

Athletics Influence on Eating Disorders in the College Demographic

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INTRODUCTION

Athletes feel a constant pressure to maintain an accepted physique while in the spotlight. The current study examined the role of social pressures on college athletes' degree of conformity to norms related to body type and the thin-as-beautiful aesthetic.

PURPOSE

The purpose of our study is to increase the awareness of eating disorders in athletes and coaching staff. Given the stigma surrounding the topic, eating disorders are easily dismissed. However, many suffer from these mental disorders and it surrounds the entire college community.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

152 athletes from UWEC (116 women and 36 men; age $M=20.05$) completed an online survey offered to them either through the SONA system, an email from their coaching staff, or through social media.

PROCEDURE

Participants took an online Qualtrics Survey consisting of questions regarding body image, eating habits, pressure of sport, and coaches discussions of eating disorders.

We were able to use the SCOFF Questionnaire for Eating Disorders as a guide for the questions on our survey pertaining to the athlete's eating habits (Morgan et al., 1999). Many of our questions were personal, and required a short written answer. We coded these responses systematically and obtained our results through SPSS analyses.



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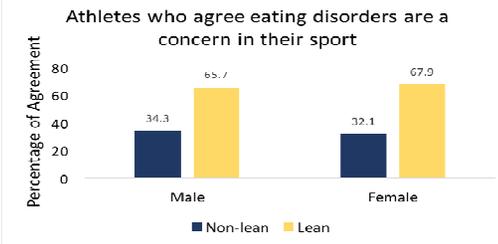
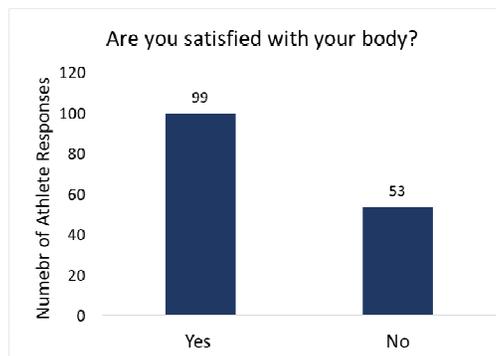
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the coaches in the UWEC softball, men's basketball, gymnastics, volleyball, men and women's track and field, men and women's cross country, and wrestling programs for participating in our interview process. Also, thank you to the UWEC student athletes who took the online survey.

RESULTS

Our convenience sample was grouped for analyses based on gender, participation in lean and non-lean sports, and degree of body satisfaction. Key findings are listed below:

- Females were overall less satisfied with their body than were males ($p=.001$).
- Responses to the question "Are you trying to lose weight?" varied reliably by gender and sport type ($p=.049$).
- Coaches of lean sports reported providing more educational opportunities regarding disordered eating than did those of non-lean sports ($p=.015$).
- 65% of our participants were satisfied with their bodies.
- 16% of our participants personally experienced disordered eating or an eating disorder.
- Both male and female athletes in lean sports agreed that eating disorders were a concern in their sport ($p=.000$)



DISCUSSION

Variations of self-perception and disordered eating habits between athletes in lean and non-lean sports were outlined through the results of the survey. Lean sports can be described as sports where having a lower weight than may be normal is more beneficial to the athlete, and non-lean sports are sports where weight does not influence performance. Participants who are involved in sports that emphasize a relationship between appearing thin and achieving excellence tend to be less satisfied with their bodies in combination with a pressure to look a certain way based off the image of their sport. While there were recognizable differences in results in relation to gender, sport type was shown to have more influence throughout our data. We believe that this may be due to a variety of influences other than their gender, such as a coaching staff and teammate influences. In assessing different prevention techniques and education of eating disorders, we observed from our data that more education may be beneficial to both coaches and athletes in all sports.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Looking ahead, we would like to obtain more participation from a wider variety of sports and equal representation of male and female athletes. While we had a variety of both lean and non-lean sports, specific sport teams that participated in the survey dominated others that may have given more conclusive information. We would also like to compare Division 1, Division 2, and Division 3 schools in terms of the potentially different types of pressures placed on both coaches and athletes to achieve excellence (Peden et al., 2008). Additionally, we are interested in examining differences between incoming student athletes and seniors who are finishing their sports career, with the idea that student vulnerabilities and behaviors may change across their time in college.

REFERENCES

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