



## A comparison of body size ideals, body dissatisfaction, and media influence between female track athletes, martial artists, and non-athletes

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** In assessments of body image among athletes, there remains an important discrepancy between studies reporting, on one hand, increased body dissatisfaction among athletes and, on the other, lower body image concerns. In order to help resolve this contradiction, the present study examined body size ideals, body dissatisfaction, and media influence among female recreational athletes and non-athletes.

**Method:** Forty-one track athletes (a judged sport in which leanness is actively promoted), 47 women involved in Taek Won Do (a martial art with little or no emphasis on leanness), and 44 non-athletes completed self-report measures of ideal body size, body dissatisfaction, and media influence, and provided their demographic details.

**Results:** Results showed that, after controlling for participants' body mass index (BMI), there were no significant between-group differences in ideal body size. By contrast, track athletes reported the highest body dissatisfaction scores and the highest internalisation of athletic media messages. Results of a regression analysis showed that, for the total sample, participants' BMI and internalisation of athletic media messages predicted body dissatisfaction over-and-above involvement in the different sports.

**Conclusion:** These results support the suggestion that women participating in leanness-promoting sports experience greater body dissatisfaction than women in other sports or non-athletes.

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Body image refers to the internal perception of one's own physical or outer appearance (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). In many developed countries, rates of body image dissatisfaction – typically measured as the difference between an individual's current and ideal body shape – are very high or rising, particularly among women (e.g., Allaz, Bernstein, Rouget, Archinard, & Morabia, 1998; Cash & Henry, 1995). For instance, a *Psychology Today* survey revealed that 56% of women were dissatisfied with their overall appearance (Garner, 1997). Even so, studies have recognised that body image dissatisfaction may be higher among some groups, such as Caucasians compared with ethnic minorities (Altabe, 1998; Swami, Airs, Chouhan, Padilla Leon, & Towell, in press), heterosexuals compared with gay men and lesbians (Swami & Tovée, 2006, 2008), and non-feminists compared with women who hold feminist beliefs (Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008a).

One particular subgroup that has received a great deal of attention within the body image literature is female athletes. Specifically, it has been suggested that female athletes may be at higher risk of body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders due to a need to attain athletic physiques under task (e.g., performance advantages or weight requirements) or social pressure (Davis & Cowles, 1989; Sundgot-Borgen, 1993, 1994a). In line with this perspective, some research indicates that athletes are at increased risk of eating disorders and body image dissatisfaction compared with the general population (Hausenblas & Carron, 1999; Taub & Blinde, 1992). In contrast, however, other research suggests that athletes report lower body image concerns than non-athletes (Anderson, Zager, Hetzler, Nahikian-Nelms, & Syler, 1996; Fulker-son, Keel, Leon, & Dorr, 1997; Hausenblas & Mack, 1999), possibly as a result of increased self-esteem (Bowker, Gadbois, & Cornock, 2003; Fox, 2000; Landers & Arent, 2001; Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

Brownell and Rodin (1992) have attributed this discrepancy to the failure of many studies to examine the moderating effects of competitive level (e.g., high school, college, club or recreational, and elite levels) and sports type. In terms of the former, it has been suggested that female athletes who participate at competitive or

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elite levels are at higher risk for developing body image dissatisfaction than recreational or high school athletes (e.g., Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000). The former may be under heightened individual, family, or sociocultural pressure to maintain particular body physiques, as leanness or thinness is viewed as enhancing performance (Brownell, Rodin, & Wilmore, 1992). However, there are contradictory findings, including Smolak et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis of eating problems in female athletes, in which elite gymnasts competing at national or international levels did not differ significantly from non-athletes.

Body image disorders are also more prevalent among female athletes involved in 'judged' sports (where physical appearance has an influence on performance evaluation; e.g., ballet, gymnastics, figure skating) or sports that promote leanness (e.g., synchronised swimming, track athletics, aerobics) (de Bruin, Oudejans, & Bakker, 2007; Davidson, Earnest, & Birch, 2002; Fogelholm & Hiilloskorpi, 1999; Fulkerson et al., 1997; Hully & Hill, 2001; Johnson, Powers, & Dick, 1999; Sundgot-Borgen, 1994b; Yates, Edman, Crago, & Crowell, 2003; Ziegler et al., 1998; Zucker, Womble, Williamson, & Perrin, 1999). For example, Rosen (1996) reported that pathogenic weight-control (e.g., fasting, self-induced vomiting) was used most frequently by young gymnasts compared with other athletes. By contrast, one meta-analysis found no differences in body image between athletes in aesthetic, endurance, or ball game types (Hausenblas & Symons Downs, 2001).

Finally, there is also some suggestion that media influences may play a role in engendering body dissatisfaction among different types of athletes, compared with non-athletes (Ginsberg & Gray, 2006). In general, numerous studies have revealed associations between thin media images and body dissatisfaction (e.g., Harrison, 1997, 2000; Taylor et al., 1998; Turner, Hamilton, Angood, & Dwyer, 1997), particularly among women who engage in social comparison with media images (Botta, 2003; Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Thompson et al., 1999). Recently, Ginsberg and Gray (2006) extended these results, showing that sports magazines for judged sports were more likely to depict thinner cover models than magazines for non-judged sports. This, in turn, may result in differences in body dissatisfaction among different types of athletes, particularly if media depictions of ideal body shape and size are internalised.

## The present study

Additional data are necessary to help resolve the contradictions in this literature. In the present study, therefore, we compared physical attractiveness ideals, body dissatisfaction, and internalisation of media ideals between female athletes and an age-matched sample of non-athletes. The former was further divided between women participating in track athletics (a judged sport in which leanness is actively promoted) and martial arts (a non-judged sport with little or no emphasis on leanness). More specifically, we examined attractiveness ideals and body dissatisfaction using the recently validated Photographic Figure Rating Scale (PFRS; Swami, Salem, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008b), and media influence using the Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ-3; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004). Because we expected large differences in body mass index (BMI) between track athletes on one hand, and martial artists and control individuals on the other, we used (self-reported) BMI as a covariate in our analyses. This is important because BMI has only rarely been controlled for in other studies, despite being related to body dissatisfaction and internalisation of media influence (Ingledeu & Sullivan, 2002).

Based on the preceding literature, we formulated a number of hypotheses.

First, based on responses to the PFRS, we predicted that track athletes would idealise a thinner female figure than either martial artists or the control sample. We further predicted that track artists would find attractive a narrower range of body sizes than either of the other two groups. Third, using current and ideal body discrepancies based on responses to the PFRS, we predicted that track athletes would show greater body dissatisfaction than the martial arts and control groups. Finally, we predicted that the track athletes would show greater internalisation of media influences, particularly in relation to the endorsement and acceptance of an athletic and toned body ideal (as measured by the Internalisation-Athletic subscale of the SATAQ-3).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 132 women ranging in age between 16 and 61 years: 41 track athletes, 47 martial artists, and 44 non-athletes (control group).

### Track athletes

The track athletes consisted of women involved in two recreational athletic clubs in London and representing a wide range of skill levels (age  $M \pm SD = 24.71 \pm 9.38$ , BMI  $M \pm SD = 20.25 \pm 4.48$ ). All women in this group took part in regular and non-competitive athletic training, consisting of short- and medium-distance running, technical jumping, and some weight training. The majority of participants in this group were of European Caucasian descent (85.4%), while others were of Asian descent (4.9%), African Caribbean descent (4.9%), or of other ancestry (4.9%). Most participants were married (65.9%) or single (19.5%; in a dating relationship = 9.8%; other = 4.8%), and had obtained a General Certification of Secondary Education (GCSE, 41.5%; A-Levels = 17.1%; tertiary education = 41.5%).

### Martial artists

This group consisted of women involved in a recreational (non-competitive) Tae Kwon Do organisation in Greater London (age  $M \pm SD = 28.96 \pm 8.42$ , BMI  $M \pm SD = 23.49 \pm 3.98$ ). Tae Kwon Do is a combination of combat techniques and self-defence (emphasising kicks thrown from mobile stances), exercise, and philosophy. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants in this group were of European Caucasian descent (83.0%; African Caribbean = 4.3%; Asian = 2.1%; other = 10.6%). Most women in this group were married (42.6%) or single (25.5%; in a dating relationship = 12.8%; other = 19.2%) and had been educated to a GCSE level (36.2%; A-Levels = 14.9%; other post-secondary qualification = 48.9%).

### Non-athletes

Participants in this group were an age-matched general population sample who reported little or no participation in sporting activities (age  $M \pm SD = 27.57 \pm 10.64$ , BMI  $M \pm SD = 22.70 \pm 4.03$ ). Of this sample, 72.7% were of European Caucasian descent, 18.2% were of Asian descent, 4.5% were of African Caribbean descent, and 4.5% were of other ancestry. Most women in this sample were married (36.4%), single (34.1%), or dating (25.0%; other = 4.5%) and had obtained their A-Levels (42.3%; GCSEs = 29.5%; tertiary education = 28.2%).

### Measures

Participants completed a three-page questionnaire consisting of three sections in the following order.

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