SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL OF SPORT AND PERFORMANCE

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Body size, race, and beauty in sport: A preliminary study of the perspectives of a university's female rugby and netball players

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes of female university rugby and netball players toward their bodies, specifically their perceptions of size, race, and beauty. The sports were chosen because of their respective masculine and feminine images, historically. The study used a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of eight players from the women's rugby and netball teams at a university in the north-east of England. Thematic analysis revealed three themes: inclusivity, discrimination, and the promotion of inclusiveness. Almost all participants reported negative body image, especially outside the sporting environment. However, most participants emphasised a positive outlook on their bodies in society and on the utilisation of their unique bodies to better serve their purposes in the sports they play. The study's findings emphasise the need to foster inclusivity of body types and races in sporting environments and in the rest of society.

Keywords: Physical activity psychology, Body image, Self-image, Thematic analysis, Society, Sport performance.

Cite this article as:
Luca, M., Davis, P., & Whyte, I. (2023). Body size, race, and beauty in sport: A preliminary study of the perspectives of a university's female rugby and netball players. *Scientific Journal of Sport and Performance*, *3*(1), 19-36.

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Submitted for publication September 26, 2023.
Accepted for publication October 14, 2023.
Published October 00, 2023.
Scientific Journal of Sport and Performance. ISSN 2794-0586.
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doi:

INTRODUCTION

Sport is a massive social and cultural phenomenon. Beedie and Craig (2011) note that sport is, globally, a frequent component of people's lives. Sport is therefore fitted to contribute to our understanding of and response to social and cultural problems (Sekot, 2009). While a site of self-expression, humanisation, and identity-performance (Kretchmar, 2015), sport has been available to some more than others. One cause of limited availability is gender inequality.

While gender inequality extends far beyond sport (Senne, 2016), sport is a site of precise manifestations. For instance, women and girls have suffered and continue to suffer exclusion, under-payment, and undervaluation. Molnar and Kelly (2013, 169-170) observe that 'men still have more and wider opportunities to turn professional and make a living out of practicing and performing', and offer the illustration of bodybuilder Joanna Thomas, unable to secure sponsorship and moved to provide nude pictures of herself on the internet for paying customers to supplement her income (for some expose of how the Covid pandemic threw gendered material inequalities in sport into sharp relief, see Davis and Weaving, 2022). Males have long dominated the structure of sport too, from performance and prestige to organisation, officiating and coaching.

Gendered material inequalities in sport cannot be detached from the symbolic inequalities and historical ideologies to which they are intimately connected. Russell (2002) observes that women's involvement in physical exercise during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sparked a variety of anxieties, worries and false beliefs about negative repercussions, underpinned by and recreating the 'frailty myth'. Leong (2018), similarly, notes that until 1870 women's participation in sport was viewed as purely recreational rather than a means of competition. Female physical education pioneer Madame Osterberg, again, saw the value of female physical education as its contribution to the creation of successful mothers and homemakers (Hargreaves, 1994, 77-78). This landscape provides early intimation of the symbiosis of sport and masculine attributes such as power, aggression, strength, dominance, and violence (Hardy, 2015) - desiderata of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1987). The prototypical sport body, again, has been conceived as an 'able-bodied' *male* body, defined by a height, weight, muscle mass, toughness, and athleticism more likely to be found in men (Lunde and Gattario, 2017). This echoes Willis's (1994, 36) observation that 'it is assumed that sports success *is* success at being masculine. Physical achievement and masculine identity are taken to be the same.' The matrix of sport, sporting bodies and masculinity is sufficient to make female sport a diminutive version, a status confirmed by the fact that males, again, have dominated sport's scaffolding, such as organisation, officiating, and coaching. Furthermore, a prestigious conception of femininity, defined by (among other things) bodily *passivity*, has encouraged the notion that sport – especially that centralising speed, strength, and power – and femininity are antithetical (Mackinnon, 1987, 120). As Willis (1994, 36) again puts it, 'to succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because she has, in certain profound symbolic ways, become a man.' And the unkindest cut of all might be that even in sports (such as figure skating) culturally identified with girls and young women, success is to do with 'fitting the youthful, lithe, nubile, stereotypically "*perfect*" popular image of femininity' (Willis 1994, 36). This is illustrated in Daddario's (1994) study, which found that a major American media network's coverage of women's events at the 1992 Winter Olympics featured a range of devices foregrounding female athletes' sexual attractiveness or beauty, i.e., their putatively endearing, putatively adolescent, or prepubescent qualities; their mental fragility; and their motivations to please others (such as family members) through their Olympic performance.

The immediately preceding involves (among other things) media behaviour. Pedersen (2002) contends, prior to the advent of social media, that one of the most significant influences upon contemporary gender attitudes is the media. Writing over a decade later, Trolan (2013) observes that the mass media plays a significant

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role, through daily images in print and television, in spreading gender discrimination and gender inequalities. There is, again, a preoccupation with what a woman's body should look like, as a criterion of whether she is worthy of participation in sport (Trolan, 2013). Fink (2015) similarly observes that characteristics such femininity and heterosexuality continue to dominate how the media frames sportswomen, echoing Lock's (2010) invocation of Butler's notion of the 'heterosexual matrix', linking sex, gender, and female heterosexuality. In cahoots with these framings is a media idealisation of female thinness (Greenwood and Cin, 2012) and whiteness. Media body ideals are typically embodied in white women (Greenwood and Cin, 2012). Greenwood and Cin (2012), again, observe a regular social assumption that people of colour belong to another cultural environment, in which the white, thin beauty ideal is rejected or considered irrelevant, and where determinants of female self-esteem are more likely to be community and (non-media) institutions such as religion.

The preceding landscape courts body image challenges for females who play sport. These challenges might be nuanced according to features such as the sport played, whether one is inside or outside of one's sport environment, and race.

Rugby and netball are, materially and culturally, very different sports. The first is a sociocultural signifier of masculinity, while the second is a sociocultural signifier of femininity. Rugby is seen as a sport for men because of how physically demanding the game is (Kane and Snyder, 1989). Like football and hockey, it encourages and celebrates the traditional masculine notions of dominance through forceful physical contact and toughness (Hardy, 2015). Female rugby has therefore been hindered by the fear that women may become more masculine (Joncheray and Tlili, 2013). Netball, in contrast, is a sport in which women predominate and is a successful female sport (Nauright and Broomhall, 1994). However, this success is not without ambiguity. In the late nineteenth century, women's basketball led to netball to match patriarchal notions of 'an acquiescent femininity' (Devonport et al., 2019). Basketball's contact was eliminated, which Treagus (2005) described as a process of diminishing basketball's masculinity to make sure it complied with the prevalent conceptions of female physical movement. The limited exertion and absence of contact make netball a female sport acceptable to the patriarchal environment of sport. Furthermore, netball is notable for fostering femininity in its participants' attire, body, and behaviour (Devonport et al., 2019).

Women's sport has made undoubted progress. Women are quickly making their way into sports once thought to be for exclusively male participation (O'Neill and Mulready, 2015). Despite this, there remain problems with the potential to impact on how female athletes see their bodies (Varnes et al., 2013). Historical and contemporary societies apply beauty standards that call for a slim, athletic body type that is difficult to attain. Female athletes, again, are vulnerable to framing as sexual objects. This co-exists with pressure to achieve excellence in one's sport (Godoy-Izquierdo and D´ıaz, 2021).

There is evidence that female athletes have good body perception in the sport context (see Liechty et al., 2015; Lunde and Gattario, 2017; Devonport et al., 2019, as cited in Godoy-Izquierdo and D´ıaz, 2021). Despite the social negativity surrounding female athlete body image, female athletes adopt 'body positivity'. This involves improvement in body image through appreciation of physical changes, and a greater understanding and appreciation of the utility – as opposed to the appearance - of one's body. The female athlete honours and celebrates her body because she is united with it in a loving and appreciating way (Godoy-Izquierdo and D´ıaz, 2021).

Outside of the sport context, however, female athletes might worry about their actual and 'ideal' body weight, size, and form, since they often do not fit the stereotype of the typical female body. Female body ideals,

again, elevate the slim, white, curved, toned and heterosexual body. Women who play male-dominated sports, such as football, rugby, and hockey, must deal with the insulting terms, 'butch' and 'lesbian', used to disparage their appearance (Liechty et al., 2015).

Daddario's (1994) foregoing findings reveal problematic commentary on female athletes. Nor is such problematic commentary consigned to the dustbin of history. Despite a drop in openly sexist representation (Wolter, 2021, as cited in LeCouteur and Yong, 2022), male and female athletes are still described differently. For instance, commentators continue to emphasise female athletes' physical attributes above their performance skills (Fink, 2015). Nor is the problematic commentary confined to those whose job it is to commentate. Body commentary often comes from coaches, parents, athletes, friends, and other spectators (LeCouteur and Yong, 2022; Muscat and Long, 2008; SIater and Tiggemann, 2011). Athletes who hear harsh criticism of their bodies, especially from coaches, may become upset and anxious, because they feel under pressure to meet specific standards of appearance (Mosewich et al., 2009). Ryan (1996, cited in Muscat and Long, 2008) illustrates in the case of gymnastics coach Bela Karolyi (male) how coaches' (overwhelmingly male) negative remarks propagate the sociocultural value of beauty, slimness and (therefore) weight loss: Karolyi called one pupil a 'pregnant cow' as she began puberty, called another a 'pregnant spider' and called another an 'overstuffed Christmas turkey'. Kerr, Berman, and Souza (2006), again, find that coaches frequently make comments about teen girls who grow hips or breasts. This behaviour may damage a young woman's body image and may cause her to wonder what is going to happen to her body.

The objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) is another lens through which to view body image in women's sports. Based on this theory, women are valued more as objects to be used and consumed by others than as individuals with emotions and distinct purposes (Muscat and Long, 2008). According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), the objectification theory explains how being a woman in over-sexualized Western cultures will significantly affect one's life. It explains that after seeing various forms of bodily objectification, women and girls eventually start to view themselves as an 'object' that people can judge, based solely on their appearance (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2005). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) introduced the term, 'self-objectification', which signifies a constant close eye on one's appearance. Though not all women experience it, most self-objectification is associated with negative outcomes. It depends solely on how a person views their body. For instance, ballet dancers have been identified as at risk of self-objectification and eating disorders, due to their high concentration on their bodies and appearance (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2005).

Research has now shifted its emphasis to how external factors lead to objectification and therefore how to lessen it (Liechty et al., 2015). Most physical activity venues (e.g., gyms) highlight someone's attractiveness and weight, which may create an environment that is objectifying (Prichard and Tiggemann, 2005). D'abundo (2007) explains that physical activity with a focus on health, well-being, and pleasure, rather than appearance, produces less oppressive and objectifying circumstances. A healthier atmosphere could result if people view the physical activity setting as a tool to assist them in their health, rather than something to help them appear fit in today's society. A healthy environment will result in a lower self-objectification and increase the likelihood of positive body image (Liechty et al., 2015).

The significance of race and ethnicity to the ideal body is unclear. Craig (2006) observes that race has commonly been excluded from feminist studies of beauty, despite the intimate ties between racial politics and discourses of beauty. Writing much later, Winter et al. (2019) note that race and ethnicity, which may have an impact on body ideal and self-image, have not yet been sufficiently investigated. However, Winter et al.'s (2019) study found that women of colour have a higher appreciation of their body image. In contrast,

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white women are more concerned with their weight and appearance, which can lead to eating disorders and high levels of anxiety or depression. Women of colour choose to embrace their bodies (Mucherah and Frazier, 2013; Winter et al., 2019) and enjoy the uniqueness expressed in smiles, styles, attitudes, and confidence (Winter et al., 2019), limiting the hegemony of white 'thin' culture.

This study seeks to discover the respective body image experiences and impressions, inside and outside of one's sport environment, of members of the female rugby and netball teams at a university in the north-east of England, UK. The research population, again, was selected because of the preceding material and symbolic differences between rugby and netball, which might elicit different body image experiences and impressions. To meet this overarching aim, three research questions (RQ) were developed:

- RQ 1. What are university female rugby and netball players' perspectives upon the value of their bodies?
- RQ 2. What are the similarities and dissimilarities in how university female rugby and netball players perceive and value their bodies?
- RQ 3. How do university female rugby and netball players perceive and value their bodies with respect to societal standards of female attractiveness?

METHOD

Following ethical approval by the host university (Ethics reference number 011937), adult female rugby and netball players from a university in the north-east of England were invited to take part in this study.

This investigation employed a qualitative approach, eliciting data through semi-structured interviews. This allowed the researchers to concentrate on the athletes' experiences, feelings, and the explanations proffered by them for their behaviour or perceptions (Merriam, 2019). Semi-structured interviews also allow for adaptability in questioning, providing the ability to re-order questions or follow-up lines of interest with supplementary questions, resulting in the prospect of gaining richer data (Jones, 2022).

Interviews were conducted online and recorded for transcription using Microsoft Teams (Microsoft Corporation, One Microsoft Way Redmond, Washington, U.S).

Recruitment

Recruitment was a two-stage process. First, two gatekeepers, namely a rugby coach and a netball team captain, were contacted by email. They were sent information about the study, inclusion criteria, and how confidential data would be handled, alongside a request for their assistance in identifying potential participants for the study. The gatekeepers provided details to the researchers, after which they had no further dealings with the project team.

The second stage of the recruitment process involved each prospective participant being sent an email invitation, accompanied by a Participant Information Sheet and an Informed Consent Form. Eight women responded affirmatively, and having completed and given their informed consent, were recruited for the study.

Participants

Four female rugby players (mean age = 19.5 years, range 19 – 20 years) and four female netball players (mean age = 24 years, range 21 – 30 years) took part in the study (Figure 1). Mean age of the eight participants = 21.75 years; SD: ± 3.69. There was a large range of experiences noted, with one netball player citing 25 years of experience, and one rugby player 10 years. Other participants had notably less experience.

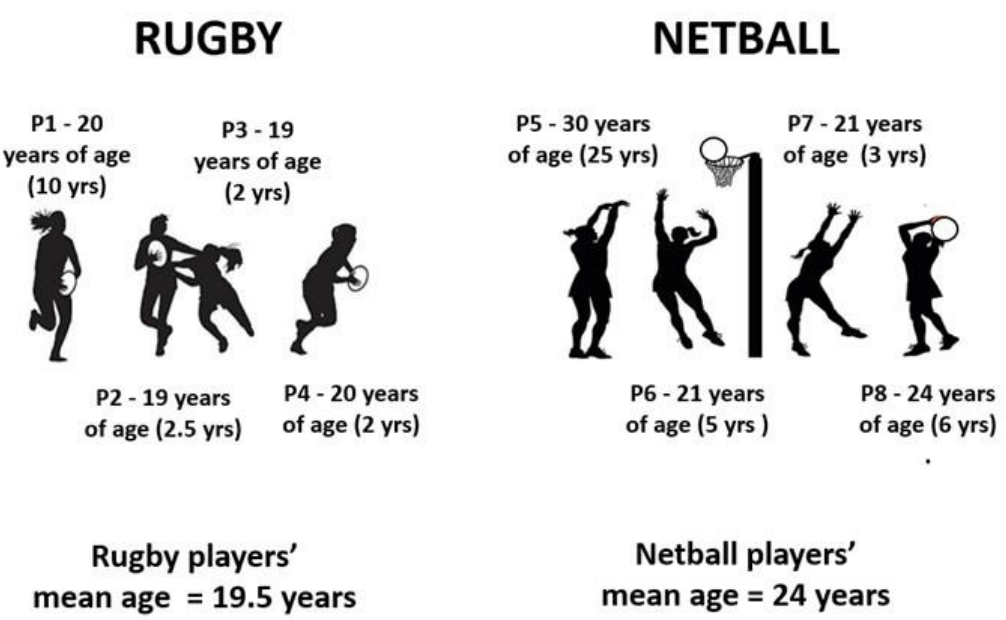

Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of participants, indicating participant ID (P), age and years' experience (in parentheses).

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim.* Data was analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stage process. At the first stage (Read and Take notes), personal identifying information was removed from the text. The process then followed that of similar studies, with meaning units identified, coded, and then allocated to themes that were identified by the authors (Figure 2). A meaning unit has been defined by Tesch (2013, p121) as '… a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information.' In this context, it might be a word or two, a sentence or a bigger chunk of information. Irrespective of length, the determining factor is that a meaning unit must mean something in the context of the research undertaken.

Figure 2. Representation of Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-stage thematic analysis process.

To help ensure trustworthiness, *member checking* was carried out. Jones (2022, p. 288) explains member checking as asking 'those being investigated to judge the analysis and interpretation themselves, by providing them with a summary of the analysis and asking them to critically comment upon the adequacy of the findings. Participants were sent copies of the analysis, and all were happy with it.

RESULTS

Following *verbatim* transcription of the eight interviews, 25,000 words were presented for thematic analysis. The first stage involved an initial read-through of the text, during which personal identification information

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was removed. Next, meaning units were identified and distilled to nine themes. Further analysis developed three main categories with three themes in each category. The categories were Inclusiveness, Discrimination, and Promoting Inclusiveness (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Diagrammatic representation of nine themes identified following coding and the three categories developed from further distillation.

Inclusiveness

Participants provided comments that were distilled into three themes before being grouped under the category of inclusiveness. The themes reflected participants' attitudes toward their own appearance, their views of sociocultural attitudes to appearances, and their perceptions of the attitudes that sport have around appearances (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Inclusiveness and underlying themes that illustrate meaning units.

Inclusive Attitudes to One's Own Appearance

It is recognised that the way in which an individual views or experiences their body (body image) often varies across time and circumstance (Grogan, 2021). Irrespective, a person's body image impacts how that individual value their own body (Grogan, 2021). This can be expressed in positive or negative thoughts or behaviours. Most respondents felt positive perceptions of their bodies increased as they aged and matured. Inclusive statements about their own appearances were common in the transcripts, with most developing the idea that being different should be viewed as a positive characteristic, as it shows uniqueness. For instance, Participant 4 commented on this uniqueness while also recognising that for some, it might be viewed negatively (Figure 4).

Most interviewees suggested that competitive sport participants often had different conceptions of participation from the general population who exercise. For example, competitors are likely to want to improve fitness levels and well-being, as well as their competitive performance, in contrast with the broader 'physically active' population, who tend to have more aesthetic goals (see fuller review in Harwood et al, 2015). Participant 5 exemplified this:

> *I do care what I look like, but I'm doing the Great North Run [half marathon] in September, so I am now running to train for that. I'm not running to lose weight. I'm running to train for that event. So, I think that it is slightly different from people who run to lose weight or become slimmer, or whatever. (Participant 5).*

Other positive messages, mostly affirming the changes in their bodies as they trained and got fitter, were given by both sets of participants. These changes were of concern initially, but the concerns were supplanted by the realisation that it was those self-same bodies that assisted their success in their respective sports. Participant 4 stated:

> *You kind of realise ... your purpose in a rugby match is better served because of my size and because I'm a bit bigger than other people. I'm that stronger. That makes me better at the position that I'm asked to play. (Participant 4).*

Inclusive sociocultural attitudes to appearances

Most participants viewed society's attitudes to body image as problematic. Through time, societal attitudes about body size, race, and appearance have changed. Respondents identified this change even in their relatively young lives. However, they also recognised that societal views about how a person or a group appears can still be stereotypically negative. Participant 2, for instance, indicated concerns about how people perceive and value people of colour (Figure 4).

Participants believed strongly that sport has the capacity to promote greater inclusivity and needs to do so, specifically in showcasing differences in body types, shape and stature, and race. Participant 3 vocalised this concern, focussing on the impact that seeing different types of people taking part in sport makes, through providing diverse positive role models for younger people. The issue of race, colour, and body type was also mentioned by Participant 8, who believed strongly that social media stokes many toxic and damaging images of bodies, especially to young people. She called for broader conceptions of 'ideal' bodies (Figure 4). She expanded on the issue of representation of people of colour:

> *... it really means that you can relate to them and feel validated by them being there and showing up because we know that people of colour are often shunned and often not given the attention they*

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deserve or representation they deserve. And it will make a huge difference to people confidence if they can see themselves and people in the media and in sport. (Participant 8).

Inclusive Sport Attitudes to Appearances

When it came to sport-specific attitudes to players' appearances, rugby and rugby players were deemed to have strong perspectives on the value of body type inclusivity. Our rugby respondents all recognised and stated that rugby was a sport for all, irrespective of size, shape, race, or appearance (see Participant 1's comment in Figure 4). She continued her promotion of rugby's diversity image, noting:

You just have to be able to play, really. Just show up to training and ... or like cause different place like different people at different roles. Like you're not great like running a lot, like running distance and like being fast and all, then there's like different positions for you. (Participant 1).

The role that the sport of rugby has in promoting confidence, body-image, and ultimately self-esteem cannot be underplayed. Participant 2 offered her vision of its importance (Figure 4).

By contrast, netball players offered different insights with respect to the importance of body-type in netball. All four were in accord about the need to be tall to play at a high level. Such comments were partly mitigated by Participant 5, who noted that height is imperative at elite standard, but that being shorter should not preclude others from playing at their own levels.

Discrimination

Following analysis of the transcripts, the next category identified was Discrimination. The data highlighted poor body image and its negative consequences. It is organised under three themes: attitudes to one's own appearance; sociocultural attitudes to appearances; and sport attitudes to appearances (Figure 5).

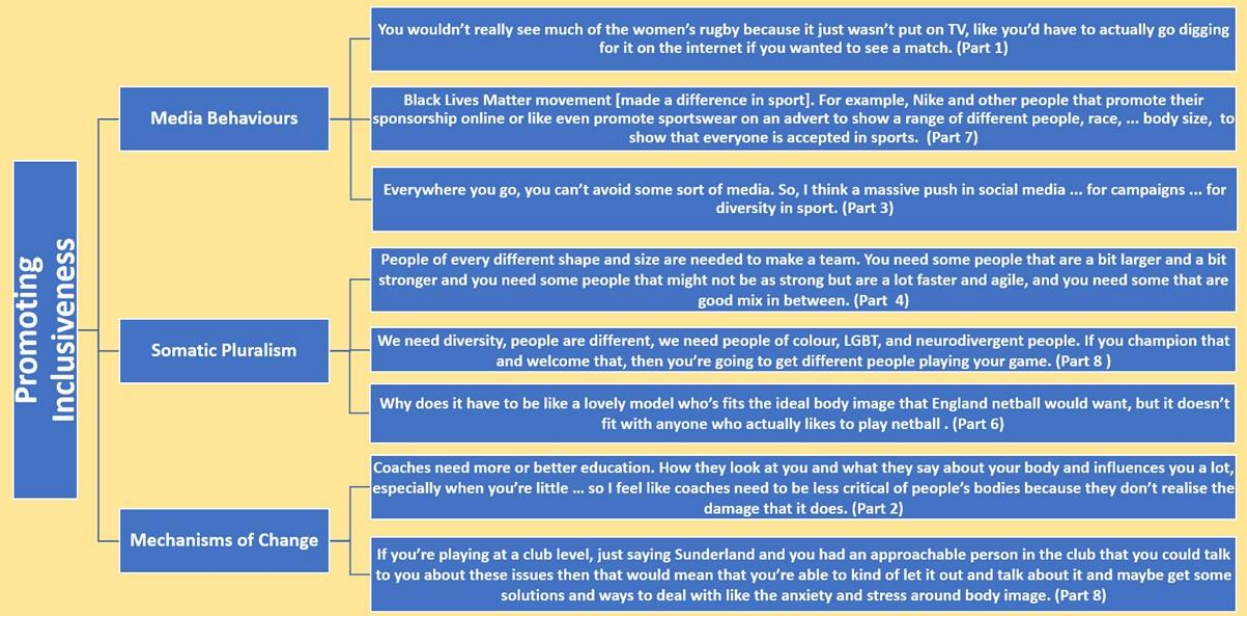

Figure 5. The category of Discrimination and underlying themes showing examples of meaning units.

Discriminatory attitudes to one's own appearance

All participants recounted struggles they had experienced while dealing with their (at times changing) body. They identified that there were different and sometimes ambiguous messages inside and outside of sport (see, for instance, Participant 2, Figure 5).

Continual comparison with others was viewed as a debilitating factor, with some respondents confirming that such comparisons were made between their athletic bodies and non-athletic bodies of general society.

Society's 'ideal' model was often at odds with more muscled or defined bodies of sportswomen. Negative consequences were reported, often involving weight-loss or restricted dietary intake. One example is that of a 30-year-old netball player, who related the difficulties she experienced when obsessed with losing weight:

> *I was addicted to it, if you know what I mean. I was recording everything I ate and the calorific values. That was as a result of comparing myself to other people [and wanting to be thinner, like them], not because it meant that I could run faster or play netball better. (Participant 5).*

Discriminatory sociocultural attitudes to appearances

The sport of netball is considered by many to be a feminine sport, with the media and broader sport culture influencing what a netball player should look like (REF). From this has evolved the stereotypical picture of a slim, tall netball player (see Participant 7, Figure 5).

Most comments indicated the negative influence of social media and other outlets in contemporary society, due to their promotion of what the 'ideal' woman should look like. The fickleness of these media was also noted, with Participant 2 (Figure 5), again, indicating contradictions between the promotion of a healthy, fit body and the constant advertising of weight loss products and plans, alongside images of 'ideal bodies':

> *And it's just like, so which would you rather a person be: happy and comfortable whilst they promote other bodies to lose weight and stuff like that. I just don't understand that. It's kind of a mixed messaging. (Participant 2).*

Additionally, social media offers a platform for constant comparison with others, with the potential for negative consequences, especially for younger women. One participant offered further opinions on how social media challenges young girls' perceptions of themselves:

> *I think they [younger girls] are the people that watch social media ... [the impact is] based a lot on their own self-confidence and how they feel about themselves, because you can constantly compare yourself to other people. (Participant 5).*

Discriminatory attitudes in sport to appearances

While social media promotes perceptions of appearances, all of which bring pressure to conform on athletes of all ages and abilities, society in general also advocates on athletes' body type and appearance. This burdens some athletes to match those perceptions (see Participant 4, Figure 5).

Earlier in this text, we explained that netball players were expected to be tall, however, appearance is also deemed to be important:

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So, there is a big stigma about how you should look on a netball court and being like tanned, shaved legs, hair ... beautifully done, nails, gorgeous like super slim, super skinny. (Participant 6).

Promoting inclusiveness

This is the final category, with three themes underpinning themes: media behaviours, somatic pluralism, and mechanisms of change (Figure 6).

Media behaviours

Participants highlighted the opportunities for the media to promote inclusion and diversity of body types and appearances. Yet comments emphasised that the contemporary media frequently highlights sports for men, and expressed the impact:

I grew up only watching men's rugby matches on television because that is what was televised. Supporting the men's game is not a problem, but as a woman or a young girl, sometimes you could not relate to men's game or men's representations of body (Participant 1).

Participant 7 advocated that media advertisements display different body types, appearances, and ethnicities. She also observed that the *Black Lives Matter* movement had a positive impact on inclusion and diversity in sport (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The category of Discrimination and underlying themes showing examples of meaning units.

Participants called for media platforms, given their (preceding) ability to promote diverse body types, to promote positive messages (e.g., Participant 3, Figure 6). Participant 3 cautioned, however, that positive messages are not enough:

It's not just saying it [presenting the message], saying 'everyone should play rugby' or 'there's no specific type of person you need to be to play this sport'. You have got to show it as well. (Participant 3).

Somatic pluralism

By 'somatic pluralism', we intend an egalitarianism of (female) body-types. That is, neither the white, slim, curved soma nor any other is privileged. Hierarchy of female bodies (according to slimness or colour, for instance) is rejected. One of the concerns around the 'body ideal' in contemporary society is that it focusses heavily on one demographic, namely white people. This led to a call from participants to promote the right for everyone to be able to take part in sport, as well as be accepted in society, irrespective of appearance and body type. Given that the participants play team sports, they endorsed the need for teams to consist of people of all types. A comment from Participant 4 illustrated this perspective with respect to rugby:

> *You know, if you had a team full of the whole same size, it wouldn't be very good because you need different people with different strengths to deformity, and so I think it's just making that more known and more common in other sports that we don't all have to be the exact same to do this sport. We can have variant of body types because we did need different ... you know, different body types for different factors. (Participant 4).*

Participants believed that sport could champion diversity and inclusion (e.g., Participant 8, Figure 6), continuous with the need for society to accept the uniqueness of individuals. Participant 8 finished by noting how such behaviour could impact on sport:

> *It's just going to completely change the way that sport is looked at if it seems like it's a ... a game and a sport for everyone to take part in. (Participant 8).*

In sport, advertisers often use professional models instead of real sportswomen to demonstrate society's view of athleticism. This was challenged by Participant 6 (Figure 6). Participant 5 voiced her opinions of how such negative imagery might be negated, especially to help younger athletes:

> *I think we should be focusing on that [sportspeople] and pushing [promoting]that young girls and women, as opposed to all of these Instagram models that don't [are not sportswomen or girls]. We don't see behind the scenes, we don't know whether they might have, you know, starved themselves for a week for one set of photos, and you know it's not real life. So, I think we have to look at women that have succeeded in sport and look at them for their sporting ability, not for how they look or base the fact that they've done well on is because of their body shape or whatever. (Participant 5).*

Mechanisms of change

The final theme of this category reflects participants' views of how change might be actioned. Participants all recognised that spectators and coaches make comments about athletes' appearances in training or on the field of play. Participants suggested this might be due to ignorance. Nonetheless, with negative comments affecting athletes' self-confidence and mood, education was proposed as a strategy to counter this:

> *We need to educate coaches and society in general to be more mindful when criticising students' or athletes' appearance, because it could impact the athletes' attitudes towards the sport they love. (Participant 2).*

Participant 2 expanded, focussing on the sway that her coach held with her:

> *When I danced, my coach had a lot of like influence on how I felt about myself. Her views were important to me. (Participant 2).*

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In addition to educating society about body commentary, Participant 8 (Figure 6) promoted the need for support, proposing that teams need well-being or welfare officers to monitor and counsel athletes where necessary: '[This would] make sure that they are mentally healthy while playing.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to answer the three research questions (RQ):

- RQ 1. What are university female rugby and netball players' perspectives upon the value of their bodies?
- RQ 2. What are the similarities and dissimilarities in how university female rugby and netball players perceive and value their bodies?
- RQ 3. How do university female rugby and netball players perceive and value their bodies with respect to societal standards of female attractiveness?

In consideration of this section of the paper, it was clear that there is an overlap among participant responses that made it difficult and artificial to focus discretely on each research question. For example, participants' responses suggested that at times they held negative perceptions of body image. This could be aligned with RQ 1. When probed on the grounds for such perceptions, the responses indicated that societal standards played a role. This could be aligned with RQ3. Therefore, this section is presented more discursively and with less hierarchical ordering than is typical. Noted in parentheses are RQs to which the text seems to refer e.g., '(RQ 1)', evidencing that the three research questions have been answered.

In the world of women's sports, body image issues are prevalent (Sabiston et al., 2020; Slater and Tiggemann, 2011). Almost all participants reported positive body images in sporting society or while participating in sports (RQ1). However, some participants expressed concern about the pressure athletes feel to appear in a specific way when they wanted to be female athletes (RQ 1). They especially felt insecure when they began participating in sports. Moreover, everyone who participated in this study felt that sport society needs to be more accepting of the variety of body images, and that everyone should be able to engage in sport, regardless of body size, ethnicity, or appearance (RQ 1).

Most participants found it uncomfortable to respond to questions on ethnicity and ideal bodies. This discomfort might be because of the sensitivity and volatility of issues of race and ethnicity in the present day. Some participants, however, honestly responded to the issue by asserting that there should be multiple body ideals in modern society and that they should not all be tied to the "*white*" ideal body standard (RQ 3).

Rugby and netball participants expressed different views, respectively, about how important it is to have the ideal body to participate in each sport (RQ 2). Consistent with Liechty et al.'s (2015) study, this study found that rugby offers more opportunities for people with all different body types and other characteristics, such as race and beauty, which are not essential for participating in rugby. Rugby players concurred that the sport requires a diversity of body types to fill each position, because it is so different. Although it is not always the case, they claim that positions at the front require a larger body size to maintain attack opposition, whilst positions at the back are typically smaller and more agile (RQ 2). Rugby players mentioned how their bodies had altered through playing rugby, with some body parts getting bigger and not fitting the "*ideal body*" that society has built for women (RQ2 & 3). However, as time went on, they began to believe that their additional attribute could help them improve their performance, which is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Liechty et al., 2015; Sabiston et al., 2019). Netballers' experiences with their bodies emerged as different. As a result of feeling pressure to conform to society's ideal body and the ideal body of a netballer, netballers' self-

confidence deteriorated (RQ 2 & 3). Netball is more liable than rugby to stigmatise players whose appearance does not measure up to its ideals (RQ 2). The stigma is frequently created by society and the media, because netball is primarily viewed as a feminine sport (Devonport et al., 2019) (RQ 3). For some netballers, the stigma caused them to have a poor relationship with their bodies, since they felt that their bodies did not match what society expected of them (RQ2 & 3).

Negative perceptions of body image were related to body commentary in sports. Body commentary, again, is associated with elevated anxiety, eating disorders, and body dissatisfaction (RQ 1 & 3). This study's findings about low self-esteem, low satisfaction, and a compulsive need to lose weight may all be related to body criticism. Again, numerous publications (e.g., Kerr, Berman, and Souza, 2006; Muscat and Long, 2008) have demonstrated that those instances are the outcome of body commentary that can come from a variety of individuals, including coaches, parents, players, friends, and other spectators (e.g., LeCouteur and Yong, 2022) (RQ 3).

Observed against the objectification theory, this study found that most participants had a positive sense of personal ownership of their bodies, which they valued for reasons other than how they looked to others (RQ 1). Instead of attempting to conform to society's ideal image, most people see their bodies as tools (D'abundo, 2007) (RQ 1 & 3). Through this, the participants recognised that adjusting their lifestyle (e.g., clothing, eating habits) had reduced negative self-objectification and improved their body image.

When asked about ideas for addressing and reducing body image issues, all participants answered passionately. Some suggested a narrative change in media behaviours (RQ 3), some wanted younger women or generations to be more visible (to diversify role models and help open possibilities for the majority), and some wanted broader conversation and education on how to promote inclusion and lessen body commentary on someone's appearance (RQ3).

Limitations and future research

The results of this study may not be generalisable to all university women who play rugby and netball, because participants came exclusively from the teams of one university in the north-east of England. Due to scheduling constraints, there were only eight participants. As such, the study is presented as preliminary work in the area. For future research, it would be beneficial if more people could participate, offering greater reliability and transferability of findings to other populations. Additionally, all participants are white British. In future research, participants from other races and geographical areas could be part of the sample, to allow for exploration of the significance for body image of racial and cultural background.

Future research could include male players, whose responses would be compared with those of female counterparts. Even though netball is a sport where women predominate, men are welcome to participate (White, 2003; in Hartmann, Tews and Pfister, 2003, pp. 35-52). Therefore, a future study could identify discrepancies or continuities between the sexes. The inclusion of other sports is another way to broaden the findings and gain a deeper understanding of the challenges women currently face in society. Swimming, for instance, is an individual sport which, according to Howells and Grogan (2012), has been classified as a slim build activity demanding low body mass index (BMI) for maximum performance (Byrne and McLean, 2002); a speed-focused sport favouring lighter than ideal weight (Robinson and Ferraro, 2004); and an aesthetic sport promoting thinness and beauty culture (Slater and Tiggemann, 2011). Future studies could continue to examine how sports could contribute to an increase in body satisfaction in sport cultures and in broader society, and help to design strategies for greater inclusivity.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Provide an explanatory text about the authors' contribution through the management page of your article or our email: sjsp@aearedo.es.

SUPPORTING AGENCIES

No funding agencies were reported by the authors.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was performed in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration principles and ethical approval was granted by the local Ethics Committee of University of Sunderland, UK (011937 dated 26/05/2022).

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank all the players involved in the study for their willingness to speak at length about their perspectives and experiences.

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