Reconceptualizing Women’s Wellbeing During the Pandemic: Sport, Fitness and More-Than-Human Connection

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Abstract
This paper explores the gendered, disruptive effects and affective intensities of COVID-19 and the ways that women working in the sport and fitness sector were prompted to establish more-than-human connection through technologies, the environment, and objects. Bringing together theoretical and embodied insights from object interviews with 17 women sport and fitness professionals (i.e., athletes, coaches, instructors) in Aotearoa New Zealand, this paper advances a relational understanding of the multiple human and nonhuman forces that shape and transform women’s wellbeing during pandemic. Drawing upon particular feminist materialisms (i.e., Barad, Braidotti, Bennett), we reconceptualize wellbeing to move beyond biomedical formulations of health or illness. Through our analysis and discussion, we trace embodied ways of knowing that produce wellbeing as a more-than-human entanglement, a gendered phenomenon that can be understood as an ongoing negotiation of affective, material, cultural, technological and environmental forces during a period of disruption and uncertainty.

Keywords
Wellbeing, women, COVID-19, feminist new materialisms, sport and fitness

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The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted individual wellbeing (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). The negative social, economic and health effects of COVID-19 have been felt disproportionately by marginalized groups, particularly women (Masselot & Hayes, 2020; Power, 2020). Women lost their jobs at much greater rates whilst also taking responsibility for much of the unpaid labor required to care for their families. In these conditions, women’s mental health has also been heavily impacted for both frontline workers and in the home (Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020). Feminist researchers across an array of disciplines have examined the impacts of the pandemic on girls, women and older women’s experiences of wellbeing, with social isolation, loneliness, domestic abuse, increased domestic labour, job losses, and financial strain and insecurity, all taking significant tolls (Clisby & Choudhury, 2022; Gao & Sai, 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). Research on the gendered dimensions of COVID-19 has also revealed how women engaged with physical activities, digital technology and leisure pursuits as strategies for managing unprecedented levels of stress, and how their relationships with such activities are impacted by new risks and responsibilities (Giles & Oncescu, 2021; Humberstone, 2021; Pandya, 2021). Despite a quickly growing body of scholarship exploring wellbeing during the pandemic, much of this work is underpinned by humanist assumptions, focusing predominantly on the subject who retains agency and ‘engages’ with the world out there. Here, we draw from feminist materialisms to reveal how the disruption of the pandemic prompted new understandings of wellbeing beyond the agentic human subject, towards the notion of becoming, as relational, non-linear, unfinished, and more-than-human.

In this paper, we draw upon interviews and object-oriented methods with 17 women working in the Aotearoa New Zealand1 sport and fitness sector (i.e., athletes, coaches, fitness instructors, studio owners) during the various stages of strict social restrictions throughout 2020, and a selective engagement with feminist new materialist theorists (i.e., Braidotti, Barad, Bennett), to explore women’s reimaginings of wellbeing in a radically altered social world. After detailing our engagement with feminist new materialisms and our methodological approach, we examine some of the highly affective intensities (i.e., manifesting as fear, anxiety, loss, stress) that the women grappled with during the early stages of the Aotearoa lockdown (Braidotti, 2020), a period of great dis/continuity and dis/orientation where many experienced their lives as unsettled. Through our discussion, we reveal the new relations of connection and closeness (Barad, 2014) that emerged during periods of prolonged social isolation. These included the women’s engagement with technologies, the environment, and everyday objects (i.e., hand sanitizer, gloves) (Bennett, 2010). We then focus on the affective experiences of re-turning – not as going back but as re-examining multiple processes that are shifting understandings (Barad, 2014) – to everyday life following lockdown/s, and the women’s reflections and learnings through this period.

This research builds upon and extends current understandings of wellbeing during the pandemic. We present COVID-19 as a force that has disrupted, challenged and changed these women’s understandings of wellbeing. Through each of these sections, the experiences of the women sport and fitness professionals highlight the human
and nonhuman entangled relations that emerged during the pandemic in Aotearoa. For the women in our study – all experts in their own and others healthy, moving bodies prior to pandemic – wellbeing came to be known differently, as a relational and non-linear state of becoming through connections with moving (and still) bodies, as well as objects, technologies and environments of sport, fitness and leisure. With COVID-19 acting as a radical jarring (stop, hold, start, stop again) to familiar rhythms and routines, and introducing new risks of bodies coming too close, the pandemic prompted new modes of attending and connecting, and different affective intensities. Through disruptive spacetimemattering (Barad, 2010), many women engaged in processes of reimagining their sporting, fitness and social lives—their becoming with the world—differently, beyond narratives of health and wellbeing before, during and after the pandemic, and towards an ongoing process of becoming with the world. Embracing new materialist concepts to help surface these women’s experiences of reconceptualizing wellbeing through their everyday and sporting practices, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature exploring the ontological politics of wellbeing as more-than-human phenomena before, during and beyond the pandemic.

**Rethinking Wellbeing, Pandemic and the Moving Body with New Materialisms**

Wellbeing has been understood, conceptualized and theorized in a range of ways over recent decades. While wellbeing has been studied from biosocial, socio-cultural, economic and psychosocial approaches, many have acknowledged that the nuances and complexities of how wellbeing is experienced exceed what can be captured in the measurements of surveys and questionnaires (Smith & Reid, 2017). Responding to such concerns, feminist scholars across an array of disciplines, including health, sport, leisure and work, have drawn upon a range of theories—from phenomenology to post-structuralism—to explore women’s embodied and multidimensional experiences of wellbeing in both developed and developing contexts (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2020; Petty & Trussell, 2021; Wittmer, 2021). In so doing, they have revealed the many ways that women’s wellbeing is impacted by gendered social and economic structures, as well as their local communities and built and natural environments (Sirgy, 2021). Working in the context of the pandemic, feminist scholars are making important contributions to understanding how COVID-19 is impacting women’s subjective experiences of wellbeing, depending on an array of social variables and positionalities (i.e., age, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economics, disability, urban/rural, household dynamics and living conditions, work status). Underpinning much of this work, however, are the humanist assumptions of sociology or psychology that focus predominantly on the thinking, acting, (more or less) agentic woman as individualised subject.

Over the past two years, a growing body of feminist scholarship has shown the potential of new materialist approaches to explore health, wellbeing, embodiment and recovery beyond humanist notions of experience as an individual phenomenon. Emerging in response to concerns that the linguistic and cultural turn were “inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 6), new
materialisms works to unsettle the prioritizing of the social and discursive in the production of meaning, and to acknowledge the agentic capacities of human and nonhuman matter (e.g., bodies, environments, technologies and objects) (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Braidotti, 2022; Coole & Frost, 2011). By exploring the material-discursive formation of experience, feminist materialisms orient thinking towards questions concerning how the phenomenon of well-being comes to “shape and be shaped by the elements of the world that women are entangled with” (Hickey-Moody & Collin, 2020; Coffey, 2021; McLeod, 2017; Smith & Reid, 2017). Some feminist scholars are also identifying how sport and physical activity can disrupt gendered normativity to create opportunities for women’s wellbeing and recovery when “they generate pleasure, imagination, connection, strength and freedom as a gendered bodying that is not orientated primarily around feminized expectations of pleasing others” (Fullagar et al., 2019, p. 51). Such theoretical approaches are important because they build upon and extend feminist ways of knowing women’s experiences beyond individualistic and linear narratives of wellbeing that are too often tied to physical and mental health as absence of illness, or ill-being (McLeod, 2017). Such understandings of wellbeing are particularly valuable in the context of the complex challenges posed by COVID-19 as a more-than-human phenomenon (Lupton, 2022; Searl & Turnbull, 2020).

Importantly, such understanding of an intricately interconnected embodied experience of wellbeing—before and during the pandemic—is not “new” knowledge. Drawing upon Indigenous ways of knowing and non-Western cosmologies, scholars have articulated how the reciprocal relationships between humans and the non-human world brings into view the significant influence of cultural, spiritual and the natural environment on human health and well-being in the context of the harmful and traumatic impacts of colonization (Arnold et al., 2021; Kimmerer, 2013; Mark & Lyons, 2010; Walker et al., 2013). For example, in Aotearoa, the Māori worldview of hauora refers to the interrelated nature of physical, social, psychological, social, spiritual and environmental wellbeing (Heaton, 2016; Pihama et al., 2015; Salter, 2000; Severinsen & Rewiti, 2020). In Aotearoa, such understandings of wellbeing have been widely taken up (in some cases, mis/re-appropriated) in a range of contexts, including health care settings, education and public policy. For example, the Government’s various reiterations of the ‘Wellbeing Budget’ prioritize economic, social and cultural capital as integral for a healthy and sustainable future, including in ‘securing our recovery’ post-COVID-19 (Wellbeing Budget, 2021). In this paper, we acknowledge the ontological limitations of our Whiteness, and First Nations scholars’ emphasis on the incommensurability of knowledge claims (Moreton-Robinson, 2020), hence we emphasize the shifting politics of embodied relations with land, sovereignty and identity bound up with wellbeing and COVID-19 human and non-human worlds.

The experience of living during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a growing number of scholars to turn to new materialisms to help with making meaning of, and finding ways of responding to, the affective, environmental, technological, and biological entanglements present in this unique conjuncture (Braidotti, 2020; Cheded & Skandalis, 2020; Lunstrum et al., 2021; Lupton et al., 2021; Sikka, 2021). In so
doing, they have explored COVID-19 as more-than-human phenomena, and the agentic capacities of the virus as a nonhuman actant (Lupton, 2022). Of particular relevance here are the important feminist engagements with new materialisms to examine the gendered affects of COVID-19 (Bozalek et al., 2021), and feminist reimagining of the posthuman condition during the pandemic (Braidotti, 2020). Although not always the case, the feminist scholars whose work we draw upon in this paper (i.e., Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2020) acknowledge the important contributions of ancient and contemporary Indigenous and First Nations philosophies, ways of knowing and learning with nonhuman creatures, objects and forces.

Building upon previous feminist and Indigenous scholarship on wellbeing, in this paper, we engage concepts from feminist new materialist scholars to conceptualize women’s wellbeing during pandemic as more-than-human relations that are continually becoming, as past, present and future reconfigurations of the world. In so doing, this article expands upon our previous writing early in the pandemic where we took inspiration from Braidotti’s (2020) thinking on affirmative ethics during pandemic to explore the affective intensities of women’s experiences, as fear, anxiety, hope and connection, during the emergence and continuation of COVID-19 in Aotearoa (see Jeffrey et al., 2022). This paper also draws upon and extends Fullagar and Pavlidis (2020) feminist new materialist writing during the emergence of the pandemic. In their article, they explored the affective, embodied and gendered experiences generated by the COVID-19 disruption, explaining “the disruptive biocultural force of the coronavirus highlights the value of more-than-human perspectives for examining the gendered effects and affects on our everyday lives and leisure practices” (p. 152). Engaging feminist new materialisms, they embark on a process of writing through the “complexity of embodied affects (fear, loss, hope)”, and in so doing, highlight the challenges to “humanist notions of ‘agency’ posed by these shifting timespace relations of home confinement, restricted movement and altered work-leisure routines” (p. 152). According to Fullagar and Pavlidis (2020), feminist new materialisms also prompt new questions of change (and sport, leisure and lifestyle choices) as “complexity and emergence”, with attention focused on “multiple affects and (digitally mediated) interrelationships that produce expanded or limited agentic capacities, rather than atomistic agents” (p. 155). Continuing, they acknowledge the limitations of humanist notions of ‘agency’ for understanding “what the coronavirus ‘does’ as a gendered phenomenon” (p. 152). Taking up such ideas, in this paper we ask, how might feminist new materialisms prompt us to move beyond thinking of women as individual agents with more or less power to narrate their narratives of wellbeing, and to consider the unfinished work of wellbeing, the human and more-than-human multiplicities of becoming through and beyond the pandemic? In particular, we were curious to learn about the unique insights that this group of women could impart, as sports and fitness professionals with expert knowledge on the gendered dimensions of moving bodies in the pandemic.

Building upon and extending the emergent scholarship on the sociology of COVID-19 (Lupton & Willis, 2021; Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020) and the impact of COVID-19 on sport and physical activity (Evans et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2020; Rowe, 2020), a few scholars are theoretically, methodologically and
representationally exploring embodied experience in terms of COVID-sport-body assemblages. As Newman and Thorpe (2021) write, “the pandemic has forced us to rethink the relatedness of the body—to other bodies, to vulnerable bodies, to the population as a whole, to particulate matter, to the state and its medical-industrial-complexes. We have been forced to reimagine how bodies move, how movement is relative, how we breathe, and where we can stand or walk or travel or live” (p. 129). In this paper we take inspiration from feminist wellbeing and materialist scholars to reimagine the ongoing configurations of wellbeing, sport, moving bodies and the pandemic.

**Wellbeing in Pandemic as Relational and Non-Linear**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an overview of all that is similar and different between feminist materialisms and other ontological and epistemological approaches (see Thorpe et al., 2020; Coole & Frost, 2010). The range of new materialist approaches to re-imagining non/human relations during pandemic are vast and complex, further, we recognize the importance of contributing to this line of inquiry to understanding women’s embodied experiences of the pandemic as a continually evolving phenomena. In this paper, we take inspiration from three new materialist scholars and concepts that we found to be most relevant to our empirical material and the women’s experiences of pandemic. We engage both theoretically and methodologically with feminist materialist understandings of affective intensities (i.e., fear and hope as relational forces) (Braidotti, 2020), vibrant matter (Bennett, 2010), closeness and spacetimemattering (Barad, 2010), to explore how women working in the sport and fitness sector navigated their affective and embodied experiences of wellbeing while continuing to train and work (mostly digitally) with their sporting and fitness communities during the pandemic.

Simply, we selected these three concepts as we found them insightful for exploring more complex understandings of women’s wellbeing during pandemic. Wellbeing is frequently (not always, but too often) conceived as ‘positive’ feelings about one’s social, emotional, cultural and economic health (D’Ambrosio & Frick, 2012). During the pandemic, however, wellbeing must be negotiated in and through an array of intraacting affective intensities (i.e., manifesting as fear, anxiety, uncertainty, hope, connection). Taking inspiration from Deleuzian strands of thought (Deleuze, 1992), affect here is more than mood or emotion, and refers to the “the generative forces or intensities produced when bodies encounter one another”, with affective intensities referring to the movement of forces that bring bodies, emotions, sensations, objects, technologies, space and people into particular relations and assemblages (Clark & Lupton, 2021, p. 1,226). Braidotti (2020) described the “underlying mood during this pandemic as affective” (p. 1) in terms of cultural configurations produced through COVID-19, as a force that affects bodies through oscillating experiences of hope and fear, courage and boredom, and prompted creative collective solutions that involve non/human relations. Importantly, for Braidotti (2020), mood here is not the individual, emotional experience (i.e., good or bad mood), but rather refers to a posthuman condition,
where affects are entangled with human and nonhuman encounters often in non-conscious ways. In our discussion of the influence of nonhuman materiality on the lived experiences of our participants, we also take inspiration from Bennett’s (2010) discussion of matter (including objects and images) as ‘vibrant’ and ‘lively’ and recognize this as constitutive of women’s wellbeing as relational and more-than-human.

Engaging Barad’s concepts of spacetimemattering and re-turning, this paper also attends to more dynamic and nonlinear understandings of the processes of wellbeing during the pandemic. Barad (2010) writes, “past, present and future, [are] not in a relation of linear unfolding, but threaded through one another in a nonlinear enfolding of spacetimemattering, a topology that defies any suggestion of a smooth manifold” (p. 244; see Brice, 2021; Simpkins, 2017). Although not writing specifically about the pandemic, Barad’s (2010) understanding of spacetimemattering encourages new ways of thinking about the “relationship of continuity and discontinuity”, the “joins and disjoins”, with time and space “out of joint. Dispersed. Diffracted” (Barad, 2010, p. 244). Such an ethico-ontological shift in knowing wellbeing, encourages us to rethink women’s past, present, and future sporting, healthy, active, ‘well’ selves as more than before-during-after COVID-19 identity negotiations, but rather as refracting across spacetime, and always becoming in relation with human and nonhuman matter. Importantly, we engage with feminist new materialisms to guide our ways of thinking about wellbeing as not fixed, but as relational, and to highlight the perpetual becomingness of the human subject with respect to more than human entanglement. In so doing, there is a politics of knowledge inherent within this project. Engaging with feminist new materialisms, we trace the multiple and more-than-human (human and nonhuman) relations and practices through which wellbeing and risk were co-implicated in particular ways throughout women’s sporting, fitness, and everyday lives during times of disruption, dis/continuity, and disjointedness.

Towards Feminist Relational Methods in Pandemic

Wellbeing and social connection are typically considered to be profoundly human experiences. In this project we sought to advance understanding of Aotearoa women’s wellbeing during pandemic by making thinkable the human and nonhuman dimensions of connection throughout pandemic life. Informed by the disruptive theoretical and methodological assumptions of feminist materialism, we worked with and beyond interpretive methods (digital interviews) and experimented with object-oriented interviews, which we discuss in more detail throughout this section. Together, these methods helped us explore wellbeing as ‘entangled’ through affective relations with human and nonhuman actants.

Following an online call for participants and purposive sampling among our existing networks in the Aotearoa sport and fitness sector, we (Thorpe, Jeffrey and Dr Nida Ahmad) conducted semi-structured digital interviews with 17 women who were living in Aotearoa during the pandemic and working in the sport or fitness industry. Interviews commenced in August and finished in November 2020. The participants ranged in age (34–50 years) and came from a variety of ethnic, cultural and socio-
economic backgrounds. All of the participants were working in the fitness and sports industry before and during the pandemic. Some of the women operated and ran fitness studios (i.e., CrossFit, Yoga) or their own training programs (i.e., running, functional fitness, boxing classes), some were trainers at gyms, coaches for other athletes or participants, some worked in the sports sector, and others were elite athletes. Although their sporting fields are not the specific focus of this paper, their understandings of well-being through the pandemic are rooted in their working lives in which they were invested in their own and others’ healthy, moving bodies before and during the pandemic. Their pre-pandemic subjectivities were all firmly rooted in their sporting and fitness-related skills and achievements. As sport and fitness professionals across a range of fields, we were thus interested in their embodied expertise of wellbeing when their sport-fitness subjectivities and social-professional-emotional lives were radically disrupted. We continued to learn from our participants expert knowledge on the gendered dimensions of moving bodies in the pandemic, reading their transcripts through feminist new materialist concepts, re-turning the ontological politics of wellbeing.

Most interviews were approximately one hour in duration, conducted online (the majority via Zoom) and professionally transcribed. During the interviews we discussed how COVID-19 had affected their sporting and physical activity participation; where/who they participated with, and reasons for their participation during this difficult time; engagement with digital technologies for their sport, fitness and social connectivity; and how their participation enabled or constrained their sense of connection to people, places and/or the environment. Throughout the interview process, we came to understand the ways that COVID-19 was disrupting the women’s lives and resulting in complex affective experiences. The empirical material revealed deep insights and a broad range of issues about their sporting and fitness practices, and their personal and professional lives during the pandemic (also see Jeffrey et al., 2022). However, for this paper, we focus on how women came to know their own and others’ wellbeing differently, as relational human and nonhuman connections during a time of disruption, risk, fear, and uncertainty.

Aligned with our critical ethico-onto-epistemology and recognizing the unique socio-materialities being lived and felt during COVID-19 (Sikka, 2021; Watson et al., 2021), we invited the women to bring images and/or objects to the interview in the hope that this might evoke affective moments and different dimensions of experience that may elude more normalized human interview methods. Inspired by recent feminist posthuman and new materialist research (Clark, 2020; Coffey, 2020; Hickey-Moody, 2020; Thorpe et al., 2020), particularly recent developments in material methods (Brice and Thorpe, 2021; Ravn, 2021; Woodward, 2019), this optional object-oriented method (Holmes, 2020; Nordstrom, 2013; Woodward, 2016) at the end of the interviews provided an opportunity to explore some of the nonhuman relations being lived and felt by the women during the pandemic. Participants brought along a range of personally meaningful objects and images (i.e., teacup, ornaments, weights, photos; see below for a selection) that evoked affective responses related to their lived experiences and memories of pandemic. The range of objects and images shared highlighted the women’s diverse experiences of living during a pandemic.
and the unique ways that these women fostered safety, connection and wellbeing amidst unprecedented times. In other words, these objects were ‘lively’ and ‘vital’ (Bennett, 2010) in what they ‘did’ to the women’s wellbeing and sense of connection. The discussions that these objects and images evoked were valuable in that they helped to reveal what mattered and how environments and technologies became entangled in the women’s understandings of wellbeing during the pandemic. Later in the paper we include a selection of these images because they produced different affective intensities, disrupting human-centeredness and forging connections in new ways that became part of narratives of self in the process of becoming.

The ‘research apparatus’ of this study has limitations. As Barad (2007) reminds us, while the research apparatus (the observation and measuring instruments of the research) is a more-than-human arrangement, it is typically researchers who make ‘agential cuts’- actions, practices and decisions – that have consequences for the boundaries around what can/not be known. We acknowledge that agential cuts were made as to who was included in the study, and the focus of subsequent analysis. Although from a range of ethnic and cultural groups (i.e., Pākehā/NZ European, Māori, mixed-ethnicity, migrant, Muslim), all of our participants, who self-selected into this study, were in paid-employment (either self-employed or working for a sport or fitness business or organization, and thus had access to governmental financial support during the lockdown). Furthermore, as White non-Indigenous, settler scholars, we also made an agential cut in terms of our engagement with Māori ways of knowing hauora / wellbeing, acknowledging that such research should only be done with, by and for Māori wāhine. Exploring the experiences of a select group of women who had the time, resources and willingness to participate, also means that the understandings of wellbeing presented in this paper are not representative of all women in Aotearoa. This study did not focus on other key aspects of gendered risk during pandemic, such as homelessness, domestic violence, racism or other experiences of marginality. Thus, we acknowledge that further research is needed to consider different ways in which wellbeing materializes as political matters among more diverse groups of women in Aotearoa and beyond. As Barad (2007) makes clear, the differentiating cuts that apparatuses make have ethical consequences, as they not only measure phenomena, but are also material-discursive practices that produce difference.

**Women and Wellbeing in the Pandemic: Dis/Continuity, Isolation and Connection**

In this section we draw upon interviews with the 17 women who were actively working in the sport and fitness sector before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the human and nonhuman entangled relations that emerged during and following the 2020 lockdowns in Aotearoa. Firstly, we explore the highly affective intensities that the women grappled with during the early stages of the Aotearoa lockdown, a time of great disruption and dis/continuity in both their personal and professional lives. We then examine the new relations of nonhuman touch and connection that emerged
during social isolation and as humans became risky, including the women’s engagement with technologies, the environment, and objects that were of particular significance during pandemic (i.e., hand sanitizer, gloves). Finally, we focus on the affective experiences of re-turning to everyday life following lockdown, and the women’s reflections and learnings through this period.

While the following discussion is organized into separate parts, embracing the onto-epistemological implications of feminist new materialisms, we avoid framing these sections as clearly delineated, separate themes. Although we discuss particular periods of time (i.e., during the early stages of COVID-19 in Aotearoa; the re-turn to social life following the first prolonged lockdown), Barad’s conceptualization of spacetimemattering shapes our analysis of wellbeing within layered and entangled notions of time, space and movement. Across the different periods of time, we acknowledge that emotional and affective respondings are constantly evolving, with past-present-future and human and nonhuman relations becoming entangled across time, space and matter. Indeed, across the sections, we show how the women are reimagining wellbeing not as fixed or linear, but relational and multiple, and always entangled with the sensory and more-than-human world around them. At times human relations come to the fore, at other times, intra-actions with objects, technologies and the environment suggest more-than-human orientations of wellbeing. Throughout, however, we reveal the perpetual becoming of women during the pandemic, and the importance of human and nonhuman objects for enabling new ways of researching the connection to self, others and the world during a pandemic. In so doing, we show that, for the women in our study, living through a pandemic prompted new noticings and embodied ways of knowing wellbeing differently through the moving body, and as entangled connections with human and nonhuman forces; wellbeing enfolds fear and uncertainty, rather than be defined as oppositional. Such entanglements affect how wellbeing is experienced in the flux and becoming of pandemic life.

Affective Respondings to Dis/Continuity

In 2020, Aotearoa experienced two ‘waves’ of COVID-19, with an initial national lockdown and isolation period (Levels Four and Three) of just over seven weeks from late March to mid-May. During this time, citizens were legally required to stay within their household “bubble”, with only essential travel allowed (i.e., food, medical supplies or essential work). Following international trends, the social, physical, economic and emotional effects of COVID-19 disproportionately impacted women as their working and familial obligations and support-structures changed drastically (Masselot & Hayes, 2020; Robinson, 2020). In Aotearoa, women experienced 90 percent of the pandemic-related job losses, particularly those in part-time and more intimate professions (i.e., hospitality, beauty, fitness). With the emergence of the pandemic in Aotearoa and quick transition into isolation, many of the women experienced “complex and internally contradictory alternation of emotions” (Braidotti, 2020, p. 1). Their initial affective intensities emerged as fear and anxiety, with their concerns
primarily human-oriented (particularly immediate family members who may have been most ‘at-risk’). However, for many, these initial concerns shifted towards the impact on others, and particularly their wider sport and fitness communities.

As previous research has shown, women carried the majority of the gendered emotional labor during the pandemic (Özkazanç-Pan & Pullen, 2020). Similarly, many of the women in our sample were caring for young children, taking on the majority of household labor and homeschooling, while also looking after elderly family members and partners, and navigating new uncertainties around their own employment. The sport and fitness sector was hit particularly hard by the pandemic, with women’s sport losing much of its funding and support, and (predominantly women) fitness professionals facing much uncertainty with gyms and studios closing temporarily and permanently. Some of the women revealed the emotional difficulties they experienced during this early stage of pandemic. For these women, the extended periods of social isolation and financial insecurity negatively impacted their mental health and overall sense of wellbeing:

I got stressed and anxious, I actually took it out on food. I started eating a lot of things, like, I was actually using food as a way to cope with the lockdown. And we’ve been really out of touch with humans, other human beings. So for me, the way to soothe that, I was just eating chocolate. Yeah, that was really bad (Mia, gym owner; emphasis added).

Whereas some engaged in self-soothing tactics (i.e., eating chocolate, watching Netflix), others adopted different habits to ‘manage’ their wellbeing based on their pre-COVID-19 understandings of health, re-turning to practices of self-care as a key strategy for coping: “[My yoga] practices really helped me to get through and get me out of my head… to focus on something bigger than just the steam in my head” (Aurora, yoga studio owner). As sport and fitness professionals, the majority turned to physical activity—modifying the home environment to create workout spaces—to support their physical and mental wellbeing during the initial stages of the lockdown (Engels et al., 2021). But for some, this also meant letting go of a need to ‘control’ elements of their lives (i.e., training, nutrition, work), and embodying uncertainty in the present: “I think that it’s just a matter of doing what you can in a positive manner when you can and deal with things as and when. I don’t think you can really do any comprehensive planning for this next wee bit of time, the immediate future” (Stella, PT business owner).

For the women in our study, the emergence of COVID-19 was a “dis/orienting experience of the dis/jointedness of time and space, entanglements of here and there, now and then”, with a “ghostly sense of dis/continuity” (Barad, 2010, p. 240). Embodying uncertainty meant living with ambivalent affects—fears, desires, hopes, loss and frustration—which continued to emerge (and re-turn) in new and unexpected ways across space and time. The women’s experiences of wellbeing were not described as always hopeful and courageous, but as continual processes of accepting the complexity of their lived experiences as oscillating between moments of boredom and
potential, hope and fear. Similar to Braidotti’s (2020) writing on pandemic, these women experienced fluctuating affective intensities as they grappled with maintaining wellbeing in their drastically changed everyday lives. These affective intensities materialized in different ways for women in the sport and fitness field, with both ‘letting go’ and ‘holding on’ as alternative orientations to fear in pandemic times. Both were useful strategies for living with the deep uncertainties for these women whose livelihoods had been (temporarily and/or permanently) taken away from them.

While all expressed worry about their careers, the athletes were particularly concerned about their sporting futures. Below, Gina laments over losing access to her sport, an activity that previously filled her days and could have sustained her as an established ‘coping mechanism’, as well as fears around a potential loss of career:

The biggest thing for us, as surfers, is like we surf every single day. So for that to all of a sudden be taken away from us, yeah, I guess we were sad and angry and all the emotions came through. I guess at the moment it is so unknown... the fear is if it doesn’t happen next year, then I will obviously have to start thinking about retirement and thinking about a new career (professional surfer).

The fears expressed by the competitive athletes in our sample echo those in recent research on the impact of COVID-19 on professional women’s sport (Bowes et al., 2020; Clarkson et al., 2020). International research has consistently shown that women’s sport was heavily impacted by COVID-19, with men’s sports training and competition being prioritized during times of economic and health uncertainty.

In the early stages of the pandemic, many of the women relied on familiar, accessible, individualized strategies for coping (i.e., comfort food, Netflix, exercise, meditation). However, as conditions developed and the periods of social isolation continued, many found themselves experimenting with new understandings of wellbeing as connection with humans and nonhuman matter, such as technologies, the environment, and objects. Put differently, the disruptive effects of COVID-19 and the affective intensity of uncertainty prompted the women to renegotiate understandings of wellbeing within the parameters of life disrupted, socially isolated, and dis/jointed. Importantly, such understandings of wellbeing as not discrete ‘states’ but multiple compositions of forces and relations, were also being negotiated within existing and exacerbated gendered inequalities impacting the women’s working, social and family lives.

### Closeness in Pandemic

Barad’s (2014) question—“What is the meaning of closeness?” (p. 153)—takes on new significance in pandemic times, when fear is reverberating through media and everyday spaces. What is the meaning of ‘closeness’ when human touch and encounters with bodies, objects, air and other mediums carries the risk of contagion? Exploring feminist materialist understandings of touch, Fullagar and Murris (2021) write: “touch shifts from being understood as a human interaction with an external world... to a
dynamic intra-action that involves multiple, co-constitutive relations with nonhuman and human others” (n.p.). For the participants in our study, as women who were accustomed to working in close physical proximity to clients, closeness and touch during COVID-19 had to be renegotiated, felt through their relations with both human and nonhuman matter, both in-person and from a distance. In this way, closeness, connection and touch were “not a mode of knowing as capturing the world out there” before, during or after COVID-19, but rather relational intra-actions that invoked “ethical questions about being in touch with otherness and the conditions through which difference is produced” during disruption, dis/continuity and dis-connection (Fullagar & Murris, 2021, n.p). For all of our participants, the risks and disruption caused by COVID-19 prompted the women to connect in new ways with a range of human and nonhuman forces, including digital technologies, the environment and objects. Through such connections, the women moved beyond wellbeing practices they were accustomed to prior to the pandemic (i.e., going for a run with a teammate or taking a yoga class in a studio), and came to new understandings of wellbeing as relational, entangled and more-than-human. Below, we expand upon three non-human forces that were particularly influential for these women in their pandemic re-imagining of wellbeing: technology, nature and objects.

Technologies

Digital technologies played (and continue to play) a critical role in connecting humans—families, friends, students and teachers, classmates, colleagues, health professionals—during the pandemic (Marston et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2021). Digital technologies shaped participant experiences of connection with others in multiple ways - producing objects, such as photos, and platforms for communicating through the dynamics of movement and everyday social interactions. For example, Joan reflected:

> So looking at my photos, I have a photo of us playing board games and my partner took a photo of me dancing in the lounge and we shared it on Facebook… it was funny. I [also] have a funny video of my family chat and we are laughing because my mum and dad can’t work Facebook… It was mainly sharing photos of our food with our family (Joan, ultra runner & coach).

Digital platforms (i.e., Zoom, Whatsapp, Messenger) allowed the women to reach out, support and share experiences with their friends, colleagues and teammates. For example, Michael, a yoga teacher, found that she prioritized “physical activity, kindness to others, connecting with friends and family” during the lockdown, adding that such relations of care were mostly facilitated “through Zoom and Whatsapp. And in some ways I have connected more with people than I would in my normal day-to-day life”. The notion that digital technology facilitated care and quality time is somewhat at odds with popular tropes about technologies taking us away from each other (Dredge & Schreurs, 2020). These are examples of how women’s active
embodiment materialized through digital technologies in ways - seeing and being seen moving on screens together-apart - that troubled passive/active, digital/physical binaries that are persistent in sport and physical cultures.

In their important study of Australian adults use of digital technologies (i.e., online videos and live streamed fitness classes), Clark and Lupton (2021) revealed how ‘pandemic fitness assemblages’ surfaced new “affects, sensations and embodiments” through modified home environments and daily routines (p. 1,222). For the women in our study, their use of digital technologies was primarily in offering fitness classes for others, and/or for training together. In so doing, their relations with family, friends, colleagues and clients were constituted through screens and technologies in ways that afforded new sensorial experiences of connection and care, where touching screens and buttons evoked different affects than the visceral touch of bodies, shared spacetime and objects. For example, for the athletes in our group, Zoom workouts and social ‘catch-ups’ were important in supporting one another through grueling workouts and isolation from the team environment:

Our sport scientists would run a group session and a lot of the girls found that really good. Because even though you are not physically there with each other, you can still push each other through the screen. And just knowing that there are people doing the same thing as you, that are trying to work hard through this time, was nice (Ruby, football athlete).

Yeah, so for the team they did a few zoom sessions regularly and they did some with our wellbeing coach. The team had a few online sessions to keep in touch with what is happening and how they are dealing with it. And they had daily zoom meetings for work to see how things are going on. We had Friday virtual drinks and staff quiz and stuff like that. … We tried a few things. It’s not that easy, but we did the best we could. We tried to stay connected and not just for work (Mackenzie, national sport team manager).

Drawing on Barad’s (2007, 2012, 2015) agential realism theory of touching and queer(ed) intimacy, Cheded and Skandalis (2020) reflect on the “(im)possibility of alternative forms of haptic encounters in digital spaces”, with an emphasis on the “non-human entities of performative accounts of such encounters” (p. 3). Arguably, such ideas are productive for exploring women’s use of digital technologies as felt connection and thus highlights the relational experience of wellbeing as a shared together-apart movement. As the risk of physical touch and connection with human bodies threatened women’s sense of wellbeing, digital technologies afforded different movement relations that suggest how wellbeing can be conceptualized as dynamic becoming rather than a state of being to be realized. Shared digital experiences involved the flow of multiple intensities where moments of connection co-existed alongside disruption, pleasure, loss, fun, loneliness, companionship, sadness and joy. Wellbeing became a matter of holding in productive tension the forces of movement and stillness, connection and disconnection, fear and hope, that shape encounters.

As Barad (2014) writes, touching (reaching out for encounter) is a “matter of response. Each of ‘us’ is constituted in response-ability. Each of ‘us’ is constituted
as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other” (p. 161). Many of the women (particularly the fitness instructors and studio/gym owners) offered free online classes, ensuring there was time to share personal experiences and vulnerabilities before and/or after such classes. In such actions, the women were taking responsibility for their communities, reaching out, touching, showing care through the sharing of digitally-enabled shared movement experiences. Such relations of care influenced the women’s wellbeing, generating collective closeness that countered the individualization of fear and responsibilisation of COVID-19 risk. Importantly, this ethos of care was entangled in COVID-19 as gendered phenomena (Fullagar & Pavlidis, 2020). As seen in many other aspects of pandemic society (i.e., the home, essential workers, nursing), the responsibility to enact the emotional, physical and digital labor and (often invisible unpaid or lowly paid) care for others were affective respondings felt and practiced predominantly by women in the sport and fitness sector.

**Environments**

Media reports and emerging literature has revealed the importance of access to natural environments (i.e., parks, forest, waterways) for human coping during COVID-19 and beyond (Buckley et al., 2019), with some documenting a rise in those taking up nature-related activities (i.e., bird watching, bush or beach walking, gardening) (Chaudhury & Banerjee, 2020; Corley et al., 2021; O’Brien & Forster, 2021; Tomasso et al., 2021). Yet access is far from equitable, with age, race, class, disability, and location (i.e., housing density, poor urban communities) impacting opportunities to safely participate in and connect with the natural environment. In particular, researchers have examined the inequities of accessing urban blue and green spaces during the pandemic, and the health and wellbeing consequences of such uneven access (Astell-Burt & Feng, 2021; Humberstone, 2021; Spotswood et al., 2021).

While the pandemic may have brought to the fore new appreciation of the significance of the natural environment for individual and community health and wellbeing, it is important to note that Indigenous communities have long valued the vitalism of nonhuman matter, privileged ecocentrism over anthropocentrism, and have worked to “challenge dualistic understandings of nature society relationships” (Thomas, 2015, p. 975). As noted above, in Aotearoa, human relationships with the environment are critical to the Māori worldview of hauora. As Ngata (2022) states, Māori are “not merely actors upon an environment, but rather we are environmental beings” (p. 301). The natural environment (i.e., ngahere/forest, awa/river, maunga/mountain, moana/ocean) is lively and agentic, with whenua, connections to land and nature, central to Māori ways of knowing health and wellbeing (Waiti & Awatere, 2019).

Human geographers, environmental humanities scholars and feminist theorists have also been exploring complex understandings of the relationships between humans and the environment, and how relationships with nature (i.e., greenspaces, bluespaces) influence human perceptions of wellbeing (e.g., Olive & Wheaton, 2021; Walter, 2020; Wheaton et al., 2021), including sport and leisure during the pandemic (see
Humberstone, 2021; Wheaton, 2021). Some are also leaning into the ethico-onto-epistemological turn towards posthuman, more-than-human, and new materialisms to rethink sustainability (Alaimo, 2012; Smith, 2019), pollution (Evers, 2021), climate emergency (Neimanis & Walker, 2014) and environmental politics (Alaimo, 2016). Engaging with posthumanism, new materialisms and ecofeminisms, feminist scholars are making important contributions to understanding women’s experiences of wellbeing as natural-social entanglements, rather than individualized achievements (Alaimo, 2020; Braidotti, 2022; Gaard, 2011).

Many of our participants spoke of how they attuned to their connection with the environment (i.e., mountains, forest, beaches, weather), and entangled relations with objects of nature (i.e., leaves, dirt), in new ways that unsettled normative binaries of nature-culture, self-world. For example, during one interview, Joan (ultra-runner and coach) shared a series of “nice photos of nature… because it was Autumn… the trees… so lots of appreciation for our local environment.” Another participant renewed her connection with her local mountain: “I grew up here and every time I see Mount Taranaki, it’s still pretty magical. … I guess that [the pandemic lockdown] helped me to appreciate it even more” (Gina, surfer). Another woman commented on the joys of slowing down and taking time to enjoy nature whether it was “walking in to work or popping down to the river near our house… the thing about taking longer is you have a bit more time to appreciate the flowers and the rugged path along the way.” During lockdown, she recalled enjoying “slackline [walking along a low tightrope outdoors] and the leaves and the sunny weather. … And I think part of what I liked about those activities, and when I go for a walk, was not having a time schedule” (Michael, yoga teacher and seniors’ sport coordinator). Importantly, for many of the women, these were new environmental noticings prompted by the disruption of the pandemic, the slowing down of their social and professional lives, with less emphasis being placed on their athletic and fitness achievements. Natural environments and objects called forth different agentic relations and hence a more dynamic sense of wellbeing.

Weather was another nonhuman phenomenon that called for new noticings by participants who spoke of their close observations of the seasonal changes around them during lockdown. As Edensor et al. (2020) note, in relation to geographical work on affective engagements with weather, “weather affects our moods and emotions… familiar weather-worlds are embedded in sensory and affective memories” (p. 12). Some participants described the importance of attuning to small details in the environment and the impact they had on their mental health. For example, Mia commented:

all the other factors in the environment really affected me, like the light. And you know these are small little things, they just didn’t fit in. So I didn’t realize how big of an issue it [my environment] was until this lockdown to be very honest (Mia, a gym owner).
To paraphrase Neimanis and Walker (2014), for the women in our study, the pandemic prompted processes of becoming “weather bodies”, experiencing new intra-actions with weather and their surrounding environments (p. 558).

While the majority of the women’s comments on the environment focused on the therapeutic benefits of connecting to nature and surroundings, their observations were not necessarily specific to their sport or fitness practices, but enabled through the disruption to spacetimemattering, and familiar rhythms and routines. Without the affective and material forces of gyms, studios and training facilities, the pandemic prompted new environmental noticing (i.e., the light or leaves falling). In this way, their observations differ from the growing body of literature exploring the more-than-human environmental relations of those involved in nature-based sports (Olive & Wheaton, 2021). Arguably, such findings suggest that, beyond sporting participation in nature, more-than-human environmental relations and affective responses may also be possible through the slowing down and attending to the small details of our immediate environments (i.e., backyard, trees in the street), and the disruption to familiar sporting and movement practices.

Furthermore, some of the women were acutely aware of the tenuous and changing environments (social/ecological) within which they were living. Not only were they living through pandemic, they were also aware of global issues of social unrest and pressing concerns about climate change. For some of the women in our study, such noticing prompted new reflections on the risk of ecological-social collapse as entangled with pandemic:

I think back to the beginning of the year [2020] and all of those bush fires over in Australia […] that was just terrifying to be seeing that devastation, and that really hit people hard too, it was an unstoppable inferno. That was crazy and you just had no control over that. And now we have this COVID (Hannah, yoga teacher).

In a time when, not just COVID, but environmental and economic things in the world seem quite challenging globally at the moment, there is a desire to […] make a difference (Michael, yoga teacher and seniors’ sport coordinator).

Such comments are revealing of how disrupted and renewed relations with their local environment intra-acted with ecological-social collapse, prompting some to rethink their strategies to “make a difference”. Hannah recalls, “I have made big decisions about my life based, not just off the back of this [COVID/lockdown], but through this time, just wanting to live more sustainably.” Turning to Indigenous, queer, and feminist theorists writing about “care and proximity in place, in conversation with the places and communities I think-with”, Osborne (2019) acknowledges the potential in “learn[ing] to attend and nurture tiny growing entanglements in wastespaces and ruins” (p. 148). For the women in our study, their entangled affective relations with local environments (i.e., their gardens, trees near their homes, urban waterways) and pandemic-ecological-social disruption-despair-depression prompted a politics of well-being not evident before COVID-19 (Figure 1).
For the women in this study, and most others living through COVID-19, our “interactions with surfaces, objects, and, of course, other humans have been wholly transformed during the pandemic” (Cheded & Skandalis, 2020, p. 1). Many of the women in our study discussed a range of nonhuman objects as entangled in their affective relations with the COVID-19 world. In discussions of experiences of fear and anxiety, some referred to particular objects (i.e., sanitizer, gloves) as helping them to manage perceptions of risk:

I was very cautious throughout the whole thing. When I went to the supermarket I was hand sanitising my hands and I was washing things down … I do not want this virus.

Figure 1. Images from authors and participants taken during COVID-19 lockdown in Aotearoa prompting affective connections with the environment.

Objects

For the women in this study, and most others living through COVID-19, our “interactions with surfaces, objects, and, of course, other humans have been wholly transformed during the pandemic” (Cheded & Skandalis, 2020, p. 1). Many of the women in our study discussed a range of nonhuman objects as entangled in their affective relations with the COVID-19 world. In discussions of experiences of fear and anxiety, some referred to particular objects (i.e., sanitizer, gloves) as helping them to manage perceptions of risk:

I was very cautious throughout the whole thing. When I went to the supermarket I was hand sanitising my hands and I was washing things down … I do not want this virus.
Going in for training… I didn’t want to touch anyone or get too close because I am just quite a cautious person so that factor was definitely still in the back of my head… I was trying to stay away from people a little bit just to be on the safe side and I always had my little container of sanitizer in my boot bag (Ruby, football player).

I was like, “oh my God, is my business going to depend on me having hand sanitizer or not?” And, you know, I ordered five liters of hand sanitizers for the gym because I was like, “if we have to survive through this COVID I need this!” (Mia, gym-owner).

Various objects (i.e., hand sanitizer, masks) also reemerged as significant in the women’s relations of care for their communities following the lockdown/s. For example, a number of the women spoke about hand sanitizer as a small but important gesture of care for their clients (Figure 2):

I think I spent like 200 dollars on this bulk thing of hand sanitizer. I was in that kind of panic mode. And I think many of us were just thinking about all of these new things that we have to be doing and these new precautions and looking after my community and making sure that they felt safe and looked after in this time of chaos (Claire-Lee, yoga studio owner).

With the lowering of social-restrictions (Levels Two and One in Aotearoa), some also discussed the implementation of new rules and regulations to navigate risk in their sporting and fitness environments, including new objects being introduced into fitness spaces to mitigate risk (i.e., cotton gloves), and new protocols that introduced different ways of relating to objects that had previously been in the sporting field (i.e., soccer bibs), but were taking on new meanings as objects of potential risk in pandemic times:

Figure 2. Photos of hand sanitizers and cleaning products lined up at a personal trainer’s fitness studio.
It was a matter of changing up our classes and what we offer and changing up how they were offered. In regards to making sure that there’s that one meter difference between everybody. When they’re doing their workouts together, everybody has to wear gloves. So it’s not just the normal cotton gloves, but they have to wear these cotton gloves with plastic where the palm is so there is no transferring of sweat (Teresa, boxing coach and facility manager).

[When we train] we wear GPS units. So we usually wear a bib that we have that in and usually they would wash all of that for us, but we had to take all of that home and wash it ourselves and only use our own bib and we weren’t allowed to touch any of the gear or anything, like we weren’t allowed to pick up cones. So there were a few different rules… (Ruby, football player).

Writing in *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett (2010) explores the vital materialities that flow in and through objects. In what she calls ‘thing-power’, objects or ‘inanimate things’ are agentic, they “speak to us”, affect and move us, with a “curious ability… to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2004, p. 351). Taking up such ideas and exploring the agential activation of ‘everyday objects’ during COVID-19, Sikka (2021) explores the face mask and toilet roll as agentic, “nodal technologies within the assemblages of objects (human and non), relations, institutions, and structures” (p. 12) (also Lupton et al., 2021). For many of the women in our study, the socio-material intra-actions with objects of health (i.e., sanitizer) and fitness (i.e., bibs, cones, gloves) prompted new affective relations, sensory experiences, embodied routines and strange new intimacies with sporting human and nonhuman matter. Such objects, while seemingly mundane, ‘do’ something in that they prompt new haptic encounters of touch and contact in and through moving bodies. For some, such objects were also entangled in new relations of care for their movement communities.

Some of our participants reconnected with objects—new, old and borrowed—as a source of pleasure. Such object-oriented encounters prompted affective responses, bringing moments of peace, connection and hope into their everyday lives. For example, Jolene (PT studio owner) spent the lockdown at her partner’s house, but took care to bring a few personally meaningful objects with her, “like my cup. It was given to me by a very good friend and so I made sure that it was one of the things that I brought with me right before lockdown just so that I did have some of my stuff here”. For Jolene, the more-than-human connection with familiar material objects (such as her cup) prompted feelings of comfort in relation to displacement, dis/continuity and uncertainty.

The pandemic made starkly visible our entanglements with the nonhuman and more-than-human, whether this was a cup, the gym or weights, sanitizer and more. These ‘things’ now had more prominence, more power, revealing “themselves to be potentially forceful agents”, or what Bennett (2010) refers to as ‘vibrant matter’. For Mia (gym owner), it was her ‘vision board’ that acted “like my anchor to bring me back” during times when “I felt really stuck or unhopeful or demotivated”.

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Continuing, she explained that during moments of despair, looking at her vision board provided an important connection, a reminder of “this is what you want. These are your hopes and dreams and this is why you’re here and this is your purpose, so look at your family and look at the things that you have” (Mia, gym owner).

Many of the women also found joy and comfort in objects of sport and fitness (i.e., borrowed weights) (Figure 3). For example, Claire-Lee experienced pleasure moving in “multiple different ways.” She recalled how she “borrowed weights from the gym” and “just needed to throw around some kettlebells” (yoga studio owner). Not dissimilar from the Australian adults in Clark and Lupton’s (2021) study, many of the athletes in the group modified their home environment to create a space dedicated for their training. For example, Ruby, an elite football player, described her efforts to reimagine her childhood home:

I pretty much just had some bands and like a football and then we had some old monkey bars out the back from when we were younger and dad set them up and they were actually quite useful, I was able to do chin ups and stuff. But I got quite creative and tried to bring different things into the gym programs… you kind of just made do with what you had.

Many also mentioned reconnecting with the creative arts (i.e., painting, drawing, photography), and some found joy in cooking and eating together, both physically and digitally, with friends and family. For example, Claire-Lee enjoyed connecting

Figure 3. Images of objects of fitness borrowed and repurposed to keep active during lockdown.
with a range of projects and objects that all contributed to her wellbeing, “I reignited my passions and pleasures. I baked all the things and I got the paints back out and started painting again. And I haven’t done that in ages.” Such comments highlight more-than-human intra-actions with objects (i.e., a teacup, paintbrush, food) as important in the “geographies of happiness” and thus, wellbeing (pleasure, even) during pandemic (Figure 4). These new relations with objects were prompted by the radical disruption to their professional and personal lives, and the arrhythmia of their everyday sporting and fitness practices. The women’s connections with objects, and the varied ways that these intra-actions influenced their affective experiences in their sporting and everyday lives, signal the need for “more transient, transpersonal and contextual aspects of wellbeing” (Smith & Reid, 2017, p. 807) during and beyond pandemic times.

Re-Turning: Wellbeing as Unsettled and Entangled

Through their new understandings of wellbeing, cultivated through extended periods of social isolation and attempts at connecting through creative experiments entangling with human and nonhuman forces, many of our participants began to know their everyday lives differently. While many looked forward to the return to a ‘new normal’ after extended lockdown and periods of social restriction, for Barad (2014), re-turning is not “reflecting on or going back to a past that was”, but rather a “multiplicity of processes” across spacetimemattering (p. 168). For the women sport and fitness professionals, after weeks of turning the past-present-future “over and over again” (Barad, 2014, p. 168) while confined during lockdown, leaving the home ‘bubble’ inspired a process of re-turning that roused new noticings as they experienced their social lives and familiar movement practices, differently.

Figure 4. Images from participants of objects of affect and connection during COVID-19.
Many of the women in our study spoke of an affective overload and feelings of becoming socially ‘overwhelmed’ post-lockdown. As Aotearoa transitioned out of a strict lockdown, some of our participants found the haptic encounters of everyday life too much after a prolonged period of social isolation. For example, a boxing coach described her anxieties of ‘hugging’ upon returning to her work environment and the need to reestablish her own bodily boundaries:

I liked that COVID gave me the barrier that I needed so people no longer, you know, hugged and tried to hug and kiss you… I wanted that space (Teresa, boxing coach & facility manager).

As a Muslim woman, Teresa’s experience of lockdown and isolation allowed her to renegotiate her own sensory input, and the ongoing threat of COVID-19 meant that she could continue to try to maintain some sense of space from others when and as she needed. This ‘space’ from others was needed by many in our study. In the following comments from Claire-Lee, a yoga studio owner, we hear of the high levels of personal and collective exhaustion being experienced upon reentering social life:

By the time it got to about 3 or 4 o’clock in the afternoon I started to get overwhelmed by the everything-ness. Just the traffic, the driving, the face-to-face interaction. I mean I love people but just that whole realisation like, “whoa! Life is full on!”

Those evening [yoga] class numbers were definitely impacted. People were conditioned to “home is safe” and we were in winter. So when people got to the end of the day it was like, go home and re-hibernate.

Some described the emotional upheavals during this ‘re-turn’ to the ‘routines’ of social life as prompting new social anxieties and feelings of uncertainty, or what participants referred to as ‘social awkwardness’ during a ‘very sensitive’ and ‘wobbly’ time:

I was noticing the part in me around that shift that was really resistant to coming out of lockdown because it had become familiar. And there was a sort of social awkwardness, just not quite knowing how to be out in the world. Part of me just wanted to stay inside and be quiet. And going into the studio and being there felt like a lot (Aurora, yoga studio owner).

It felt really wobbly. It felt like we were learning to walk again, and be around one another… coming back into society, community, it was a very sensitive time. I remember thinking… we need to do things with care and not rush things (Winifred, yoga studio owner).

Some of the women worked to reimagine the movement classes and spaces that they offered their participants with the intention of better supporting both themselves and others in the renegotiation of boundaries that had materialized in the lockdown bubble:
It was interesting to see how quiet people felt when they first started coming back. And it was nice for them to see people and come into this kind of familiar space. But then [I would] do a practice where they could be silent [and] reconnect to their bodies. … I feel in many ways this COVID thing, on a more esoteric level, has really highlighted how impermanent everything is and that all we really have is the present moment…. So, [I have been] looking at our studio and thinking about what practices, what styles, what teachers can we bring in that can really support that for the community (Aurora, yoga studio owner).

For many of the women in our study, their haptic experiences of connection and touch during periods of social isolation prompted them to be attentive and ‘alive’ to the numerous possibilities of becoming, which is an “ethical call in itself” (Barad, 2007, p. 396). This sense of aliveness and being in the present—both through movement and stillness—was an ongoing relation that was inextricably part of the affective negotiation of the changing boundaries of bodily encounters that were constitutive of the pandemic as different spacetimematterings. As the women described, shifting experiences of connection and isolation could be both too little and too much.

The women in our study were being moved by the affective capacities and their entangled human and nonhuman relations in and through COVID-19 towards new wellbeing knowledge and practices. For some, these entangled relations prompted them to know, to feel, and to ‘do’ wellbeing differently. A number of the women spoke of the lockdown as offering the ‘gift’ of time, and how the disrupted spatiotemporalities of pandemic prompted new noticings in the world around them. For example, Teresa (boxing coach) re-turned throughout the interview to the importance of time:

My experience in lockdown actually improved my wellbeing because it gave me time to really be thinking about things that were important. Because it gave me time to breathe and to slow down and re-evaluate and reflect. And so, you know, I made some pretty big life changing decisions during lockdown.

I loved the quietness. I love that there was no traffic. I love seeing people out walking… I like that life slowed down and that there wasn’t this rushing and stressing. Before lockdown I was totally just rushing and stressing. … I really felt like it was a groundhog day… same crap different day, but lockdown just kind of stopped that.

With COVID-19 prompting new modes of connection and affective intensities through disruptive spacetimematterering and more-than-human movement practices, many of our participants engaged in processes of reimagining their lives—their becoming with the world—differently.

Some embarked on an array of small and large practices of change, including starting a new business or revisiting ways of working to prioritize more time with loved ones, a greater focus on health and/or in nature. For example, Jasmine, a fitness instructor, had committed to “financially freeing up more time to do things with my family… to spend more time with the kids”, and was planning to move to a rural location to
connect more with the natural environment: “We want to move somewhere different where we can do more outdoorsy stuff... just being in touch with nature more… because that is so important for your wellbeing” (Jasmine, fitness instructor). Others were less motivated by grand gestures (i.e., new job, move towns), instead acknowledging their own vulnerability and vitality, and community connections, as enough:

You need to be real about how you are feeling and a little bit vulnerable, not hide things or bottle things up or try to be everything to everybody. I learned the power of being vulnerable, of people and community, and the importance of connection and the importance of kindness and being okay with whatever you’ve got in your mind (Taylor, dance studio owner).

I think for me it’s been more of a reaffirmation that what I am doing is good enough, you know? Like I don’t need to be all of these things. We put so much pressure on ourselves… we spread ourselves too thin… trying to be a whole bunch of other people’s ideas of being the best person (Naomi, PT).

As these comments suggest, the women sport and fitness professionals were both “enlivened and unsettled” through their human and nonhuman relations during the pandemic (Fullagar et al., 2019, p. 13). These negotiations of risk, uncertainty and wellbeing also disrupted gendered modes of enacting subjectivity as women spoke about questioning the imperative to be ‘everything to everybody’, valuing vulnerability (as a strength rather than weakness) and challenging normative ideas about good womanhood that increased pressure. These new modes of relating emerged through new spacetimematterings, and the queering of haptic encounters with objects, technologies, environments and human bodies. Acknowledging this dynamic and nonlinear process shifts our thinking beyond humanist assumptions about wellbeing as arising from women’s individual agency, and towards a relational understanding of wellbeing as “an intra-active, entangled process through which agency is produced and performed in its embodied multiplicity” (Author et al., 2019, p. 4).

### Conclusion: The Ontological Politics of Wellbeing as Continually Becoming

This paper contributes to a growing body of feminist scholarship that has shown the possibilities of new materialist and posthuman approaches for rethinking health, wellbeing, embodiment and recovery beyond an individual experience or measurable state. Such an approach opens up new ways of doing and knowing how wellbeing comes to matter in the dynamics of everyday movement that shapes and is shaped by the more-than-human world that women are entangled with (Coffey, 2021; Fullagar et al., 2019; McLeod, 2017). Such theoretical approaches are particularly important in a COVID-19 society because they help to reposition women’s experiences beyond humanistic assumptions about wellbeing (individualistic, linear, medicalised and psychologized), and toward processes of becoming that
recognize how past, present and future experiences are reconfigured through the dynamics of more-than-human worlds.

Engaging both theoretically and methodologically with feminist materialisms, we explored the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on women’s understandings of health and wellbeing, as well as the creative strategies they are developing to renew a sense of hope, connection and touch amidst constantly evolving conditions of fear, risk, dis/continuity and uncertainty. Drawing upon interviews with 17 women working in the sport and fitness sector in Aotearoa, we came to rethink wellbeing during pandemic as relational, multiple, and entangled with affective, cultural, technological, and environmental forces. The novelty of this research is its focus on everyday embodied relational experiences of wellbeing that are both human and nonhuman, being lived and felt through the moving bodies of sport and fitness professionals during times of heightened stress, anxiety, uncertainty and disruption. Importantly, it was the radical disruption to the familiar practices, places and rhythms of their moving bodies that prompted more-than-human relations with the world. Moving differently, the women came to attune to the process of becoming through their entangled relations with objects, technologies, the environment and other humans (i.e., family, colleagues, clients). In this sense, their understandings of wellbeing expanded well beyond individual physical and mental health, to thinking about relational and collective wellbeing enacted through small acts of care for human and nonhuman others. In contrast to previous research that has largely focused on how sport and physical activity impacts subjective experiences of wellbeing, for the women in our study—whose pre-pandemic lives orientated around sport and fitness for work and pleasure—COVID-19 was a radical disruption to their familiar sporting and fitness rhythms and routines, thus prompting new noticings, and relations with human and nonhuman others. Put simply, the pandemic emphasized the importance of more-than-human ways of knowing that inform different notions and practices of wellbeing for these women, not necessarily through the doing of sport and fitness, but rather in negotiating the disruption to everyday movement practices.

This project provides an important and timely opportunity to understand how a global pandemic has impacted women’s wellbeing, their social, physical, mental and spiritual health, their connection to people and places, as well as human and nonhuman practices to rebuild connections and renew a sense of hope in the future. For the women in this study, when touching other human bodies became too risky, they turned to alternative forms of connection with objects (i.e., teapots, weights), technologies (i.e., Zoom, Whatsapp), and environments (i.e., forests, mountains, light, leaves). These nonhuman forces enabled agentic capacities in that they prompted new ways of noticing how they were living (and expected to live in terms of gendered and professional expectations) among the women. Objects, technologies and environments moved the women in highly affective and embodied ways to surface new understandings of wellbeing as relational experiences that are inclusive of more-than-human connections. Importantly, such processes of knowing wellbeing during pandemic are not linear or final. The women are engaged in the unfinished work of wellbeing, as multiplicity, but still within normative gendered demands and expectations. As mothers, partners, daughters, colleagues and
friends, they were expected to engage in heightened levels of gendered labor both in the home, the community, and the (digital and physical) workplace.

Within the gendered phenomenon of pandemic, the women sport and fitness professionals were considering re-connection as ongoing, with past-present-future interacting to shape their affective and ethical respondings. Many of the women in our study had little desire to re-turn to a ‘new normal.’ Instead, they were turning their past-present-future pandemic lives over and over. They continued to experiment with different modes of relating and living with human and nonhuman others and objects to reconceptualize wellbeing as an orientation—a direction, an ethos, respond-ability—bound up with dis-continuity and uncertain futures. What kinds of disruptions, new forms of feminist politics, may become possible in post-pandemic times where women have been prompted to rethink wellbeing beyond the (more and less) agentic individual, and towards more-than-human collectives? What are the potentialities and possibilities in these new ways of knowing wellbeing before-during-after pandemic? These are questions that surfaced from this study and inspire our continued research with women, and their changing relations with sport and fitness communities, during the pandemic.

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**Notes**

1. Aotearoa is the current Māori name for New Zealand. As the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand, Aotearoa is increasingly the preferred name for the country. In this paper, and from this point onwards, Aotearoa New Zealand will be referred to as Aotearoa.

2. A subsequent project building upon and extending this study includes a multicultural team, with Māori and Pasifika wāhine, as well as Muslim and migrant women, leading research on women’s cultural understandings of wellbeing in pandemic times in Aotearoa.

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