Body Image Perceptions of Post-Career Female Athletes: Implications for Sport Managers

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On a global scale, female athletes and non-athletes are affected by mainstream marketing and social comparisons that influence their own body image perceptions. Sadly, a variety of health issues, some of which include eating disorders, substance abuse, depression and decreased self-esteem may emerge as a result of these comparisons (Varnes et al., 2013). Although female athletes tend to have greater confidence in their bodies in comparison to non-athlete, they are also likely to have greater body image dissatisfaction (Davis, 1992). Social comparison theory argues that body ideals are socially constructed through media-enforced and appearance-oriented culture (Thompson et al., 1999). Many of the body ideal comparisons that female athletes naturally evaluate themselves against are those socially constructed frames (Reichart, 2015).

While extensive literature discusses the body image and related mental health of current female athletes, little research has addressed the experiences of post-career female athletes during and after their initial transition from college sport. This is a relevant theoretical and practical gap to address, as Kong and Harris (2015) showed that body image dissatisfaction and associated eating disorders continued to develop after athletes retire. Some research suggests that female athletes tend to compare their bodies in the post-career phase, to that of active competition (Greenleaf, 2002), which has valuable extensions for social comparison theory. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the multiple points of comparison that former female athletes evaluate in their post-career phase, what factors influence their body image perceptions, and if/how those influences change over time. From a management perspective, we hope to gain insight from participants themselves as to resources and organizational supports that could assist in preventing body image dissatisfaction and mitigating the negative impact of poor perceptions on the mental and physical health of athletes.

Our in-progress study utilizes semi-structured interviews to elicit narratives of former female college athletes that were recruited through a process of purposive criterion sampling. Participants (anticipated n=30) were selected based on the following: (a) Self identify as a female, (b) Are a former NCAA student-athlete, (c) Are not currently pursuing competitive sport pathways. Sample questions included: Do you ever find yourself comparing your current body, with your collegiate athlete body? In what ways? When you have thoughts about your body (positive or negative), do they ever involve comparisons? If so, what or who do you tend to compare yourself too? Once interviews are completed, we will take an inductive approach to data analysis, including transcribing the interview audio recordings, open-coding, cross referencing interview data with field notes and observer comments, and noting emergent thematic findings. Reflexivity, peer checking, interview transcript checks, and member checking will also be utilized to enhance authenticity and accuracy.

The emerging findings have strong implications for research and practice, including illuminating the voices of former female athletes in regards to body image and providing free and cost-efficient methods for sport managers to adopt to assist current and future transitioning athletes in that process.