Relationships Between Physical Self-Presentation and Sport Competition Trait Anxiety: A Preliminary Study

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Sport competition trait anxiety (A-trait) reflects an individual's tendency to perceive threat and to experience anxiety in sport competition (Martens, 1977). Leary (1992) suggested that sport competition anxiety revolves around the self-presentational implications of competition. That is, people need to feel that they have made a positive impression on others, but whenever they compete, they run the risk of conveying negative images of themselves, and being negatively evaluated by observers. Leary (1992) suggested that like social anxiety, sport competition anxiety may arise when individuals doubt their ability to present a desired image and fear subsequent negative evaluative reactions from an audience (Leary, 1983; Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Indeed, the perception of evaluative threat has been identified as a key construct in theories of competitive anxiety (Endler, 1978; Vealey, 1990), and considerable research has documented the positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation of performance and competitive trait anxiety (e.g., Gould, Horn, & Spreeman, 1983; Lewthwaite & Scanlan, 1989; Passer, 1983). However, performance may not be the only self-presentational aspect of sport associated with competition anxiety. Research has demonstrated that sport participants are often concerned with the appearance and evaluation of their bodies (e.g., Davis & Cowles, 1989; Mack & Carron, 1994; McAuley & Burman, 1993), and Leary (1992) suggested that such physical self-presentation concerns may be a concomitant of sport competition anxiety. To explore these ideas, the present study examined the relationship between two aspects of physical self-presentation—social physique anxiety and physical self-presentation confidence—and sport competition trait anxiety.

Social physique anxiety (SPA) is a construct that represents self-presentational anxiety related to the physique (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989). Hart et al. (1989) have developed the Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS) as a trait measure of the anxiety experienced when one's physique is perceived to be evaluated by others. Women high in SPA have been found to (a) experience more self-reported stress and feel less comfortable during physique evaluation,
have more frequent negative thoughts about their body’s appearance (Hart et al., 1989), (c) prefer private exercise settings (Spink, 1992), and (d) prefer settings that de-emphasize the physique (Crawford & Eklund, 1994).

Given the relationship between SPA and women’s discomfort in (Hart et al., 1989) and avoidance of situations (Spink, 1992) involving physical self-presentation, it is argued that women with high SPA may have a tendency to respond to sport competition with greater anxiety. For women with high SPA, competitive situations may pose a greater threat and fear of negative physical evaluation by a variety of sources, such as spectators, officials, and other competitors. Indeed, Mack and Carron (1994) recently found that female figure skaters perceived their physiques to be evaluated more during competitions than during practice sessions. Thus, in the present study, it was hypothesized that women who are more anxious about presenting their bodies to an audience (i.e., high SPA) would tend to experience more anxiety in situations involving sport competition (i.e., high sport competition trait anxiety).

Physical self-presentation confidence (PSPC), as conceptualized and measured by a subscale of the Physical Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES; Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, & Cantrell, 1982), represents confidence in displaying or using one’s body and in having these attributes/skills evaluated by others. Unlike the SPAS, which contains items relevant only to self-presentation of the physique (specifically body fat, muscle tone, and proportions), items on the PSPC subscale pertain to self-presentation of an array of physical attributes (e.g., posture, size, voice). Individuals with low PSPC have been found to experience greater social anxiety (Ryckman et al., 1982; sample of males and females) and greater social physique anxiety (McAuley & Burman, 1993; sample of females only). These results suggest that women who doubt that their bodies will make a favorable impression on others will tend to experience greater anxiety in situations where their bodies are displayed to an evaluative audience. In sport competition, these self-presentation doubts may be a source of sport competition anxiety, just as doubts about performance are a source of anxiety (Lewthwaite & Scanlan, 1989). Based on the foregoing results and logic, it was hypothesized that women with low physical self-presentation confidence would have higher sport competition trait anxiety.

Given the published findings reviewed, it was also expected that significant relationships between A-trait and SPA and A-trait and PSPC would occur for female participants only. The existence of such gender differences can be expected for several reasons. First, popular media images and sport socialization processes place greater emphasis on the body and its appearance for females than for males (cf. Greendorfer, 1992; Striegel-Moore, Silverstein, & Rodin, 1986). Even women who participate in traditionally male-dominated sports may be subtly encouraged to ascribe to images of “beauty, glamour, and sex appeal” (MacNeill, 1988, p. 205). Conversely, it has been argued that sport, for males, usually places greater emphasis on physical skill than on physical appearance (MacNeill, 1988). There is also some evidence that men are less preoccupied with body appearance than women and are less likely to develop body-related anxiety (Secord & Jourard, 1953).

Taking into account these research findings and gender socialization issues, it is argued that relative to males, female sport participants may be more concerned with other peoples’ impressions and evaluations of their bodies. Thus, for women, doubts and anxiety stemming from their physical self-presentation concerns may