Female Adolescent Athletes' Experiences of Body Dissatisfaction Across Individual and Team Sports

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A B S T R A C T

There is an abundance of research explaining the physical and psychological benefits of sport and exercise. Some research suggests sport and exercise may act as a protective factor against body dissatisfaction for adolescent females (Fernández-Bustos et al., 2019; Soulliard et al. 2019). However, it is unclear if adolescent females' experiences in specific sport settings contribute to perceptions about their bodies. Therefore, this study investigated body perception and its sociocultural influences in adolescent females in team sports versus adolescent females in individual sports. Three focus groups of team sport athletes and two focus groups of individual sport athletes, ages 14-16 years, were conducted. The following four core themes were identified around influences and messaging in sport related to the athletes' bodies: relationships among teammates and coaches, self-concept, functionality, and social influence. Based on these themes, the findings indicate adolescent female athletes may view sport as a helpful tool to reduce or counteract body dissatisfaction, particularly in team sport athletes. However, sport may not entirely reduce the negative impact from normative and potentially harmful messages surrounding body weight and image, both of which are pervasive in society, the media, and relationships with influential individuals, such as friends, family, and coaches.

Keywords: adolescent females, body dissatisfaction, female athletes

Body dissatisfaction is characterized by a negative perception and attitude concerning an individual's physical appearance (Heider et al., 2018). Research has linked body dissatisfaction to depression, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, lower quality of life (Lantz et al., 2018), and eating disorders (Chen et al., 2020; Romano et al., 2021). Adolescent female athletes are a population of interest regarding body dissatisfaction due to the unique demands of balancing school and sport. Entering high school is a challenging time of physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social changes (Marcotte et al., 2002; Simons, 2017). During this time, adolescents often are faced with weight-related teasing or bullying and the social pressure to fit in with peers (Rosewall et al., 2018). Moreover, adolescence is a critical and vulnerable phase when females tend to experience a greater degree of difficulty coping with puberty-related bodily changes (Nigar & Naqvi, 2019). This especially is true for earlier maturing girls who have an increased prevalence of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Shope et al., 2022). Additionally, adolescent female athletes must balance weight-related societal expectations of thinness with the demands and expectations of sports. Numerous studies exist examining common beliefs about body ideals within various sports (e.g., Gutnik et al., 2015; Masanovic, 2018). This may pose a unique challenge for adolescent female athletes who seek to meet the demands of their sport's ideal body type while balancing the stress of pubertal changes, pressure from peers, and societal standards to be thin.

According to the sociocultural model for eating disorders (Striegel-Moore & Bulik, 2007), Western culture's female ideal of extreme thinness and objectification are risk factors for body dissatisfaction. Specifically for female athletes, Petrie & Greenleaf's (2007) sociocultural model of eating disorder development indicates internalization of societal appearance ideals combined with weight pressures in sport may lead to increased body dissatisfaction. The internalization of both appearance ideals may lead an athlete to compare their own body size and shape in a negative manner and may result in disordered eating behaviors such as excessive exercise or dietary restriction (Petrie & Greenleaf, 2013). Recently, social media use has been found to influence the development of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in athletes (Stoyel et al., 2020). Therefore, adolescent female athletes may have an increased risk for body dissatisfaction due to sport-specific weight and appearance pressures, pressure to conform to the thin body ideal, and exposure and internalization of these ideals through social media use.

The thin and athletic ideals outlined above correlate with the contextual body image approach, which states that athletes have both an athletic body image and a social body image (De Bruin et al., 2011, 2018). Athletic body image is defined as the evaluation of an internal image of an individual's own body within an athletic environment (Greenleaf, 2002). Alternatively, social body image is in reference to an individual's evaluation of their body within the context of their daily life (De Bruin & Oudejans, 2018; De Bruin et al., 2011). Several studies have investigated the transiency of body satisfaction in reference to athletic and social body image (Beckner & Record; 2016; Krane et al., 2004; Sabiston et al., 2019; Sabiston et al., 2020). This concept explains that female athletes often positively interpret their body as tools for successful performance and therefore evaluate their body image positively. However, positive evaluations of their bodies often do not transfer outside of sport, as they do not align with socially constructed Western feminine beauty ideals.

Several research studies have supported the notion that sport can act as a protective measure against body dissatisfaction (Neissaar & Raudsepp, 2011; Soulliard et al. 2019). However, contrary findings have indicated that specific sport types may place athletes at a higher risk of body dissatisfaction (Fernández-Bustos et al., 2019). Due to conflicting evidence, it is unclear if adolescent females use sport as a protective strategy concerning body image perceptions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and perceptions of adolescent females' body image surrounding participation in team sports compared to individual sports. Team sports were defined as a group of individuals working toward a shared, competitive goal (e.g., soccer or basketball; Sabiston et al., 2016). Individual sports were defined as competing against others for personal goals (e.g., swimming or track and field; Sabiston et al., 2016). Sport type was examined as past research indicated individual sports may not be protective against body dissatisfaction due to less social connections and cohesion (Staurowsky et al., 2015). Individual sports also tend to scrutinize performance (e.g., gymnastics) and emphasize physical appearance (Staurowsky et al., 2015). Further, individual sport athletes are more likely to compete in environments where their bodies are more exposed (e.g., swimming) which may increase negative judgment of their bodies (Nemeth et al., 2020).

Method

Participants

Adolescent females (n = 28) ages 14-16 years were assigned by convenience of schedules to focus groups of four to eight participants based on sport type (i.e., team sport or individual sport) for five sessions. Three focus groups consisted of team sports representing soccer (39%, $n = 11$) and basketball (18%, $n = 5$), and two groups represented individual sports of swimming (39%, n = 11) and track and field (4%, $n = 1$). The unequal distribution of athletes is due to convenience sampling. Females in 8th–10th grade who engaged in sport three to five times per week were recruited using convenience and reverse snowball sampling through emailing coaches and posting flyers at elite youth sport clubs in central Indiana (e.g., USA swimming). The presence of eating or other psychological disorders were listed as exclusion criteria to control for a potential impact of pre-existing disorders on perspectives regarding body image in sport.

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Instruments

Due to the qualitative design of the study, the primary instruments were the researchers. The first author, research assistant, and auditor were graduate students pursuing a dual master's degree in sport and exercise psychology and clinical mental health counseling. Other instruments include a selection of sport questionnaire, a demographic questionnaire, and an interview guide.

Selection of Sport Type Questionnaire

Parents or guardians completed a one-item questionnaire attached to the consent forms before the study began. The form described the categories of individual and team sports. To form clear focus groups, parents or guardians were instructed to select only one category that best described their daughters' participation in sport. This decision was based on which sport type their daughters spent the greatest number of hours in practice and competition.

Demographic Questionnaire

Each participant completed a short, six-item demographic form prior to the focus group interview. This included information such as age, ethnicity, year in school, and the average number of hours of sport participation per week.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate focus groups, with 10 primary questions, along with probing questions based on participant responses. The interview guide was developed by the first author and principal investigator based on the literature review. The guide was reviewed by a licensed psychologist and was piloted with three female adolescent athletes. Interview guide questions were broad and general; this enabled participants to choose the direction and content of the conversation and decreased potential pressure to share personal information. These broad questions were followed-up by specific probing questions. The guide began with an icebreaker activity, followed by questions regarding the participants' sport experience in relation to body image. The following are examples of questions: (1) "How do you think girls usually feel about their bodies when participating in your sport?, (2) "When do girls typically feel (positively/negatively) about their bodies in sport or physical activity?", and (3) "What can be done to help girls have a more positive experience more regularly?"

Procedure

IRB approval was obtained prior to conducting this study. After obtaining written parental consent, parents completed the selection of sport and exercise type questionnaire. Participants then were assigned to four focus groups, two of which comprised elite soccer players from one soccer club, two focus groups for two elite level swim clubs, and one focus group for a travel basketball team. A high school track athlete was assigned to a swimming focus group due to sport type and convenience of scheduling. Researchers collaborated with coaches to schedule focus group times and locations. Four focus groups occurred during practice, while one was held immediately following practice. Each focus group took place in a semiprivate location so outsiders could not hear the conversation.

To begin each focus group, the first author briefed participants on the purpose of the study, discussed confidentiality and its limitations, obtained participant assent, and administered the demographic form. Focus group interviews were audio-recorded using a voice recorder and followed a semi-structured format that lasted 30–45 minutes in total. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refer to this type of interview as "conversation with purpose" (p. 109). After each focus group interview, researchers debriefed participants, reviewed expectations and limits of confidentiality, and provided a list of resources for counseling services and eating disorder-specific resources. All participants had the opportunity to enter a random drawing for one of two $25 Amazon gift cards. Field notes were taken immediately following each focus group and all materials (i.e., consent, assent, recordings, and field notes) were stored in a secure location.
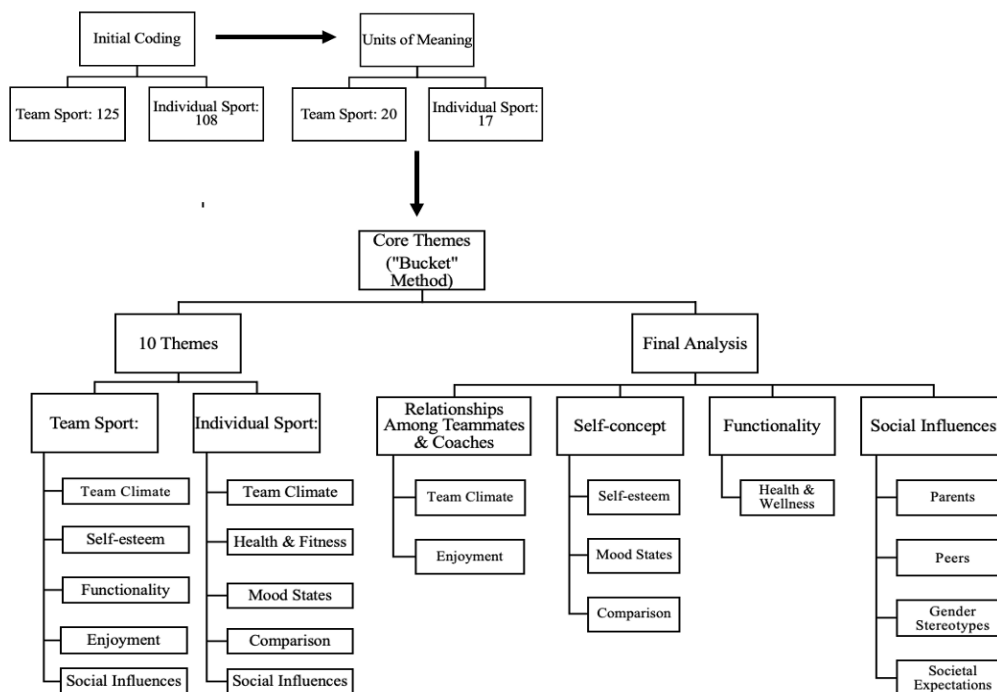
Design and Analysis

Thematic analysis, an inductive coding method, was utilized for data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Verbatim transcribing and open coding processes were adapted from Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to analyze individual and team focus group recordings. The researchers did not specify which participant was speaking in the transcriptions, thus increasing confidentiality (Taylor, 2015). Anonymization is recommended in qualitative research, especially when working with vulnerable populations (i.e., youth; Surmiak, 2018; Vainio, 2013). Investigator triangulation also was used to pull collective themes from individual responses. Triangulation involves two or more researchers providing multiple observations and conclusions to confirm findings or to introduce different perspectives (Carter et al., 2014). Using the process of horizontalization in phenomenological research, every statement was viewed as having equal weight in determining its relevance to the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis began after the first interview and continued until the completion of the last interview.

Findings and Discussion

A majority of participants identified as Caucasian (75%, $n = 21$), though two identified as biracial or Hispanic. Five participants chose not to answer. The participants engaged in their sport an average of 13.48 (SD = 5.38) hours per week. Finally, 21% ($n = 6$) reported participating in a second sport, and 50% ($n = 3$) of those reported participating in a different sport type than their primary sport (e.g., a basketball player also participating in track and field).

Initial codes for each transcript were compared, resulting in the identification of a combined 129 phrases for team sport and 111 for individual sport. Researchers identified 20 units of meaning for team sport and 17 units of meaning for individual sport. After sorting the initial pieces into "buckets" using the units of meaning, five core themes were identified for team sports (i.e., coaches and teammates, enjoyment, self-esteem, functionality, and social influences) and individual sport (coaches and teammates, comparisons, mood states, health and fitness, and social influences). The original ten themes were contrasted between the individual and team sport athletes to form four major core themes across sport contexts: relationships among teammates and coaches, self-concept, functionality, and social influences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

Theme Identification Process

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Relationships among Teammates and Coaches

The theme of relationships among teammates and coaches includes subthemes of team climate and enjoyment. Team climate encompasses the team environment, specifically the quality of teammate and coach relationships, and was reported to influence the participants' perceptions of body image. One team sport athlete shared, "He [coach] really promotes us to actually build a relationship so that all of us are best friends or family…so all of us are really supportive of each other now since we're so much closer." An individual sport participant stated:

We have such a good team that builds you up, so if you come into high school feeling bad about yourself everyone is so nice and so supportive you just feel so much better already and feel so much more confident in yourself.

Team sport teammates were described as supportive and improved each other's confidence in themselves and in their bodies related to performance. One team sport athlete mentioned, "Especially in high school, your team is like your family, they're your backbone. I feel like on my team there was no room for making fun of someone for their body image because we're all so supportive towards one another." These findings are consistent with research indicating young females primarily participate in sport for a sense of belonging and enjoyment (Staurowsky et al., 2015). However, some athletes, particularly in individual sports, admitted they compared their appearance against the appearance of teammates. One participant stated, "You all look different so you're going to judge yourself on other people."

Many individual sport athletes described coaches as generally supportive and did not feel pressure placed on them to look a certain way. For example, an individual sport athlete said, "I feel like the coaches here encourage you and tell you that you did something really well and that makes you feel better about yourself and it makes you feel like you're better than other people." The coach's encouragement emphasized functionality of the body and performance, rather than appearance. On the contrary, a few team sport athletes identified coaches as potential sources of frustration or guilt when they encourage the athletes to work toward a specific body composition, especially if this was perceived as unachievable by the athletes. Rather than reinforcing an ideal athletic body composition, coaches should set realistic and individualized goals for athletes where they are evaluated on effort, improvement, functionality, and are only compared to themselves rather than an ideal body for their sport. More specifically, coaches should avoid discussing body weight with athletes and instead focus on function and measurable performance outcomes, such as progress on a skill or improvements in event times.

Another distinct difference between team and individual sports was that individual sport participants' coaches emphasized nutrition—specifically, avoiding certain foods—whereas nutrition was not mentioned by team sport athletes. One participant shared, "I've definitely had that talk but that's only because one of my coaches heard me order a cinnamon sugar bagel with extra cream cheese." Comments regarding nutrition from coaches can negatively influence an athlete's body image (Beckner & Record, 2016). Although team sport participants viewed their coach's expectations as well-intended, the focus on nutrition to prevent increased body fat may send implicit messages about an ideal physical appearance, which may be internalized by female athletes. It is important to note all participants reported having male coaches only.

Relationships with teammates and coaches seemed to create a positive team climate, which may have contributed to participant enjoyment of the sport. Many team sport participants expressed a love for their game and reported feelings of happiness and joy. One shared:

I feel really relaxed even though it's a really high-intensity sport. I feel more relaxed and less stressed when I'm actually focused on something else other than things at school or friends or any of that other stuff that might stress you out.

Another stated:

With soccer and the whole team thing, it's a nice kind of escape from my life and school, I guess. I feel like that's a majority of my day and then when I come to soccer it's kind of an escape from that.

These statements of sport enjoyment were not as prevalent in the individual sport groups.

In conclusion, a positive, supportive team climate promoted participants' comfortability in their bodies, especially in team sports. Athletes who reported positive experiences with teammates and coaches reported less body dissatisfaction and greater sport enjoyment. Of importance, team

sport athletes expressed legitimate love of their sport more than athletes in individual sports. Although many factors influence sport enjoyment, individual sport athletes reported more frequent social comparison and shared their coaches placed a greater emphasis on nutrition, which may negatively impact perceptions of the athletes' bodies and sport enjoyment. Although both groups described coaches as being generally supportive, pressure from coaches to alter body composition may negatively impact athletes. Therefore, it is crucial coaches set realistic goals and shift their focus to performance, improvement, and effort.

Self-Concept

The second core theme was self-concept, which encompasses self-esteem from team sport themes, as well as the individual sport themes of mood states and comparison. Self-concept, specifically physical self-concept, is heavily influenced by body image (Fernández-Bustos et al., 2019). The present study observed individual sport athletes discussed comparison to others to a greater extent than team sport athletes. Team sport participants expressed a constant comparison of their body types, primarily to their opponents' body types based on height and strength. This comparison resulted in many participants feeling intimidated or insecure about their body and their abilities. One participant explained, "It's a big mental thing because if you see someone who is super tall and you have to go against them, it's intimidating." While team sport athletes experienced social comparison with opponents, individual sport athletes expressed worrying about the opinions of both teammates and opponents regarding their body type and body image. One possible explanation for this observation is that individual sport athletes are competing against their opponents as well as their teammates, whereas in team sports, teammates are working together as they compete against a common opponent. This was supported in focus group conversations where one participant said, "In a team sport you're not competing against your teammates. But in swimming, sometimes you're actually racing the person from your team, so there's a lot more competition and comparison that goes on in individual sports." Individual sport athletes reported comparing themselves against their teammates based on speed, athletic ability, and interactions with coaches. These comparisons were amplified while changing in the locker rooms where everyone's bodies were on display.

Although many individual sport athletes' self-esteem, self-concept, and body image were negatively impacted due to social comparison, other individual athletes reported improvements:

> I feel like since we're all in our swimsuits and we all shower together, I feel like ever since I started swimming, I feel a lot more comfortable with my body. Because I feel like nobody can really judge you for it, and then I feel like no one outside of here is going to judge me for it.

The findings of higher self-esteem across a few team and individual sport athletes in this study is consistent with research indicating athletes recorded higher self-esteem than non-athletes (Petisco-Rodríguez et al., 2020). However, no prior research compares self-esteem and self-concept linked to body dissatisfaction in female adolescent individual and team sport athletes.

It is important to note, not all individual athletes and team sport athletes reacted in the same manner to comparison. A few athletes in both sport types did not experience body dissatisfaction in the sport context, yet stated the sense of positive body image they experienced in sport did not always transfer outside of sport. One participant stated:

> I feel like we're around these people all the time and I feel like I'm really comfortable around everyone on the team, but when I go to school, I'm a lot more self-conscious, I become a completely different person. I'm super self-conscious about the way I look in certain clothes.

This feeling coincides with the dual standard for females inside and outside of sport as they strive to achieve the athletic and thin ideal simultaneously. Consequently, as athletes shift between these two settings with different ideals, they may experience body dissatisfaction due to the contradictory nature of the ideals. Based on the assumption that focusing on functionality and strength as opposed to appearance is a protective factor, certain sport and team climates that encourage female athletes to focus on functionality may be protective against body dissatisfaction (Alleva et al., 2015).

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Functionality

The present study analyzed functionality in relation to (a) an emphasis on strength or function, (b) comparing different body types based on an event or position, and (c) feeling negatively when on a break from sport. Several female participants emphasized function over appearance regarding their body image. It appeared that females in both sport types emphasized what their body could do rather than how it looked. Many athletes spoke about their bodies in terms of strength and expressed a wish to be stronger to increase the likelihood of success in their sport. For example, participants shared statements such as, "I try not to focus on how my body looks rather than what it can actually do," or "I think it's more of you have to be able to do things and less how you look." Similarly, other participants discussed feeling best about their bodies when they were feeling strong, capable, and ready to perform.

Many of the participants also discussed their body types concerning the position they played on the team or the events in which they competed. In team sports, certain body types were identified as being more successful for specific positions. If the athletes did not fit this body type, they could be at a disadvantage in a game. This contrasts with research suggesting there may not be differences in functional abilities of players based on their position on a team (Milanovic et al., 2015). In individual sports, the participants discussed body type comparison regarding thinness, muscles (strength), and shape to their teammates, competitors, or other successful athletes in specific events. One team sport participant stated:

> As a post you have to be pretty strong and obviously, I'm not, so I'm like, 'Well, what can I do about this?' So sometimes it turns into, 'I'm not strong enough or I'm not big enough.' But usually, I've found it's more skill based and not really your body shape.

Although several athletes in both sport types reported focusing on functionality rather than appearance, there also were athletes in team and individual sports who evaluated their athletic ability based on the ideal body shape perceived as being most suited for a specific position or event. Consequently, adolescents who engage in sport may experience body dissatisfaction due to perceived physical limitations if they do not possess the "ideal" body for their sport type.

Social Influences

The final theme observed in both individual and team focus groups was social influences. Social influences were defined by the researchers as any societal factor that was not directly related to their participation in sport, such as parents, peers, gender stereotypes, print media, social media, broadcast media, and general societal expectations. Participants in both sport types categorized parents as a potential negative influence on their experiences, particularly when parents made comments regarding weight loss, exercise habits, nutrition, or wanting more feminine daughters. A team sport athlete mentioned, "Their parents raise them to be more feminine, definitely. Girls aren't supposed to do this, girls aren't supposed to do that. Just be petite, small, kind of out of the way." Another athlete shared she often contemplated whether she should eat a second helping at dinner after her mother commented on how much she was eating. Although some athletes, particularly individual athletes, reported negative experiences with parents, other athletes shared the positive impact of parent relations. One athlete shared, "When they [parents] tell you that you did really well and stuff you feel good about yourself." The words of encouragement and praise from parents have the potential to improve self-concept and body satisfaction (Schneider et al., 2013).

The final two subthemes of social influences are gender stereotypes and societal expectations. Participants described boys as stronger, more competitive, and more confident than girls. One participant shared, "I feel like they [boys] get a lot stronger than girls do, so I feel like they get more confident." As previously stated, many of the participants expressed a desire to be stronger in order to be more successful in their sport. This created an interesting paradox for female athletes, as many believed boys viewed strong and muscular girls as unattractive. One participant said, "When guys look at girls, they don't like girls that are muscular, like that grosses them out. So, I feel like no girl is going to want to be muscular." The athletes in the study believed society expects them to be tall, thin, and to "not show the muscles but feel like they have the muscles." This aligns with prior research findings that boys tend to focus on gaining muscle to a greater

extent than females, yet female athletes still are expected to gain muscle while maintaining a thin "feminine" build (Monge-Rojas et al., 2017). This paradox is consistent with previous research (Krane et al., 2004; Monge-Rojas et al., 2017). Krane et al. (2004) introduced the notion that female athletes live within two conflicting cultures: the athletics culture associated with traditional masculinity and the larger social culture where traditional femininity is celebrated.

This conflict between the strong athletic ideal and the thin social ideal was present in all focus groups, regardless of sport type. One participant stated, "Girls know how it is to feel bad about themselves…you have to be tan, not too tall, and not too short, can't be too fat, you can't be too skinny." When asked if it was possible to obtain both, a participant stated:

> I feel like the societal way for a woman to look is supposed to be really thin and I feel like because in soccer you're supposed to be thin, but you're also supposed to be really muscular. So, you can't fit both. It's either one or the other; you're either an outcast in society or in soccer.

In both sport types, the participants did not feel it was possible to achieve one ideal while also achieving the other. These athletes expressed frustration toward the unfairness of being expected to balance two contradicting expectations, while boys only work to achieve strength.

When asked where the athletes learned about the "ideal" body types for women in general society and sport, the participants identified social media (e.g., Instagram), magazines, television, and peers at school as the primary sources. One athlete stated, "I think we see people on TV or the popular girl in school that is super skinny and can do everything or the Olympians, that they made it this far and they're so much smaller than me." Another athlete stated:

> You see most of the athletes they sponsor, so you look at that you're like, 'Okay, I want to be really good. If I want to be sponsored, I need to have abs and I need to be able to rock a swimsuit.

The negative influence of media on body dissatisfaction is supported in previous research (e.g., Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Saiphoo & Vahedi 2019).). Athletes in the present study believed they must look like athletes in the media to achieve sport success. This is concerning, as female athletes often are objectified and portrayed as hypersexual in the media (Daniels et al., 2021; Geurin, 2017). Ultimately, the pervasiveness of sociocultural factors and their potential negative influence on body dissatisfaction was evident among all five focus groups in both team and individual sport athletes.

Implications

The findings of the study give way to important implications for those who have an influence on the lives of adolescent female athletes, such as parents, coaches, and sport psychology professionals. When focus group participants were asked what they would like to see changed to make adolescent females' experiences more positive, many expressed a wish for a change in societal expectations of females. Other participants wished to not feel obligated to always look their best as females. Several participants spoke about "making muscles okay" and wishing for increased approval to eat what they desire without guilt. Research has demonstrated coach and parent communication with adolescent female athletes can be influential in their development of a positive body image and health choices (Beckner & Record, 2016; Forney et al., 2012; Hart et al., 2014). Negative reactions to comments made by family, peers, or even coaches may contribute to the onset of disordered eating behaviors (Forney et al., 2012; Sabiston et al., 2020). Therefore, parents, coaches, and professionals must be aware of the language they are using around adolescent athletes and the implicit messages they may be promoting. Both positive and negative objectifying language and weight commentary should be avoided due to their association with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Slater & Tiggemann, 2014). Comments should not be made about weight loss, weight gain, or other physical aspects of an athlete's body. When speaking about sport training and nutrition, terminology addressing the functionality of the athlete should be utilized rather than referencing appearance or body weight. For instance, instead of coaches emphasizing nutrition to avoid acquiring body fat, sport nutrition should be discussed as a tool to energize and fuel the human body to perform at an optimal level. Further, more inclusive uniform options may prevent body weight and body size discrimination, especially for individual

athletes who often compete in environments where their bodies are highly exposed (Soulliard et al., 2019).

Sport psychology professionals, or other professionals who work within youth sport, should be educated on the specific issues related to body dissatisfaction to help adolescent female athletes increase awareness of and manage appearance-related anxiety. This can be achieved through the implementation of coach workshops where education on body image and disordered eating in relation to coaches is disseminated. Research on coaching workshops and trainings of this nature have yielded positive outcomes, such as reductions of perceived pressure for athletes to lose weight and reductions in body dissatisfaction (Buchholz et al., 2008; Martinsen et al., 2014). This education must emphasize functionality and empowerment rather than appearance (Koulanova et al. 2021). Coaches and other sport-related personnel who communicate body appreciation and functionality might even help athletes increase sport performance by increasing sport confidence and flow state (Soulliard et al., 2019). While both individual and team sport athletes reported comparison to opponents regarding body type and body image, individual athletes appear to be more prone to comparison among teammates in addition to opponents. Therefore, practitioners should help facilitate a safe environment where individual sport athletes compete against themselves, rather than thinking about competing against their teammates and comparing themselves to their teammates. Fostering this type of environment may reduce body dissatisfaction through the reduction of teammate social comparison.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations exist regarding the focus group design, such as the 45-minute time constraints due to practice schedules, focus group timing (immediately following or during practice), and the potential fear of sharing differing opinions than their peers present in the group. These factors may have influenced the content shared in the focus groups. For example, many participants described teammates and coaches as being supportive, but it is unclear if the same sentiments would have been shared if the groups were in a different setting or were composed of strangers. Further, it is possible participants were influenced by social desirability bias during the focus groups due to the challenging nature of the discussion topic and the presence of others.

Another consideration was that three participants also were involved in a second sport (e.g., a basketball player who also ran track and field). This was not controlled for in the study, except for assigning the multi-sport athletes into the sport type group where they spent the greatest number of hours. These athletes were able to provide a specific comparison between individual and team sport contexts, which may be an area for future research. Further, the sport positions of athletes on each team also should be researched. This is of importance, as the middle-distance track athlete may report a different relationship with their body than a shotput thrower or 100m sprinter due to the promotion of different body types for specific sport positions.

Despite these limitations, the main strength of the study was the qualitative research design to capture the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of adolescent female athletes regarding body dissatisfaction. This is the only study to our knowledge utilizing a qualitative design to understand body dissatisfaction among adolescent females in team sports compared to individual sports. The study design allowed researchers to identify a variety of influences on body dissatisfaction to be grouped into core themes. The conception of themes is critical to better understand the relationship between body image and sport—a relationship that other researchers have described as complex, dynamic, bidirectional, acute, and chronic (Sabiston et al., 2019).

As this study yielded some mixed results, future research should continue to investigate sport as a protective factor against negative body dissatisfaction. Another area for research would be to analyze body dissatisfaction at different levels of sport, as elite-level coaches may place more pressure on athletes to obtain a specific body ideal more commonly associated with success in the sport (Stoyel et al., 2021). Given that the athletes in this study were faced with the challenge of balancing two conflicting ideals of appearance, it may be worthwhile to compare the experiences of adolescent female athletes regarding body dissatisfaction to females who do not participate in sport. Future research also should study the nature and impact of coaching styles and the coach-athlete relationships of male coaches on athlete body dissatisfaction in comparison to female coaches. It is possible that female coaches may better understand the pressure of society and

implicit messages due to personal experiences (Sabiston et al., 2020). Adolescent participants in the current study reported experiences with only male coaches. However, no coaches were interviewed in the study, which is another limitation.

Conclusion

The following four core themes were identified as a result of focus groups with individual and team sport athletes: relationships among teammates and coaches, self-concept, functionality, and social influences. Within these core themes, the present study yielded mixed findings as to whether sport participation functions as a protective factor against body dissatisfaction in female adolescent athletes. The mixed findings likely are a result of females being faced with the contradictory athletic ideal and the societal ideal of thinness for females. Further, comparison to others fueled body dissatisfaction. While both individual and team sport athletes reported comparison to opponents, primarily individual sport athletes emphasized comparing their bodies to their own teammates. This likely is due to team climate and the nature of individual sports, as they are competing against both opponents and teammates rather than directly working only with teammates to win as in team sports. Findings demonstrated a positive team climate with supportive teammates and coaches may serve to protect against body dissatisfaction while also positively influencing sport enjoyment. On the contrary, individual sport athletes with coaches who emphasized nutrition and the attainment of the athletic ideal body were found to discuss sport enjoyment less frequently than team sport athletes with coaches who did not emphasize nutrition. Therefore, it is critical people of influence on adolescent athletes must intentionally create a positive sport environment focusing on functionality over appearance, emphasize performance, and encourage self-comparison and a growth mindset instead of comparison to teammates, opponents, or societal ideals.

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