Gliding on the edge of the iron cage: performing rationality and artistry in the sport of figure skating

Zaoying Ji

Abstract

Prior studies on growing formal rationalization in evaluation systems have overwhelmingly shown that they operate as “iron cages,” which redefine standards of excellence around quantifiable metrics. However, existing literature may have overestimated the extent of isomorphism in individual or organizational practices under highly rationalized systems of assessment. The judging system in figure skating both rewards quantifiable technical merit and valorizes a circumscribed notion of artistry characterized by maturity and authenticity. It constitutes a combination of formal rationalization and culturally specific productions of artistry, offering participants a distinct set of options in constructing their competition routines. Drawing on exclusively obtained interview data with 40 Olympic-level figure skaters from the U.S. and 5 other countries, and following Alexander’s (Sociol Theory 22(4):527–573, 2004) social performance theory, I explore the contingent process by which figure skaters maneuver between conformity to the formally rationalized rulebook and the non-isomorphic yet culture-structured performances of artistry. In doing so, I identify three types of skaters based on their embodiment of artistry: the emerging phenoms, the athletic performers and the “authentic” artists. My article reveals that despite rationalizing tendencies of the scoring system, skaters strive for social performances of artistry based on shared cultural scripts of greatness in the sport.

Keywords Formal rationalization · Culture · Authenticity · Embodiment · Agency · Aesthetics

Zaoying Ji
zaoyingj@uci.edu

1 Sociology Department, University of California, Irvine, 3151 Social Science Plaza, Irvine, CA 92697, USA
Introduction

At the 2022 Beijing Olympic Winter Games, 17-year-old Russian figure skater Alexandra Trusova punched her fist at the conclusion of her free skate, barely able to hold her emotions in after what appeared to be a triumphant skate. Performing to the soundtrack of Disney movie *Cruella*, Trusova achieved an unprecedented technical feat by landing five quadruple jumps in one program, a monumental accomplishment only rivaled by the most skilled male skaters. Sitting in the *Kiss and Cry* awaiting her scores, Trusova seemed reassured and rejoiced, almost anticipating her crowning moment with three competitors remaining. However, in a somewhat surprising turn of events approximately 15 minutes later, Trusova’s training mate and reigning world champion Anna Shcherbakova overtook her in the final standings and eventually claimed the Olympic title. Despite only executing two quadruple jumps compared to Trusova’s five, Shcherbakova dazzled the audience with a delicate balancing act between complicated technical maneuvers and unmanufactured artistry. Her free skate featured varied facial expressions, complex transitional steps and balletic extensions, while Trusova’s performance placed an overwhelming emphasis on her jumping elements, which left her sporadic attempts of performing to the music feeling contrived and her routine disjointed. Shcherbakova, in an elegant plum dress, utilized multiple means of symbolic production as she seamlessly weaved her technical elements in and out of her choreography. Not only did she transition effortlessly between one jump and the next, but she also embodied a versatile artist within a four-minute span: she was melancholy skating to *Ruska* by Apocalyptica, slightly flirtatious as the music transitioned to *The Master and Margarita*. Finally, as the program culminated in Mozart’s *Lacrimosa*, she displayed a level of solemnity and gravitas uncharacteristic of her tender age of 17. As the scores for Shcherbakova were posted, Trusova, having championed a movement to push the sport forward solely on technical grounds and broken various Guinness World Records in the process, was inconsolable. Her strategy of stacking up points from higher levels of technical difficulty and displaying remarkable athleticism at the expense of artistry has proven less than fruitful.

The epic battle between Shcherbakova and Trusova sheds light on the different ways in which figure skaters draw on, mediate and perform narratives of rationality and artistry under the current judging system in figure skating. Known as the International Judging System (IJS), it was adopted by the International Skating Union (ISU) following the judging scandal at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games in order to minimize geopolitical biases and introduce greater transparency to the evaluation process. During the pairs skating competition at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City, Russia’s Elena Berezhnaya/Anton Sikharulidze and Canada’s Jamie Salé/David Pelletier both produced gold-medal worthy performances. The 9-person judging panel, split in half by the former Communist bloc (Russia, China, Poland, Ukraine) and the Western liberal bloc (U.S., Canada, Germany, Japan), reached a stalemate with the French judge holding the swing vote. The French judge ruled in support of the Russian pair in exchange for favors.
from a Russian judge for a French couple in the ice dance competition. When such allegations surfaced, the ISU and the International Olympic Committee ultimately invalidated the French vote in the pairs competition and awarded both the Russian and the Canadian pairs a gold medal, thereby producing the sport’s only dual Olympic champions to date. The 6.0 system used at the 2002 Olympic Games, under which judges used ordinal rankings and easily conspired with one another based on geopolitical interests, came under microscopic scrutiny after the disreputable incident. After months of discussions, the ISU came up with an alternative judging system, the International Judging System, which relies on its quantitative metrics to undermine collusion amongst judges. Unlike the previous scoring system that capped the perfect score at 6.0, the IJS quantifies both technical merit and artistic impression with much greater precision. On the technical side, it designates a base value to each trick and an execution score between −3 and +3 (later changed to −5 to +5). On the artistic side, the judges evaluate skaters based on five categories (Skating Skills, Transitions, Performance, Composition and Interpretation of the Music) on a scale from 0.25 to 10. To counteract judges’ predilection to score their compatriots favorably and deflate the scores of their chief competitors, the IJS drops the highest and lowest scores received by each skater among a panel of 9 judges. Competitors’ total scores, accurate up to two decimal places, also make it much less likely for athletes to tie in the final standings.

Figure skating’s International Judging System is emblematic of our increasing reliance on formally rational means to achieve unquantifiable and ineffable ends in the modern world. In higher education, for example, institutional prestige and quality of instruction have been largely gauged by the proliferation of college rankings published each year (Espeland and Sauder 2016). Similarly, UNESCO has relied heavily on rationalized metrics to demonstrate the transnational relevance of cultural heritage (DeSoucey et al. 2019). In the context of skating, concerns for transparency and fairness have led to the exclusive use of numbers to present seemingly disinterested evidence of competence and relative achievement: not only has the new judging system established a clear pecking order among technical elements by their levels of difficulty and quality of execution, it has also assigned numeric values to skaters’ artistic expressions.

However, in a sport that valorizes something as intangible and ineffable as artistry, how do skaters as embodied performers make sense of the drive to submit their performances to formally rationalized evaluations and enact shared cultural notions of greatness in figure skating, particularly the social meaning of artistry? To answer this question, I gained exclusive access to some of the most acclaimed athletes in the sport and conducted 40 semi-structured interviews on skaters’ lived experiences navigating growing rationalization in the judging system and conceiving of achieving authentic social performances on the ice. Contrary to institutional theorists’ prediction of tight coupling and isomorphic practices, I observe a range of skaters’ responses as they work around the constraints imposed by the judging system, enact shared cultural beliefs about the social meaning of excellence in the sport and attempt to touch the audience at both a cognitive level and an emotional level. I argue that the manner in which athletes adopt cultural scripts from the broader figure
skating community and strive to create psychological identification with the judges is an ongoing contingent process mediated by individual agency. While neoinstitutionalism has focused exclusively on instrumental reasons in terms of survival and legitimacy in organizational fields, it has overlooked non-instrumental ones (Larsen 2016), in this case, figure skaters’ passion for and belief in their craft. Excellence in the sport of figure skating, while subject to formally rationalized metrics of evaluation, has not been stripped of cultural meanings or of performance artistry. Cultural sociologists view rationality itself not as an empirical fact but as a cultural construct bound by actors’ sense-making capacities (Broch 2020). Formal rationalization has rarely overtaken any organizational field, nor has it eliminated the space for agentic actors to actively interpret and enact cultural pragmatics (Alexander 2004).

According to Alexander (2004), audiences in modern society are fragmented, as they hold divergent values and may experience different degrees of psychological identification with any given performance. In figure skating, the social meaning of excellence has long been contested, as evidenced by the epic battle between Russian sensations Trusova and Shcherbakova. For some, the most glorious and exciting moments of the sport stem from extraordinary athletic feats, especially when accomplished by young skaters.

For many others, however, the presentation of an artistic persona, as skaters put out social performances that publicly convey recognizable embodiment of artistry, has remained a pillar in defining standards of excellence in the sport, as judges and audiences alike respond emotionally to the "goosebump factor" and "bigger than life charisma" (McCormick 2015, p. 171) that skaters cultivate through their performances. Artistry takes on a contextualized meaning of authenticity and conveys distinct social expectations of what a figure skater should embody on the ice. Importantly, authenticity in artistic expression is not so much a default state as it is the culmination of elaborate training and a result of a social performance. It represents a state of mastery that judges have incorporated into the evaluation process and tokenized by the presentation component (i.e. artistic) scores that skaters receive. In this paper, I explore the various ways in which elite figure skaters interpret the social meaning of excellence in the sport and how they describe their efforts to create social performances for the judges and the audience.

**From ritual to record: growing formal rationalization of sports evaluations**

The drastic changes that have taken place in the sport of figure skating need to be understood within the broader context of growing formal rationality and escalating demands for accountability, transparency and legitimacy in sports and beyond. Scholars have used terms such as “audit society” (Power 1997) and “audit culture” (Strathern 2000) to describe increasing pressure to monitor individual and organizational performances. Quantitative measures, which appear to be stripped of emotions and personal biases, are often considered the most reliable form of evidence for performance and competency (Espeland and Sauder 2016). Consequently, in recent decades, we have seen the rise of formally rationalized evaluation regimes in many
industries, such as rankings in higher education, ratings for hospitals and international indices for wellbeing and affluence. Rising neoliberal ideologies and their market-based principles have reinforced the emphasis on measurements (Bromley and Powell 2012).

In modern sports, Allen Guttman (2004) has famously observed a movement from “ritual” to “record,” where principles of equality and fairness have contributed to the rationalization of almost all athletic activities. Modern sports, from America’s national games of football and baseball to artistic ones like gymnastics and figure skating are rationalized in “Max Weber’s sense of Zweckrationalitaet, i.e., there is a logical relationship between means and ends” (Guttman 2004, p. 40). Competitors enter local, national or international contests under the assumption that they will be rule-governed events and judged transparently and rationally, often with quantitative metrics (McCormick 2015). The rules are ever-changing cultural artifacts instead of divine instructions, but they do inform players’ training regimens and competition strategies. The drive to quantification and rationalization has also led to a newfound fascination with quantitative records, which, at a high level of abstraction, make the most impressive performances today comparable to those in the past. These records and comparisons fascinate sports followers and garner considerable attention in mass media. When it comes to aesthetic-based sports, quantification creates a perpetual quest for perfection. People to this day marvel at the first perfect ten in gymnastics achieved by Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci, with athletes continuing to chase that level of perfection even after the scoring system has been adapted (Guttman 2004).

The drive to submit all spheres of public life to the scrutiny of quantifiable metrics has fundamentally shifted how institutions operate. Organizations have felt growing pressure to conform to the external environment and have altered the way they operate on a daily basis. They have redistributed attention, strategy and efforts, focusing specifically on areas explicitly assessed by these rationalizing regimes (Bromley and Powell 2012). Unfortunately, efforts to align one’s practices based on quantifiable standards often come with unexpected, negative consequences. In K-12 public education, for example, middle school teachers in Atlanta who faced sanctions due to poor test results admitted to routinely changing their students’ answers on tests that determine if their school is meeting federal standards outlined by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative (Espeland and Sauder 2016). NCLB relied on formally rational methods of comparing standardized test scores to achieve its goal of offering better and fairer education. Likewise, in classical music competitions judged by numeric scores, efforts to ensure objectivity and fairness work against the musical way of being and “interferes with the ritual dynamics of transcendent aesthetic experience” (McCormick 2015, pp. 6–7). Musicians are acutely aware that the formally rationalized criteria used to judge their performances undermine their musical values, but they feel compelled to prioritize technical accuracy in order to maximize their chances at becoming a laureate.

How do elite figure skaters navigate the submission of their performances to formally rationalized evaluations, which in turn shapes their training regimens, competition routines and standings? I draw on insights from Jeffrey Alexander (2004)’s
social performance theory to understand athletes’ divergent attempts to create psychological identification with the judges and the audience.

**Sports as social performances**

While institutionalists’ conceptualization of the iron cage highlights how culture constrains and homogenizes action, cultural sociologists (Alexander 2004; Broch 2020; Larsen 2016) posit that culture possesses relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions and that it is as consequential as material or instrumental forces (Alexander and Smith 2004). Actions are never simply coerced but invariably embedded in shared cultural meanings, which provide for both routine and creativity, “allowing for the reproduction and transformation of structure” (Alexander and Smith 2004). Contrary to the iron cage perspective that paints individuals as ideological dopes, cultural sociologists perceive actors as engaging in cultural meaning-making processes that shape their behaviors in a contingent manner. While actors do think strategically about gaining legitimacy in their respective fields and being perceived as relevant and excellent in what they do, what the neoinstitutional perspective has totally missed is that these actors also have a genuine passion for and belief in what they do that stretches beyond the need for survival (Larsen 2016). A successful performance of legitimacy relies upon both instrumental and non-instrumental reasons, especially in social contexts that value authenticity (Alexander 2004).

In this article, I draw on Alexander (2004) to investigate how elite figure skaters enact different cultural meaning systems and present their “authentic” artistic selves while maneuvering technicalities imposed by the quantitative metrics in the judging system. Alexander’s theory of social performance is useful for making sense of elite figure skating because it illustrates how the sport is not a purely mechanical behavior but rather one that valorizes culturally distinct notions of artistry characterized by maturity and authenticity. It brings culture together with situational pragmatics and outlines an agentic process by which individuals or groups put culture narratives, myths and codes into action. It is an iconic process where cultural meaning intersects with materiality and corporal acts (Broch 2020). Actors, in this case competitive figure skaters, project cultural meanings and enact patterned representations that are encoded in their cultural scripts, which are systems of collective representation that invoke cognitive resonance with the audience (McCormick 2015). During our interviews, skaters reveal how the figure skating community lacks consensus when it comes to cultural scripts on the competition circuit. Athletes, coaches, judges and the audience vary in how they interpret standards of excellence in the sport, particularly when it comes to the embodiment of artistry on the ice. Like in many other sports, collective representations in figure skating are mediated by loosely coupled institutionalized logics (Broch 2020). Given the lack of a set script, we observe a range of plausible interpretations, which are in turn embodied through diverging training regimens in the “back stage” (Goffman 1959) as well as varied presentation of one’s self on the front stage, where skaters glide around the edges of the iron cage and present their artistic, musical and gendered selves.
Gliding on the edge of the iron cage: performing rationality…

According to Alexander (2004, p. 529), the key to a successful cultural performance lies in authenticity through cultural pragmatics, or the “social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation.” The primary task for actors is not to embody social meanings that they personally subscribe to. Rather, it is to signal what they wish to have others believe and to utilize actions and gestures to convince the audience of the authenticity of their performances. Alexander argues that as societies become more complex and fragmented, elements of social performance become increasingly de-fused. Therefore, actors are tasked with re-fusing multiple multiple codes, myth and narratives back together into an indivisible whole and maintaining a seamless flow throughout their performances. These means of symbolic production also “serve as iconic representations to help them dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent” (Alexander 2004, p. 532). They range from performers’ outfits to many other “standardized expressive equipment” that is “intentionally or unwittingly employed” (Goffman 1959, pp. 22–51). In figure skating, athletes’ costumes, hairstyles, makeup and accessories play an instrumental role in materializing skaters’ cultural narratives and artistic visions. Competition outfits are designed to flatter skaters’ bodies and align them with valorized aesthetics in the sport: slender, balletic long lines for female skaters and toned muscular build for male skaters. Makeup, hairstyles and jewelries help enhance the narratives and emotions but are not overly elaborate so as to appear staged. The ultimate goal of figure skaters transcends technical mastery. It establishes an emotional connection and “create[s] the conditions for projecting cultural meaning from performance to audience” via psychological identification (Alexander 2004, p. 547). When putting together elaborate choreography for their competition routines, figure skaters engage in emotion management and dramaturgy through the practice of mis-en-scèn: they put culture “into the scene” (Broch 2020) through communicative gestures beyond the execution of technical elements. They painstakingly choose the styles of music that they are skating to and diligently control the way they emote throughout their performances, hoping to present an artistic persona that is believable to the audience. In competition, as figure skaters take center ice, hit their starting pose and wait for the music to start playing, they participate in the ritual of elite organized sport, where each contestant is allotted approximately 7 minutes (short and long programs combined) to showcase their craft under the spotlight, with a panel of 9 judges sitting in the front row, carefully examining each minute detail of one’s performance within the confines of the scoring system while the audience sits in the bleachers, applauding, waving flags and banners in support of their favorite athletes.

In trying to strike a balance between being in control and overtaken by the plausible limits of the iron cage of organized play, actors signal mastery by marshaling out an appearance of naturalness and effortlessly embodying authentic performers without shedding light on the constructed nature of performance. That said, authenticity is not so much a default state as it is achieved through a highly elaborate and rehearsed process. Building a reputation as an authentic performer requires social, cultural and economic capital to access various means of symbolic production, ranging from custom-made skates to designer costumes and elaborate makeup. The unequal distribution of social power (Alexander 2004) among national governing bodies
and training sites also means that some athletes are more able to rely on the support of their federations than others for guidance and feedback. *U.S. Figure Skating* and other resourceful nations invite skaters on their national team to an annual training camp to assess the materials that skaters have come up with for the upcoming competition season and send expert judges to their training bases throughout the season to monitor them and give them feedback. It is not uncommon for skaters to be advised to change their programs in the middle of a competition season if officials deemed that these routines deviate from the desirable forms of artistic expressions in the sport. Such was the case for one Team USA skater I interviewed, who debuted their short program during the off season in front of a panel of international judges. “For a lack of a better word, they tore that program apart,” the skater (skater 3) recalled. The judges vetoed that program on the ground that it failed to build up to that exciting Olympic moment and felt lukewarm.

Moreover, status hierarchies in the sport of figure skating and society at large endow nearly monopolistic power in the judging panel, who assigns symbolic values to skaters’ display of naturalness and artistry. Intersecting cultural meanings with materiality and corporal acts (Broch 2020), judges and officials subject athletes to a regulated social order in the sport and construct a range of options when it comes to presenting artistry and an image of a docile body (Foucault 1995) that has been improved and transformed through prolonged rigorous training. They valorize gendered and heteronormative aesthetics and bodily practices that are commonly associated with upper-class, European (American) bodily practices, drawing inspiration from classical ballet and musical accompaniment (Kestnbaum 2003).

Following Alexander (2004)’s social performance theory, I investigate how cultural codes inform and shape athletes’ performances in general and their embodiment of artistry specifically. I argue that elite figure skaters’ performances are balancing acts between conformity to the iron cage of rules and the non-isomorphic yet culturally structured cultivation of authentic performances. In the next section, I show how athletes’ diverse approaches to competitive figure skating are contingent on different cultural narratives that they subscribe to regarding being an artist on the ice. Based on the ways in which they navigate and negotiate within or on the edges of the iron-cage judging system, I developed a three-way typology of elite skaters, namely the emerging phenoms, the athletic performers and the “authentic” artists.

**Data and method**

To examine how elite figure skaters as embodied performers enact shared cultural notions of greatness in the face of growing rationalization in the scoring system, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with current elite figure skaters who bear the consequences of judgments made under the IJS, which dictate their standings and reputation in the sport. In particular, I highlight how athletes’ cultural understanding of formally rationalized stipulations in the rulebook shapes the ways they construct their competition routines. By focusing on the embodiment of culture in actual practices, my interviews illuminate how athletes’ actions are both enabled and constrained by background representations.
in the skating community (Alexander and Smith 2004; Sewell 1992). In focusing on one case, I have sacrificed breadth for depth, but the merit of in-depth, interview-based projects lies in their unique ability to account for narratives that large-scale quantitative research fails to capture. Other researchers who study how rules, numbers and formally rationalized systems affect behaviors and outcomes have used similar types of data and methodological tools (e.g. Lom 2016; Espeland and Sauder 2007; Christin 2018).

As a former competitive skater and one of the select few individuals who are granted media credentials at major international figure skating competitions, I gained exclusive access to the most accomplished athletes who are currently active in the sport. From October, 2020 to January, 2022, I collected interview data at all international events held on U.S. soil as well as two U.S. Figure Skating Championships. I spoke to athletes in the mixed zone and press conferences immediately following their competitions. The bulk of my interview data, however, has come from in-depth interviews, each ranging from 30 minutes to an hour, that I conducted the day after the conclusion of each competition. During the 2020/2021 season, per COVID-19 protocols, all of my interviews took place either on Zoom or over the phone. Beginning in July, 2021, I was able to conduct interviews on site and broaden my sample beyond Team USA skaters as travel restrictions eased.

In total, I conducted 40 one-on-one, in-depth interviews with figure skaters from the U.S. and 5 other countries. My sample of skaters includes both novice athletes who recently became age-eligible at the Olympic level and veteran skaters holding National and/or World Championships titles and medals. Respondents are roughly evenly distributed among the four subfields of figure skating, namely men and women singles, pair skating and ice dance. Given the small number of athletes who are able to make the national team in figure skating (for reference, Team USA has 55 skaters across four disciplines this season on its Olympic-level roster), my sample is representative of elite figure skaters in the U.S. while also attending to international perspectives. All interviewees gave me permission to record our conversations and I have transcribed them. National governing bodies of the sport, who give permission for accredited journalists to conduct exclusive interviews following each event, have fulfilled all my interview requests, so I have a response rate of 100%. That said, with respect to limited capacity in processing interview requests, I did not put in an excessive number at any given competition. Instead, I accumulated a cross-national sample of elite athletes over time.

Data analysis involves thematic coding and content analysis of interview transcripts. Revolving my research questions, I focused on skaters’ lived experience of striving for psychological identification with the judges and the audience based on shared cultural beliefs of excellence in the sport. I also made notes around each discussion that invokes the 6.0 system or the IJS as well as the way that elite skaters balance their time between technique and artistry in training to zoom in on the impact of the judging system on skaters’ program construction.
The iron-cage judging system in the sport of figure skating

The growing formal rationalization in figure skating’s judging system has restructured the institutional environment that gives top-level skaters a circumscribed set of options when it comes to constructing their competition routines and crafting their day-to-day training regimens. During our interviews, most skaters described the constant tug of war that occurs between the two major components of their performance: on one hand, skaters perform up to a dozen technical elements in a competition program, all of which are closely scrutinized by the judging panel who numerically assesses their levels of difficulty and quality of execution. On the other hand, the artistic side of the sport calls for musicality, character portrayal and emotional execution. However, the technical and artistic aspects of their skating frequently work against one another. Commitments to the choreography and transitional steps, even something as minuscule as a hand gesture and head movement can easily throw off a jump completely. Therefore, striving to put together a fused social performance is a tremendously challenging feat.

In addition, as the new judging system spells out the exact features required and their respective numeric values, technical elements have become much more time-consuming than they were before, which leave skaters with limited opportunities to showcase their artistry. My interview data explores the ways in which skaters reconcile the exacting technical requirements imposed by the scoring system with their artistic visions. A pair skater (skater 2) shared that in their four-minute long program that consisted of 11 elements, just a spin alone can take up to 20 seconds. Sometimes, they go to extra lengths to ensure that they do not lose points due to human errors in operating this incredibly elaborate scoring machine: “you want to hold your death spiral for an additional half rev just in case the technical panel blinked and missed half a rev (laugh).” The time-consuming nature of technical elements under IJS has undermined their ability to dedicate considerable time and effort to performance and interpretation.

Stacy Lom (2016), who studies the effect of IJS on the sport of figure skating, contends that the increasingly quantified nature of the judging system has led to a disproportionate emphasis on technical merit and a devaluation of artistry, which is harder to be accounted for through formally rationalized means. Skaters play the “numbers game” and produce performances that are highly homogeneous to their competitors’. However, I find that skaters’ responses to the judging system have been far from unanimous: while some treat each aspect of their performance, technical or artistic, as highly intentional athletic endeavors, others strive to preserve their artistry from being mastered by constraints imposed by the numeric stipulations of the rulebook. As skaters navigate their institutional environment governed by the IJS, they invoke shared cultural codes regarding embodiment of artistry and standards of excellence in the sport, which in turn shape the way they present themselves in competition. A highly circumscribed notion of artistry that valorizes maturity and authenticity creates an additional axis of stratification within a highly rationalized system. Skaters who intend to present themselves as authentic artists work towards enacting what cultural sociologists understand to
be “cultural pragmatics”: they dedicate considerable efforts to persuasively integrate various elements of their routines, hoping to present them as a fused, convincing whole.

**The emerging phenoms**

According to Goffman (1959), actors intentionally or unwittingly employ “expressive equipment,” hoping to present to the audience an idealized version of themselves aligned with distinct cultural expectations. In recent years, mass media have hyped up novice skaters who upset their more experienced counterparts by executing extraordinarily complex technical elements. For example, when 14-year-old American phenom Alysa Liu defended her U.S. National title in a stacked field of seasoned competitors, major media outlets like NBC Sports (2020) applauded her for being one of the only female skaters to have ever landed the historically difficult Triple Axel, completing 3.5 revolutions in the air, but made no remarks on her artistry. Indeed, in the elite figure skating world, young skaters who burst onto the scene are usually expected to be some of the most technically advanced. However, when it comes to the artistic aspects of their skating, they are often perceived as lacking maturity and life experience to authenticate the complex emotions that they hope to convey. Therefore, just like novice rock climbers (Beames and Pike 2008) who deliberately try to misrepresent their abilities through overly elaborate, pro-level clothing, newcomers to the senior level often wear custom-made outfits bedazzled with rhinestones and makeup geared for upscale elegance to make them appear older (Rand 2012). Some even go so far as to choose pieces of music portraying themes and life experiences beyond their age in a primitive attempt to signal maturity and sophistication in style and expressions.

In spite of their surface-level efforts to embody the mature, artistic skater, the emerging phenoms in the sport are limited by a lower ceiling on artistry given their small body of work at the senior level. Judges routinely reward veteran skaters who present themselves as mature, sophisticated performers and penalize younger skaters for their contrived and disingenuous attempts at enacting artistry. Therefore, in alignment with the cultural terms of reference in the sport, the novice skaters in my study unanimously claimed that when they are perceived as newcomers to the senior scene, they strive to create exhilarating moments on competition ice by attempting spectacular technical elements, such as jumps with more than three revolutions or hyper-extended posture on spins. A skater in my study who made the Olympic team in their first senior season (skater 4) recalled that they had to upgrade their technical arsenal in order to boost their chances. “Because it was my first year senior, my [artistic] components wouldn’t just magically go up,” they explained, “I knew that I needed those quadruple jumps so that I could undeniably raise my scores to where I could qualify for the Olympic team.” And they did make it to the Olympic Games that year.

However, even though spectacular technical elements give newcomers fleeting moments of glory, as judges and audiences alike are amazed by their mind-blowing jumping abilities, it only goes so far in the sport. Prioritizing the easily quantifiable
elements may have become a desirable approach in other fields, but in a sport like figure skating that valorizes something as ineffable as artistry, immense technical prowess will not be sufficient to fully capture the essence of its excellence. Therefore, primarily highlighting technical merit is only common practice amongst newcomers to the scene. Seasoned competitors who strive to claim top accolades acknowledge that the only viable way to the pinnacle of their sport is to excel both technically and artistically. That said, they find different ways to enact artistry within the constraints of their highly restrictive institutional environment.

The athletic performers

In the sport of figure skating, one’s perceived ability to enact authentic artistry depends heavily upon the most fundamental means of symbolic production an actor can access—their body. For female skaters in particular, perceptions of authenticity and artistry are profoundly governed by culturally distinct standards of femininity that revolve around the “artistic” and “athletic” dichotomy, which frequently function as codes akin to butch and femme (Rand 2012). “Athletic” skaters, especially when described in opposition to “artistic” skaters, are often known for technical prowess that are unattainable for most female skaters. Tonya Harding and Midori Ito, two renowned “athletic” skaters of the past generation, are not perceived artistic because of their mastery of the once elusive jump: the triple Axel, an accomplishment that was gendered masculine at the time for its rarity in women’s skating. “Athletic” also implies that such technical feats are achieved at the expense of artistry.

Today, as more female skaters have entered the previously male-exclusive territories of triple Axels and quadruple jumps, gender coding in the sport becomes increasingly nuanced. It is not just about whether women singles competitors can accomplish such remarkable technical feats, as triple Axels and quadruple jumps are usually required to succeed at the highest level of the sport. Instead, it is how one accomplishes these “ultra-C” elements that dictates the way they are gender coded. On the one hand, if a female skater is able to complete four revolutions in the air using the “spinny” technique, which requires the athlete to be extraordinarily slim so as to speed up rotations, they are usually still coded as “female” for their delicate, ballerina-like style of movement. On the other hand, when female skaters acquire the necessary air time to rotate four times through the height and distance of their jumps as well as speed and power, just like their predecessors Harding and Ito had done, they are usually perceived as “athletic.” Their physical stature tends to be more muscular and bulkier, which also contributes to their perceived masculinity.

As such, for skaters in my study who are perceived as athletic and lacking femininity, curating an artistic persona on the ice, especially one that aligns with the valorized aesthetics in the sport, has been an ongoing struggle. Being viewed as lacking the culturally valorized physical attributes and lyrical styles of performance, they adopt a heavily intentional approach to crafting their competition programs. Instead of viewing artistry as an outlet of self-expression, they treat it as athletic endeavors and work closely with the judging system to carefully check off each box on the rubric. For example, when a single skater (skater 5) holds their leg up (the
skating term for it is a “spiral sequence”) to highlight their flexibility and strength in between their jumps, they calculate in their head how the transitional move would elevate their scores. “When I’m doing the spiral,” they explained, “in my head I’m thinking interpretation and transitions [marks] may go up, especially if it’s put later on in the program and it’s that exciting moment.” Skaters who view artistic expression as athletic labor consider it to be a highly strenuous activity that needs to be balanced against the execution of technical elements. A pair skater in my study carefully anticipates the energy required to perform their choreography and match the intensity of the music at the end of their long program. To these athletes, artistic expressions are not categorically different from technical elements. They are merely another task assigned by the judging system and may be attained through predominantly athletic endeavors.

The “Authentic” artists

Although some skaters in my study treat the artistic elements of their skating as highly intentional and closely align the construction of their programs with the highly quantified judging system, others approach their choreographic process to showcase artistry in a more seemingly natural and unmanufactured manner. Granted, the artistic persona in figure skating is not innate. Rather, it is a combination of desirable physical attributes and years of practice and curation. One needs to understand the distinct cultural expectations in the world of figure skating and go through a prolonged apprenticeship period in order to master and naturalize their embodiments of such desired qualities. A veteran on Team USA (skater 7) shared that skaters have to navigate various “hidden curricula” in the sport when it comes to how artistry is assessed, as there could be discrepancies in preferences of music choice and choreographic packaging between international and domestic judges. In recent years, while the widely acclaimed French Olympic champions Gabriella Papadakis/Guillaume Cizeron have popularized a minimalist style accompanied by modern piano pieces on the international competition scene, American judges continue to reward crowd-pleasing programs set to Broadway and other Americana music that is more accessible to the audience at U.S. National Championships. Therefore, skaters learn to weigh their battles against one another and come up with competition routines that are eclectic enough to cater towards both sets of judges and crowds.

Skaters who strive to become “authentic” artists engage in cultural pragmatics (Alexander 2004), trying to make their social performance appear seamless and convincing as a whole. They convey their genuine passion for the performance aspect of the sport and prioritize the artistic aspect of their skating, even if it potentially jeopardizes the execution of their technical elements. One single skater (skater 6) in my study, for example, views creating a skating routine as analogous to painting a picture with a brush. Instead of thinking how individual movements fulfill the IJS requirements, they draw the picture as one piece of art. “Each step, each jump and weaving in and out is like a brush stroke,” the skater said. “At the end of the program you have this painting. That’s how I see it. It’s very holistic. You can’t see the whole picture until it’s done and appreciate it as a whole.”
They acknowledge that their artistic vision can potentially undermine the consistency of their jumps, but they have refused to let their integrity falter when it comes to artistry, which is what made them fall in love with skating in the first place. “I try my best to push the artistic side and make the transitions as difficult as possible,” the skater claimed. “It obviously makes the elements harder but I definitely want to push that way because that’s what drew me in when I was 5 years old and my love for performing and for the artistic side of the sport has only grown over the years. I don’t want to hold back artistically for the technical.”

Similarly, a pairs team (skaters 7 and 8) who values musicality places an incredibly tricky choreographic pattern right before their most intricate lift on the crescendo of the music. While their choreographic pattern will unlikely make a significant contribution to their overall score, it drastically enhances their musicality and quality of their artistic expressions. They specifically hope to counteract the homogenizing nature of the IJS and avoid the tendency to “go from one [technical] element to another” in their competition programs merely to satisfy the rigid and rationalized requirements laid out by the judging system.

Skaters hoping to be perceived as authentic artists engage in elaborate training regimens focused on the way they present their artistic personas in front of the judges and the audience. When asked about how they cultivate a sense of naturalness when it comes to projecting artistry on the ice, skater 6 rejected the idea of “innate talent” and pointed to an elaborate, prolonged rehearsal process that includes a myriad of dance practices as a supplement to their skating training. As they (skater 6) put it:

Did artistry come naturally to me? No, Naturally I love performing but to be honest, throughout the years, I have taken so many dance classes, from ballet to modern to hip hop. I have worked really hard with my choreographers each year to cultivate a chosen artistic genre. Every single year I learn a different type of style and a different range of performances, whether it’s Latin, classical, Broadway, jazz and it’s always changing and growing my repertoire.

In the face of increasingly complex technical requirements mandated by the judging system, skaters acknowledge the inevitable tradeoff involved in the process of cultivating an authentic artistic persona on the ice. They recognize that their artistic vision can potentially undermine the consistency of their jumps, as even a tiny gesture intended to enhance their artistic vision could completely throw their balance off and interfere with their ability to execute technical elements. However, because of their genuine passion for the artistic aspects of the sport, they have non-instrumental reasons (Larsen 2016) for not watering down their choreography for the sake of technicality.

In trying to master transitional steps that could enhance the seamlessness of their routines, figure skaters who strive to enact authentic artistry dedicate a considerable amount of time in their daily training regimens to refine their toolkits used to fuse elements of their performances back together. One such important tool is skating skills, which refer to an athlete’s ability to execute complicated transitional steps that integrate their technical elements seamlessly and with ample flow. Skaters who valorize and actively maintain the image of authentic artistry through their
performances hone their skating skills daily. A singles skater (skater 9) told me that their training group, one of the most prominent in their country, begins each morning with a skating skills class, which helps athletes learn to control their edges with the utmost precision and convey their artistic visions with clear intentions through each movement. They also frequently access their choreographers throughout the season and dedicate entire training sessions to polishing nuanced in their choreographies only.

Furthermore, skaters who strive to become “authentic” artists constantly work on their ability to emote, hoping to forge psychological identification with the audience (Alexander 2004). To hone their ability to resonate with the audience at an emotional level and “make them feel something when [we] perform,” multiple skaters (e.g. skaters 3, 6–9) in my study make use of the mirrors in ballet studios to practice engaging their facial expressions during their performances in accordance with their music, characters and choreography. A national champion single skater (skater 9) explained that efforts to naturalize these emotions in competition is a time-consuming one, but “if you do something like that [engaging with your emotions and sharing a story] in your practice and you’re always cognizant of it, when you go and compete, it becomes little bit easier to share.”

That said, processes of enacting authentic artistry are much smoother for those who possess the physical attributes and personality traits that are coded as artistic in figure skating. The figure skating world is an archetypical field where background representations intersect with materiality and corporal acts (Broch 2020). Judges and officials in the sport actively shape the notion of artistry and its proper forms of embodiment on the ice. While it is true that athletes are encouraged to project their authentic selves on the ice, specific cultural expectations in the sport dictate that some athletes’ artistic personas are given more currency than others’. Figure skating, like other aesthetics-based sports and art forms, are built upon an elitist culture that espouses a distinct, Eurocentric vision: when it comes to female skaters, for instance, long, toned lines are coded as artistic whereas stockier bodies are coded as athletic and powerful, which is a less desirable look on the ice. Many Olympic skaters that I spoke to predict that the refined ballerina look will continue to be the enduring image of the sport for years to come. In pairs and ice dance, while teams can portray a wide range of relationships with one another, heterosexual, romantic narratives have been disproportionately rewarded. “I do think our chemistry plays to our advantage when it comes to our interpretation,” a pair skater (skater 3) confessed. “We are the classic cliche of pair teams who are a couple off the ice. Our program is about a girl who is a free spirit and this man falls in love with her and vice versa.” Pair skaters who can cultivate romantic chemistry between one another are often perceived as more artistic, whereas sibling teams have been known to be held down in presentation component scores for their inability to do so.

Thus, cultivating an authentic artistry persona is a concerted effort that centers around the skater’s balancing act between the iron cage of technicality and the social performance of authentic artistry. It hinges upon different cultural narratives that skaters subscribe to regarding being an artist on the ice as well as judges’ perceptions of artistry and gender coding dynamics in the sport. One skater (skater 7) in my study illustrated such contingent processes of cultivating authenticity and
performing artistry as follows: “[artistry] can be enhanced through training as one gets older, but I haven’t witnessed too many skaters have a rebirth of their ability to interpret. I’ve seen some get better or learn how to move in a more pleasing way to the eye, but if they don’t have [the desired physical attributes] from the start, they will likely shine less than the skater who breathes artistry.” The culturally specific perception of artistry based on one’s physicality and styles of performance valorizes some skaters’ presentation of an artistic persona while diminishing others’. That said, skaters who strive for authenticity and artistic integrity exert considerable agency in their training regimens and engage in a prolonged rehearsal process to hone various means of symbolic production that are employed to invoke cultural scripts that signify artistry and resonate with the audience.

Discussion and conclusion

This article contributes broadly to a growing body of literature that examines the consequences of formally rationalized instruments of evaluation (Espeland and Sauder 2016; Christin 2018; Rivera and Tilcsik 2019). Similar to Lisa McCormick (2015)’s research on classical musicians, who compromise their musical values to prioritize technical accuracy in response to the formally rationalized criteria in competition, I find that there is tension between striving for technical prowess and artistic expressions in the sport of figure skating. On one hand, athletes struggle with the increased time constraints imposed by the exacting requirements on the technical side under IJS, which compete with their time and energy spent on the artistic side of their skating. On the other hand, commitment to choreography and emotional execution is draining, which can impede the execution of technical elements.

Drawing on Alexander (2004), this article explores the various ways in which skaters maneuver between the iron cage of rationalized technical requirements and their presentation of an artistic persona. I illustrate the contingent process by which elite figure skaters enact cultural structures and their varied success at persuading the audience of the authenticity of their performances. Newcomers to the Olympic level make contrived attempts to signify their maturity and mastery of the sport through overly elaborate costumes and makeup as well as age-inappropriate music selections. Veterans in the sport, on the other hand, present bifurcated strategies when it comes to performing such balancing acts. Some adopt a heavily intentional approach to crafting their competition programs, whereas others make a concerted effort to seamlessly re-fuse multiple elements of their performances back into a convincing whole, striving to achieve an appearance of authentic artistry. As I have shown in my study, the notion of artistry comes with specific, socially constructed expectations in the sport, while “authenticity,” as paradoxically as it sounds, is a highly elaborate and rehearsed state that takes years of practice (McCormick 2015). Skaters who work towards presenting an authentic artist persona constantly hone their transitional steps, skating skills among other means of symbolic production that facilitate their dramatization of “invisible motives and morals they are trying to represent” (Alexander 2004, p. 532).
While my work accounts for the current desired aesthetics in the sport, it does not adequately explain how those who hold social power have actively defined and perpetuated their aesthetic judgements and whether or not these standards have or could evolve over time. In figure skating, judges and the International Skating Union hold considerable social power (Alexander 2004) in defining and assessing proper embodiment of artistry on the ice. Scholars have found that aesthetic judgments are influenced by the judgments of others in the community (e.g. Childress and Friedkin 2012; Lamont 2009). Although privately held views may or may not change through social interactions, one’s expressed judgments tend to conform to community standards (Wohl 2015). Therefore, it would be worthwhile to study conferences hosted by the International Skating Union to examine discussions regarding the proper embodiment of artistry in the sport of figure skating to gain a better understanding of how standards of excellence are defined and negotiated among judges and officials.

Due to inherent challenges associated with accessing an elite and exclusive population, the majority of my respondents represent Team USA with a few others competing on behalf of other countries in Asia, Europe and North America. As Angèle Christin (2018) has observed in her study on how media outlets in the U.S. and France respond to quantifiable metrics in their external environments, actors’ responses to constraints and pressures imposed by formally rationalized forms of assessments depend on their national and institutional contexts. Therefore, while I have tried to recruit participants from a range of countries, this study does not capture the impact of IJS on some key actors in the field, most noticeably athletes from Russia. I have anecdotally observed that Russian skaters disproportionately attempt to display artistry in a more mechanical manner, but I am unable to test my hypothesis given the language barrier. Future studies may investigate how processes of meaning-making and legitimacy-building diverge across national contexts despite a nearly universal drive to submit to quantifiable metrics.

In conclusion, the scoring system in figure skating represents a hybrid evaluation system that constitutes a combination of formal rationalization and culturally specific production of authentic artistry. The formally rationalized scoring system, coupled with a multifaceted and globalized definition of artistry, elicits a distinctive range of responses and strategies from skaters who strive to offer authentic social performances. Skaters work towards embodying shared cultural notions of greatness on the ice and engage in agentic work to maneuver between the iron cage of technical requirements and the symbolic production of artistry. Despite risking the consistency of their technical elements, athletes who strive to convey authentic artistry through their social performances on the ice constantly work on integrating elements of their performance into a fused whole and honing their ability to create psychological identification with the audience through their movements and emotions. Findings in my study suggest that in spite of coercion in the external environment, in this case the growing quantification of the scoring systems in figure skating, actors never behave purely due to instrumental reasons. In fact, instrumental reasons themselves are codes and narratives that shape figure skaters’ performances. Therefore, the sport of figure skating is embedded in a wealth of shared cultural scripts, as athletes actively display and shape meanings of their social situations through performances on the ice (Alexander 2004).
Acknowledgements The author wishes to thank Dr. Trygve Broch for his editorial wisdom and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. This paper benefited from perceptive feedback from Nina Bandelj, Francesca Polletta, Evan Schofer, Julia Lerch and Alexa Knierim. Participants at the American Sociological Association’s Annual Meeting also provided useful suggestions on earlier drafts.

References

Alexander, J. 2004. Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy. *Sociological Theory* 22 (4): 527–573.

Alexander, J. 2011. *Performance and Power*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Alexander, J., and P. Smith. 2004. *The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology*. New Haven: Yale University Center for Cultural Sociology.

Beames, S., and E. Pike. 2008. Goffman goes rock climbing: Using creative fiction to explore the presentation of self in outdoor education. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education* 12 (2): 3–11.

Broch, T. 2020. *A Performative Feel for the Game: How Meaningful Sports Shape Gender, Bodies, and Social Life (Cultural Sociology)*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bromley, P., and W. Powell. 2012. From Smoke and Mirrors to Walking the Talk: Decoupling in the Contemporary World. *The Academy of Management Annals*. 6 (1): 483–530.

Childress, C., and N. Friedkin. 2012. Cultural Reception and Production: The Social Construction of Meaning in Book Clubs. *American Sociological Review* 77 (1): 45–68.

Christin, A. 2018. Counting Clicks: Quantification and Variation in Web Journalism in the United States and France. *American Journal of Sociology*. 123 (5): 1382–1415.

Coburn, C. 2004. Beyond Decoupling: Rethinking the Relationship Between the Institutional Environment and the Classroom. *Sociology of Education* 77: 211–244.

DeSoucey, M., M. Elliott, and V. Schmutz. 2019. Rationalized Authenticity and the Transnational Spread of Intangible Cultural Heritage. *Poetics* 75 (2019): 101332.

DiMaggio, P., and W. Powell. 1983. The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review* 48 (2): 147–160.

Espeland, W., and M. Sauder. 2007. Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds. *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (1): 1–40.

Espeland, W., and M. Sauder. 2016. *Engines of Anxiety: Academic Rankings, Reputations and Accountability*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Guttman, A. 2004. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hallett, T. 2010. The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School. *American Sociological Review* 75 (1): 52–74.

Kellogg, K. 2009. Operating room: Relational spaces and microinstitutional change in surgery. *American Journal of Sociology*. 115 (3): 657–711.

Kestnbaum, E. 2003. *Culture On Ice: Figure Skating and Cultural Meaning*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Lamont, M. 2009. *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Larsen, H. 2016. *Performing Legitimacy: Studies in High Culture and the Public Sphere*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lom, S. 2016. Changing Rules, Changing Practices: The Direct and Indirect Effects of Tight Coupling in Figure Skating. *Organization Science* 27 (1): 36–52.

McCormick, L. 2015. *Performing Civility: International Competitions in Classical Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Power, M. 1997. *The Audit Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rand, E. 2012. *Red Nails, Black Skates: Gender, Cash, and Pleasure On and Off the Ice*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rivera, L., and A. Tilcsik. 2019. Scaling Down Inequality: Rating Scales, Gender Bias, and the Architecture of Evaluation. *American Sociological Review* 84 (2): 248–274.
Sewell, W. 1992. A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation. *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (1): 1–30.

Strathern, M. 2000. *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. New York: Routledge.

Swidler, A. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Witz, A., C. Warhurst, and D. Nickson. 2003. The Labor of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Organization. *Organization* 10 (1): 33–54.

Wohl, H. 2015. Community Sense: The Cohesive Power of Aesthetic Judgment. *Sociological Theory* 33 (4): 299–326.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.

**Zaoying Ji** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine.