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## **“I Feel Pressure:” Exploring the Phenomenon of Body Image Formation in Collegiate Female Athletes Within the Context of Social Comparison Theory**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the study was to examine female athletes' perceptions of their body image as a result of comparing themselves to others. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) was used as the theoretical basis for understanding the effects of body image among intercollegiate female athletes. Using a qualitative analysis, the authors individually interviewed 20 female collegiate athletes attending a Division I university and thematically coded their responses. The findings suggest that coaches and teammates significantly contribute to body image pressures in female athletes, as participants were sensitive to the comments and perceptions of these groups. Finally, athletes perceived that the external population (those outside of coaches and teammates) evaluated athletic talent based on actual body image.

Key Words: optimal physique, stress, coaching



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## **“I Feel Pressure”: Exploring the Phenomenon of Body Image Formation in Collegiate Female Athletes Within the Context of Social Comparison Theory**

Christy Henrich, a former gymnast of near-Olympic caliber died at the age of 22 due to complications related to eating disorders (Pace, 1994). According to her mother, “...99 percent of what has happened to Christy is because of the sport” (Pace, 1994, para. 9). Sports and sport figures are both lauded and vilified by society, which contributes to various stressors for athletes. Often these stressors include an exaggerated emphasis on winning, poor coach/parent–athlete relationships, and pressure for young people to succeed (Holt, Hoar, & Fraser, 2005). In the case of Christy Henrich, an offhand comment by a judge at a meet was taken to mean she was overweight (Wilstein, 1994). The comment led Henrich to compare herself to the thin Soviet and Romanian gymnasts. As a result, Henrich believed these gymnasts were, in fact, getting better scores due to their size and condition (Wilstein, 1994). Although Henrich sought reassurance from her coach regarding her perceived physical condition of being overweight, it was never given (Wilstein, 1994).

While the Henrich scenario is extreme, body image issues involving the female athlete population occur regularly (Bissell, 2004; Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2001). Individuals tend to compare themselves socially to others in similar positions, and this is evident in athletics generally as well as in the Henrich situation. For example, Henrich did not ask whether she was good enough, but whether she was thin enough in comparison to the other elite athletes. As seen through this, an important source of self-knowledge lies in comparisons with other people. The theoretical framework typically used to examine this phenomenon is the social comparison theory (SCT; Festinger, 1954)

The SCT suggests that individuals learn about their own abilities and attitudes by making comparisons to certain standards or to others who are reasonably similar (Festinger, 1954). Although abilities and attitudes are, in fact, different, Festinger suggested that together they affect behavior. Specifically, Festinger stated that “a person’s cognition (his opinions and beliefs) about the situation in which he exists and his appraisals of what he is capable of doing (his evaluation of his abilities) will together have bearing on his behavior” (p. 117). As such, the SCT states that individuals look to compare themselves, either downwardly or upwardly, to specific standards or to others that possess similar abilities and successes (Festinger, 1954).

Although these concepts have been applied to various research studies, there are limited records of its application to the athletic population. This is interesting because athletes have recognized peers or teammates as a favored source of competence estimation, self-esteem enhancement, social-moral reasoning, and behavior (Duncan, 1993; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Treasure, 2003). A major premise of the SCT is that individuals will compare themselves to those with similar abilities when objective means for evaluation (such as specific feedback, weight restrictions, or judging criteria) do not exist, (Festinger, 1954). In making such comparisons, athletes may perform downward comparisons by likening themselves to those on the team who have been athletically less successful, or may engage in upward comparisons by



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comparing themselves to others who have attained or exceeded a certain level of accomplishment greater than their own (Bessendorf, 2006). Festinger stated, "...if a person evaluates his running ability, he will do so by comparing his time to run some distance with the times that other persons have taken" (p. 116). Festinger further noted that social comparisons are selected at the level at which the difference is found:

When pressures toward uniformity exist with respect to abilities, these pressures are manifested less in social process and more in action against the environment which restrains movement. Thus, a person who runs more slowly than others with whom he compares himself, and for whom the ability is important, may spend considerable time practicing running. In a similar situation where the ability in question is intelligence, the person may study harder. (p. 126)

Given that Festinger's (1954) SCT indicates that pressures directed at enhancing abilities, such as those seen in the context of developing athletic teams and/or performances, may be driven more by the environment and those within the environment, it is alarming that more studies have not explored such stressors through the lens of the SCT. This is especially true for the athletic population, as this group is prone to pressures from a variety of sources (Gorham, 2012). For instance, coaches may be the basis of stress and anxiety in sport experiences (Ntoumanis & Biddle, 1999; Smith, Zane, Smoll & Coppel, 1983) as they may be critical about a performance or emphasize winning to the point of giving most of their attention only to the "best" on the team, causing other athletes to develop questions about their athletic competencies and performances (Brustad, Babke, & Smith, 2001). Additionally, athletes may be at a great risk when considering the physical and emotional demands placed upon them and their body to remain fit (Davis & Cowles, 1989; Rao & Overman, 1986; Zeigler, 2011). Pressures may be formed by various factors, including explicit "weight restrictions either by sport or coach, judging criteria that emphasize thin and stereotypically attractive bodies, performance demands that encourage very low percentage body fat, coaches applying pressure to lose weight and peer pressure" (Zeigler, 2011, para. 8). As Gorham (2012) noted, female athletes are an especially sensitive population in relation to the development of eating disorders caused by body image disturbances (Bissell, 2004). In fact, it has been documented that prevalence rates for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating may be as low as 1% in the general population, but as high as 62% for athletes (Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni, 2011; Byrne & McClean, 2001).

High prevalence rates for body dissatisfaction and disordered eating within this population may in part be due to the pressures from coaches, but also from others (Presnell, Bearman, & Stice, 2004). Presnell and colleagues indicated that perceived pressure from peers to possess a certain body image is the primary factor of a person's body dissatisfaction. Specifically, an athlete's body image may be shaped by the perceptions and comparisons of what family and friends think of them. This may occur when others amplify negative body image concerns through teasing or place pressures on the person to change his or her appearance (Presnell et al., 2004). Gerner and Wilson (2005) further asserted that poor body image occurs when peer acceptance, perceived social support, and friendship intimacy are low. In



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circumstances in which individuals perceive that team membership is significant, the athlete may interpret the in-group characteristics as more important than those of the out-group or external population (Sheeran, Abrams, & Orbell, 1995). In other words, athletes may more readily compare themselves to those who possess similar attributes, such as teammates or coaches who provide certain criteria, than those who are not on the team, such as family members and friends. The study of athletic pressures and the associated influences of such pressures on athletes' body images is not a new phenomenon. Although there is seemingly a vast amount of literature that exists regarding this topic, athlete body dissatisfaction remains an area of concern across sports (Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni 2011; Byrne & McClean, 2001). It is critical to understand further the pressures placed upon female athletes, as well as the formations of such pressures, in order to form better strategies for pressure elimination or reduction.

An attractive feature of the social comparison theory is its application to human group behavior; as such, in the present study the investigators employed it as a theoretical basis for understanding the effects of body image among intercollegiate female athletes. Specifically, the purpose of this investigation was to explore female athletes' perceptions of their body image as influenced by interactions with (a) coaches, (b) teammates, and (c) others in the external population. The study was guided by the following research question: To what extent will the social comparison theory further explain the influences of coaches, teammates, and others (those outside of coaches and teammates) in the external population on body image formation within the female athletic population?

## Methods

### Participants

The specific sampling strategy used in this study was considered homogeneous sampling: "In homogeneous sampling the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell, 2005, p. 206). Although it was important to be mindful about selecting a racially diverse group of athletes (Caucasian and African-American), the participants were still a part of a specific group (current female Division I athletes), and therefore were homogeneous in nature. The institution in which the study occurred offered seven sports. The researchers, along with a panel of experts well-versed in qualitative research, determined that recruiting at least 2, but no more than 4, participants would be sufficient in terms of garnering quality data. In order to capture multiple perspectives, 2–4 athletes from each of the seven sports were chosen. Hence, 20 interviewees were selected from seven sports (track, tennis, basketball, softball, soccer, golf, and volleyball) at a Division I university in the southern region of the United States. Efforts were made to interview athletes from diverse racial and sport backgrounds (see Table 1). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms for all respondents are used.



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Table 1.  
*Participant Sport and Racial Profiles*

Pseudonym	Sport	Race
Betty	Track	African American
Janet	Track	African American
Carol	Track	African American
Susan	Basketball	African American
Vivian	Basketball	Caucasian
Gloria	Tennis	Caucasian
Paula	Tennis	Other
Francine	Softball	Caucasian
Marcy	Softball	African American
Linda	Softball	Caucasian
Sandra	Softball	Caucasian
Rose	Soccer	Caucasian
Patty	Soccer	Caucasian
Kate	Soccer	Caucasian
Donna	Volleyball	Caucasian
Rhonda	Volleyball	Caucasian
Nancy	Volleyball	Caucasian
Gina	Volleyball	Caucasian
Gwen	Golf	Caucasian
Annie	Golf	Caucasian

## Procedures

Harrison and Fredrickson (2003) noted that studies have analyzed the perception of body image through quantitative methodologies. However, body image is a complex and multifaceted construct, including a variety of perceptual, affective, and cognitive aspects of body experience (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990; Grogan, 1999). Body image is largely subjective and dependent on the individual; therefore, qualitative studies may provide greater insight into body image formation (Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni, 2011). Arthur-Cameselle and Quatromoni (2011) noted that there is a lack of qualitative studies that may “confirm hypotheses about factors in the sport environment that may be related to the onset of eating disorders in highly competitive athletes” (p. 3). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), qualitative methods are applied to “seek a better understanding of complex situations” (p. 95). Additionally, qualitative investigations provide evidence regarding the understanding of complex relationships (Eisenhardt, 1989). Qualitative research deals with phenomena that includes naturalistic inquiry, inductive analysis, and holistic thinking (Patton, 1999). However, Patton (1999) warns that, to be effective, a “qualitative



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researcher has an obligation to be methodical in reporting sufficient details of data collection and the process of analysis to permit others to judge the quality of the resulting product” (p. 1191).

Based on the extant research concerning the pressures on female athletes, a semistructured interview guide was created. Individual interviews were used to capture participants’ perspectives in order to address the study’s research question.

The goal was to solicit as much in-depth information as possible from the participants. Therefore, it was important that the interview questions be open-ended (Creswell, 2005). The interviews were divided into two phases: (1) questions with images (see Table 2) and (2) questions without images (see Table 3). At the outset of both phases of interviews, the interviewees signed an informed consent, so that the interview sessions could be recorded.



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Table 2.

*\*Phase One Sample Questions*

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Item Sample

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1. What do you see when you look at these pictures?  
-Give as many adjectives as you can think of to describe each picture.
  2. What is the person in each picture doing?  
-Describe where you think each person has been.  
-Describe where you think each person is going.
  3. If I told you this person (thin model) was an athlete, what sport(s) would you say she played? Describe why you think this.
  4. If I told you this person (obese model) was an athlete, what sport(s) would you say she played? Describe why you think this.
  5. How old do you think each person is?  
-If you see that they differ in age, why?
  6. If you had to choose, which person would you rather have as a teammate? Why?
  7. Do you see yourself in either image? Why?  
-Do you have a personal connection to this image? Why?
  8. Name an athlete that comes to mind when you see each person. Describe why you think this.
  9. Looking at these people, if they were not athletes, what occupation(s) do you think they would have? Why?
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Table 3.  
*Phase Two Sample Questions*

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Item	Sample
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1. What comes to mind when you think of body image?
  2. As an athlete, do you think it is important to have a healthy body image? Why?
  3. Tell me some of your experiences with body image and your athletic performance.
  4. Overall, what are your feelings about the way athletes are portrayed in the media?
  5. Give as many adjectives as you can think of to describe the way women are portrayed in the media.
  6. Give as many adjectives as you can think of to describe the way men are portrayed in the media.
  7. Describe the way you see White women athletes portrayed in the media.
  8. Describe the way you see non-White women athletes portrayed in the media.
  9. What sports do you most often see in magazines?
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## Data Collection

*Phase one.* Two computer generated images of female athletes were presented simultaneously. Questions pertaining to these images were asked in order to garner information in an attempt to provide insight into how the SCT may further explain the body image formation of female athletes. The images depicted females in athletic-type clothing assuming an active pose. The only difference in the images was the fact that one was an illustration of a female with an unhealthy body mass index (see Figure 1, left graphic), while the other was an illustration of a female with a healthy body mass index (see Figure 1, right graphic). The researchers, with the help of a graphics designer, constructed the images to depict a female with a class I obesity body mass index of 30.0–34.9 and a female with a normal body mass index of 18.5–24.9.





## Illustrations

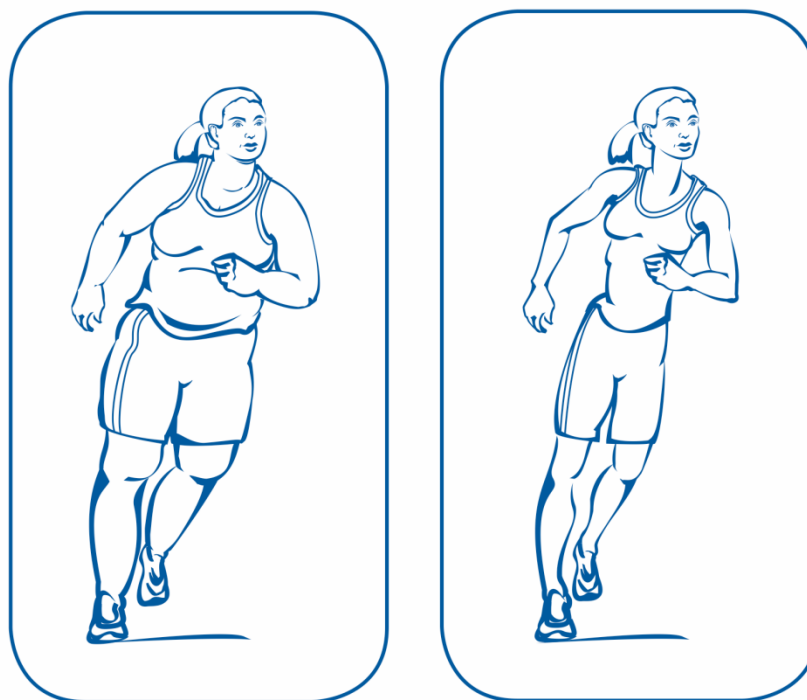


Figure 1.  
*Illustration of a Female Athlete with (a) an Unhealthy Body Mass Index (left graphic) and (b) a Health Body Mass Index (right graphic)*

*Phase two.* Immediately after the completion of phase one, phase two of the interviews began. A predetermined set of interview questions was used to guide this process; however, efforts were made to ensure flexible conversation for the interviewee. In addition, probes were used when necessary in order to have the interviewee expand upon a topic or to clarify certain points.

### Data Analysis

Over 12 hours of digital audio recordings were generated during data collection. The individual interviews ranged from 27:45 minutes in length to 56:47 minutes in length; the average interview was 37 minutes in length. The interview transcripts were 18–32 pages; the



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average transcript was 22 pages. The recordings were professionally transcribed and coded following Wolcott's (1994) suggestions for data transformation: (a) displaying findings, (b) identifying patterned regularities in the data, (c) comparing cases with one another, and (d) critiquing the research process. Thus, a constant comparative method of analysis of the interviews was conducted both intratextually (within each interview) as well as intertextually (across interviews) to identify key themes (Bazerman & Prior, 2003; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) reported that intratextual analysis involves comparing, contrasting, and coding the data throughout an ongoing inspection to detect whether any concepts emerge. Intratextual analysis necessitates that each transcript is reviewed, with the researcher making concise, analytic messages in the margins (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Such a progression helped to identify significant text segments (i.e., quotes) pertinent to the research focus, and these were subsequently grouped into theme categories. This routine was followed until all quotes (i.e., raw data themes) were grouped into theme categories.

Intertextual analysis of the data was conducted in different ways. First, the evaluation of similar concepts, blunt statements, and major themes took place when viewing the article interviews. Second, comparisons of answers of each of the interviews took place across interviews. Further scrutiny involved linking similar data themes to amalgamate higher-order themes into a more refined concept (Van Manen, 1998). Once no new categories emerged, it was believed that saturation had been reached regarding the aims of this study.

## Trustworthiness of Study

The multiple interviews, empathetic stance, "devil's advocate" technique, and member checks were used to ensure that the "goodness criteria" (Sparkes, 1998) had been met. Conducting interviews with multiple athletes provided the opportunity to examine their perceptions of the perceived sources of pressures they encountered. An empathetic stance was cultivated by member checking, which has been defined as "the process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (Creswell, 2005, p. 252). Once the coding was completed, a devil's advocate method was employed by using outside individuals. Within the framework of being a devil's advocate, an outside person or external auditor is responsible to "conduct a thorough review of the study and report back, in writing, the strengths and weaknesses of the project" (Creswell, 2005, p. 253). The external audit occurred via a panel of experts that challenged potential biases and assumptions of fellow researchers involved in the data analysis process. Discussions and review of transcripts among the researchers allowed for the critical reflection on the themes under investigation and aided the identification of emergent themes. Finally, member checking involved sending the participants a written account of the findings and asking them to verify the accuracy of the findings. The following was asked of the participants: (a) whether the description provided by the researcher was complete and realistic, (b) the accuracy of themes, and (c) whether the interpretations were fair and representative. Member checking allowed the investigators to obtain a general sense of



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how the athletes felt about the accuracy of themes. All of the interviewees agreed that the themes were, in fact, a very accurate portrayal.

## Results

Three areas of pressure emerged as influences on body image formation within the context of SCT. Specifically, (a) pressure from coaches, (b) pressure from teammates and (c) pressure from others were found to have a strong impact on the female athletes' overall body image formation. While a number of the respondents who addressed these pressures used similar words, the most illuminating comments, or those that are generally the most representative of the athletes from this study, are presented in an effort to be concise. Two results summary tables illustrate the participants' specific words stemming from questions asked in phase two; thus, each comment is followed with a numeric value that corresponds with the phase two item that triggered each response (see Tables 4 and 5).



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Table 4.

*Results Summary: Feels Pressure from Coaches*

Participant #	Participant Comment (Phase Two Item Eliciting Response)
#7	Coaches make it harder, ends up resulting in a lot of problems—eating disorders, depression, stress (3)
#17	Coaches don't think you're fit by looking at you—might not play for their school (3)
#12	[Influenced by] conditioning coaches, strength coach—before recruited by coach—will tell you about weight (2)
#3	Our coaches tell us all the time when you're in shape—will perform better than the ones who are not (3)
#7	Coach thinks I need to lose weight—put me on a diet—other girls may not take this so well...quit eating, become bulimic, anorexic, or gain more weight (3)
#9	Coach makes comments (3)
#12	Told by coach that I was too skinny-had to put on muscle; the same coach who told me to put on weight told our whole team that we had to lose 5 pounds—I didn't think I needed to lose 5 pounds (3)
#14	Coach told me to lose 10 pounds—would look better on my stat sheet. (2)
#18	My coaches told me before I went home for summer-was getting too big—I was upset—I'd never been told I weighed too much (3)
#19	Coaches put us on strict diets for athletes (3)
#21	My coach is little—so he's sensitive about how much girls weigh (3)
#22	Have friends in swimming and ballet—their coaches have been pushing them to lose weight to make it easier to perform (3)
#11	People constantly looking at you—recruiting coaches, people's opinions of our body image—coaches, teammates (2)
#5	We have to weigh in every week—girls say they want to lose weight (2)
#21	[Influenced by] coaches—some athletes more sensitive about the way they look—someone makes comment about weight—take it harshly (2)
#15	Some coaches make you wear 2" spandex over 4" spandex to get the audience (5)



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Table 5.

*Results Summary: Feels Pressure from Teammates*

Participant #	Participant Comment (Phase Two Item Eliciting Response)
#12	[Influenced by] teammates (2)
#15	[Influenced by] look of other athletes—want to be like them (2)
#12	Compare self to teammates (2)
#15	Undressing, taking showers in front of each other—if you are uncomfortable with yourself don't want to show body (2)
#15	Always want to be the strongest on the team—teammate competition (3)

## Pressure from Coaches

A significant theme that emerged pertained to the relationship between coaches and athletes. Kate stated that “some coaches put strict diets for their athletes, you know, that they can only eat a certain amount of things before games and after games and stuff like that. So I think the coaches...are definitely an influence.” As statements such as these were seen in numerous cases, this section thoroughly builds the case that coaches are indeed a powerful influence in the interviewees' ideas of themselves from a physical standpoint.

One of the aspects regarding coaches that emerged was the idea of first impressions, especially during recruitment. Throughout the interviews, the athletes would repeatedly discuss the issue of being fit and lean in the eyes of coaches. For example, Rose indicated that “if coaches don't think that you're fit, by just like looking at you, they might not ask you to come play for their school....” To Rose, as well as some of the other athletes, being fit and lean was synonymous with being a good athlete, and this was most often seen in the recruitment process. Rhonda also felt this way, as indicated by her statement that “sometimes before you even get recruited by a coach or something they'll tell you that you need to put on weight or you need to lose weight or things like that.” Another athlete, Donna, indicated that “even coaches recruiting, if they're recruiting someone and they...if you appear to not be in shape or not healthy then they're not going to look at you.”

Regarding fitness and weight, the majority of the athletes felt that coaches apply pressure on them to achieve certain standards. Nancy offered that she has felt this as she stated, “I was told that I needed to, that if I lost 10 pounds, that it would help me and it would look better on



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my stat sheet.” Gloria indicated that coaches’ expectations regarding weight have the potential to influence the development of problems in the athletes:

You know when your coach is on your back about it [weight] they feel like they need to have a team that’s perceived as fit and athletic, it makes it harder and ends up resulting in a lot of problems...anywhere from any kind of eating disorder to depression, stressing you out a lot like that.

Another athlete, when asked to discuss some of her experiences with body image and her athletic performance, spoke passionately about how her coaches influence how she feels about her body:

I just feel like our coach has this image in her head that only skinny girls can play soccer because they’re fast, which is not true...like whenever we go, like if we go out to eat and stuff with our team, she’ll be like, ‘oh do you guys really need to eat that?’ And she’s just kidding around, but sometimes she doesn’t understand that like some of us really are struggling with that kind of thing.

## **Pressure from Teammates**

A second theme that emerged was “pressure from teammates.” For example, Gina was asked whether she felt it was important for athletes to compare themselves to teammates to have a healthy body image. She responded that she felt influenced by her teammates and often felt self-conscious about her body image:

Personally I am a little bit self-conscious and, not so much as I was earlier this season, but like when you’re an athlete, you’re always around the other girls and you always have to be like, your undressing in front of each other, taking showers with each other and all that kind of stuff, and if you’re uncomfortable being with yourself, you don’t want to be showing people your body and that kind of stuff.

Rhonda felt pressure from her teammates as well. When asked how she felt athletes are influenced by body image, she initially responded, “I think that you compare yourself to your teammates. Your teammates are always around you. So they’re there to push you. Sometimes they push you in a good direction, sometimes they don’t.”

Betty, a track athlete, when asked to discuss some of her experiences with body image and her athletic performance, offered that at times she wished she were more “attractive” compared with her teammates:

Girls all want to be the prettiest because they want all the attention; and so, when you see someone else getting all the attention,...then you just at that moment say well, I wish I was prettier, ‘cause then maybe they’ll be looking at me and maybe I’d be feeling good.



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A volleyball player, Gina, felt strongly about pressure from teammates:

Athletes are influenced by body image by, well they look at other [teammates] who have great bodies and they're great athletes and they want to be like them. That's one way they can be influenced. I'm influenced by my friend, and she is an amazing volleyball player with an amazing body and she's benching like 150 in high school. So I'm like, wow, I want to be like her.

Janet, a track athlete, indicated that she felt pressure from teammate comparisons. She went on to elaborate that "if they [teammates] think that your weight is too high, then they'll be like you need to lose weight or we can't help you out and stuff. Then you'll try to lose the weight."

During phase one of the interviews, the interviewees were asked to indicate who they would rather have as a teammate, the graphically depicted lean or nonlean athlete. Notably, 52% of the participants indicated that the lean athlete would be a more desirable teammate. Typical responses supporting this notion included "more versatile," "able to perform more tasks," "more endurance," "seems quicker...stronger," "better physically...shows endurance."

## Pressure from Others

The third theme was pressure from others. For the purpose of the present study, "other people" referred to the interviewees' family and friends, nonathletic peers, spectators at their events, and even their teachers. One recurring aspect was the notion that athletes feel they have a certain standard to live up to in the eyes of others. Patty, when asked about some of her experiences with body image and her athletic performance, indicated that she was often influenced by the perceptions of others regarding her body image:

I have to tone, I can never be, I can never have like a fat day, you know. Like I have to be this size and wear these kinds of clothes and look this way and I feel like if I don't, then I'm letting everybody else down.

Patty was then asked what she meant by "letting everybody else down." She went on to say that "I care about what other people think about me a lot." Betty, a track athlete, stated that "you're going to be out in front of a lot of people, and you're going to have to do a lot of things...you just need to look like you can do what you are going to do...what you have to do." Another track athlete, Janet, expressed rather emotionally how heavily she was influenced by spectators of her sport by saying "it's like constantly in your head—you'll probably be, 'I don't like the way I look. I might look funny when I run. Oh my goodness, I can't run my race right because I look funny!'" When asked how athletes are influenced by body image, Marcy, a softball player, indicated that



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[athletes] care about what they look like in the eyes of other people or what they probably would think...if you were a certain size playing a sport, and then gain so much weight, it's going to be noticed by your fans as an athlete.

Kate also made a reference to feeling pressure to maintain a certain weight in the eyes of others. Specifically, she felt that people can make perceptions about other people solely based on weight, and this puts pressure on her to maintain a specific weight. She stated that

For myself, if I don't maintain a certain weight, I feel like I need to lose weight to stay in the range of what I am, and if not, I'm afraid people would look at me different or not think I'm capable of doing something.

Some of the athletes also made references to their nonathletic peers. For example, when asked about her experiences with body image and her athletic performance, Rose indicated that she has a tendency to get self-conscious in front of others. She was referring to the notion that as an athlete she is expected to be more muscular than the average girl: "When you are in front of other people, sometimes you kind of get a little self-conscious. You just compare yourself to what other people look like."

## Discussion

The central phenomenon that emerged in this study was "feeling pressure" as a result of social comparisons made by coaches, teammates, and others in the external population. As noted, there is scant literature related to body image formation within the female athlete population that utilizes qualitative study design and applies the SCT.

According to Taylor and Lobel (1989), "Social comparison processes include the desire to affiliate with others, the desire for information about others, and explicit self-evaluation against others" (p. 569). The female athletes in the present study felt pressure through comparisons originating from multiple sources such as coaches, teammates, and external populations. Amorose and Horn (2000) reported that coaching behaviors often generate perceived pressure on the athlete to attain and maintain certain criteria, which may have a significant impact on an athlete. Since coaches often interact with their athletes, there are numerous occasions on which they can influence an athlete's perception of competence and self-determination. As in the case of perceived pressure from coaches, one of the fundamental elements was the notion that the athletes felt that coaches judged them based on their body image. The athletes revealed that they were hypersensitive to the comments and perceptions of their coaches regarding their body image. The area of recruitment was a particularly powerful source of pressure on the athletes, as the majority of the interviewees made references to the notion that coaches will make assessments of them solely based on their physical appearance before seeing their performance. For this reason, the athletes felt pressure to be perceived as lean and fit in the eyes of their coaches. The athletes suggested that coaches may directly or indirectly judge performance capabilities by evaluating body image alone. The athletes in the present study





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felt a sense of urgency to be regarded as fit and lean in the eyes of their coaches. Thus, it appears that the comparisons between the direct statements and criteria performance objectives supplied by the coaches contributed to their body image formation.

Another poignant theme was the perceived pressure that athletes felt from teammates. The female athletes conveyed that the appearance of their teammates served as a catalyst for making comparisons to themselves. The athletes also revealed that they tend to desire to be compared to a teammate they deemed lean and fit. As such, it appears that the participants internalize comparisons to their teammates, which influence their personal perceptions of body image (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Hogg, 2000). These comparisons seemed to apply pressure to the athletes, thereby becoming a driving force for the athletes to perform better. Such perceptions align very well with the SCT, as the theory suggests that individuals learn about their own abilities and attitudes by making comparisons to others who are reasonably similar (Festinger, 1954). As interactions with teammates are unavoidable, the athletes appeared to upwardly compare themselves to their teammates by trying to attain a healthy body image. A representative response from the athletes revealed that comparisons to teammates can be deemed positive, in that it can be a force to encourage athletes to work harder to be a better athlete or to have a healthy body. Thus, upward social comparisons may be beneficial for the overall team improvement as well as for increasing the perception of a healthy body image.

In sum, teammate comparisons proved to be a force in the way in which the female athletes in the present study viewed themselves. These comparisons offer the capacity to push the athletes in an upward social comparison, a positive direction, as they work towards a healthy body image. Festinger (1954) characterized the individual as principally rational and unbiased, demonstrating a self-evaluation that is stable, precise, and accurate. By stressing such impartial, nondirectional, self-evaluative goals of social comparison, one may own up to an honest self-assessment, thereby aiming to better the self (Wood, 1989).

Another theme that emerged dealt with the pressure from others. This notion supports research indicating that when aware of the somatic-self, people become uncomfortable when they have attention focused on themselves, and they often become self-critical (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Fisher, 1985). This notion was evident in the present study, as the athletes felt that individuals in the external population evaluated their athletic talent based on body image. As viewed by the athletes, this allowed the others to compare their athletic abilities to the abilities of other athletes. If a member of the external population attributed the athlete's success purely to his or her body image, the athletes may have enough indirect contact to influence their body image. According to Festinger (1954), SCT can be applied on occasions when objective standards do not exist, leading individuals to compare themselves directly or indirectly with others. Within the context of the present study, an indirect comparison may result when a parent, friend, or family member mentions that losing weight or increasing muscle mass would allow the athlete to compete better against athletes who appear to be leaner or more muscular. In essence, the athletes suggested that the external population indirectly compared their athletic talent to a competitor or teammate on the basis of body image. If a member of the external population



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compared the athlete to a more talented teammate or other competitor who was leaner, an upward social comparison would result. Although the parent may not have ever been involved in the sport or have any training, comparing the athlete to others may motivate him or her to achieve better results. If presented properly, an upward social comparison would result. However, specific comments such as “I can never have like a fat day, I might look funny when I run,” or “I’m letting everybody else down” may be signals that upward social comparison is not being used. According to Taylor and Lobel (1989), when “the right kind of similar other is not available, victims under threat can manufacture comparison to others by inventing less fortunate others from whole cloth” (p. 576). Much like the Christy Heinrich situation, if the comparisons are not presented or taken properly, dire consequences could result.

## Limitations

The present study sought to add to the scant research in the area of body image formation within the female athletic population and to review such findings under the lens of the SCT. However, several study limitations should be considered. For example, the study was delimited to current female athletes attending a single university in the southeastern United States; hence, the perspectives were limited to this one athlete sample. Expanding to other conferences and regions would perhaps extend, as well as present new perspectives on, the phenomenon of the relationship between feeling pressure and the SCT. With regard to triangulation of data sources, member checking proved to be a powerful credibility tool, yet it was still considered a limitation of the study due to the fact that the researchers depended on the responses of the participants. For example, the researchers were concerned about whether the participants were in fact being honest and not just agreeable. During member checks, participants were given a bubble chart, illustrating the themes that emerged in the study. Upon viewing the illustration, participants were asked to be honest in their opinions of its accuracy. Thus the researchers were mindful not to provoke the participants in any way, but rather just allow them to express their thoughts. As a group, the participants were very passionate in their opinions that the themes were, in fact, accurate; this leads to the assumption that the results accurately represented the participants’ views.

## Future Research

In order to address gaps in the literature base, the following recommendations are suggested for further study. First, there is a lack of literature regarding body image and male athletes; therefore, it would be beneficial to replicate this study using male athletes. Second, there is a lack of qualitative research examining body image and athletes. Therefore, it would be beneficial to expand the present study through methods such as focus groups. Specifically, focus groups could be used to garner information about the body image of female and male athletes with regard to gender. Third, studies designed to focus on the racial aspect of body image would be beneficial. Fourth, there is a lack of literature regarding body image and adolescents. The present study could be replicated using adolescent female and male athletes. Fifth, the themes



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that emerged from the present study could be used to construct an instrument for use in a quantitative study.

## Applications for Practitioners

As coaches are indeed influential in the well-being of their athletes, results from the present study could serve to educate them on the implications of their words and actions. Overall, the biggest application is to illustrate how sensitive the female athletes in the present study were regarding body image formation. These female athletes may sometimes be regarded as more mentally tough when compared to their nonathletic female peers. In considering that the female athletes were especially sensitive to comments from coaches, it is appropriate to suggest that coaches take more time in getting to know their athletes, so as to be better informed on their desired communication and motivation styles. This concept aligns well with findings from a recent study that indicated that coaches and athletes should focus on enhancing “their shared understanding” (Lorimer & Jowett, 2013, p. 329) as communication is critical in developing and maintaining any rapport. By honing communication skills, athletes may develop a better understanding of the motives for their coaches’ comments, thereby possibly removing some of the negative personal associations stemming from such comments.

In addition to becoming more informed on how to address individual athletes, specifically regarding optimal performance physiques, coaches should be aware of the environment in which such conversations are being held. Athletes in the present study naturally compared themselves to one another, but moreover, these athletes made decisions about their physique, adding personal pressures to themselves, as a result of the coaches’ comments regarding other athletes. The context of performance-based comments regarding losing and/or gaining weight and/or muscle should be managed at an individualized level.

Findings from the present study can be used to help guide coaches in their daily practices as well as serve as content material for coaching curricula and training sessions. Additionally, the results may provide topical content for female athletic support groups. A summary of these and other potential applications for practitioners is provided in Table 6.



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Table 7.

*Application for Practitioners*

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*Participant # Participant Comment (Phase Two Item Eliciting Response)*

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1. Compare athletes to their own previous performances not to the performance of others. For example, “Why can’t you be fast like Katie?” is not appropriate.
  2. Focus on healthy behaviors rather than a particular size or weight. For example, focus on communicating information regarding a proper diet that is likely to provide the nutrients appropriate for a particular athlete, sport and season.
  3. Avoid creating an atmosphere where athletes are paranoid about their food choices. Be educational in an approach to a balanced diet.
  4. Avoid stereotyping athletes for sports and/or positions by observing body type. Instead, focus on skill level. For example, the tallest girls on a basketball team may be more skilled at the guard position but are often placed in the post because of their height.
  5. Focus improvements on both performance-related (agility, balance, coordination, power, quickness, speed, etc.) and fitness-related (body composition, cardiorespiratory endurance, flexibility, muscular endurance and muscular strength) elements, as any one of these areas or combined areas are likely to enhance performance over simple weight gains and/or losses.
  6. Focus on improving personal communication skills, as the words of a coach are influential. Therefore, use the terminology that matters; in other words, use language that is focused on performance-related skills (agility, balance, coordination, power, quickness, speed, etc.) versus language that is directed at weight gain and/or losses. These are the attributes that will enhance athletic performance.
  7. Educate female athletes on the difference between fat and muscle. If they do not know that muscle weighs more than fat, they may be shocked and dismayed at the increase in body weight when they begin a serious workout regimen such as those seen in collegiate athletics.
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## Summary

As a whole, the interviewees indicated very poignantly the direct link between coaches, teammates, and others in influencing body image formation. It was further noted that the phenomenon of “feels pressure” was fundamental to the overall picture of the factors that influence the body image of these female athletes. Revealing links between the SCT and feeling pressure were seen throughout the themes that emerged in this study. The theme of “pressure from coaches” was revealed as being a powerful influence on the way the athletes felt about



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themselves from the physical standpoint. The athletes also believed that coaches will often make assumptions regarding athletic potential based solely on physique, as seen during recruitment. This lends itself to athletes comparing themselves to other recruits that are comparable to them. The theme of “pressure from teammates” was also revealed as a source of pressure, both positively and negatively; positive with respect to the notion that it can propel these athletes to work harder to enhance athletic performance, yet negative in that it offers the capacity to make unhealthy social comparisons. The notion of making unhealthy social comparisons was also seen through the participants’ experiences with observing their teammates engaging in unhealthy eating and/or exercise practices, either as a result of feeling self-conscious, or of trying to lose weight or gain muscle mass. This observation would often lead the participants to emulate their teammates’ unhealthy behaviors. Finally, the theme of “pressure from others” provided very moving illustrations that the athletes felt pressure, by social comparison, to maintain a certain physique. Examples of this were seen when participants discussed their experiences with feeling self-conscious in the eyes of others (family and friends, nonathletic peers, spectators at events, and teachers). Some of the interviewees were very specific with regard to their experiences, revealing that gaining muscle weight is often perceived negatively in social aspects.



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