of surrounding ideas that work to distill the doing, being, and embracing to individual commercialized consumption.

This thesis contributes to literature on empowerment and girls’ sport by analyzing how a girls’ sport organization draws on and contributes to notions of “empowerment through sport” in a neoliberal context. This thesis also suggests ways in which taken for granted neoliberal values can reinforce inequitable social systems and acts of oppression through the well-meaning work that the girls’ sport organization, Fast and Female, is doing.
Chapter 4

Knowledges of Empowerment: An Analysis of Interviews with Expert Sportswomen

Sportswomen are the cogs in the Fast and Female machine. Without them there would be no programming, no events, and no role models for participants to look up to. The sportswomen whom I have interviewed here have all been involved with Fast and Female in some way. Their involvement with Fast and Female is an opportunity for them to contribute to the messaging and meanings that Fast and Female produces, and to be influenced, in turn, by those same messages and meanings.

My aim in interviewing these women and writing this chapter was to learn from their expertise. As experts in girls’ and women’s sport, these women pose an invaluable resource to talk about Fast and Female, empowerment, empowerment through sport, and girls’ sport generally. In looking more thoroughly at our conversations, it is my aim to piece together a richer understanding of what girls’ sport and empowerment through sport might look like. In this chapter I consider three sets of ideas from my interviews: femininity as it relates to sport and Fast and Female; empowerment as it is related to individuals, role models, and community support; and goal setting (a tool used in Fast and Female workshops) as a way to engage girls in developing a critical and collective consciousness. Through this chapter I develop my understanding of Fast and Female and I argue that the organization should approach goal setting as an opportunity to engage girls’ in a collective form of empowerment that bolsters girls’ and women’s sport, and raises girls’ consciousness about their roles in the larger community of Canadian girls’ sport. These interviews have provided context around Fast and Female, and they have
helped me in thinking about this project as part of a larger conversation about girls’ sport and empowerment. My conversations with these women, and this chapter’s analysis, ultimately led me to create a goal setting workbook, included in Appendix A, that could work to encourage community relationships, collective aspects of empowerment, and critical thinking for girls’ who follow Fast and Female.

All of the women I talked to have been involved in girls’ and women’s sport, in some way or another, for most of their lives. Chandra Crawford is the founder and an ambassador of Fast and Female, an Olympic gold medalist in cross-country skiing in 2006, a public speaker, and a MBA student (Crawford, 2016). Gail Niinimaa is a Fast and Female Sport Expert and a textile conservator in Calgary, Alberta (LinkedIn.com, 2015). Gail has coached biathletes and cross-country skiers from a community level to a national level, is a former Canadian national team member with a best result of fifth at a world championship, and she now coaches a women’s ski group in Calgary, Alberta for women aged 55 and older (G. Niinimaa, personal communication, March 26, 2015). Madeleine Williams is a Canadian Fast and Female ambassador, chair of Cross-Country Canada’s Women’s Committee, an Olympian in cross-country skiing, a former varsity athlete in track, and a lawyer (M. Williams, personal communication, April 27, 2015). Holly Brooks is an American Fast and Female ambassador, she is a two time Olympian (Vancouver and Sochi) in cross-country skiing, a master’s student, and a ski coach in Anchorage, Alaska (H. Brooks, personal communication, June 3, 2015). Joanne Ross is a Fast and Female Sport Expert; she was a varsity and professional athlete in volleyball; she has spent time coaching at community and intercollegiate levels; and, she is currently the High Performance Director at Volleyball BC (J. Ross, personal communication, May...
Interviewee Six, who requested that her identity is be withheld, was a high school and varsity athlete, who pursued a coaching career and has coached various levels of national and international sport (Interviewee Six, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

**Fast & Female**

Before Fast and Female’s first event in 2005, the women of cross-country Canada’s national team were talking about the declining rate of high level women in the generations that were supposed to be following them. Through discussions at training camps, Crawford and her teammates developed the basis for the Fast and Female organization. In our interview, Crawford detailed how Fast and Female has developed over the last ten years.

We were just 17 and we were like, “Wow, it really sucks that kids aren’t active, it really sucks that the obesity rate is on such a climb…” And at that time, in say, 1998, the headlines were really all about the increasing incidence of childhood obesity and the simultaneous reduction of Phys-Ed time for kids. So just as teens we thought, “this is – terrible!” Over the next few years we would notice: “ok, there’s actually a crazier problem in sport, which is that girls quit way more than boys.” And my teammates and I were looking at who would be the up and comers who would nip at our heels, and [not many girls were there]. We were kind of talking about it over training sessions and at camps, and we decided to do something about it. (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Canmore in winter of ‘07 that was our first massive [event]. Like we had little tiny [events], then the Olympic thing happened, and it was like – wow, ok, [Fast and Female] is going to become big, and it is going to become big, like, right now! (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015)

[Things] to be proud of over these last two years: 8000 girls have experienced Fast and Female events. Which means they signed up, went
there, got the shirt, met Olympians, did healthy physical activity, danced around, and had an experience that our brand really stands for – which is that there’s a place for girls in sport, there’s a culture for girls in sport, and it’s so fantastic and important for girls to be in sport. (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015)

It’s just demand! I’m really happy that we’ve been able to affect so many girls and create a culture [of] girls in sport. We’ve found a way to continue meeting the demand and we’re evolving, because we run on sponsorships and donations and participant fees. So, we’re tiny, but we’re still rocking.” (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Fast and Female was built around the aim of attracting more girls to sport as part of a solution to problems that the organizers saw in society and in their community – like increased obesity rates and the fact that girls seemed to be leaving sport earlier than boys.

The quotes above demonstrate how Fast and Female started, and what it has accomplished so far. Fast and Female’s followers and participants are invested in Fast and Female – the organization puts out an exciting, and invigorating vibe. As Crawford says, “[her] whole job has been to try to answer the demand” for Fast and Female events (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015).

I explicitly asked my other interviewees: “Is Fast and Female necessary?” The women I interviewed agreed on the importance and necessity of Fast and Female. One woman in particular, Interviewee Six, spoke to the cultural relevancy of Fast and Female, and of girls needing to see other girls and women in sport more generally:

Yes, in capital letters with 24 font with 700 exclamation marks!!!

[Sporty women] are not in our everyday lives. And I believe that there’s something about understanding that it can be cool to wear shorts and a headband and get sweaty and be an athlete. And, it’s also cool to wear a dress and paint your fingernails and be really smart in school. And, it’s also cool to do a whole bunch of things that girls do, but I think the piece that gets missed is that it’s so cool to be a girl athlete. And that’s the message that Fast and Female delivers: “This is fun, this is cool, and look
at us!” … And [Fast and Female events are] an opportunity for these young girls to see strong female athlete role models and to form a connection.

I can remember this when I worked at [a university] for 18 years: I would go past the gym, just walking down the hall at lunch time, and I’d look down there and go “Oh well who’s in there? Who’s in the gym?” And it’s a group of six or seven guys and they’re just in there, rec. balling, and they’re terrible basketball players and they don’t care. Like – they are in there and they’re playing up a storm and I don’t ever remember in my 18 years walking past a gym and seeing a group of girls doing that. And Fast and Female, I think, is trying to spread the message: “It doesn’t matter if you’re male or female; It’s cool to be sporty.” And if our young females don’t see other young females doing [sport], how will they ever get to know that it’s okay and that it’s cool when every time they walk past a gym they only see boys in there? (Interviewee Six, personal communication, May 7, 2015)

During our conversation Interviewee Six discussed the importance of female athletes as examples for girls interested in sports. Interviewee Six specifically said that women’s and girls’ representation in sport is important because public sporting spaces are often taken up by men. The idea that sport has traditionally been a masculine domain is well documented by sport sociologists (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 2002).

Other women, Williams and Brooks, spoke to Fast and Female’s work in breaking down cultural stigma about girls and women in sport. Williams said,

What we saw was, basically, girls were choosing makeup and boys over sports. And so, we thought that’s silly. You can have both – you know, we’re girly and we’re feminine and we’re also athletic. You can do that – I think there is still a lot of negative stereotyping that comes along with being an athletic woman, you know, that girls aren’t strong, can’t run, or scream, or kick. And I think Fast and Female does a lot to break those [ideas] down within the girls themselves. I think that is a good place to start. If you can convince the girls themselves that, in fact, you can be very athletic and still be feminine, and still consider yourself a girl, you’ve gone a long way – and when someone tells them “Oh well you can’t do that.” they can say, “Well you know you’re wrong, I can.” And so, I think there’s definitely still a place for [promoting women in sport]. (personal
Brooks said,

Absolutely. Fast and Female is an organization that exposes girls to healthy role models who are enthusiastic and passionate about what they do. It’s their [ambassadors’] chance to tell [their] stories and share [their] enthusiasm with younger girls who are facing a lot of peer pressure to maybe not do something – to [not] do sports that are often more associated or affiliated with guys. You know, girls have a lot of pressure to be skinny and wear makeup and fit in. And Fast and Female is an organization that exposes girls, who are under a lot of pressure, to role models who say things like, “Hey you can be strong and – and strong is fun and you can gain a lot of confidence from sports.” Having that exposure or having that interface between the older girls and younger girls is, I think, really important and essential to capturing the attention of some of those girls who are on the fence about whether to quit sports altogether or keep going…because they’ve been exposed to people who have had positive experiences. (personal communication, June 3, 2015)

Williams spoke to the point that sporty women are still not recognized for being either sporty or feminine. The trivialization of women and girls in sport is an idea that has been historically noted by both M. Ann Hall (2002) and Jennifer Hargreaves (1994) in their work regarding the histories of girls’ and women’s sport in western culture. In her interview, Williams focuses on two ideas: 1) that girls struggle to see whether there is room for girliness in athleticism; and 2) that women in sport have not been taken seriously. What I see in Williams’ quote is that she recognizes multiple meanings of what it is to be feminine, but at the same time it seems like she is most concerned about girls who are preoccupied with being the right kind of feminine (e.g., the kind of feminine where girls are interested in boys and in putting on makeup). Emphasizing femininity in sport contexts is really challenging. On one hand, sport should be able to be a feminine space where the colour pink and playing with make-up are acceptable. On the other hand,
femininity, and girls and women in sport (and in general), should not have to be defined by a heteronormative version of femininity (the pink version). The question I come away with here is how might Fast and Female embrace different meanings of femininity through sport? It seems that both Brooks and Williams suggest that ambassadors and the sharing of stories of women in sport are a really important avenue where Fast and Female opens up the possibilities for girls to see what being feminine can mean.

The sporting femininity that Fast and Female presents online is limited by the organization’s branding. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. But briefly, the Fast and Female brand is defined by (but also not limited to) the colour pink, and it is generally represented by photos of women and girls who are light skinned, strong, able bodied, conventionally attractive, and not fat. In its branding, Fast and Female delivers an exaggerated response to counter the idea that women and girls in sport, and sport itself, are not girly or feminine. In her book about Canadian women’s sport history, Hall shows that the need to emphasize or preserve female athletes’ femininity is not new in sport (2002). Sociologists see a general trend in sports media coverage where sportswomen’s femininity and sexuality are frequently commented upon (Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Kane & LaVoi, 2007; Kearney, 2011). These frequent detractors from the women’s remarkable sporting accomplishments work to trivialize women’s athleticism and are evidence of heterosexism (Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Kane & LaVoi, 2007; Kearney, 2011).

The pinkness of Fast and Female’s brand has not gone unnoticed by Brooks who recalled a period of time when she was an ambassador for Fast and Female and when the women’s U.S. national cross country ski team also had pink gear. Brooks said,
Yeah, I think the pink thing is really hard. Sometimes it’s like, “Gosh, that’s overly girly, and why do [our national team outfits] have to be pink?” But at the same time, why not? Do we really have to be pink to be feminine? Do we really have to be feminine to share our message? … But I think [pink] helps [Fast and Female’s] branding in some ways.

I think that’s something [having pink, but providing other options, like green or blue or orange, etc.] that’s really important and [that Fast and Female] can improve on. It’s hard because some girls really like that aspect…they love the pink. They love putting glitter on their faces and bows on their hair, but not all girls do. There are tons of tomboys and tons of girls who want nothing to do with pink, and those are important girls too. Those are girls we want to reach, as well. So... it’s an interesting conundrum. (personal communication, June 3, 2015)

Girls and women in all of their different kinds of girliness and womanliness and masculinities should be able to confidently participate in sport (Cooky & Dworkin, 2013). While women athletes have been trivialized for being too girly, sportswomen have also been criticized historically for challenging the natural order of things by being too masculine (Cole, 2000; Ritchie, 2003). I see a convenient juxtaposition between the trivialization of women when they seem too feminine and the discrediting of women when they seem too masculine. The extreme version of the latter has been the disqualification of women from competition for failing the so-called sex test at an international event (Cole, 2000; Ritchie 2003). The marginalization of women in sport is rooted in an idealization of heteronormative femininity and masculinity that ties people’s individual traits to their bodies and that polarizes those traits into two distinct (biological) categories of male and female (Hall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 2000). The marginalization of women in sport is also rooted in homophobia and in insecurities about masculinity and what it means to be masculine in sport (Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 2000).
In her book about sport and gender, Jennifer Hargreaves observes “that female sports have been riddled with complexities and contradictions throughout their history” (1994, p.3). Fast and Female’s sport events are no exception to this and their programs present their followers with many contradictions. For instance, Fast and Female works to help girls advocate for themselves in their choice to be active, but then the organization’s branding prescribes specific ways to be feminine. One of the organization’s mantras is for girls “to be leaders in all that they do” (Fast and Female, 2015a, emphasis added), yet it seems that the organization only recognizes the leadership of current athletes, rather than women who have a wider range of experience in sport and who have been involved in sport for longer and at many levels as athletes, coaches, mentors, or sport administrators. Brooks said this about the potential confusion around Fast and Female’s messaging:

Yeah, you know, I think the messaging can be confusing but it depends on how you look at it. The idea is that [Fast and Female] is incredibly inclusive [of] girls of all abilities, shapes and sizes who have different levels of experience. But at the same time, the motto is “Spread the love; Dominate the world” [laughing]. A lot of the ambassadors tend to be girls who are at the top of their sport. I think that can be confusing and maybe it is intimidating to some girls who aren’t at the top of their sport. But, the whole goal of the program is to capture those girls who are thinking about dropping out or who don’t have much experience with sport in the first place… We have ambassadors whose sole job is to float around and find the girls who seem lost; these are girls who don’t have much experience, don’t come with other friends, or need a little bit of a confidence boost. And I think [Fast and Female ambassadors running events] always explain that “Dominate the World” doesn’t mean winning an Olympic medal, it can mean anything you want it to mean, it can mean doing as well as you can on your math test. The word “domination” is very strong, but I think it essentially means finding passion in something that you love to do. That’s what it means to me. (H. Brooks, personal communication, June 3, 2015)
Brooks says that being a leader, or “Dominating the World” does not have to be about winning an Olympic medal, or even about excelling in sport. But in thinking about this quote from Brooks, and earlier quotes from Brooks, Williams, and Interviewee Six that touched on the importance of girls having the example of women in sport, I again see a contradiction. I find it really encouraging that Fast and Female ambassadors are given opportunities to clarify the organization’s messaging to girls during in-person events. This likely means that ambassadors are able to enrich the organization’s messaging with their own understandings and experiences, of sport and of life, as former girls in the sport system. But if the people who are helping to clarify contradictions are all athletes, then the girls who are sorting through different sporting contradictions for themselves are only being presented with ideas about sport and success from one perspective out of many.

Williams also spoke about clarifying moments when she was an event ambassador:

Fast and Female events often include a goal setting exercise, and the idea is not to confine yourself to sport related goals. It’s just “What do you want to do?” Some of the girls are very young so it’s sort of open ended. A couple of times [girls have] asked “Well do these [goals] have to be about sports?” And, the answer is no, you can put down anything you want. It’s anything! And their eyes just light up and they get so excited about all the stuff they could put on this goal sheet! And that to me is very telling because you’re doing this [goal-setting] in sort of a sport environment – but just to be an enabler and broaden horizons or open doors. That’s pretty cool. You know it wouldn’t even occur to me that girls wouldn’t feel comfortable writing something other than a sport goal. What, they just thought, “Oh I’m at a sports thing I can only put down sports goals”? And well… That’s not really the point [laughing]. (M. Williams, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

Martin Camiré, Tanya Forneris, Pierre Trudel, and Dany Bernard (2011) argue that sport programs forwarding positive youth development should explicitly work to transfer the relevancy of ideas that are presented in a sporting context into other areas of participants’
lives. In the literature about positive development through sport, there is a larger discussion about the implicit and explicit transfer of skills developed in sport to other areas of participants’ lives (see Turnnidge, Hancock, & Côté, 2014). Coakley (2011), Kane & LaVoi (2007), and Rauscher and Cooky (2015) would suggest that ambassadors and Fast and Female need to examine girls’ personal accomplishments, barriers, and skills (like goal-setting) to consider both how those accomplishments, and barriers are situated in a larger social community, and how girls might use skills they have gained through Fast and Female events in benefiting or changing that community and in addressing larger barriers for other girls.

**Empowerment**

When I asked the women I interviewed to define empowerment, they connected it with many different personal qualities, with skills, and with environmental factors. The qualities they identified included resilience, confidence, competence, and perseverance. The women connected empowerment with skills like learning how to gain knowledge and information to make decisions, being able to overcome adversity or limiting perspectives or barriers, being able to advocate for your own choices, and being able to manage and bounce back from failure or negative feedback. Finally, the women I interviewed said that to foster girls’ empowerment, advocates for girls need to provide access to groups where girls can feel social belonging and support, and have a safe space for exploration and failure (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015; G. Niinimaa, personal communication, March 26, 2015; H. Brooks, personal
Many of these qualities are promoted in many other youth sport programs (Camiré et al., 2011; Coakley, 2011; Rauscher & Cooky, 2015). The ideas offered by the women I interviewed could be linked to a larger culture of girls’ sport – like needing an environment that encourages growth and accepts failure as a part of learning. But many of these ideas focused more directly on developing personal traits that would enable individual empowerment – the development of individual qualities like confidence and resilience regarding set-backs and negativity.

A focus on individual empowerment that does not connect to a sense of collective empowerment, or foster an awareness of a larger body of people who work together to ensure common goals such as equality for a specific group of people (Cruikshank, 1999; Sharma, 2008; Simon, 1994), or foster community engagement is an indication of how neoliberal ideology has informed dominant knowledges about sport and empowerment (Cruikshank, 1999; Sharma 2008; Silk & Andrews, 2012). Collins argues that individual consciousness-raising without teachings on group awareness and efforts ultimately fails in delivering a strong basis for girls’ empowerment (Collins, 2000). The sport experts’ ideas about empowerment often reflect a focus on outcomes for an individual, but they also present understandings of empowerment as something that is more collective or community oriented. In this section I will look at both of these approaches in turn.
Individual Empowerment

During the interviews I asked: “what do girls need to become empowered?”

But to me I think empowerment is having the confidence to step up and do something that you really want to do or feel you can do. The word ‘power’ is the strength to do something. ‘Empower’ is like, giving yourself the strength to do something, and I would say personally, I’m a very empowered person. I just step up and do anything that I feel like doing because I guess I feel I’m not afraid of failing. (G. Niinimaa, personal communication, March 26, 2015)

I believe that the top thing girls need to be empowered is social belonging… And, I think that social belonging challenges the natural hierarchy, as well, because you’ll see people who don’t have enough money (let’s say someone from a low income family) but might still find a way to buy the newest Nike sneakers. To me, that is evidence that social belonging can supersede some other basic needs sometimes and is actually a very high need. (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Resilience is a fabulous tool to have in your tool box. And you can’t learn resilience if everyone in your life solves your problems for you. Resilience [is] a tool of taking responsibility… And to me, empowerment means I am my own hero. I am the hero in my own life, and I don’t need someone to come and save me. I don’t need someone to come and save me from the disappointment of [a problem or set back]. I know how to save myself. (Interviewee Six, personal communication, May 7, 2016)

In each of the above quotes the women I interviewed emphasize empowerment as it relates to the individual. Crawford also talks about the importance of social belonging, a concept I would have expected to be key in an organization like Fast and Female. In her example, Crawford suggests that commercial products can be an avenue to social belonging, however her point is made to demonstrate that the desire to feel a social connection is more important than many other desires and is what girls ultimately need to engage in the process of becoming empowered. Interviewee Six and Niinimaa say that empowerment is being able to solve your own problems without the help or mention of
others. Niinimaa and Interviewee Six draw on qualities such as confidence, strength, and resilience. The above quotes emphasize individuals’ efforts in gaining something for themselves. Interviewee Six, and Niinimaa, also suggest that empowerment is meant, generally, to combat disappointment and the fear of failure. The focus of empowerment in the ideas demonstrated above, is on individual advancement, rather than the advancement of others or of a community (Cruikshank, 1999; Silk & Andrews, 2012). However, social belonging, confidence, not being afraid to try things, and resilience are also qualities that would benefit members of a larger group advocating for something, e.g., more women in leadership roles in sport organizations, or more low-cost opportunities for girls of marginalized populations to participate in sports throughout adolescence.

**Role Models**

As I discuss in Chapters Six and Seven, Fast and Female does promote the notion that women and girls can help to empower each other (Kane & LaVoi, 2007; Staurowsky, et. al, 2015). Role models are an important aspect of Fast and Female’s work, and the topic came up in conversation during my interviews. Niinimaa spoke about how biathlon and cross-country skiing came to be popular, especially with girls. She said,

> When Miriam [Bédard] got her two gold medals, that just kind of gave the profile to the [biathlon and cross-country skiing]. So all of the sudden there were all these young girls who wanted to be in this sport. It’s the same with Beckie [Scott], Sara [Renner], and Chandra [Crawford]. [They] got their medals; that’s the same thing. It’s like [girls are saying] “Oh I want to do that! If a Canadian can do that, I can do that.” It’s kind of like – it breaks that barrier down. (G. Niinimaa, personal communication, March 26, 2015)
Bédard, Scott, and Renner were some of the first Canadian biathletes and cross-country skiers who were celebrated and popularized in the media, especially in Alberta’s cross-country skiing and biathlon sport cultures. Williams spoke to the value of really getting to know your role models not simply as athletes, but as whole people as well. She said,

I think it comes back to, basically, a couple of the things I was just talking about, including setting ourselves [the ambassadors] out as real people to these girls. So, you know, I’ll come into something like [a Fast and Female event], and to me, what’s most empowering about what I can give is the whole picture of me. So, it’s not like, “Oh, I was a skier and I went to the Olympics.” You know, there are six of us here who did that. That’s not that exciting. But what’s empowering about [the ambassadors is] giving this whole picture: like – “I translated the skill set that I gained being an elite athlete into being a law student, and then also being fit enough to go run on a very competitive track team.” So, just giving this bigger picture. And that’s part of the intimacy of the events. You’re in a small group with one ambassador and six or seven girls and [the girls] get to know [their] ambassador and [the girls] get to know a little bit more about them as a whole person not just as a training robot. [The girls] start to see [the ambassadors] as real people who have had real setbacks. [The ambassadors] have dealt with the same real girl stuff that [the girls are] dealing with. So, I think that that’s the real value of that kind of setup. (M. Williams, personal communication, April 27, 2015)

What Williams is saying here really supports Fast and Female’s programming in providing girls access to and an opportunity to get to know successful female athletes.

Niinimaa and Williams talk about how having accessible role models can spark the imagination of young girls, so they can see that something was possible for someone who came before them, and so they could think that it might be possible for them too (personal communication, March 25, 2015 and April 27, 2015, respectively).

Meier (2015) talks about sporting role models in her article about the lack of popular female role models in sport. In the article, Meier argues that adding women to
sporting spaces is not enough to recognize them as sporting role models (2015).

Sportswomen, she writes, remain “invisible and irrelevant” in popular discourse (2015, p.970). Media coverage of women promotes sports women who “conform to sociocultural expectations and sex-role stereotypes [of women and femininity]” in ways that hinder the promotion of women who represent identities that deviate from those expected expectations (Meier, 2015, p.970). Meier argues that presenting female role models with varied backgrounds and histories is crucial in expanding their influence with girls and women (2015). Meier argues that role models and leaders in women’s and girls’ sport need to advocate for change at “individual, structural and societal levels by simultaneous top-down (gender policies, etc.) and bottom-up (educational and recreational frameworks) measures” (2015, p.978).

Fast and Female is certainly providing access to many female role models, but as Meier (2015) argues, providing role models is not enough to encourage participation in sport. Williams spoke about how event participants engage with Fast and Female ambassadors in ways that allowed them to see ambassadors as people, not just athletes (personal communication, April 27, 2015). A more personal connection with sportswomen may be beneficial to the girls’ going to Fast and Female events, but as I discuss in Chapters Five and Six, the role models that Fast and Female showcases, taken as a group, generally lack diversity in race, ability, and their representations of femininity. Such a limited perspective on the type of women or type of femininity that can be seen in sport may limit Fast and Female’s followers to a very homogenous pool of girls expressing a very specific type of femininity. If Fast and Female is truly aiming to “Spread the love,” as one of its mantras states, and “get as many girls hooked on the
healthy lifestyle,” as its mission statement states, then the organization could benefit from investing in and popularizing femininities that are alternative to societal norms of beauty. As Fast and Female portrays girls, women, and femininity, the organization has created a norm of what a girl in sport looks like within the group of Fast and Female ambassadors, volunteers, and participants that are showcased online (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapters Six and Seven).

**Community Support**

The women I interviewed also spoke about how empowerment could be grounded in a girls’ or women’s sport culture, like the one Fast and Female is trying to create.

Crawford says:

[Fast and Female is] not there when we’re doing some empowerment work. It can be seeing the [Fast and Female] logo on someone else’s helmet and going big on a jump because it just sparked that fire because [the girls think] “I’m part of something: Fast and Female!” The stories we get from parents, “Our kid was getting bullied at school and I could just say to her, ‘Hey Annie! Fast and Female.’ And she would feel better, and she’d wipe away [her] tears and she’d be like ‘You know what, yeah, I’m part of something, I’m confident.’” And I would say that in situations like that, we went there. It has nothing to do with the Olympians, and it has a little more to do with the broader culture we’ve created.” (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015)

Crawford suggests that people might carry the meanings and messages of a larger community or culture with them to have an impact on their choices or actions in difficult or unwanted situations. While Annie may have been bullied at school, being involved in sport and in Fast and Female seemed to have given her a different community, a different support network where she could find social belonging and gain self-confidence. The knowledge that others agree with them, or share a perspective with them can be huge for
some girls in their efforts to maintain their girly sportiness and battle negative bullying at school (Kane & LaVo, 2007; Staurowsky et. al, 2015).

Ross reflects on how she, as a sport system administrator and coach, can help empower girls by connecting individuals, through sharing information. She says,

So, I think empowerment for me is knowledge. Because I think to make good decisions you have to feel empowered; I think you want to feel good in your decisions. You want to feel that you’re guiding your own way in the world and leading your life as opposed to just following it, and to do that I think you need information. So, what I think is empowering for female sport is not to tell girls how to do it, but to give them all the information and support them in their decisions. Giving [girls] the facts and supporting them in their decisions is what I think empowerment is.” (J. Ross, personal communication, May 25, 2015)

Ross specifically called out the need for girls to feel not only supported in their choices but to feel as if they have a community they can rely on, a community that can provide potential resources for information. Ross specifically identified a way that she could personally contribute to a community of girls; here I see that empowerment is not just about gaining confidence, but that it can also be about having a positive impact on the people around you. This understanding, however, still centers on individuals – Ross and the girl making a decision. Ross’ quote does suggest that empowerment cannot stop at an individual level – the interpersonal level is also important. A community of support, and being part of the support system for others is part of becoming empowered. Interviewee Six, Niinimaa, and Ross, also spoke to the importance of coaches, or leaders, or teachers in fostering an environment for empowerment, regardless of the learning situation participants find themselves in.

But I can’t imagine that sport is the only [space for empowerment]. I think it’s who you have around you. That would be really key. We call them coaches. A saxophone player might call them a teacher or a maestro.
Whoever your leader or teacher or mentor is, I think those are the people who would create the empowerment, or the environment that would foster [it]. (J. Ross, personal communication, May 25, 2015)

[W]hen I went to university, [my coach] was the first female that I’d ever been coached by. And I’m still finding that to be the case – where many females go through their sporting career having never being coached by a female. I just remember thinking what an amazing woman [my coach] was. And I remember thinking how strong, smart and competent she was. I remember thinking when I started pursing the coaching path, “Wow! I want to be like [her]!” (Interviewee Six, personal communication, May 7, 2015)

I had a wonderful coach and she, I think, probably was the main figure who kept me in sport the longest, because she didn’t care whether I was the best gymnast or not. I was a very important member of the school gymnastic team. But, when I look back she was really key as to why I stayed in sport. (G. Niinimaa, personal communication, March 26, 2015)

Niinimaa went on to become one of the first women on the Canadian biathlon team and she later successfully lobbied the International Olympic Committee to have biathlon included as a women’s sport in the winter Olympics. Interviewee Six went on to become a very successful coach at various levels. The quotes above bring attention to the role that teachers or leaders play in facilitating empowering environments for others. It is in this relationship, where those teachers might bring their students’ attention to histories, or problems, or successes, that could further develop students’ understandings of collective empowerment. For example, in my introduction I quoted Chandra Crawford saying that she was not the only athlete on the Canadian women’s cross country ski team who had noticed girls dropping out of sport. Crawford says that together, she and her teammates came up with a strategy to combat a problem that they saw – that strategy is, of course, Fast and Female. Further, the Women’s Committee of Cross Country Canada (the governing body of cross-country skiing in Canada) often works with, and supports, Fast
and Female (Williams, personal communication, April 27 2015). Sharing stories of collaborative efforts that end up altering current culture might increase Fast and Female’s followers’ awareness of how impactful the empowerment of girls and women at a collective or community level could be.

**Goal Setting as a Strategy for Empowerment**

Beyond role models and community support, the experts I spoke with frequently brought up goal setting as an important strategy for fostering empowerment. Fast and Female often has goal-setting sessions included in its events (H. Brooks, personal communication, June 3, 2015; M. Williams, personal communication, April 27, 2015). When they spoke about goal setting, the experts often spoke about it as an empowering part of sport, and as a practical skill that can be readily applied in non-sport situations.

It does help to have a goal and to be [able] to work through it. And I guess the empowerment comes in the success, or knowing that you can do it. (G. Niinimaa, personal communication, March 26, 2015)

Yeah, I mean I think sports really teach you, or teach me how to set a goal and work towards it. I mean, oftentimes, you set a big goal and there are lots of little subjective and objective goals that you try to hit along the way. And, you know, sometimes you may [miss] those objectives and you have to kind of pivot and change your plan... (H. Brooks, personal communication, June 3, 2015)

Another time I failed an exam and I knew failed it because I left over half of it blank. I walked out of the exam and shed a couple [of] tears for maybe 30 seconds, and then I got a pen and paper and figured out what I was going to do now. Like, yes, I failed the exam, but now what are my options? And I marched into the program director’s office, and I showed them my plan of yes, it happened, here’s what I’m thinking. So, that was kind of an athlete’s style. And [it was] kind of how [athletes] would handle it [in a sport situation]. Yeah, I would be bummed if [my team] had a bad race, but we debriefed, and we [had] that routine whether it was a
good race or a bad race. You learn, you move on, and those are all skills that I’ve been uncovering as I go and as I uncover the need for them in these [non-sport] situations. (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2016)

Brooks, Crawford, and Niinimaa all talked about how goals can help people work toward a difficult accomplishment, or about how goals can help people deal with disappointment. Earlier in this chapter, Interviewee Six also talked about how empowerment means that people can pick themselves back up after a disappointment.

Goal setting was not something I asked about, but rather something that these women brought up themselves as a practical tool to take from sport and apply to the rest of their lives. In the above quotes, I see that much of the emphasis of goal-setting in sport is on individual accomplishment or betterment. These are valuable skills for girls to have in a neoliberal context, but they are skills that enable individuals to fit within that context, rather than challenge it or the oppressions that it encourages. What would happen if the focus of goal setting was changed from accomplishment to reflexivity? From individual efforts to collective ones? From individual desires to community betterment?

When I consider what goal setting does to help empower individuals, I can see that goal setting makes things that seem insurmountable more manageable by breaking them down into a process, rather than a looming aspiration. I think it would also be possible to connect the type of process that is encouraged by setting individual goals to teaching about collective empowerment. Goal-setting, in my experience, and as shown in Crawford’s above quote, is a process that requires people to be self-reflective. When setting goals, it is important to ask oneself many questions, like:

- What do I want to do or achieve? By when?
• How might I become or do this better?
• What are the steps that will get me to what I want?

These are very individual questions, but they are questions that ask the goal setter to think in detail. I think the process of goal-setting, of asking detailed questions and purposely thinking about them, could be part of encouraging girls to develop a more collective consciousness if the detailed questions they were asking were about girls’ communities, rather than just about themselves. In this way, goal setting could be used in a way that was not so individual. Goal setting could be used in a way that doesn’t prioritize individual accomplishment, but helps in creating a mindset for Fast and Female participants to think about larger problems, or solutions, and how they might be solved by girls.

**Goal Setting Theory**

Goal setting theory, formed over four decades of psychology research, is based on the idea that a defined outcome can inspire action (Locke & Latham, 2002). According to Locke & Latham, setting goals affects performance through four mechanisms: 1) by directing focus and effort to relevant activities, 2) by increasing one’s enthusiasm for the performing or learning process (when desired outcomes are considered more difficult but still attainable), 3) by maintaining interest and persistence in achieving something – especially when a time limit is set, and, 4) indirectly, by motivating goal setters to look for task-related strategies or knowledge that will help them in their goal (2002). Similar to what Niinimaa and Brooks were saying about finding success in accomplishing parts of goals, Barry J. Zimmerman, Albert Bandura, and Manuel Martinez-Pons found that
students continued to believe in their ability to do well in school when they set and met small goals and received support from adults around them (parents and teachers) (1992).

The foundation of goal setting theory is based on two things: 1) desired outcomes and 2) helpful resources (Locke & Latham, 2002). It seems like it would be entirely possible to imagine directed goal setting that would emphasize community engagement (as a desired outcome), through the development of individual, interpersonal and collaborative skills (as helpful resources). I have developed this approach in Appendix A, by creating a goal-setting workbook with those characteristics in mind.

Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons characterized the students they considered in their study as self-motivated individuals, students who were taking on goal setting as part of their responsibility to do well in school (1992). In sport, my coaches (across the different sports I have been competitive in) always initiated and checked in with my goals and goal-setting process at the beginning, middle, and end of each season. Fast and Female could develop the notion that goal setting as a tool that girls continually use in sport, is also relevant for their everyday lives, and for group initiatives. It is my hope that the workbook I have developed could be used by Fast and Female. The organization could give it to girls to take home after Fast and Female’s in person-events.

Learning from Experts and Considering Literature: An Analysis

This chapter has explored complicated meanings associated with femininity, Fast and Female, empowerment, and goal-setting. This analysis touches on four main points. My first point is about femininity and Fast and Female; my second point is about the
definition of empowerment as an individual process; my third point considers ideas about collective empowerment; and my fourth point considers how goal setting might be able to contribute to the development of collective thinking skills, and potential in developing a collective empowerment amongst girls and women.

For my first point, about femininity and Fast and Female, I argue that Fast and Female’s branding can be seen as a response to historical popular trends of trivializing women athletes when they were seen as too feminine, and discrediting them when they were seen to be too masculine. The Fast and Female brand is about challenging two notions: 1) that sport is inherently masculine, and 2) that girls should not take up space in sport. By this reasoning, awesome women in sport are still awesome if they are conventionally feminine and if they bring that femininity, in the form of pinkness, to sport. What Fast and Female’s response is missing, however, is an overt acceptance of different types of girls who might participate in sport, and of different types of femininities that can be expressed through sport. In considering many different meanings that go into how people might understand or identify with femininity (Weedon, 1997), Fast and Female programming and events could appeal to more girls who could benefit from programs focusing on sport and empowerment.

For my second point, about the definition of empowerment as an individual process, I argue that neoliberal ideology shapes the discourses linking sport and empowerment. We see this when the sport experts talk about empowerment as something meaningful to individuals, and to themselves. Cruikshank (1999) argues that when governments that downplayed their role in social welfare, starting in the 1960s, they promoted empowerment programs to encourage people to take on personal responsibility
for their well-being. Cruikshank (1999) writes that ideas of individual responsibility became so pervasive within neoliberal contexts that eventually public discourse considered a person’s lack of empowerment not as a failure of government in providing adequate social support, but as a failure of the individual in not accessing the right social resources to empower themselves.

The women I interviewed touched on points about how consumerism and personal responsibility and growth are now often linked in popular definitions of empowerment. Hains (2012) comments on this trend in her book, noting the shift of girl power politics from girls contributing to their own culture during the Riot Grrrl era to girls (and their parents) purchasing Girl Power during the Spice Girls era. The comparison that I can see between Hains’ (2012) and Cruikshank’s (1999) work is that Hains focuses on how individual responsibility has been linked to people’s purchasing power, for example when people buy into something like Girl Power. Buying into a product or program is the responsibility of the individual, it is something a person does for themselves (or their kids). While Riot Grrrl music and activism also emphasized individual responsibility, the artists wanted girls to be responsible for contributing to and being a part of a larger community of girls and women who were trying to challenge and change narratives of femininity.

For my third point, about collective empowerment, I argue that women and girls can empower themselves when they consider themselves not simply as individuals, but as contributing members of a larger social group. Collins argues for a politics of empowerment that requires action and efforts to change “unjust social institutions” in addition to raising the consciousness of individuals (2000, p.273). Simon (1994)
discusses collective social action that previous social movements like the women’s liberation movement and the Black rights movement have relied on to change societal discrimination based on gender and race. If women and girls in sport were to see themselves as mentors, and coaches, and part of a community made up of other girls and women they might envision empowerment not as something that is only personal, but as something that is developed and maintained through interpersonal relationships. This community could turn the personal political by working to help future generations of girls and women not only exist in sport as it currently is, but to change it to meet needs that they determine and value in their own right.

My fourth argument is that in working towards empowerment through sport, something about sport needs to be changed so that it includes and fosters skills like collaboration and the development of collective consciousness. Scholars such as Collins (2000), Cruikshank (1999), Sharma (2008), and Simon (1994) advocate for collaboration and collective consciousness as integral to the kind of empowerment that could foster social change. The experts whom I spoke with suggested that goal setting as a practice can be a useful tool in helping girls become empowered. They argued that goal setting in sport was useful for girls’ empowerment as goal setting is a way to reflect upon, identify, and accomplish individual goals. And that’s thing about current day sport – it reflects core tenets of neoliberal ideology (for example individual responsibility and free market consumerism). In considering empowerment through sport as a process for both individual and collective means, a goal-setting workbook could help Fast and Female encourage girls to think about themselves, sport, and their surrounding communities in ways that might allow the girls to recognize and act upon social inequality.
Empowerment, Fast and Female, and Goal Setting: A Conclusion

Fast and Female events aim to empower girls through sport (Fast and Female, 2013b). The women that I spoke with were concerned with how women and femininity are perceived in sport. The women said that Fast and Female encourages girls to be girly and that girliness in sport is actually awesome. Bringing pink girliness to sport is Fast and Female’s way of showing its followers that girls do not have to choose between being girly and playing sports. Fast and Female wants to empower girls to stick with sport throughout their lives (Fast and Female, 2015a). The organization wants girls to be confident in their sporting practices, but also, during those sporting practices, it seems that Fast and Female wants girls to be confident in their femininity. Considering that many different types of girls may be interested in sport, Fast and Female’s reliance on the colour pink to represent girls’ sport and girls’ empowerment could be misguided and ultimately could dissuade some girls from continuing on in sport.

The sport experts I spoke with suggested that empowerment through sport is not just about sport, but also about other areas in girls’ lives (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015; M. Williams, personal communication, April 27, 2015; H. Brooks, personal communication, June 3, 2015). Crawford mentioned that girls carry meanings and feelings of what it is to be empowered beyond the Fast and Female community (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015). She said that girls carry a feeling of empowerment into their lives when they continually choose to be sporty (C. Crawford, personal communication, March 25, 2015). But my sense is that the work that is done outside of Fast and Female’s events could be more purposeful and
considerate of how processes of empowerment work with other areas of participants’ lives. The goal-setting workbook I have prepared in Appendix A could be a step towards that purposefulness if Fast and Female were to use it at events or/and make it available on their website. A more direct approach in sharing ideas about empowerment and individual and collective consciousness, such as introducing this workbook and talking about why collective goals are good, might further enable girls to advocate for girls’ and women’s empowerment. Establishing more a collective consciousness in members of the girls’ and women’s sporting communities would allow for more beneficial and longer lasting societal change.
Chapter 5

The People’s (Approved) Response: Testimonials About Fast and Female

This chapter is the first of three that look at Fast and Female’s online content. In this chapter I consider seven of the 18 testimonials on Fast and Female’s website. My selection of which testimonials to include was based off of the detail of description and uniqueness of the commentary that was provided in the available quotes. In Chapter Six I consider the rest of Fast and Female’s website. In Chapter Seven I consider Fast and Female’s online representations of its programming and social media. I have started my analysis of the online content with the organization’s testimonials because the testimonials show how the organization is situated in a neoliberal context, while also validating the work of Fast and Female.

The testimonial section on Fast and Female’s website is intended show the impact the organization’s ideas and practices have had on girl’s everyday lives. The testimonials are filtered; that is, Fast and Female chooses what to showcase on its website, including testimonials, but the testimonials come from community members. Here, we see what Fast and Female would like us to see, and so this page allows the organization to construct an image of itself using the words of people who have been associated with the program. The testimonials we see on this page help shine a positive light on Fast and Female. The intertextuality between the testimonials and the rest of Fast and Female’s online work (which I discuss in Chapters Six and Seven) means that the testimonials can work to validate the organization’s work. The testimonials section of the website has quotes from parents, former participants, ambassadors, and volunteers, all of
whom shine a positive light on Fast and Female (Fast and Female, 2015u). It is clear that these people value the work that Fast and Female is doing and that they have had positive experiences with the organization.

When I consider the testimonials beyond face value, some of them point to how Fast and Female operates, what people value about the organization, and what kind of influence it has on the participants in its events. Much of the language that is used is similar to what is used in Fast and Female’s own messaging. I have only included some partial testimonies as part of this analysis. I specifically looked for quotes that explained how Fast and Female operates during its events, or how girls reacted to Fast and Female programming and online media. However, my aim with this chapter is not to examine how Fast and Female operates during events, or how people have reacted to Fast and Female, but to explore how Fast and Female has showcased how the organization accomplishes its work.

Testimonials

The following collection of quotes emphasizes how Fast and Female “inspires, motivates, empowers, and supports” their participants. At the time she wrote this testimonial, Kendra Hicks was a grade twelve student and a cross-country skiing athlete from Canmore, Alberta. She wrote:

…I remember the feeling of being so incredibly inspired by the older female athletes. I got them to sign my shirt, and I honestly didn’t take it off for a month after that! I specifically remember Amanda Ammar telling me that I was a really fast, really fun kid. Funny enough, Amanda is now
my teammate and she still tells me things like that. But I was so amazed that somebody that successful, and that amazing, told me that in Silver Star back in 2006. …

… I think girls turn away from this sport because it’s so manly and so hardcore! But what they don’t realize is that’s the beauty of it! I really look up to Emily Batty because she shows girls that sports like cross-country skiing, downhill skiing, and mountain biking are for girls too! She shows everyone to embrace our femininity and go out there and kick butt! She’s fast and she is so female!

… I have become a better person because of cross-country skiing, there’s no denying it. In my club (Canmore Nordic Ski Club) there are no girls my age who ski. It’s tragic for many reasons. I want to tell young girls they are amazing, I want them to look up to me. … (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Hicks’ testimonial draws attention to the prominence of the ambassadors at Fast and Female events (Amanda Ammar, Emily Batty). She reiterates a belief that girls turn away from the ‘manliness’ in sport, and she praises Fast and Female’s examples of how girls can still be feminine in sport. Specifically, Hicks refers to Canadian professional mountain biker Emily Batty – Fast and Female’s 2013 Most Stylish Ambassador, an online award that features a staged and stylized Batty on a bicycle decorated in festive holiday lights (a photo appropriated from a separate holiday post on Batty’s personal blog; see the Facebook award photo in Figure 1) – emphasizing how notions of heteronormative femininity are reiterated and celebrated by this (former) individual ambassador and by the organization (Fast and Female, 2015v). Finally, Hicks talks about her need for Fast and Female and their ambassadors, and her desire to follow Fast and Female’s examples of community leadership, trying to promote the inclusion of more girls in sport by being a positive role model for them. Taken as one quote, this is an example of Fast and Female’s values being taken up by one individual. It is an example
of one Fast and Female follower who seems to have solidified values around athletes as role models, heteronormative femininity, community, athleticism, and sport.

Gail Niinimaa, a listed sport expert on fastandfemale.com, had the following to say in her testimonial:

… I believe that every time we have an opportunity to empower girls in sport we grow our sport in substantial ways.

In 1981 there were 2 women competing in Biathlon in Canada – Kaarina from BC and Denise from Alberta … until 1992 when Myriam [Bédard] won an Olympic medal and many young girls knew that it was a real possibly for Canadians to succeed at the Olympic level.

So all of you great ambassadors need to know that you make a huge difference as role models and mentors to the young girls who you work with. When people see that the way has been paved it opens the door to set the bar even higher. … I’m going to forge a new skiing class this year and plan to give ski instruction for women 55+ at COP [Canada Olympic Park, in Calgary, Alberta] this winter!! So maybe [you] can encourage that age group to also be empowered through sport!! … (Fast and Female, 2015u)
Niinimaa’s testimony is explicit in tying empowerment to sport and she talks about the influence and importance of athletes as role models for younger generations. She notes that that role models open up the realm of possibility to those who look up to them – possibilities not only of achievement, but of pushing the limits of what people originally thought of as realistic. As a listed sport expert on Fast and Female’s website, Niinimaa’s status within the organization along with her testimony could work to validate Fast and Female’s efforts even further – to the extent where Niinimaa is working to promote the empowerment through sport approach to a new age group – to a women’s sport community beyond those involved with Fast and Female.

Montana Nault, a volunteer who wrote her testimonial in November of 2014, said this about an event at Canada Olympic Park in Calgary, Alberta:

Watching the young girls be inspired by Olympians to be physically active and how to properly do so was inspiring for myself to even watch. I wish I could’ve been participating in the event. It was amazing to see all the different types of emotions going on within those girls, and to see relationships build within the group throughout the day. … Taking pictures of the event, and being able to capture the emotions within the girls made me feel as though I was feeling those emotions along with them. … I think it’s wonderful that teaching the importance of physical activity, and how to properly be physically active to young kids, especially girls. Girls don’t normally get the opportunity to shine because they’re surrounded by boys and feel uncomfortable. Hopefully this inspires girls to not let boys get in the way of their greatness and talents with physical activity and sport. Girls and boys are both human, and both are capable of amazing things. (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Karen Johnson, a parent and volunteer at an event in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories said the following in her testimonial:

… It was so cool to peak in the door and see 50 kids all dancing in step together. In a short time they all learned the dance steps. They were doing it for themselves, not to perform.
The Fast and Female experience has connected the girls who participated in it in a unique way. Years from now I could see them connecting with one of the other females and saying “Hey, weren’t you at that first Fast and Female weekend in YK. We had so much fun!” It was a real memory builder.

… I cannot think of anything more wonderful than the sight from our Yellowknife ski club balcony of 50 girls having a ball going around and around in the stadium on their skis at Fast and Female. Also, it was so great to have each of the girls ski the loppet with a group. They really challenged themselves. Many of the girls would not have skied as far if they had skied the loppet with their families. They also might have complained a lot more! (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Nault’s and Johnson’s quotes include notions of what a successful woman looks like in sport, who can dictate how to do sport properly, group participation, interaction between peers, the development of connections, lasting relationships and memories, and a concern that girls’ should be participating in sports for themselves, regardless of boys’ opinions or performance (a dichotomous view of gender in pitting girls against boys). These two testimonies shine light on some of the contradictions between individual and community based aspects of sport. These women show an expectation for individual responsibility for participation and effort (despite the boys) and positivity in competition (despite the idea that the girls should be participating for themselves, and not to perform). While expressing the importance of individual responsibility and competition, Nault and Johnson also consider collective action positively when they write about groups of girls doing active things together and the relationships and collective emotions the Fast and Female participants experienced. Nault and Johnson’s consideration of collective action is then paralleled by the pleased assertion that the participants were being physically active in a way that was “proper” or better than they otherwise could have done. These positive judgements attribute expertise to Fast and Female regarding what is considered
worthwhile in terms of girls’ empowerment, sport, the healthy lifestyle, and girliness.

Nault’s and Johnson’s testimonies point to discourses that shape Fast and Female’s work. Their testimonies point to discourses of success through athletic prowess, normative sport practice in what is proper and community organized, dichotomous views of gender in sport, and neoliberal individualism that shaped the Fast and Female event that the women observed.

This next set of quotes emphasizes the potential behavioural and emotional changes that Fast and Female may have inspired for its followers. Whitney, a mother of a participant said the following:

Thank you SO MUCH for this event, it was such a huge confidence builder for her. She has been scared and dreading moving up in to the Learn to Train program from Jackrabbits because she didn’t think she was good enough or fast enough – after yesterday, she can’t wait for L2T to start!! The work you and your colleagues are doing is so important, I can’t thank you enough for the confidence it gave my daughter. (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Renee, a mother of a follower wrote,

I want to encourage (and thank) your organization in continuing your work. With my daughter being very limited these last couple of months due to injury, and much physical therapy still ahead of her, she has been watching some of your online videos and reading the articles from your Facebook feed. She has been living vicariously through the athletes featured and is looking forward to getting back out on the snow and training hard. Being the mom of a very active daughter, whom we are striving to raise as a strong and confident young lady, your organization is top notch in showing these young ladies how to be strong and confident in all aspects of their lives. (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Beth Hill House, a mother from Prince George, British Columbia said this:
I was very impressed with the Fast and Female program. Thanks for all the enthusiasm you bought to Prince George. Over the years, my daughter has felt uncomfortable XC skiing although it is our family sport and we have been taking her since she was two. This year she refused jackrabbits and sat in the lodge instead during lessons. However she saw the Fast and Female posters which piqued her interest and she signed up. She had such a good time during the two hours of Fast and Female that she came back saying “I wonder why I ever told you I didn’t like skiing. I love skiing! Sign me up for lessons next year mom!” This sentiment has lasted for our family downhill ski trip this week as well. I am so grateful to Fast and Female for bringing my daughter around to love skiing. My sincere thanks to all of you. (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Laurie Arseneault, a junior mountain bike racer out of Terrebonne, Québec wrote:

We were very happy to represent Canada at the mountain bike World Championship in Norway. Me (Laurie Arsenault) and Marine Lewis matched our helmets and gloves to be really “Fast and Female” for this race. You’re such an inspiration for juniors girls like us. For me, I hope one day to help young ladies to reach [their] goals like you did. (Fast and Female, 2015u)

Whitney, Renee, and Beth Hill House suggest that a Fast and Female event seemed to cajole their daughters into being more involved and excited about sport. Renee did not comment specifically on an event, but on the impact Fast and Female’s online community had on her injured daughter, who engaged with the community online. Renee also commended the organization’s expertise in showing girls how to be strong and confident. Laurie Areneault commented on the encouragement and sport practice she took away from Fast and Female when she and her friend matched their helmets and outfits to be extra Fast and Female. This group of testimonies emphasizes that girls do feel unconfident in sport sand that this is why they drop-out. The testimonies show that Fast and Female does help girls to stay in sport, and the organization seems to have an
impact on how girls and women understand what it means to be a girl in sport (or to be Fast and Female).

**Analysis of Fast and Female’s Testimonials**

The language of these testimonials ascribes positive meanings to Fast and Female’s messaging and value. The testimonials offer a general validity to the organization. The people writing the testimonials seem to draw on language from the organization to make sense of their (or their daughters’) sporting experiences and goals. This presents Fast and Female as an influential authority with regards to girls’ sport and girls’ empowerment. As an influential and authoritative organization, Fast and Female helps define what it means to be a girl, to be a girl in sport, and to be a girl who can be empowered.

The language within most of the testimonials often adds to the dance between individual responsibility or action (Cruikshank, 1999) and community participation and benefit (Kane & LaVoi, 2007), which I discussed in the previous chapter. Many testimonials talk about the sport status of an individual girl, but many also emphasize, or go on to identify, the need for girls to do things together. Individual participation in organized sport and the idea of ‘community’ are highlighted as core tenets of sport and of Fast and Female. By extension, sport participation and community are portrayed as an integral part of how Fast and Female represents empowerment.
There is an overarching notion that organized sport is good throughout the testimonials. Perhaps this is a product of Fast and Female presenting sport in an organized event-based way, but it also highlights a concern for girls’ participation specifically in organized sport (rather than other versions of sport) – or an assumption that, to participate in a process of empowerment, it is best for girls to be involved in sport, rather than other pursuits (e.g., music, theatre, community engagement, unorganized sport or physical activity). I discussed this idea in more detail following a quote from Crawford during our interviews in Chapter Four. How effective are sporting communities in producing collective empowerment through collaborative projects?

As many scholars have considered, organized sport and neoliberalism often go hand in hand (Goodkind, 2009; Silk & Andrews, 2012). It is interesting, in these testimonials, to see girls as individual athletes concerned about how they might give back to the community as is. This is interesting because it identifies a desire to be part of a community, but also a lack of questioning and of reflexivity about the way things are. Coakley (2011), Kane and LaVoi (2007), and Rauscher and Cooky (2015), in their reviews of sport programs that promote development for participants, have found that volunteerism that emphasizes personal skill development, that does not promote an understanding of greater social inequities, is common in many sport programs. Sport as a space that fosters individual and collective empowerment as well as a critical social consciousness would have girls (and women) asking not only how they can help and be involved, but how they might change things about pre-existing structures to make them better (Kane & LaVoi, 2007; Rauscher & Cooky, 2015). The skill of maintaining a
critical consciousness, is a skill that is not focused on in many sport programs, but it is something that would develop both an individual and collective consciousness about empowerment (Collins, 2000) that could be beneficial later on in girls’ lives for themselves and for the greater good (Coakley, 2011; Kane & LaVoiv, 2007; Rauscher & Cooky, 2015). At the very least girls should be taught about the lack of equal opportunity in sport, and barriers to sport participation for other girls and boys based upon their sexuality, ability, race, gender identity and expression, class, and geographic location.

It is not surprising that individual skills or qualities are the things that people identify and repeat when they reflect on their experience with Fast and Female. Fast and Female, and these girls who participate in the organization’s programs, are situated in a neoliberal context that promotes individuality and individual responsibility and success. This neoliberal context also rejects the notion that a collective subjectivity, or collaborative effort, might be a more beneficial way to tackle barriers set by structural oppressions and inequalities (Collins, 2000; Cruikshank, 1999; Simon, 1994). By definition, a neoliberal context obfuscates the idea that barriers in girls’ lives may be due to larger social inequalities, because of its encouraged emphasis on individual success and responsibility (Cruikshank, 1999; Silk & Andrews, 2012). As an organization that battles social pressures that denigrate women and girls, and that works towards girls’ empowerment, it would be beneficial for Fast and Female to help foster girls’ critical social consciousness of the broader context. Developing girls’ critical awareness of their social situations – and the differing social situations of others – and a desire for collective empowerment could allow girls an opportunity to change the culture that trivializes and
oppresses their athleticism, rather than only providing them with tools to exist confidently in, and in spite of, that oppressive and biased culture.

Conclusions

Through the testimonials, Fast and Female suggests that it has a positive impact on its participants, followers, and associated adults. These testimonials suggest how important Fast and Female’s vision, ideals, and understandings and representations of sport, femininity, athleticism, and their role models, are to the organization. The quotes I have used here draw attention to what the organization seems to find important – the change or solidification of ideas in girls’ attitudes regarding confidence, empowerment, community and sport. The testimonials also suggest that Fast and Female does value community associations and relationships in its programming and, ultimately, that the organization sees these as key aspects in its work around girl-centered sport. Through this analysis it seems clear that Fast and Female values and works to foster individual and collective approaches to empowerment through sport. What remains unclear to me in this chapter is how Fast and Female creates a space within sport that teaches girls to look to consider the larger community involved in girls’ and women’s sport and that encourages a collective attitude amongst girls that could allow them to identify and challenge barriers rooted in societal stigma, oppression, and inequality.
Chapter 6

Girls Empowerment Through Sport: Fast and Female’s Website as a Cultural Text

When I started looking into Fast and Female, one of the first places I went was the organization’s website: fastandfemale.com. The pink branding that was so overtly stereotypically feminine bothered me, and that is initially what drew me to my analysis. Why is this experience of sport, the experience of Fast and Female, so pink? Coming to their website I questioned the pink branding, I questioned why I was being told that girls needed to be empowered through sport, and I questioned why this empowerment was grounded in pinkness. The pink really bothered me. But eventually my thinking shifted. Eventually I remembered (a basic idea) that sport, as it is commonly portrayed and experienced, is not gender neutral. Sociologists have argued that sport has predominantly been a masculine space throughout sport history (Hargreaves, 1994; Theberge, 2000). The reason the pink bothered me so much is because it was not a deviation from a neutral starting point; the pink presentation of sport was a rejection of the stereotypical masculinity that is often presented as sport for everyone. Sure, women and girls can like the colour blue, and they can like winning, or being tough, or taking tackles, or being aggressive... but I so rarely saw women taking these stereotypically masculine qualities out of the dark brooding black and blue masculine context and resituating them in a pink, fun-loving, stereotypically feminine context. In short, that’s what I saw on Fast and Female’s website. Fast and Female is making an obviously (stereotypically) feminine space for women and girls to reclaim traits like aggression, physical competence, confidence, and empowerment. I was bothered by it because all of my time in sport had
been spent in a masculine space – and I had been ok with that, I was able to embrace sport in its masculine way. Was that wrong?

In this chapter I consider the Fast and Female website as a cultural text that depicts the organization’s ideas about girls’ empowerment through sport. Looking through the Fast and Female website I see clear connections between the organization and ideas about empowerment, health, neoliberalism, ability, race, class, femininity, and, of course, sport. It is clear that Fast and Female justifies its actions and presence by saying it contributes to girls’ empowerment, which in turn they link to girls’ health and social status. Further, the organization depends heavily on a predominantly white and able-bodied pool of volunteers who have had extensive opportunity and experience in sport and who are able to represent “empowered women.” Finally, Fast and Female’s financial reliance on corporate sponsors, donations from community members, and purchases from its shop situate the organization as part of the free-market economy in a neoliberal, middle class context. Through this chapter I explain how my viewing of the Fast and Female website led me to these conclusions. This chapter has three sections – a description, an analysis, and a conclusion.

**Looks Are Everything: A Description of Fastandfemale.com**

On my first visit to the website, I noticed a general theme of pinkness— the pink navigation banner was on every page, the text in images was often pink, areas that were meant to have attention drawn to them (like the “donate” button) were pink, images of events and participants wearing branded Fast and Female clothing had a lot of pink in
them, hyperlinks were pink (rather than the traditional blue), labels under photos were pink, and many of the items in the online shop featured fuchsia pink (Fast and Female, 2015f). Of course the organization does utilize other colours, for example purple, white, light blue, and black – but this particular shade of fuchsia is clearly very important to Fast and Female’s brand and to all of Fast and Female’s efforts in creating a girls’ culture around sport.

**Fast and Female Homepage**

Fast and Female’s homepage showcases the organization’s brand very well. Initially the viewer sees a homepage adorned with a fuchsia navigation banner and a scrolling image bar with three images of women and girls that link to other areas of the website (Fast and Female, 2015f). The first image (figure 2) is of a woman and two girls, all of whom have blonde hair and appear to be white. The three figures have been close cropped and placed on a manufactured pastel and geometric pink background. Alongside we can read the pink words “**EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SPORT** Find out what drives our team to help empower young women to remain in sport” [sic] (Fast and Female, 2015f). The link on this image, “read more,” brings viewers to the website’s main “About” page where they can read about Fast and Female’s mission, visions, values and mantra (Fast and Female, 2015a).

The second image (figure 3) that scrolls on the homepage is a woman wearing a black Fast and Female hoodie, neck tube and cap superimposed onto a darker black and pink wallpaper background. She is standing beside pink words that read “Join the
Figure 2. Fast and Female navigation banner and first scrolling image (Fast and Female, 2015f).

Figure 3. Second scrolling image on the Fast and Female homepage (Fast and Female, 2015f).

Figure 4. Third scrolling image on Fast and Female's homepage (Fast and Female, 2015f).
movement and help **SPREAD THE LOVE**” (Fast and Female, 2015f). The link “visit our store” on this second picture takes the viewer to the online Fast and Female shop (Fast and Female, 2015r).

The third image (figure 4) that scrolls on the homepage is of a very-light skinned, blonde haired woman sitting on a skeleton sled, wearing jewelry and dressed as if she were going to participate in the sport, but without a helmet (which is required in competition). This woman is superimposed on a Canadian flag background next to the red words: “our Ambassadors and **THE POWER OF INSPIRATION**” (Fast and Female, 2015f). The link “read more” on the third picture takes the viewer to the organization’s “Ambassador” page with all of the ambassadors’ names and pictures, and links to profiles with more details about them (Fast and Female, 2015b).

**Fast and Female’s “Girls in Sport” Page**

This section of Fast and Female’s website summarizes the reasons the organization uses to justify and promote its programming. The page “Girls in Sport” provides crucial context for all of Fast and Female’s actions. This page links to two additional pages: “reasons why girls drop out of sports,” and “ways to keep girls in sport” (Fast and Female, 2015m). Both these pages draw on and refer to the American Women’s Sport Foundation materials (Fast and Female, 2015m). The two main facts that Fast and Female constantly repeats in programming and messaging are that “girls are twice as likely to drop out of sport compared to boys [in their lifetimes]” (a statistic from the Women’s Sport Foundation) and that “girls are six times as likely to drop out of sport
During adolescence when compared to boys” (Fast and Female, 2015e, q emphasis added). According to the information on these pages, keeping girls in sport is important because a “lack of physical activity is directly related to increased pregnancy, delinquency, obesity, truancy and increased risk taking among school aged girls” (Fast and Female, 2015m).

Fast and Female defines physical activity as something that will “make [someone] strong, increase energy and flexibility, and turn [them] into a physically active person” (2015m). To become the physically active person Fast and Female refers to, one must move one’s body and increase one’s heart rate three times each week (Fast and Female, 2015m). Fast and Female gives the following three tips for parents who are looking to keep their girls in sport: change attitudes about physical fitness (i.e., change a girl’s aversion to being labeled an athlete or jock, or the belief that she is not good or knowledgeable enough to participate), do activities with your daughter and keep them fun and not too stressful, and encourage participation and interest in sport (i.e., by going to a local game with her and her friends, or sharing with her how you stay active) (2015m).

Fast and Female also recognizes barriers girls have to participating in sport. Barriers include a lack of access to sport programs, safety and transportation issues, fear of social stigma for being identified as boyish or a lesbian, a decreased quality of experience in the physical activity that girls do try, cost, and a lack of positive female role models (Fast and Female, 2015m). Fast and Female tries to empower girls through sport by giving them a safe space to try activities, gain skills, and have fun positive experiences (Fast and Female, 2015a). The organization aims to encourage social
belonging amongst their followers. The hope is that this feeling will encourage girls to stay in sport through their lifetime (Fast and Female, 2015m; Crawford, 2015).

**Fast and Female’s “About Us” Page**

This page is home to Fast and Female’s “who we are and what we do” and “vision” statements (Fast and Female, 2015a). These two statements summarize what Fast and Female aspires to and are crucial to understanding how Fast and Female works to impact girls’ sport culture.

Who we are and what we do: …The organization’s goal is to support, motivate, inspire and empower girls ages 9 to 19 to stick to sports and the healthy lifestyle. Fast and Female creates “Empowerment through sport” for girls by hosting fun-filled, non-competitive programming led by female Olympians and elite athletes, as well as by delivering educational content to parents and coaches" (Fast and Female, 2015a).

Vision: Fast and Female’s vision is to deliver inspiring, innovative, and high impact programming for the positive personal and athletic development of young female athletes involved in an array of sports. Fast and Female hopes that one day, all girls will have positive and empowering experiences in sports as a foundation for success in life (Fast and Female, 2015a).

On this page, a photo of light-skinned girls and young women, with brown and blonde hair, wearing light pink t-shirts with a darker pink Fast and Female logo, who are participating in some kind of group activity is positioned to the left of the black text (Fast and Female, 2015a).

**Mantras.** Fast and Female’s “mantra” statements are much more provocative than their mission statements. “Spread the love” and “Dominate the world” (Fast and Female, 2015a) are two catch phrases that can be seen on banners in photos of Fast and
Female events and they are often referred to and repeated in interviews and other media (Fast and Female, 2015n). The full mantras are: "In everything we do, our mantras are to: Spread the love: Get as many girls hooked on a healthy and active lifestyle” and “Dominate the world: Rejoice in the possibility of being leaders in all that we do" (Fast and female, 2015a). These mantras define the abstract catch phrases in an oddly specific way. The first mantra’s explanation equates love with obtaining, maintaining, or sharing a healthy and active lifestyle. The second mantra, promotes the goal of becoming a leader.

**Fast and Female’s Ambassadors and Sport Experts**

The ambassadors of Fast and Female are elite athletes who are meant to inspire, empower, support and motivate girls (Fast and Female, 2015b). The sport leaders and experts listed on Fast and Female’s website are often retired athletes themselves, in addition to being considered as very knowledgeable and notable in their specific, sport related, fields (Fast and Female, 2015s). The accomplishments and newsworthy stories regarding the sports women of Fast and Female are promoted through the organization’s website and social media platforms.

Many of the ambassadors are former Olympians, and most of them still compete at an international level (Fast and Female, 2015b). The sporting experience of these women ranges from cross-country skiing and cycling to bobsleigh, rugby, and obstacle course runners. Fast and Female has ambassadors from aerial skiing, alpine skiing and snowboarding, biathlon, bobsleigh, cross-country skiing, cycling, fencing, luge, mountain
biking, skeleton, ski cross, ski jumping, short track and long track speed skating, sprint canoe and kayak, rowing, rugby, sailing, synchronized swimming, track, triathlon, water polo, white water kayaking, and wrestling (Fast and Female, 2015b). The ambassadors also represent a number of countries. Canada and the United States are represented in the summer and winter sport categories, and some winter ambassadors also represent Australia, Sweden, and Norway (Fast and Female, 2015b). It should be noted that some of the ambassadors have retired from sport, some of them participate in para-athletics (either as an athlete with a disability or as a guide) and some of the women may not identify as white (Fast and Female, 2015b).

At the time of my writing this, there are 92 Fast and Female ambassadors and 41 sport experts (but the numbers keep growing) (Fast and Female, 2015b, s). The ambassador and sport expert pages are separate (example images of them can be found in Figures 5 and 6); the ambassador page has a grid of pictures of women with their names underneath them, and the sport expert page has a list of names and associated titles (e.g., level five biathlon coach, nutritionist, etc.) (Fast and Female, 2015b, s). The ambassadors are split into “summer” and “winter” groups based upon their sport (Fast and Female, 2015b). The sport experts are sorted into groups based on the region they reside in or serve (i.e., provinces and states) (Fast and Female, 2015b). When a website viewer clicks on the name of an ambassador or sport expert, they are taken to a page that either has a profile of an ambassador, an ambassador’s personal or professional webpage or blog, or a sport expert’s personal or professional website (Fast and Female, 2015b, l).
Figure 5. Ambassador page screen shot (Fast and Female, 2015b).

Figure 6. Sport expert page screen shot (Fast and Female, 2015s).
Rather than personal webpages, some of the sportswomen’s websites depict their involvement in sport by leading viewers to another sport organization or charity that they have founded, or a specific business related page. For example, the link associated with Shawnee Harle, a Fast and Female sport expert and assistant coach of Canada’s women’s Olympic basketball team, connects the viewer to her business page “Winning Matters” (Dynamic Coaching Solutions, 2015). The link associated with Ashley Wiles, who is a Fast and Female sport expert, life coach, avid runner and founder of Sole Girls, goes to her organization’s webpage that aims at increasing the knowledge and practice of running as a life skill (Sole Girls, 2015). A unique example is the page of Hannah Dreissigacker, who is a winter ambassador on the American Biathlon team. The link associated with Dreissigacker leads to her combined art and biathlon blog (Dreissigacker, 2015). Uniquely, Dreissigacker’s page provides an example of a woman athlete who is interested in activities other than sport. More commonly, the organization’s sport experts have links that connect to a business page about the woman’s area of expertise – e.g., Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a sport psychologist based out of Manitoba and the link associated with her goes to her consulting website “Toogood Consulting” (Toogood Consulting, 2015). The links associated with Lise Le Guellec and Gail Niinimaa go to their respective LinkedIn profiles, which detail the multiple ways in which they are invested in sport (LinkedIn Corporation, 2015 a, b). Gail Niinimaa’s LinkedIn profile also details her other interests and her career outside of sport as a Textile Conservator (LinkedIn Corporation, 2015b).
Fast and Female’s Fundraising

Fast and Female is a not-for-profit organization that relies on charitable donations, sponsors, event fees, and proceeds from their online shop to fund their programming. To encourage fundraising, the website also has two “Donate” buttons – one that specifies Canada, and one that specifies the United States (Fast and Female, 2016d). The organization lists a variety of individuals and corporate donors as sponsors. “Global Sponsors” include L.L. Bean, lululemon athletica, and Precision Nutrition. “Canada Sponsors” include Buff, Clarins, Canada’s Dairy Farmers, Jupiter Resources, and Canadian Tire’s Jumpstart program. Fast and Female also has support from a variety of other organizations, including sport governing bodies like Cross-Country Canada Skiing, community organizations like CAAWS, clothing retailers and suppliers like Podium Wear and ivivva, specific events like the Rocky Mountain Soap Company’s Women’s Run and Walk, and media partners. The organization also lists individual donors in different categories including: “Heroes ($10,000); Community Champs (~$2,000); and Leaders (~$500) (Fast and Female, 2016d).

Shop. The organization’s shop is important to consider because it is referenced through Fast and Female’s website, it is used to fundraise for the organization, and the products from the shop that are worn around the girls’ and women’s sporting community (and in other unrelated communities, like schools) help disseminate the girl-centered sport culture that Fast and Female has worked to create. The design of products has changed each year, but commonly includes the fuchsia and white Fast and Female logo on a background with complimentary colours (Fast and Female, 2015g, r). The products
themselves are linked to Fast and Female sponsors and are sport related (Fast and Female, 2015r). Fast and Female’s products reiterate the organization’s prominent and singular understanding of athletic femininity, and the shop itself represents a consumer and middle class basis for girl-centered sport.

**Lessons from Fast and Female: An Analysis of Fastandfemale.com**

I see three main themes of analysis from my observations of Fast and Female’s website. First, the organization’s website and brand emphasize the role femininity plays in girls’ sport and empowerment. Second, the organization’s website connects Fast and Female and sport to ideas about empowerment in contradictory ways. Third, Fast and Female’s fundraising efforts encourage individual responsibility and consumerism. Further, the organization’s corporate sponsors encourage ideas about health, sport, consumerism, femininity and free market values.

**Femininity**

The images on Fast and Female’s website, from the homepage to event photos to images of women on the ambassador page, predominantly depict normative ideas of mainstream femininity – that is to say, the images depict light skinned, able bodied, strong, and not fat girls and women. This is not to say that Fast and Female is completely without representations of women of colour, or women who have a disability, or who are involved in Paralympic sports. But taken as a whole, these forms of femininity are not nearly as noticeable and could easily be considered as “other-than” to the organization’s
predominant representation of femininity. The normative representations of femininity in sport are strengthened by Fast and Female’s pink brand that feeds into stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a girl. The language and images on Fast and Female’s website, as a package, do not represent various definitions of femininity – Fast and Female represents a femininity that is defined by normative ideas of who can be feminine, and what athletic prowess and success are. When I consider just the organization’s name, “Fast and Female,” I see a representation of a specific, speedy, type of athleticism, and an understanding of girls’ sport and femininity that can be accomplished by only those who are of the female sex. Just the organization’s name reduces the type of sports that girls could be encouraged to participate in to those that value speed, and it works to exclude girls who are intersex, transsexual, or transgender. Fast and Female’s website images exclude those who have bodies, display femininity, think of sport, or achieve success in ways that are alternative to mainstream norms.

Ambassadors are the main group of women that participants are instructed to look up to. Thus, one might assume they represent the kind of woman who is, or can be, empowered. One might also assume that the ambassadors are the kind of people who have access to the qualities Fast and Female associates with empowerment (for example, healthiness, sportiness, and success). My point here is that Fast and Female’s ambassadors and messaging implicitly suggests that empowerment is only accessible in some ways and to some people. The coherence of the messaging and representations on the Fast and Female website suggest that people who represent non-normative forms of
femininity or sport or strength can not be as successful, or as healthy, or as empowered as women who might seem to meet the norm.

Arguments made by Collins (2002), Hains (2012), and Meier (2015) are useful in analyzing both the visible normative and the less visible alternative representations of femininity that Fast and Female has developed on its website. Hains (2012) argues that those more closely aligned with the status quo tend to dominate empowerment projects and opportunities. Collins (2002) argues that those who are marginalized and excluded could work with projects of empowerment to more successfully change oppressive and exclusionary practices, institutions, and governments. Meier (2015) suggests that role models who represent normative forms of femininity hinder the acknowledgement and validity of role models who may represent alternative forms of femininity. These scholars are saying that people who can encourage social change the most, are often left out of empowerment projects driven by people and populations who are more inline with the status quo. Fast and Female’s presentation of the typical girl and woman in sport gives space to girls and women who embrace normative femininity. The organization may benefit from embracing representations of women and girls in sport that are different. These alternative representations, and the women and girls who the representations might resonate with, could contribute to the organization’s larger understandings of femininity and empowerment through sport.

Fast and Female seems to be forwarding just one way that girls can be involved in sport – and it is a way that emphasizes girls’ femininity. The danger of representing empowerment for people who “fit in” with normative ideas of femininity is that it
excludes first girls who want to express their femininity in a way that is not encompassed by the Fast and Female brand, and second the idea that girls might not want to be feminine (in sport, or at all). Representations of multiple definitions of femininity and of different kinds of sporty success would suggest the different ways in which individuals might relate to, and contribute to girls’ and women’s sport culture (Meier, 2015). Acknowledging that the sport system itself needs to change to accommodate the wants and needs of different groups of women and girls who participate, could help open up spaces in sport for people who are marginalized by it.

Taken as individuals, Fast and Female’s ambassadors, and the links and stories associated with them, represent a range of what it means to be feminine, successful, strong, and empowered. If participants were to look into the specific stories of ambassadors they could see examples of women as well rounded people, as people who are invested in other interests or groups, as more than athletes. Fast and Female does an excellent job of promoting girls sport and women’s sporting accomplishments. But, I think it is beneficial that the organization also shows that sport is not the only place where women (and girls) can find meaning, pleasure, success, or even empowerment.

Fast and Female’s sport experts are excellent examples of women who have achieved success in life, and in the sporting realm, but who are not current athletes. The stories of these women are different from those of the ambassadors. The sport experts’ experience and expertise in sport can be, in part, because of their own athleticism, but is more often than not related to their jobs or community engagement. There are many ways that people can be knowledgeable about sport. In emphasizing those who were successful
international athletes (the ambassadors) over those who have made significant contributions to women’s and girls’ sport in other ways (many of the experts), Fast and Female can be seen to be emphasizing women’s individual accomplishments, competitions, and success over collective community engagement or support. Practicing individual success and accomplishment over the community effort that makes it possible is indicative of a neoliberal sporting context (Silk & Andrews, 2012). By failing to showcase the sport experts on par with the organization’s ambassadors, Fast and Female is missing an opportunity to emphasize the importance of the whole community that supports girls’ and women’s sport.

Although Fast and Female’s representations of their sport experts are less prominent in comparison to the organization’s portrayals of its ambassadors, I think that the stories and actions of the sport experts do provide a basis for considering these women as potential role-models for young girls. Compared to the presentation of the ambassadors, the sport experts’ page looks boring and uninspiring (see Figures 5 and 6) (Fast and Female 2015b, s). It appears that Fast and Female has set up the two pages to exhibit the ambassadors as recognizable role models for the participants, and to exhibit the sport experts as connections to information for adults. More could be made of the whole stories of the experts – their back stories, how they got to where they are in sport and life, what they are doing now. These stories could represent alternative ways of understanding what a role model is, and what younger generations of sports women or girls could aspire to. This is especially relevant because Fast and Female’s followers are not all going to grow up to be Olympic or national team athletes, and because, eventually,
all Olympic careers end. The sport experts should not only be considered as women to look up to for young girls in sport, but for parents, coaches, and ambassadors themselves. The work that administrators and sport support staff do is necessary for sport to exist and for athletes to reach an elite competition level (as can be seen in the athlete testimonials of Dr. Adrianne Leslie Toogood’s consulting company (Toogood Consulting, 2015)).

The expertise and work that elite non-athlete sport women do in the community is equally, if not more, impactful and noteworthy than the work of athlete Olympians.

Being a sport expert is certainly an aspiration worth considering.

**Empowerment**

Girls’ empowerment through sport is the central aim of the organization. This is evident in the first thing viewers see on the home page – the image that depicts “EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SPORT” that links to the organization’s “About Us” page (Fast and Female, 2015a). This specific image, however, presents a confusing idea of what the organization’s aims are. On one hand, the image has bolded and capitalized “empowerment through sport” text. On the other hand, the image also says the organization is “empowering girls to stay in sport” (emphasis added, Fast and Female, 2015f). These are two conflicting ideas about empowerment and sport, as one suggests that girls should be in sport to become empowered and the other suggests that girls need to be empowered to stay in sport. The former idea presents sport as a process of empowerment, and the latter presents those who are in sport as needing to be empowered people. Through the website, I assume that the seemingly happy and active girls and
women are empowered, and that ideas about empowerment are limited to ideas about sport, health, and success.

The organization’s “about us” page refers to empowerment as a quality that enables someone to “stick to sports and the healthy lifestyle” (Fast and Female, 2015a, emphasis added). Through this messaging I understand that girls need to be empowered to stick to one type of lifestyle that fits in with normative ideas about health and sport; a lifestyle that includes sport and consciousness about healthy practices like eating, being active or training for a sport, and resting (from activities or training) properly. Cruikshank (1999) explains how individuals are governed through empowerment based organizations to change their own behaviour in order to become better citizens, to fit in with the status quo. Goodkind (2009) also discusses the ways sport empowerment programs, like the community basketball program she analyzed, teach skills that enable individuals to work within current social systems rather than challenge them. Fast and Female, in their messaging, branding, and online resources directs the organization’s followers to participate in a specific lifestyle in order to be considered empowered – one where individuals are conscious of, and invested in, their participation in healthy activities like eating properly and engaging in physical activity.

Messaging on the Fast and Female website often highlights how individuals can become empowered, or how individuals can become part of the Fast and Female movement (by going to events or buying something from the Fast and Female store). When the organization focuses on contributions of individual girls and parents, Fast and Female reiterates the importance of the individual within a community, rather than
recognizing how those contributions contribute to a larger community goal or project. The followers’ participation in the community and the actions of the community seem very separate, where a follower may consume the Fast and Female brand, but not contribute to it. Hains (2012) discusses this trend when she compares how individuals claimed their own power as they contributed to societal ideas about femininity and girl power during the Riot Grrrl era to how individuals bought into the idea of girl power, but did not contribute to it, by purchasing Spice Girls merchandise. I see a similarity between Hains’ example and Fast and Female. Fast and Female, on the one hand, encourages individuals to participate in empowerment by consuming ideas and changing individual behaviours. On the other hand, Fast and Female also encourages girls to contribute to programming, an idea I discuss further in Chapter Seven.

**Fundraising and Consumerism**

Fast and Female needs money to do what they do – to rent spaces, develop content, have a staff. Fast and Female’s main sponsors are L.L. Bean, lululemon, Precision Nutrition, Buff, Clarins, Canadian Dairy Farmers, Jupiter Resources, and Canadian Tire’s Jumpstart program. How the organization chooses to meet its demand for funding matters because in taking on other companies as sponsors, Fast and Female recognizes and advertises those brands. In this way Fast and Female shows that they are committed to some Canadian companies that in someway relate back to sport, outdoor activity, health, and the Canadian economy. The organization also reiterates a commitment to femininity in promoting Clarins, a Canadian make-up company. The Fast
and Female website connects the sponsors to Fast and Female’s followers, branding, and messaging.

Fast and Female followers can build upon their identity within the Fast and Female community by buying additional Fast and Female products or donating publicly to the organization. King (2008) argues that products that advertise people’s participation in a cause contribute to a wider sense of validity for the cause itself, and a higher sense of morality for the individual. This was especially evident when consumers received products – something wearable like a t-shirt – that verified their participation in a cause related to sport (King, 2008). The Fast and Female shop provides people with an opportunity to buy not just merchandise, but the brand and the associated ideas of health, physical activity, empowerment, and girls’ sport. These ideas are then disseminated to larger communities where followers wear their Fast and Female gear.

Fast and Female raises money from companies and from individual financial contributions and purchases. The ways in which Fast and Female promotes fundraising draws upon and contributes to both neoliberal individualism and to ideas about collectivity. The messaging around why Fast and Female needs funds implicitly promote ideas around people coming together to establish a collective communal identity, however the ways in which Fast and Female gains funds capitalizes on individuals’ responsibility to contribute to society and on their personal buying power. It also relies on a context where individual contributions are valued as indicators of personal accomplishment, morality, and identity (King, 2008).
Conclusion: What Does Fast and Female’s Website Messaging Teach Viewers About Empowerment?

Fast and Female’s website connects femininity, empowerment, sport, health, and consumer practices in ways that encourage community engagement and emphasize fairly homogenous representations of who makes up that community. Fast and Female constructs representations of empowered femininity in which those who have become empowered are athletic females who are strong, light-skinned, able-bodied, apparently cisgendered, middle class, and not fat. Both Hains (2012) and Goodkind (2009) wrote that many empowerment projects are organized and driven by people who closely represent the status quo. The lack of representation of alternative bodies, girls, women, athletes, and stories of success on the website limits the number of girls the organization might be relevant to and inhibits the overall growth and goodness that Fast and Female might possibly achieve.

Moving forward, Fast and Female I would recommend that Fast and Female could expand who the organization represents, who has access to their online materials and other efforts, and who (else) might benefit from, or contribute to, the organization’s work and efforts. Further, Fast and Female might be better able to foster a culture around girls’ sport that forwards community efforts and various understandings of femininity and success if the organization itself were to emphasize its sport experts who represent different ideas, perspectives, and possibilities for girls’ in sport.

Finally, the neoliberal context that Fast and Female is situated in encourages the organization to take up “common sense” ideas about individual responsibility and
success, sponsors, and fundraising efforts. Fast and Female’s partnership with corporate sponsors and encouragement of personal purchases enables the organization’s work, but it also shows the prominence of free market values over a negotiation of collective government or community resources. Accepting funds from private donors seems like common sense – more funding means more events, more content, and more empowered girls. But, accepting corporate funds also means that Fast and Female and government or sport funding agencies avoid a conversation. The conversation that is being avoided is the conversation about whose responsibility it is to empower citizens, to develop processes of empowerment, and to educate citizens about those processes. Cruikshank (1999) argues that neoliberal ideas have influenced how governments think of citizens and, in turn, how citizens think of empowerment. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the responsibility of social welfare shifted from the government and social welfare programs to non-profit non-governmental organizations and empowerment programs (Cruikshank, 1999). This shift diminished government accountability for the social welfare of citizens and instead put the responsibility of social welfare on individual citizens. Fast and Female is an example of an organization that took on the responsibility of developing processes of empowerment through sport and empowering citizens (girls specifically) in a neoliberal environment. An awareness of the history could help Fast and Female to raise questions about common sense ideas through which sport, empowerment, and fundraising are linked.
Chapter 7

Online Promotion and Engagement of Empowerment: A Textual Analysis of Fast and Female’s Social Media and Online Coverage of its Programming

Fast and Female’s programming is central to connecting girls with ideas about sport, health, empowerment, and what it is to be Fast and Female. Fast and Female’s programs are detailed, advertised, and celebrated online through Fast and Female’s website and social media profiles: Facebook; Twitter; Instagram; and YouTube. In this chapter, I consider the ways in which online depictions of Fast and Female’s programming and interaction with its community represent discourses of empowerment, femininity, and sport to the organization’s followers. This chapter is split into three main sections: description, analysis, and conclusion.

Empowering Girls: A Description of Fast and Female’s Online Coverage of their Programming

Fast and Female aims to empower girls by bringing them together to have a fun time experiencing sport and physical activity. However, in setting up programming, decisions need to be made about what that programming might look like, who will deliver the programming, and what ideas about girls’ sport and empowerment are going to be emphasized in programming materials – like banners, or online pictures. Fast and Female explains and portrays their programming in ways that allow viewers to connect with it online, even if they do not have an opportunity to be a part of it in person.
Fast and Female’s programming establishes the foundation for a girl-centered sport community with very accessible online education, interpersonal connections, and events. The organization divides its programming into two sections: experienced-based and education-based (Fast and Female, 2015p). The organization’s experienced-based programming is developed through its in-person events (i.e., “Fast and Female Summits”, “Champ Chats,” and “Power Hours”) (Fast and Female, 2015p). The education-based programming is intended to “provide the tools and knowledge to deliver exceptional experiences to girls in sport” to parents, coaches, and sport organizers through ambassador and expert talk events, and through information provided on Fast and Female’s online resource center (Fast and Female, 2015p). Educational programming targeted at younger participants includes the “FF TV Programming,” and the “Jr. Reporter program” (Fast and Female, 2015p).

**Experiential Programming**

Experiential programming has participants engage in person with sport and Fast and Female ambassadors. Fast and Female’s experience-based programming includes Summits, Champ Chats, and Power Hours (Fast and Female, 2015p). Fast and Female Summits are a relatively new type of event that the organization started hosting in 2014 (Fast and Female, 2015t). There were four in 2015, each at a different time of year and in different locations across Canada (Fast and Female, 2015t). The aim of the summits is to inspire and educate girls, parents, and coaches in attendance (Fast and Female, 2015t). To do this, Fast and Female’s ambassadors lead activities for the girls and give keynote talks
for everyone in attendance. Sport experts also lead information sessions for parents and coaches (Fast and Female, 2015t). The summits are all day events. The activity sessions, ambassadors, and sport experts at the summits represent a variety of sports. The cost of attendance to those who are not speaking, volunteering, or exhibiting something (who attend at no cost), is $47.12 (Fast and Female, 2015t). This fee includes all day access to the event and to some Fast and Female merchandise and giveaways.

Champ Chats are events that last two to three hours and involve a sport specific dryland activity, an inspirational presentation, and an autograph and photograph session led by Fast and Female ambassadors (Fast and Female, 2015d). These events serve 30 to 100 girls and aim to be age specific – that is, participants are split into age groups and given different presentations (Fast and Female, 2015d). For example, a group of girls, 14 to 18 years old, might watch a presentation on managing school and sports, whereas a group of girls aged eight to 14 might receive a talk about what is awesome and motivating about continuing on in sport (Fast and Female, 2015d). The champ chat events have a $16.37 fee that includes participation and a Fast and Female t-shirt (Fast and Female, 2015d).

Power hours are events that are club or team based and are hosted by club members with the sponsorship of Fast and Female (Fast and Female, 2015o). The cost of these events is $10, and includes a Fast and Female branded Buff (a neck warmer/headband). The cost is intended to be taken on by the organizing club or team (Fast and Female, 2015o). Fast and Female sponsors competitive clubs that offer a competitive program accessible to girls to put on Power Hour events. These events are
intended to gather female club members together, as frequently as the club chooses, to “foster a fun and stimulating environment and to develop personal skills” (Fast and Female, 2015o). The events are meant to encourage interpersonal relationships between athletes, coaches, and parents, and to develop relevant conversations about sport for the girls and women of the club (Fast and Female, 2015o). Fast and Female recognizes that Power Hours can lead to identifying and developing local role models for young athletes (2015o).

The experienced-based events are promoted and popularized by Fast and Female and the clubs they are relevant to. Most often they are advertised by posters that Fast and Female puts up on their website and social media (see Figure 7). These posters are characterized by Fast and Female’s pink themed brand and they highlight where the event will take place, when it will happen, and which ambassadors are being featured.

**Figure 7. Event Posters (Fast and Female, 2015g).**
Educational programming

Fast and Female brings about their educational and informational based programming through the FF TV Program, Jr. Reporter program, and their online resource center (Fast and Female, 2015p). The educational pillar of Fast and Female’s programming provides a base for participants to develop skills not directly related to sport, and for girls and community members to learn more about different areas of sport (Fast and Female, 2015p). The organization’s online resource center lists books and links to other sources about how to be a good sporting parent or coach, and how to foster “appropriate” femininity for girls while battling the barriers for and stereotypes about girls and sport that continue to be rampant in western culture. Through the FF TV and Jr. Reporter programs, Fast and Female encourages skills unrelated to sport that promote personal and community empowerment, and that enable the girls to work to empower each other.

The participants of the Jr. Reporter and FF TV programs create articles and YouTube videos that are posted on the organization’s website. The Jr. Reporter program enlists girls to interview and write two articles about a positive role model of their choice. The application to the program requires girls to send in a resume and cover letter (Fast and Female, 2015k). The FF TV videos include interviews carried out by Chandra Crawford or a Fast and Female participant (Fast and Female, 2015j, l). The content of the interviews seems to be left to the girls, as the questions in the articles and videos vary. These two programs seem to be trying to develop in-depth thinking skills, interpersonal
communication, and confidence in an unusual situation where the girls’ final products
will be put on public display.

The articles and videos that girls have made are posted on the website. Articles
and videos produced by the girls are unique to their interests. Girls ask ambassadors or
other girls about how and why they participate, or what their most valued goals and
accomplishments are (Fast and Female, 2015k). The FF TV videos that feature Crawford
range from ambassador tips about how to eat, train, and rest, to advertisements about new
Fast and Female initiatives and events, to interviews with Fast and Female’s sponsors and
partner representatives. The varying content of the Jr. Reporter and FF TV programs
provide content that both the girls and the organization think is important.

Fast and Female’s online resource center has pages of links to articles that are
categorized under headings of coaching, nutrition, parenting, physiology, psychology,
sociology, and book recommendations (Fast and Female, 2015f). Visitors to the page are
encouraged to send in other articles that they think would be relevant to these categories
(Fast and Female, 2015q). The resource links share information from sources of varying
credibility, including Active for Life, Active Healthy Kids Canada, Australian Sports
Commission, Blog de la Psychologie du Sport, Breaking Muscle, CAAWS, Canadian
Journal for Women in Coaching, Canadian Sport for Life, Canadian Sport Institutes,
Central Oregon Nutrition Consultants, Coach.ca, Coaches Quarterly, Competitive
Advantage, International Journal of Sports and Science, the Journal of Physical
Education, Recreation and Dance, Mindset Works, Momsteam, NY Times, Parent Tool
Kit, Psychology Today, the Sharp Center for Women and Girls, Times Union, Ted Talks,
US Cross Country National Ski Team, the Women’s Sport Foundation, and Xtri.com.

The content of the articles is publicly available, and written in an accessible manner (Fast and Female, 2015q). It is meant for parents or coaches (Fast and Female, 2015q). The content is focused on girls in sport and promotes the idea that “girls’ sport” is a different category than “children’s sport” (Fast and Female, 2015q). The information in the “Parenting,” “Coaching,” “Sociology” and “Book Recommendation” categories (Fast and Female, 2015q). The resources offer materials about how to be a better parent or coach, and about the barriers to sports participation that some girls face.

**Social Media Platforms**

As previously stated, Fast and Female does most, if not all, of its online contact through social media. The organization has profiles on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Because the profile on LinkedIn is so sparse I have not included it as part of this project. Fast and Female’s posts are mostly repetitive across the media platforms. The slight differences between the posts on different platforms seems to be a result of the platforms’ specific formats. The organization’s YouTube page contains video content that is influenced by Fast and Female participants (Fast and Female, 2015j). Facebook is filled with informative articles or news stories (Fast and Female, 2015g), and Twitter has more encouragement, interaction, and conversation between Fast and Female, its ambassadors, other female athletes, and followers (Fast and Female, 2015i). Instagram is, historically, the most inconsistently used platform I consider, but the organization has significantly increased its use of the platform. Fast and Female’s
Instagram contains photos meant to inspire and motivate, and advertisements for events. It has also been used as the hosting platform for a photo contest (Fast and Female, 2015h). Through its social media, Fast and Female creates an informative online community that is contributed to by the organization’s followers.

**Facebook**

Fast and Female updates their Facebook page irregularly, but often. The Facebook page has more than 8000 followers (Fast and Female, 2015g). The photos and links on the Fast and Female Facebook page depict the brand and the values that are promoted on the organization’s website. The posts generally depict one of the following categories: advertisements for upcoming non-elite competitions that followers might want to participate in; ambassador accomplishments; Canadian holidays; media spots or links to other organizations; merchandise advertisements and design contests; monthly newsletter links; new or updated sponsor relationships; contests for Fast and Female merchandise; event advertisements, updates, and photos; and about women’s elite international sporting events. Specific categories of posts include: “Fast and Female Friday;” “highlighting women in the world of sports;” “Mindful Monday,” “Think about it Tuesday,” and links for “Training and Nutrition Tips Thursday,” (Fast and Female, 2015g).

The women who Fast and Female have previously “highlighted” include, among others:

- Erica Wiebe in qualifying for the Rio Olympics in women’s wrestling;
• Fast and Female Ambassador Jessie Diggins on placing third in the women’s Freestyle sprint finals;

• Sara Reid, a Canadian skeleton athlete;

• Dr. Jen Welter, a coach for the Arizona Cardinals and the first female coach in NFL history;

• Canadian soccer star Christine Sinclair,

• Hayam Essam, the founder of “Girl Power” in Egypt,

• parasport marathoner Tatyana McFadden, and

• parasport tennis player Esther Vergeer (Fast and Female, 2016a).

Mindful Monday posts seem to be intended to give followers a dose of weekly inspiration. The “Mindful Monday” posts are photos with words or quotes superimposed upon them, as seen in the sample of posts below in Figure 8 (Fast and Female, 2015g). These posts are usually photos of athletes and often reiterate meritocratic and philanthropic values in the quotes – such as “the greatest power an Olympian has is the power to give back” (Fast and Female, 2015g). Most often the photos feature a white, and able bodied ambassador or event participant, with quotes similar to the ones featured in Figure 8.

A key component to most of Fast and Female’s Facebook posts are photos, a sample of which can be seen in Figure 9 on page 115. Photos are shared on the Facebook site after Fast and Female events, when an ambassador accomplishes something, and to accompany community interest pieces (e.g., “Monday motivation” posts, merchandise updates or votes, contests, or holidays like Mother’s Day and Halloween) (Fast and
Female, 2015f). The photos on Facebook are set up in albums – one album for each event or community interest project (Fast and Female, 2015g).

Throughout these photos one can see that Fast and Female events emphasize the organization’s pink brand, physical activity, and typical feminine skills and qualities such as putting on makeup or styling hair (Fast and Female, 2015g). Fast and Female mantras, key messaging and values are also emphasized when they appear on banners in event photos (as seen in some photos in Figure 9) and on the worksheets that the organization provides for the girls.

**Twitter**

Like the Facebook page, the Fast and Female Twitter page is updated irregularly, but somewhat often, depending on the busy-ness of the women’s sporting world calendar (Fast and Female, 2015i). The pink themed Twitter page has more than 3000 followers, and upwards of 5000 tweets (Fast and Female, 2015i). Men and women seem to follow Fast and Female on Twitter, and followers include parents, coaches, both young and elite athletes, sport teams, companies, social development through sport organizations, media organizations, personal trainers, event organizers (e.g., the Birkebiner Loppet Series, Banff Mountain Film Festival), Fast and Female ambassadors and sponsors, recreational sport participants, educators, journalists, politicians, psychologists, nutritionists, and students (Fast and Female, 2015i).
Figure 8. A sample of Mindful Monday Posts (Fast and Female, 2015g).
Figure 9. A sample of event photos from Fast and Female's Facebook page (Fast and Female, 2015g).
Like most organizations, Fast and Female tweets and retweets its products and events, images, articles. The organization also tweets encouraging words to female competitors around the world (but sometimes specifically “at” Fast and Female’s ambassadors) and, more often than not, the organization links its tweets to their ambassadors, sport experts, or other sport organizations (e.g., CAAWS, ParticipACTION etc.). Many of Fast and Female’s tweets repeat the organization’s other social media posts (Fast and Female, 2015g, h, i, j), but it seems as if the organization uses Twitter to create more dialogue between itself and its followers by using the “retweet” and reply feature on the Twitter platform.

As is the norm on twitter, Fast and Female uses hashtags in many of its posts to tag similar ideas, events, conversations, organizations, or to bring ideas together. Hashtags make it easier for followers to keep up to date on conversations they are interested in. Hashtags that are commonly associated with Fast and Female include #girlsinsport, #goteampink, #spreadthelove, #likeagirl, #girlpower, #fastandfemale and #rapidesradieuses (Fast and Female, 2015i). By using these hashtags Fast and Female contributes to and connects to many general conversations on Twitter.

**YouTube**

The Fast and Female YouTube channel hosts “Fast and Female TV” which showcases people, usually their ambassadors or sponsors, involved in sport. Fast and Female TV has interviewed: Dr. Mireille Belzile, a doctor of sports medicine and mother of an elite skier; Olympic bobsledder Emily Baadsvick; Olympic speed skater Kaylin
Irvine; and Olympic bobsledder Jamie Cruickshank. The interviewers on Fast and Female TV range from the organization’s founder, Chandra Crawford, to other ambassadors, to Fast and Female followers. Generally, the content of the videos has addressed topics like passion, hard work and perseverance in sport, the work/sport/personal life or school/sport/personal life balance, the importance of teammates, injury prevention, recovery and nutrition, giving back to the community, the idea that to achieve something one just has to go after it and believe in one’s self, and the idea that the lessons and confidence gained from sport translate into other areas of life. More recently, Fast and Female videos have included discussions of more than just athletes and athletics (Fast and Female, 2015j). Video discussions and questions and comments have been about hobbies and interests in areas other than sport (Fast and Female, 2015j). Most of the people in the YouTube videos wear Fast and Female branded clothing, or clothing that showcases a sponsor’s brand or the interviewee’s business. What the YouTube videos seem to add to the Fast and Female community is a better idea of who the ambassadors are, and a closer look at how ambassadors think they have achieved their accomplishments.

**Instagram**

Fast and Female uses Instagram to post photos, advertise the organization’s events and merchandise, to promote ambassadors, and, once, to launch a photo challenge with their followers (Fast and Female, 2015h). The account has more than 200 posts, and more than 1600 followers (Fast and Female, 2015h). The photos that the organization
posts usually include quotes and feature people who appear to be white women, from western countries, who are being active outdoors (see Figure 10). Engaging followers in conversation seems to be the main purpose of the Fast and Female Instagram account – e.g., posting photos or asking followers what their favourite post-recovery meal is.

By using hashtags on their own photos, followers have the opportunity to “add to” existing conversations. If a viewer decides they like a photo, and is interested in a hashtag that has been used they can click on the hashtag and see what other photos are associated with that hashtag. For example, the page depicting all of the photos with the hashtag “fastandfemale” show a variety of images from followers, ambassadors, and parents and volunteers at events (Instagram, 2015).

Through its Instagram posts, Fast and Female generally represents girl-centered-sport with images of women and girls who are feminine, white, outdoor-oriented, nutrition-conscious, successful, and athletic. The Instagram posts’ descriptions and hashtags (used for the same purpose as on twitter) ask followers to consider a variety of ideas that represent, what I imagine would be taken as a desirable sporting femininity. Through these images and hashtags I see how Fast and Female shares its ideas about sport, femininity and empowerment.
Figure 10. A sampling of Fast and Female’s Instagram photos (Fast and Female, 2015h).
Encouragement and Examples of Empowerment: An Analysis of Fast and Female’s Programming and Social Media Coverage

I see four themes in Fast and Female’s online portrayal of its programming. Through its in-person events, Fast and Female encourages girls to become empowered through sport and to be involved in the Fast and Female community. This encouragement draws on ideas about femininity and sport, individual empowerment, collective empowerment, and building up community.

Girls, Women, and Femininity in Sport

In the organization’s interaction with its online followers, Fast and Female expands upon the representations of femininity that are associated with the brand, and opens the organization up to ideas and contributions from its followers. There is huge potential for followers of Fast and Female to contribute their ideas of sport to the organization, and for the followers’ ideas about sport to be validated by others in the community. Fast and Female’s encouragement of girls to participate in online discussions suggests that girls in sport have something to contribute to the girls’ sport culture that Fast and Female is building.

Through the organizations’ representations and connections of and with ambassadors and sport experts, Fast and Female encourages and promotes women in leadership roles of sport, sport expertise, and sport governance. While the sport women of Fast and Female disseminate the organization’s messaging and meaning there is also potential for them to share their own perspectives on sport, femininity, and empowerment with the
women’s and girls’ sporting communities. This would be especially helpful if Fast and Female recruited feedback from ambassadors or sport experts who might better represent girls with non-normative gender expressions. Including perspectives from outside the norm that Fast and Female has created on its website (as discussed in Chapter Six) would help bolster more marginalized perspectives on how the organization might empower girls and contribute to girls’ sport culture (Collins, 2000). It might also provide a range of girls with valuable and notable role models (Meier, 2015).

When I compare the representation of athlete ambassadors on social media and in programming advertisements to that of the sport experts, I see a clear distinction in how Fast and Female chooses to celebrate current and recently retired athletes to a much greater extent than women involved in other areas of sport. This could be a reflection of western society’s cultural infatuation with athletes as role models, but nonetheless recognizing women in sport as people in official, governing, decision-making and leadership roles could have the potential to expand upon an understanding and expectation of girls’ potential involvement in sport. In CAAWS’ handbook *On the Move: Increasing the Participation of Girls and Young Women in Recreational Sport and Physical Activity*, Jennifer Fenton, Bryna Kopelow, and Tammy Lawrence state that the rate women and girls participate in sport administration and coaching is under representative of the rate in which women and girls participate in sport (2009). Fenton (2009) and colleagues argue that only four of the 16 members on the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) in 2008 were women. This ratio has since improved – currently, seven members, including the president of the Canadian Olympic Committee, of the 19 member
board are women (COC, 2016a) and the current Athlete’s Commission of the COC has 11 members, eight of whom are women (COC, 2016b). Clearly being part of administrative processes is an avenue active girls could look to if they are interested in staying involved with sport and aware of the different opportunities for involvement.

All of Fast and Female’s events need to be considered in the context of the whole Fast and Female project and brand. The events are directly contextualized by the posters that advertise them. These posters work to sensationalize the pinkness in girls’ sport. The colour pink has long been associated with stereotypical ideas about girls. Fast and Female’s reinforcement of this association through its overt pairing of girls and the colour pink presents a contradiction between what the organization depicts as girls’ sport and one of the organization’s goals – breaking down stereotypes of women and girls in the media. As a response to the thin, and hypersexualized images that often represent women in western media, Fast and Female uses its online content to promote a sporting femininity that shows women who are strong and sporty. Fast and Female often posts pictures on its social media that display female athletes in active and sometimes aggressive positions that do not sexualize or trivialize the women in the photos. But through its pink brand and online representations of its programing, Fast and Female has developed its own narrow version of normative femininity that excludes other expressions of gender. Ultimately, Fast and Female represents its programming in ways that reproduce associations between girl-centered sport, heteronormative femininity (pinkness), consumerism, class based barriers, and empowerment.
**Individual Empowerment**

Generally speaking, Fast and Female’s events are characterized by the organization’s merchandise and branding, and short-term, age specific activities and discussions meant to inspire and empower girls through sport. The setup of Fast and Female’s experienced-based programming reduces the concept of empowerment through sport to one day of activity about twice a year (if I assume participants go to both a summit and another event) along with messaging from Fast and Female ambassadors and sport experts. Theberge (2000), in her detailing of boys’ empowerment during Victorian physical education classes, suggests that empowerment was a process that took time. Collins (2000), suggests that individual empowerment that resulted in cultural change took generations of effort. Considering Collins (2000) and Theberge (2000), Fast and Female’s big-event-approach to empowerment seems like a start towards individual consciousness raising, but it does not seem substantial.

Fast and Female’s representations of empowerment in its online platforms seems to provide encouragement to girls to try to be good female athletes. Fast and Female encourages its followers to be responsible for their individual health outcomes, personal eating habits, and personal and athletic development. This focus on personal practices, could be augmented by extending the Fast and Female community beyond a girl’s participation in events and in online programming. Something like a dedicated community forum for girls who have “graduated” out of Fast and Female’s programming, on Facebook or the Fast and Female website, could serve this purpose and help girls see that empowerment is a long-term, ongoing process. An online community forum where
girls could chat about their experiences and what they are noticing about girls’ and women’s sport could create a space where young women could come together and discuss how they might contribute to girls’ sport together (similar to how the women who came up with the idea for Fast and Female had space at national training camps to share their ideas).

Fast and Female also encourages participation in the community through personal purchasing power. In buying up Fast and Female merchandise, or in going to many events, people can link their public identities to Fast and Female’s ideas about empowerment (King, 2008). The participation fees and constant giveaways and merchandise that are provided at experienced-based events link girl-centered sport to consumerism and capitalism. These fees also raise barriers for people with a lower socio-economic status (e.g., travel, participant, and merchandise fees). Donations to Fast and Female no doubt reduce costs for participants, however by reducing everyone’s cost and not setting up a subsidy, bursary, or travel cost fund, Fast and Female practices equality rather than equity and directly values middle and upper class girls’ participation and experience over that of working class or less geographically mobile people.

To support people who might be interested in the content of educational sessions, but who are unable to attend, Fast and Female could post YouTube videos of educational sessions, or upload transcripts of discussions on the Fast and Female website. Not only would these actions increase the accessibility of Fast and Female, but it would increase the profiles of the Sport Experts who give these talks. Putting up recordings or transcripts of Sport Experts’ presentations or talks lessens the responsibility of adults to take off
work, to pay extra money, and to figure out further travel arrangements for themselves in addition to a child they might be sending to the event. In assuming the responsibility of making talks and information more, the organization could help to build a broader community to support a wider range of girls in their processes of empowerment.

**Contributing to a Community**

Fast and Female helps develop a community of sports women and girls in Canada. The organization contributes in three ways: sharing online media about women and girls in sport with the organization’s followers; encouraging Fast and Female followers to contribute to an online community of girls’ and women’s sport; and, during in-person events meant to involve girls and women in sports. Fast and Female connects its efforts and followers online, through the organization’s social media. It is through social media that followers or other sport experts can add to and take meaning from Fast and Female’s posts and photos from events.

The different types of Fast and Female’s social media posts reproduce and expand upon, the notions of sport, empowerment, success, and health that the organization presents on its website. For example, posts on “Fast and Female Friday” update the followers on the workings of the organization. These would link to a new FF TV episode, or a new article put out by a Jr. Reporter (Fast and Female, 2015g). It seems as if the Fast and Female Friday posts try to celebrate the work of the organization and its followers by incorporating updated and new Fast and Female branded content.
Posts about “Highlighting women in the world of sport” expand upon the Fast and Female community and the organization’s understandings about girls and women in sport, empowerment, health, and success. I argue that the women in the world of sport posts expand Fast and Female’s representation of sporting femininities, and therefore the possibility of community, because they include links and information that connect followers to people who engage with the world of sport, and who are sometimes members of groups that are not well represented on Fast and Female’s website, or in its messaging, or photos.

Photos of Fast and Female’s events show how the branding of Fast and Female connects girls within the community. Fast and Female’s branding is not only displayed for online viewing, but is applied to their participants directly in the clothing that the girls are given, the setup of the events, the make-up that is given to participants to wear, and in event worksheets. These types of interaction are visible to Fast and Female Twitter followers, and they can see for themselves who else pays attention to the organization (through “re-tweets”, “favourites”, and “replies” of Fast and Female posts) and the investments and attention that Fast and Female pays to specific sport organizations, events, and people (through the things that the organization “re-tweets”) (Fast and Female, 2015i).

Hashtag connections further expand the Fast and Female community by spreading the organization’s messaging to a larger audience. Some of these conversation seem to be associated with Fast and Female, for example posts using hashtags “Fast and Female,” “Rapides Radieuses,” and “dominate the world,” are often about the organization.
However, posts with the hashtags “girls in sport,” “go team pink,” “spread the love,” “girl power,” and “like a girl” often refer to organizations, countries, or people that are not related to the organization. Twitter hashtags connect followers and allow for more dialogue between the organization and its community. There is meaningful potential for followers to contribute to and shape the conversations that Fast and Female has and is a part of. Twitter has the capacity to add meaning to Fast and Female’s use of concepts and mantras by associating the group with different hashtags, such as #empowerment, #spreadthelove or #dominatetheworld. As it is being used now, Fast and Female’s twitter account is a point where people can access and interact with the organization’s messaging.

Fast and Female’s community-based foundation and online accessibility put the girls’ sport and empowerment organization in a unique position. Fast and Female does encourage individual notions of empowerment, but it also presents ways and has potential to also encourage community consciousness – in ways similar to what Collins (2000) argues is necessary to develop a politics of empowerment. Fast and Female also presents girls’ sport as something that girls both consume and contribute to, which reflects upon the understanding of girl power as a commodity that Hains (2012) developed.

**Bolstering Collective Empowerment**

In encouraging followers to participate in an online community Fast and Female has created the basis of an empowerment that can be collective (Hains, 2012; Sharma, 2008; Cruikshank, 1999) and worked upon, or sustained, through participation online.
Although this type of maintenance is not the harrowing physical sport-related process that Theberge (2000) talks about, it does use sport to foster community conversation and involvement and support. Fast and Female’s online programs like FF Jr. Reporter through FF TV and the essays and interviews they publish on their website support the idea that girls’ voices matter in sport, and that girls, as under recognized members of the sporting community, are capable of unique contributions to the overall sport community (Collins, 2000).

In sharing the girls’ videos and articles, Fast and Female encourages girls to participate in sport culture. The online education-based programs are an avenue toward confidence that is not grounded in sport. The unique, shared nature of this experience, of one girl accomplishing something and then sharing it with other girls, could generate the start of a conversation that connects girls, that might spark some sort of collective thought, and that might instigate the development of girls’ awareness of the larger sport community around them.

**Furthering collective empowerment and community engagement.** Fast and Female disseminates different meanings of empowerment, femininity, sport and success – and in presenting these different ideas there are places where Fast and Female falls short of its potential to further collective empowerment and community engagement. Power Hour events and providing subsidies (or making events more accessible in general) are two areas that have the most potential for improvement in Fast and Female’s programing.
Power Hour events have the largest potential for increasing and maintaining community empowerment through sport as a process. The Power Hours work to develop a strong local community and they give the organizational power and responsibility to community members not necessarily directly involved with Fast and Female. These events have potential to reflect the breadth of girls’ and women’s sport across a nation. Each club’s Power Hour is advertised through Fast and Female’s online network. Power Hours enable girls and women, including women outside Fast and Female’s target age, to come together and talk about what they think about sport. As these events happen at the frequency chosen by the club, they also have the largest potential to facilitate empowerment as a process, as something that needs to be continually worked on.

Making events more accessible through location choice or by providing subsidies for events and travel costs is another area that could be improved or emphasized in Fast and Female’s online and in-person content. Subsidies are not obviously apparent for most events, to the extent where I could not find a reference to them on the Fast and Female website, although, one could volunteer for an event and access programming that way. Additionally, all the event registrations ask that people consider making an additional donation to support Fast and Female’s future programming – an idea that probably increases donations to the organization, but could marginalize people who may be struggling to afford the cost of an event anyway. It would be awesome if there was an option for people who could afford it, to donate an additional event registration, or set up a car pool to events, that would enable the participation of girls who otherwise would be unable to attend an event.
Empowerment is something that Fast and Female fosters though their events that focus on being physically active, non-competitive and fun. These events are led by Olympians and elite athletes (Fast and Female, 2015a). Fast and Female’s “about page” says that the organization’s programming is meant “…for the positive personal and athletic development of young female athletes…” (Fast and Female, 2015a). These statements link the concept of empowerment to health, physical activity, personal and athletic development, and to athletically impressive and successful women.

**Conclusion: How does Fast and Female’s Online Engagement Foster Empowerment?**

As on the website, Fast and Female’s social media shows light-skinned, successful, strong, able-bodied, not fat people, who are presumably middle class and cisgendered, and who enjoy wearing pink in most of the pictures and many of the stories the organization shares. Fast and Female continually connects this type of femininity with women’s sporting success, healthy active living, and girls’ empowerment. Including considerations of femininities that do not fall inline with the narrative that Fast and Female has thus far produced could showcase more possibilities of what it means to be a part of girls’ sport culture, and could engage more girls with the organization and sport itself.

Fast and Female has potential to start conversations about hard societal inequalities that girls face, but I find it disheartening that the organization’s messaging does not encourage this type of dialogue, nor does it lend itself to a viewership that would
include people who subscribe to alternative forms of femininities, sportiness, healthiness, or ways of empowerment. Kane and LaVoii (2007) and Rauscher and Cooky, (2015) both argue that sport programs for girls should talk about and equip girls to deal with the social inequities and barriers they may face later in their lives. Fast and Female provides a potential place where girls or parents or other followers could have such a dialogue, but the organization leaves the onus of bringing up hard, complicated, and scary topics to its followers. In this way Fast and Female leaves the nitty-gritty work of developing any type of critical discussion between followers to individuals who are courageous enough, or indeed empowered enough, to talk about the hard, complicated, and scary topics that are also relevant in girls’ lives.
Chapter 8

Conclusions

This thesis questions how a sport organization draws on and contributes to notions of empowerment, and empowerment through sport for girls. According to Simon (1994), empowerment was historically found and realized in demonstrations of civil disobedience in favour of women’s or Black persons’ civil liberties. Civic disobedience in the form of protests was essential to processes of empowerment that fed into larger civil rights movements (Collins, 2000; Simon, 1994). The history that ties notions of empowerment to different causes and forms of activism complicates the idea of “empowerment through sport.” Sport often emphasizes qualities such as individuality, discipline, and regulation. These two ideas, one of political empowerment processes and one of a regulated and disciplined space, are in conflict. How might sociologists, activists, and advocates for empowerment and girls’ sport alike transform experiences of sport to help foster empowerment? Is the example of a girl in sport an effective example of social or civic disobedience that demonstrates to those same girls that they can also be political actors who advocate against societal and institutional oppression and inequality?

Through this thesis I have argued that Fast and Female teaches girls that sport is empowering – but, while the organization draws on a feminist term (empowerment), it promotes a notion of empowerment that teaches female athletes how to exist within current mainstream and sporting cultures, rather than encouraging girls to be empowered female citizens who learn to question and challenge social inequity. The two conclusions that most strongly support this argument are first, that Fast and Female promotes a
normative sporting femininity through the organization’s branding and across Fast and Female’s online content; and second, that the organization focuses primarily on individual qualities and benefits as the outcomes of empowerment through sport. Notions of individuality have been evident both on Fast and Female’s social media and in my conversations about the organization with the six women I interviewed. Through reiterations of “empowerment” language in Fast and Female’s messaging, and through the recurring images of overwhelmingly pink-branded, white, strong, able-bodied, slim, and presumably middle class and cis-gendered girls, Fast and Female portrays a narrow understanding of empowerment for girls and women through sport. They present an image of a girls’ sport culture that excludes a large number of girls and women.

Fast and Female is an organization that collects and disseminates ideas about girls’ empowerment through sport. The organization connects girls’ empowerment to: a specific representation of femininity; organized sport participation; eating healthily; social media participation; consumerism; and economic and occupational success at an older age. Further, the organization represents elite athletes as the epitome of success, of what it is to be empowered, for women in sport (even though there are many other ways girls could become involved in sport, e.g., how sport experts are involved in sport as coaches, sport organizers, administrators, sport health staff, technicians etc.). Fast and Female has created a community to foster individual empowerment by emphasizing girls’ improvement of individual skills and qualities (e.g., resistance or confidence). In focusing on the individual level Fast and Female puts forward a version of empowerment that teaches girls how to succeed and surpass inequality within the current sport system,
rather than encouraging girls to question and challenge those inequalities to create a more equitable system.

Fast and Female is also an organization that collects and disseminates meanings about what it means to be a girl in sport. The conclusion that I have come to regarding Fast and Female’s collection of meanings around femininity, is that Fast and Female’s overtly and unapologetic pink brand is a contemporary response to a history of women’s sport where athletes’ femininity has been over emphasized, trivialized, but also required. By emphasizing the colour pink to represent girls and femininity in sport, Fast and Female communicates that yes, participants are girly, and yes they are sporty. This idea is reinforced by the responses the organization gets from its followers and participants. But, assuming that participants are among the girls I see in images on the organization’s website, and across its social media, those responses to Fast and Female’s branding are coming from a generally homogenous group.

Fast and Female has an opportunity to expand what it can do in its empowering work. Kane and LaVoi (2007) and Rauscher and Cooky (2015) suggest that sports organizations hoping to empower girls need to have hard conversations about societal inequalities and barriers that girls face not only to sports participation, but generally in life. I suggest that Fast and Female take a more intersectional approach to considering and encouraging sports participation. Different girls will need different encouragement. Girls with different backgrounds, including girls who do not like the colour pink, may need different encouragement to participate in sport. I suggest that Fast and Female not
only focus on girls who are fast and who are female, but on girls who do not have easy access to organized sport or who may not have had the opportunity to try sport at all.

The overwhelming lesson from Fast and Female is that if girls are participating in sport, and otherwise healthy behaviours, they will eventually be successful. This lesson does not consider hardships that girls and women and other people face through their lives. A portrayal of a comfortable life, where empowered people are capable of dealing with pitfalls and bumps in the road as they come up, obscures the realities of people who do not enjoy white, cisgender, heteronormative, able-bodied, or middle to upper class privilege. Further, by not acknowledging how these social realities might impact some of the organization’s followers, or potential participants, the organization prevents girls’ from beginning to learn about collective action and critical thinking (which would be the next step to the politics of empowerment that Collins (2000) argues for). If Fast and Female did focus on empowerment as a collective activity, its participants and followers would get a head start on developing a critical consciousness that would serve them equally as well in life as other personal traits do – personal traits like the confidence to try new things, or resilience in the face of failure.

**Because Some Girls Aren’t Fast or Female: My Suggestions for Fast and Female**

**Moving Forward with Girls’ Empowerment and Sport Participation**

Through this thesis I have made critiques about Fast and Female’s online content. Fast and Female has a huge potential to include more girls and women in its programming. Fast and Female has a huge potential to include greater understandings and
representations of empowerment and femininity in its work. Finally, Fast and Female has a potential to continue young women’s conversations about their sporting experience beyond their time as Fast and Female participants (when they become too old for Fast and Female events). My recommendations are below.

1. *Encourage collaborative goal setting.* Encourage goal setting that asks girls to work together to set goals. It is important for girls to take time and attention for themselves, but it is also important for girls to be aware of their social position and their collective potential to create social change. I have created a goal setting workbook that talks about goal setting, empowerment, and community that asks girls to set goals that are not only about themselves. This workbook is included as part of this thesis in Appendix A.

2. *Encourage empowerment as a collective quality.* Girls’ sport programs, for all of the individual leadership skills that they foster, should also be specifically focusing on skills such as a critical consciousness of the social and political space that the program occupies, and skills that involve collaborative idea development or collaborative action. People are empowered through the collective process, through a collective identity or subjectivity that connects individuals to ideas and projects that are larger and more impactful than they could be alone.

3. *Create an online forum or group for young women who are too old to continue participating in Fast and Female events as participants.* An online community forum could be a space where young women could chat about their sport experiences and what they are noticing about girls’ and women’s sport (e.g., a
place to talk about recent sexist coverage of women’s achievements in the Rio Olympics). This space could foster community engagement – Fast and Female could post volunteer requests on it, administrators of the forum could pose discussion topics that asked the former participants to think critically about larger issues in sport. This forum could be a space for young women to continue engaging in the community that Fast and Female has worked to develop.

4. **Embrace different meanings and representations of femininity in sport.**

Emphasizing femininity in sport contexts can be really challenging because girls’ and women might not have the same ideas of what femininity is to them. Not all girls identify with femininity. Providing options of colours for t-shirts, and an option for face-paint in addition to the pink branded t-shirts and makeup that are shown in event photos could show that Fast and Female (and girls’ sport) is welcoming to different types of sporting femininities. Considering that many different types of girls may be interested in sport, Fast and Female’s reliance on the colour pink to represent girls’ sport and girls’ empowerment could be misguided and ultimately could dissuade some girls from continuing on in sport. Fast and Female could go on to fully represent multiple meanings of what it is to be a girl in sport by rethinking other parts of its branding as well – for example changing the organization’s mantras to sayings that encourage collective sporting accomplishment and participation.

5. **Encourage role models who are not athletes.** The women listed as Fast and Female sport experts are remarkable women, and their success in sport is not less-than the success of the athlete ambassadors. The difference in representation
between the webpages showcasing the ambassadors and sport experts on Fast and Female’s website presents ambassadors as recognizable role models, and sport experts as links to information. The sport experts’ various sporting successes could provide examples of what girls could also aspire to accomplish in sport. Fast and Female could utilize their connection with sport experts to bolster the women’s sport community across generations of women by representing and valuing the experts as role models.

6. Encourage Power Hour events with a number of sessions through the sport season. Power Hours have a great local community aspect to them that recognizes girls’ local sporting communities and potentially identifies and develops local role models for young athletes (through the leadership role of organizing a Power Hour). Encouraging clubs to develop multiple sessions within a season would further bolster the girls’ and women’s local communities.

7. Set up a subsidy or bursary or a sliding payment scale, and car-pool option for events. Ask people to donate an extra admission cost when they sign themselves or their child up for a Fast and Female event. These types of options and donations would make Fast and Female’s community more accessible to those who may not be able to afford event costs, or who might not be able to get to the event.

8. Take video and post ambassador and sport expert lectures and presentations online. Or upload transcripts of the discussion on the Fast and Female website. Not only would these actions increase the accessibility of Fast and Female, but it
would increase the profiles of the Sport Experts and Ambassadors who give these talks.

**Reflexivity**

From a poststructural perspective I recognize that truth is partial and that my understanding of Fast and Female is contingent upon my social position. I am writing this thesis from a position where, more or less, I can relate to Fast and Female’s representation of femininity. I am white. I am generally strong and athletic. I am able-bodied. I am not fat. My family is well enough off. I am well enough off. I was a varsity athlete in two sports. I have participated in sport for my whole life and plan to continue that engagement in some way or another. I am a feminist. I did not start thinking critically until well into my first university degree, which was based in science. And, while I consider myself feminine, the colour pink does not especially resonate with me.

I bring an understanding of what it is to be involved in organized sport to this project. For years I only saw sport as something that was good, and healthy, and something to get better at. Through sociology and politics courses at university I learned how to critically engage with ideas about sport. I learned how to recognize that sport was not only good, and healthy, and something to get better at. Sport was also something that can be unhealthy and that could reflect social inequality and discrimination; sport is something that can exacerbate social inequality and discrimination. Further, through my sporting experience, as someone who would have been included in Fast and Female’s target audience, I was never left wanting for sporting opportunities. Having a perspective
where I identify with the people that Fast and Female shows as its participants and ambassadors, and a history where I participated in many, many sports, has made me especially aware that the population that Fast and Female is serving, may not be the only population in need of girls’ sport or empowerment programming. I am stating my position for two reasons: first to emphasize the privilege of the people I see most easily relating to Fast and Female’s predominant version of femininity; and second to contextualize the arguments I make throughout this thesis.

My account of Fast and Female is not representative of ‘truth’ – it is my perspective, my reading of the cultural meanings and context that surround both myself and Fast and Female. In this account of Fast and Female I have pulled together literature predominantly from sociology and politics, and I value the arguments in the sociological and political literature that I reference more so than arguments from other academic disciplines. As best I can, I have maintained an awareness of my preconceived, and changing personal ideas about sport, femininity, empowerment, and Fast and Female.

Limitations

There are two predominant limitations of the scope of my work: a lack of consideration of sexuality and heteronormativity in my analysis, and an intentional decision to not continually collect and consider information from Fast and Female’s constantly updated website and social media profiles. Through this project I did not address the lack of content about sexuality in Fast and Female’s programming. In my methods section I advise other researchers to consider what is absent from cultural texts,
in addition to what is there. I did not effectively consider these important absences, and it shows in my analysis as a brief consideration of heteronormativity and a lack of consideration of how ideas about girls’ sexuality in sport might be relevant to Fast and Female.

**Change in the Air**

Fast and Female has been continuously working to empower girls through sport, and so the organization’s website and social media presence has changed since I reviewed its online content between March and April of 2015. Fast and Female’s ever changing nature is indicative of an organization that is interested in contributing productively to a larger girls’ sport culture and to the lives of the organization’s followers. Further, in the continual engagement with its followers, Fast and Female is continually expanding upon its representations of femininity and empowerment, and what it means to be a girl in sport. Fast and Female has a huge potential for growth – to redefine what girls’ sport might include in terms of how people think of girls, sport and physical activity, and femininity at large. I will remain interested in the directions the organization may go and the changes it may make.
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Appendix A

An Example of my Empowerment Through Goal Setting Workbook

Empowerment Through Goal Setting

A Journal
Hello!
Hi, my name is Flurry. I made this “fill in the _______” journal to get YOU thinking about what is important to you. To get YOU thinking about how what is important to you, might also be important to others too. First I'll tell you about empowerment and goal setting, and about how this journal tries to make goal setting part of the process of empowerment. Then the rest is up to YOU. There is a space for personal reflection, and goal setting sheets. The personal reflection is meant to get you thinking about what might be important to you. The goal setting sheets are meant to help you work towards what is important to you.

I developed this journal as part of my Master’s of Arts degree. If you are interested in reading about these topics more, you can find it (and the sources that informed the creation of this journal) online in the database of Canadian Theses and Dissertations – It is titled “Teaching Empowerment Through Sport: An Analysis of Fast and Female” by Florence Hogg, for the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University. For my Master’s degree, I considered how Fast and Female teaches girls about empowerment through sport. To inform my work I read a bunch of academic literature about empowerment and girls’ sport, and I interviewed six women who are associated with Fast and Female as ambassadors and sport experts. My aim with creating this journal is to provide Fast and Female participants (and anyone else) a take-home tool that lets them engage with the process of empowerment on their own.

What’s in this Journal?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>i</td>
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<tr>
<td>What’s in this journal?</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting Goals</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
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<td>Sportswomen’s Ideas about Empowerment</td>
<td>iv</td>
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<td>Motivational Quotes and Ideas</td>
<td>vii</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Reflection</td>
<td>viii</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table of Goals!</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal Sheets</td>
<td>2-21</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Empowerment

Some people consider empowerment to be a feeling—a feeling that they are competent, capable people who aren’t afraid to try new things. Others see empowerment as a set of skills people can draw on in difficult situations. This journal considers empowerment as a process—a process of becoming aware and curious about your own self and about the world around you. As a process, empowerment involves learning about how to ask questions, make confident decisions, and take assertive action. Processes of empowerment encourage individual skills and collaborative efforts to achieve goals.

Thinking about empowerment as a process means that we need to work on our own sense of empowerment throughout our lives. Sometimes people who feel empowered in one part of their life (like female athletes) can feel disempowered in another. People might feel helpless, or unconfident, or unsure, or like they are up against impossible barriers—and that’s ok. Empowerment is something that we can work at in different ways at different times.
Setting Goals

In sport, athletes learn to set goals to help them achieve their dreams. Goal setting is a really good tool for you to reflect on what you aim to do (this week, next month, this year, or even later on in life). Goal setting is often used to identify things individuals want to accomplish, but this journal is set up to use goal setting as a tool that will help you reflect not only on what you want to do, but also on your surrounding community and relationships. Goal setting can be a process that you can use in many areas of life, with school, or extracurricular activities, with personal everyday responsibilities or with long term projects in your community.

This goal setting journal is not for goals that are easy to achieve. This goal setting journal is meant to get you thinking about exciting and hard goals that you might not achieve – and if you don’t achieve your goals, that’s ok. For every goal you set, this journal has space for you to reflect and decide if the goal you set is still something you want to pursue.

This goal setting journal is designed to get you thinking about others and about things you all might want to do together. For example, the goal “I want to hike up a mountain,” could become “I want to get a bunch of my friends and hike up a mountain together” – and that goal could become “I want to set up a group of people who are interested in climbing a new mountain every two weeks.” And that goal could turn into “I want to work with other people to protect the wildlife habitat we saw when we were walking up the mountain.”
Sportwomen’s Ideas About Empowerment

These quotes are from my interviews with incredible sportswomen about empowerment, girls’ sport, and Fast and Female.

Chandra Crawford – Fast and Female Founder, Olympic gold medalist and Master’s degree graduate said:

“I believe that the top thing girls need to be empowered is social belonging; being part of the culture, fitting in and knowing that their place in the world is secure because the underlying need to be good enough serves the higher need of belonging and being part of something.”

“I would define [empowerment] as the successful overcoming of limiting perspectives from ourselves and others. Removing anything that’s in our head that limits us is empowerment.”

“You have to go back two weeks later, two months later, two years later and constantly renew empowerment. I don’t think it’s locked in at any time. It’s like self-confidence: Yeah I was born quite self-confident and I was raised with self-confidence. But, am I still able to lose all of it? Yes.”

Holly Brooks – Fast and Female Ambassador, Olympian and a Master’s degree graduate said:

“Yeah, I mean I think sports really teach you, or teach me how to set a goal and work towards it. I mean, oftentimes you set a big goal and there are lots of little subjective and objective goals that you try to hit along the way. And, you know, sometimes you may [miss] those objectives and you have to kind of pivot and change your plan.”

“I think sport is a perfect place to experience empowerment. And that’s not to say that someone can’t feel empowered from a science experiment too, I think that’s perfectly viable. But I think sport is a great avenue for girls to gain confidence that they can then translate to other aspects of their life – be it academic, social, work in the future, and their physical health as well.”
**Gail Niinimaa** – Fast and Female Sport Expert, Textile Conservator, and former Canadian National Biathlon Team member said:

“I think it boils down to goal setting.”

“If you have [an] end goal in mind, then you can keep working with [your goal] in mind. But if you don’t, you might lose sight of why you’re doing [the hard work].”

“But to me, I think empowerment is having the confidence to step up and do something that you really want to do, or that you feel like you can do. The word ‘power’ is the strength to do something, and ‘empower’ is giving yourself the strength to do something.”

**Madeleine Williams** – Fast and Female Ambassador, Chair of Cross-country Canada’s Women’s Committee, Olympian, and Lawyer said:

“If there’s anything that you can do that makes you feel capable and allows you to fulfill your potential, I think that’s naturally going to be incredibly empowering. And I think, for me anyway, that is what sport has always been. It was something that I was good at. It made me feel strong, capable, and confident.”

“I think it is important to have a knowledge that everybody is afraid, and everybody is not going to get everything right at least some of the time. Knowing that nobody is perfect, I guess, or that nobody is always right and using that to help yourself along when you flounder a bit is, to me, the meaning of empowerment. I’m a capable person. I can do things because I’m good at learning how to do things and I’m good at trying to do things and maybe failing sometimes, but I’m perfectly willing to try and make a fool of myself. That’s what empowerment means.”
Joanne Ross – Fast and Female Sport Expert, High Performance Director at Volleyball B.C., and former Canadian National Volleyball Team member says:

“I think empowerment for me is knowledge, because I think in order to make good decisions you have to feel empowered. I think you want to feel good in your decisions, you want to feel that you’re guiding your own way in the world and that you’re leading your life as opposed to just following it. And to do that, I think you need information.”

“I think it’s who you have around you. That would be really key. We call them coaches. A saxophone player might call them a teacher, or a maestro, whatever, whoever your leader or teacher or mentor is. I think those are the people who would create the environment that would foster [empowerment].”

** A quick thank you to the sportswomen I spoke to that helped me in my own understandings about empowerment, and who encouraged through my project. A big shout out and “Thanks!” to Joanne, Madeleine, Gail, Holly, and Chandra! Thank you! **
Motivational Quotes and Ideas

Who do you look up to? What inspires you? What are your favourite quotes?
Personal Reflection

Time for BRAINSTORMING! What do you know about yourself? What do you know about the communities that you’re involved with in your surrounding area? Are there initiatives in your community that line up with what is important to you? These questions might be weird, but I hope that they’ll get you thinking about how you want to spend your effort and time, and who you might be able to work with, in setting and working towards your goals!

When you think about yourself, what qualities come to mind? What do you spend your time doing or thinking about?

What is important to you?  What do you value?
What areas of culture – what local community organizations, or initiatives, or projects, or groups reflect what’s important to you?

How do those communities encourage people to become involved?

What communities are you involved in?
What sport teams, or school programs, or extracurricular activities, or hobbies, or friend groups do you spend time with?
# Table of goals!

Keep Track of your Goals!

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GOAL: ________________________________

Date: ______________

Would others be interested in this goal?

Why is this goal important?

Who else would be interested?

Steps to accomplish the goal:
1. __________________  6. __________________
2. __________________  7. __________________
3. __________________  8. __________________
4. __________________  9. __________________
5. __________________ 10. __________________

Are these steps big enough to be another goal? Do the steps have due dates?

REFLECTIONS
Date: ________________
Are you interested in trying this again? _Y/N_

What else are you focusing on in life? So many things are interesting, don’t forget about other important things!
Ideas
Notes
Drawings
Reflections
Further Brainstorming
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Part 1: Interviewee’s sport history [and questions about anything sport specific the interviewee was currently participating in]

Can you give me a bit of your sport history, how you got started, how you’re involved now and any highlights in between?

… clarifying questions…

- What is your experience with girl-centered sport?

Part 2: Fast and Female Questions

Is there a need for Fast and Female?

What do you think Fast and Female has accomplished? Are there areas where Fat and Female could be paying more attention too?

Can you talk a little bit about what your role of being an ambassador/expert entails?

Have you, or how do you interact with the girls at Fast and Female events? What happens at the events?

Has being a part of the Fast and Female organization impacted you?

Has it changed the cultural landscape of girls’ and women in sport? (How?)

How does Fast and Female empower girls or/and women?

…clarifying questions…

- Who were they/you hoping to serve?
- What, in your view, are the goals of the organization?
- Are there any specific ways in which Fast and Female empowers girls?
- What do you think about the current state of girls in sport?
Part 3: Questions specific to girl centered sport and empowerment

What does girl-centered sport, or sport for girls look like? What should it look like?

Is girl-centered sport, or sport for girls, empowering?

What do girls need to be empowered? Why is sport a space where this empowerment can and should come from? Are there other valid paths to girls’ empowerment?

What is the role of competition in empowerment? In girl-centered sport?

So generally then, how would you define empowerment? … Is this a definition that is shared by Fast and Female or aspired to in the organization’s programming? (If not, why is it different?)

In your experience, how does physical empowerment or empowerment through sport translate to feeling empowered in other areas of life, for example school, work, and family life, or political and economic awareness?

Part 4: Final Discussion

Is there anything else you would like to add or ask about regarding what we’ve just talked about?
Appendix C

General Research Ethics Board Approval Letter

February 04, 2016

Ms. Florence Hogg
Master’s Student
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies
Queen’s University
28 Division Street
Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6

GREB Romeo #: 6014623
Title: "GPHE-184-15 Fast and Female: A case study of girl centered sport, and girls' and women’s empowerment through community sport participation"

Dear Ms. Hogg:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has reviewed and approved your request for renewal of ethics clearance for the above-named study. This renewal is valid for one year from February 5, 2016. Prior to the next renewal date you will be sent a reminder memo and the link to ROMEO to renew for another year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period. An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours. To submit an adverse event report, access the application by signing at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Adverse Event Form".

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes in study procedures or implementation of new aspects into the study procedures. Your request for protocol changes will be forwarded to the appropriate GREB reviewers and/or the GREB Chair. To submit an amendment form, access the application by signing at http://www.queensu.ca/traq/signon.html; click on "Events"; under "Create New Event" click on "General Research Ethics Board Request for Amendment of Approved Studies".

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

John Freeman, Ph.D.
Chair
General Research Ethics Board

cc: Dr. Mary Louise Adams, Faculty Supervisor
Dr. Lucie Levesque, Chair, Unit REB