COMMUNICATION OF SPORTING BODY IDEALS: EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE NCAA DIVISION I COLLEGE ATHLETES

by Angela Marie Coppola

The current study explored female college athletes’ experiences of specific others’ (i.e., coaches, teammates, and parents) communication about their sporting bodies and how they make sense of their bodies in relation to this communication. How they believed specific others should communicate with them about their bodies was also examined. Eight female National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I college athletes were recruited. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2004). Participants experienced communication from others as both supportive and unsupportive. Individualized athlete-centered training, recognizing body change, and relationship development were viewed as supportive means of communicating, whereas comparing athletes’ bodies, critical comments, and threatening sport participation were perceived as negative. These athletes experienced the sport environment as emphasizing bodies ready for successful sport performance in a variety of ways. The participants perceived conflicts between sport performing body ideals and dominant social ideals of feminine bodies.
COMMUNICATION OF SPORTING BODY IDEALS: EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE NCAA DIVISION I COLLEGE ATHLETES

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Chapter 1
Introduction

As documented in previous literature, women are more likely to experience body image disturbances than men (Cash, Phillips, Santos, & Hrabosky, 2004). Furthermore, college women might feel pressures from others in society to attain a body type that is consistent with societal expectations of the feminine ideal; however, it is possible that female college athletes might not only feel pressure to change weight and body appearance from society but also from those within the sport organization. The social pressures that college women feel can come from media images or messages (Tiggemann, 2002), and from interpersonal influences, such as peers and parents (George, 2005; Muscat & Long, 2008). Female college athletes may feel pressure to attain social body ideals and sport body ideals. Moreover, the sport and social body types could be dissimilar (Greenleaf, 2002). Therefore, female college athletes could be experiencing additional pressures when the sport ideal, social ideal, and their actual body type are not congruent.

Women in sport have body appearance expectations based on what is “believed” to be the body type that is associated with performing well; thus, women may be pressured to lose or gain weight, as well as musculature, to attain this ideal body in sport. Additionally, weight loss or weight gain is a complicated process of change for anyone and having to change the body and deal with pressures from significant others about the body may leave women feeling shameful, anxious, and ultimately, desperate (Muscat & Long, 2008). Moreover, women who feel pressured or judged because of appearance may be more likely to develop eating disorder symptoms, social physique anxiety, low self-esteem, or depression (Greenleaf, Petrie, Carter, & Reel, 2009; Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). In order to understand how to reduce the detrimental effects of social pressures on women’s mental health, it is important to understand how body ideals are communicated. Specifically, I am interested in how female athletes experience this communication and their emotional and cognitive response to suggestions for weight loss or weight gain in the sport environment.

The current study explores several aspects of the communication of body ideals. For example, what female athletes perceive or experience as positive and negative communication of
body ideals is explored in the current study. Their responses to such communication were also explored. In the process of exploring their experiences and perceptions of others’ communication about their bodies, insight into how female athletes go about making sense of their bodies was gained.

In exploring the communication of body ideals, it is important to note the extant literature on body image disturbance. Documented in this research is a difference in body image disturbance between women in body-salient and non-body-salient sports; that is, female athletes participating in sports that place a large emphasis on the way the body looks in relation to performance may be more likely to experience body image disturbance (Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000). This is one factor the current study took into consideration when recruiting study participants (i.e., in employing negative case sampling).

The questions of the current study are important to explore in order to inform coaches and significant others of how to communicate weight loss or weight gain in a healthy manner or in a way that women do not feel shame or anxiety. Such knowledge may serve to enhance relationships between athletes and others in the sport organization, such as coaches or strength and conditioning trainers. For instance, in a survey investigating perceptions of body size and coaching behavior in a sample of adolescent female athletes, gymnasts perceived that greater body size of the athlete was associated with less positive support from the coach (Cumming, Eisenmann, Smoll, Smith, & Malina, 2005).

To reiterate, the primary purpose of this study is to explore female college athletes’ experiences of specific others’ (i.e., coaches, trainers, teammates, and parents) communication about their female sporting bodies and how they make sense of their bodies in relation to this communication. How they believed specific others in the sport environment should communicate with them about their bodies was also examined. Existing research related to these issues is presented next.

**Women’s Body Ideals in Society**

Past research suggests that women internalize the thin-ideal and maintain a drive for thinness (Stice, 2002). However, recent research indicates women want to be more toned (Kyrejto, Mosewich, Kowalski, Mack, & Crocker, 2008). Women do not want to be overly
muscular so recent research has investigated a drive for leanness among females (Elliot et al., 2006; Smolak & Murnen, 2008). The drive for leanness refers to body tone and may be a healthier engagement as opposed to a drive for thinness, which according to the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner et al. 1983), is an eating disorder symptom. Although men report symptoms of muscle dysmorphia and unhealthy behaviors, such as taking supplements, in pursuit of attaining the muscular or lean ideal (Cafri et al., 2005), previous research suggests that females might be at a greater risk of accepting body ideals and body image disturbances that accompany this acceptance, such as, eating pathology, sub-clinical weight concerns, and body dissatisfaction (Cash et al., 2004; Hausenblas & McNally, 2004; Pritchard, Milligan, Elgin, Rush, & Shea, 2007). A number of body image theories have been derived from the process in which women perceive their bodies and the consequences of positive or negative body image.

**Body Image Perceptions: Theory & Research Applied to Females and Female Athletes**

Considering the process in which body ideals are perceived and interpreted have led to a number of theories and psychological constructs that have been used to understand the manifestation of females’ negative and positive body image in sport and society. The most common theories are *Self-Presentation Theory*, social physique anxiety, *Stereotype Threat*, *Self-Objectification or Objectification Theory*, *Objectified Body Consciousness*, and *Self-Ideal Discrepancy Theory*.

The process by which sport participants monitor how others perceive their body can be explained using the Self-Presentation framework in sport (Leary, 1992). *Self-Presentation theory* could be applied to one’s choice or motivation to become involved in physical activity and emotional reaction to engaging in sport and exercise. According to this theory, one may choose to participate in a sport based on the established stereotypes of the sport. For example, one who believes that figure skaters are pretty and feminine and values these attributes may choose to participate in figure skating. In contrast, someone who is seen (or sees herself) as overweight may be less likely to participate in an *aesthetic* sport in which a large emphasis is placed on a particular appearance of the body. Self-presentation applies to female athletes when those with self-presentational concerns experience detrimental psychological health when participating in a sport with an ideal body type that is inconsistent with their perceived body type. For instance, if
an athlete pressures her self or perceives pressure from others to change her body because of the stereotype, this may result in shame or anxiety (Muscat & Long, 2008). A fear of negative evaluation of the body that can be explained using the Self-Presentation framework is known as social physique anxiety (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989).

Social physique anxiety has been found to be more prevalent among women then men (Hart et al., 1989; Chu & Bushman, 2008). To understand the complex experiences and consequences of social physique anxiety, a group of adolescent women were interviewed (McHugh, Kowalski, Mack, Crocker, Junkin, Lejbak, et al., 2008). The women reported engaging in several different techniques to manage their self-presentation (e.g., eating well, dieting, and wearing nice clothes) in hopes to avoid negative evaluation of their bodies or loss of friendships (McHugh et al., 2008). Women who engage in sport and exercise for self-presentational reasons, in particular, may be experiencing social physique anxiety. It has been documented that women who exercise for self-presentational reasons, such as toning the body to fit the ideal or to attain physical attractiveness, tend to experience greater social physique anxiety (Eklund & Crawford, 1994). Building upon the previous finding, the authors also found that women who exercise for self-presentational reasons experience greater social physique anxiety even when controlling for body composition; that is, no matter her shape or size, women who exercised in order to be physically attractive or control weight reported higher social physique anxiety.

Similar to social physique anxiety, Stereotype Threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) is the concern or fear that one feels for negative evaluation that is based on a stereotype. In sport organizations, an ideal body stereotype may exist and influence an athlete’s weight loss or weight gain. There is evidence that stereotype threat can elicit anxiety among individuals (Ben-Zeev, Fein, & Inzlicht, 2005; Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, those who do not internalize a stereotype (i.e., they give no credence to the body stereotype that exists) could not perceive a threat because it is not a part of their identity. For female athletes, in particular, internalizing a stereotype could be described as accepting or valuing a specific body type that is established as normal within the sport in which they are involved. Stereotype Threat is relevant to body image in sport because women may be pressured by society or their sport organization to adhere to a
certain body type. However, the pressures may not result in negative affect if achieving the stereotypical body type is not valued. That is, athletes may experience anxiety, such as social physique anxiety, if they internalize the standards or seek to achieve the body standards set by others.

A theory that is used to understand others’ influence on females’ perceptions of their bodies (or body image) is known as Objectification Theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Self-Objectification or the Objectification Theory is a feminist theory in that it centers sexism and social context, rather than the individual, in seeking to understand body image and the practices (e.g., disordered eating) related to it. Objectification theory assumes that the female body is more likely to be looked at and judged than the male body and women who internalize the negative judgments of others are more likely to experience external pressures that could potentially lead to negative health consequences, such as disordered eating attitudes, than those women who do not internalize judgment. A theory that maintains similar assumptions as Self-Objectification and Objectification Theory is Objectified Body Consciousness (OBC). OBC, or the external view of one’s body, has three dimensions—body surveillance, body shame or internalization, and appearance control beliefs (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Body surveillance occurs when individuals’ monitor their appearance based on how they believe others are perceiving their body. Body shame or internalization occurs when one feels that the body has not conformed to an internalized body ideal that is externally constructed. Appearance control beliefs are a measure of the control one believes one has over body appearance. Similar to Stereotype Threat, body shame may apply to an athlete if she has not achieved the body ideal for her sport and feels inadequate or at fault for not achieving the ideal.

OBC and individuals’ actual and ideal weight discrepancy have been used to examine gender differences in body esteem (McKinley, 1998). Body esteem refers to the participants’ “positive” and “negative” feelings about different parts of their body (e.g., waist, physical stamina, weight, etc.) McKinley (1998) in a study of college men and women found that women were higher in OBC and lower in body esteem than men. Women’s actual and ideal weight discrepancy was much larger than men’s as well. That is, the difference between women’s
reported actual weight and desired weight was larger than men’s reported actual and desired weight.

*Self-Ideal Discrepancy* (Cash & Szymanski, 1995) refers to the incongruence between a perceived self and idealized self. There is evidence that female athletes could experience *Self-Ideal Discrepancy* in both social and sport contexts and when body ideals in sport and society are different (Greenleaf, 2002). For instance, if female athletes perceive an ideal body type in sport as being different from society’s ideal or if their perceived athletic body is different from the sport ideal, this discrepancy could result in body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating, as described in some of the early literature on this topic (Altabe & Thompson, 1992; Fallon & Rozin, 1985).

Multiple body image theories have been established and used in research to understand and explain female athletes’ and non-athletes’ experiences of body image disturbance. Some sources of societal and sport body ideals, or how the ideals are communicated (produced and reproduced), have also been studied. Specifically, media have been found to be central in this process and this research is discussed next.

**Communication and Internalization of Body Ideals Through Media**

What is considered attractive and unattractive based on social norms is communicated in a variety of ways with media being central to this communication. Research indicates North American media communicate different body ideals for men (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005) and women (Tiggemann, 2002). Media images typically convey to women a slimmer, less muscular ideal, in contrast to the more muscular ideal presented for men. The cultural messages constructed and conveyed by the media may negatively influence women’s mental and physical health (Tiggemann, 2002). Women may internalize the ideal body type more so than men and experience the negative consequences of internalization of the ideal body image. Therefore, females’ internalization of body ideals, specifically the thin-ideal, is a rich topic of investigation (Cusamano & Thompson, 1997; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005). There is evidence that media images can influence women’s body image negatively, especially for those women who engage in social comparison or internalize the media-ideal (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2004).
Thin-ideal internalization occurs when a woman internalizes the socially prescribed ideal feminine body type through exposure to the social environment, including media outlets (Cusamano & Thompson, 1997). Internalizing this mediated social body ideal means accepting that a female should be thinner to be attractive. Women in particular have been found to assimilate these socially prescribed ideals (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Not just exposure to the thin-ideal but internalization of the thin-ideal as well as societal pressures to comply with it may lead to adverse psychological health in women (Cusamano & Thompson, 1997; Cafri et al., 2005). In a review of the thin-ideal internalization literature, Thompson & Stice (2001) found that internalizing the thin-ideal was detrimental to women’s psychological and behavioral health in that it was potentially eating pathology provoking. In a meta-analytic review of eating pathology risk and maintenance factors, perceived pressure to be thin and thin-ideal internalization were considered risk factors for body dissatisfaction, dieting, and eating pathology (Stice, 2002). For instance, Harrison and colleagues (Harrison, Taylor, & Marske, 2006) found that women’s food intake decreased when shown images portraying the thin-ideal. This decrease in food intake occurred especially among women with a high discrepancy between their perceived self and ideal self, indicating an acceptance of the thin-ideal. Myers and Crowther (2007) examined thin-ideal internalization and self-objectification as mediators of the relationship between sociocultural pressures to be thin and body dissatisfaction using structural equation modeling. They found that when self-objectification and thin-ideal internalization were controlled, the relationship between sociocultural pressures and body dissatisfaction was no longer significant. In other words, if women do not accept or internalize the thin-ideal, body dissatisfaction may not occur. Internalization of the thin-ideal has also been investigated in a study of female collegiate gymnasts (Petrie, 1993) where it was found that women who reported greater levels of eating disorder disturbances reported greater endorsement of societal beliefs about what made women attractive.

In summary, women more so than men to be “suffering” from body image disturbance and internalization of the ideal body (Cash, Phillips, Santos, & Hrabosky, 2004; Peden, Stiles, Vandehey, & Diekhoff, 2008). There are female body ideals portrayed by media that if internalized by women, including by female college athletes (Petrie, 1993), are associated with
symptoms of eating disorders. Furthermore, when a female athlete perceives a discrepancy between the ideal body type in her sport and the ideal feminine body in society, as well as between her perceived self and ideal self in both contexts, body image disturbance may develop (Fallon & Rozin, 1985). Media play a role in the communication of the ideal body or body ideals for women. However, little is known about the communication of body ideals by specific others (e.g., coaches, trainers, teammates) in sport organizations or among female athletes, specifically. Further, research over the past couple decades has documented racial differences in the perception of body ideals by black and white women in that black women have been found to have a more flexible perception of an ideal body than white women (Parker, Nichter, Nichter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Ritenbaugh, 1995). Hence, racial differences in female college athletes’ perceptions and experiences of the communication of body ideals in sport should be considered as well.

Race & Body Ideals of Women

The influence of race has been explored in the research on female body ideals, self-esteem, and health behaviors. Most of this research in the U.S. focuses on white and black women only. For example, early research, such as that by Parker and colleagues (1995), found that black adolescent women perceived a less static or rigid ideal body type than white adolescent women. Parker and colleagues found that these black women also were more positive about their body image in that white adolescent females expressed greater body dissatisfaction. They concluded that in black culture, a black woman is considered attractive when she knows “her” culture and role in the community; that is, the “thin-ideal” is not the standard (Parker et al., 1995). Similarly, Powell and Kahn (1995) found in a study of black and white college women that white women were more prone to perceive the thinner ideal and experienced greater social pressure to be thin than black women. According to Poran (2002), such findings indicate that female beauty is perceived and interpreted differently by women of different races and thus race should be taken into account when examining body ideals.

Adding to the complexity of the topic, Jackson and McGill (1996) examined the intersection of race and gender, specifically, what African American and Anglo American women believed were the body type preferences of African American and Anglo American men,
respectively, and what African American and Anglo American men perceived as the ideal female body type for women of their race. Anglo American women had different perceptions of what men perceived as the female body ideal. Anglo American women thought that men preferred a smaller body type than they actually did while African American women had a more accurate perception of the average body type that African American men preferred. Furthermore, African American men were more likely to attribute positive characteristics (e.g., attractive, generous) to obese women of their race than Anglo American men. Demarest and Allen (2000) also examined the body ideals of a racially diverse group of college-age women and men. Perceptions of these ideals were assessed using figure drawings (Fallon & Rozin, 1985). African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian college students rated figures that approximated his or her current body, ideal body, the body that s/he thought was most attractive to the opposite sex, and the opposite-sex figure that he or she found most attractive. In general, women thought men preferred a smaller shape than they actually did and men thought that women preferred a bulkier shape than the women actually indicated. The researchers found that African American women have the most accurate perceptions of the body shape that men preferred whereas Caucasian women had the most distorted perception. That is, Caucasian women thought men preferred a much smaller body type than what the men reported, indicating that although there is a disconnect between the actual and ideal body type for both African American women and Caucasian women, African American women may have more realistic ideas of the preferred body type of men.

One of the reasons researchers examined racial differences in female body ideals is because of the relationship between females’ body perceptions and indicators of disordered eating as discussed previously. In an early study of three groups (e.g., Caucasians, African Americans, and Asian Americans) of female college students, Akan and Grilo (1995) found that Caucasian reported greater levels of disordered eating than African Americans and Asian Americans. Furthermore, the degree of assimilation of African Americans or acculturation of Asian Americans was unrelated to eating disorder variables; that is, regardless of African Americans or Asian Americans acceptance or rejection of mainstream culture, there was no variability in eating and dieting behaviors and attitudes or body image. Similarly, a meta-analysis of research on African American and European American women and eating disordered
behavior found racial differences in disordered eating behavior, but the differences were small (O’Neill, 2003). That is, disordered eating may be equally prevalent among black women and white women in the U.S. In a subsequent meta-analysis of body dissatisfaction among women of different race and ethnicities in the U.S. (Grabe & Hyde, 2006), white women were found to be more dissatisfied with their bodies than Black women, Hispanic women, and Asian American women, but again the difference was small. That is, black women in the U.S. may not be “protected” from weight and body dissatisfaction (Abood & Chandler, 1997) as has sometimes been claimed. Indeed, Abood and Chandler (1997) in a study of black and white college females found that race only accounted for a small proportion of the variance predicting eating disturbances. Molloy and Herzberger (1998) found that there was no relation between body disturbance and race and class, but concluded that self-esteem and views of masculinity may contribute to racial and ethnic differences in body image.

In another study examining racial differences in the prevalence of eating disorder symptoms, Streigel-Moore and colleagues (2000) surveyed 1,628 black women and 5,741 white adult women, aged 18-40, about their engagement in eating and weight control behavior in the preceding three months. Black women in this study were as likely as white women to report binge eating or vomiting during the preceding three months and more likely to report fasting and abuse of laxatives and diuretics. Recurrent binge eating (RBE) was more common in black women and RBE was related to increased psychological symptoms, indicating that black women do suffer from the same adverse consequences associated with eating disorders and eating disorder symptoms as white women. However, Petersons (2000), in a study of college women, found that white women had a greater preoccupation with weight and eating than black women and black women tended to experience body image disturbance only when faced with actual weight problems. Further, Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, and Perry (2004) examined changes in body image over time among those who identified as Black and non-Black men and women using cross-sectional data collected at 5 different time points (30 years of age or younger). They found that body image improved for black women but worsened for non-black women over time. Preoccupation with weight increased then decreased for white women but only decreased for
black women. However, given the cross-sectional data of this study, their results must be interpreted with caution.

Given these varied findings, recent research in the U.S. hypothesized that black women who do not subscribe to dominant (i.e., white) cultural ideals of female attractiveness and do not internalize these body ideals may not experience negative body image and the consequent indicators of disordered eating (Sabik, Cole, & Ward, 2010). Sabik and colleagues surveyed 905 U.S. college women who identified as African American, European American, or Asian American. The researchers found that African-American co-eds who had lower other-group orientation (i.e., endorsement of ethnic groups other than one’s own) also reported a lower drive for thinness and greater appearance esteem (i.e., were less likely to experience body image disturbance). The researchers also found that between Asian American women and European American women, appearance esteem was associated with drive for thinness. In addition, European American women who perceived that their self-worth was contingent on weight were higher in drive for thinness.

In conclusion, the intersections of race and gender in the relationship between female body image/ideals and disordered eating are complex. While Overstreet and colleagues (Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010) contend that it is important to study different races when analyzing body image in females, the research indicating few significant racial differences in disordered eating must also be considered. Further, while the intersections of race and gender are important to consider for a variety of reasons, it is also important to take into consideration sport participation when researching female body ideals and females’ body image as discussed in the next section.

**Body Image Disturbance in Female Athletes & Non-Athletes**

Comparing female athletes & non-athletes. Though it may sound counterintuitive that female college athletes may be vulnerable to body image disturbance, research has compared female athletes and non-athletes regarding the negative effects of body image disturbances. Yet some research has found collegiate female athletes may be at a greater risk for body image disturbances than non-athletes (Hausenblas & Mack, 1999). Hausenblas & Mack (1999), for example, found that while collegiate female non-athletes experienced greater social physique
anxiety than athletes, female athletes reported a higher drive for thinness. Female athletes have also reported greater disordered eating than non-athletes (Pritchard et al., 2007). Further, eating disorder symptoms, body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness were found to be among the strongest predictors of social physique anxiety in a sample of female college athletes and exercisers (Krane, Waldron, Stiles-Shipley, & Michalenok, 2002).

Previous studies have also found female college athletes to be significantly more concerned with their weight and body image and significantly more committed to physical activity than non-athletes (Finkenberg, DiNucci, & McCune, Chenette, & McCoy, 1998; DiNucci, Finkenberg, McCune, McCune, & Mayo, 1994). Petrie (1993) examined eating disorders in female collegiate gymnasts and determined attitudinal and personality correlates associated with eating disorders among this population. In a study reported a decade later, Petrie (2003) used the eating disorder continuum in the analysis. The eating disorder continuum classified gymnasts on a continuum from normal eaters, excessive exercisers, bingers, purgers, diet restricters, those with sub-threshold bulimia, and those with bulimia. Over 60% of the gymnasts met the criteria for one of the intermediate disordered eating categories. Women who were classified with higher levels of disordered eating reported a greater desire to lose weight, greater body dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem. Greenleaf and colleagues (2009) speculated that female athletes with sub-clinical weight concerns (i.e., using laxatives, self-induced vomiting, binge eating) may also express eating disorder symptoms (Greenleaf, et al., 2009). They found that such female athletes did engage in binge-eating and used laxatives and excessive dieting to control weight. Gymnasts can be considered aesthetic athletes, whereas a soccer player would be a non-aesthetic athlete. Athletes can be considered either body-salient (aesthetic or lean) or non-body-salient (non-aesthetic or non-lean). The two groups might develop similar consequences of body image disturbance, such as eating disorder symptoms and social physique anxiety; however, there have been inconsistent findings in research comparing female non-athletes and athletes. Furthermore, there have been mixed findings regarding different types of athletes.

While some research suggests that athletes may be at a great risk for negative body image, there is also some evidence that female athletes may have a more positive body image
than non-athletes. In the Hausenblas & Mack (1999) study cited above, the researchers analyzed the social physique anxiety and eating disorder symptoms of female divers, an athletic group of college women (that is, women who were student-athletes), and a non-athletic group of college females (i.e., women who were not student-athletes). The non-athletic women reported greater social physique anxiety than the athletic women and female divers leading the researchers to conclude that type of sport may not necessarily moderate the relationship between eating disorder symptoms and social physique anxiety. Subsequently, in a meta-analytic review of the differences between athletes and non-athletes, Hausenblas and Symons-Downs (2001) found that athletes had a more positive body image, though the effect size was small.

**Comparing female athletes in body-salient & non-body-salient sports.** The distinction that some (e.g., Schwarz, Gairrett, Aruguete, & Gold, 2005; Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000) have made between body-salient and non-body salient sports is based on the extent to which bodily appearance is central to performance evaluation in the sport. Body-salient (aesthetic or lean sport) athletes need to maintain a certain weight or physique to compete because of the emphasis placed on the body in performance evaluation. Previous research suggests that lean or aesthetic sport athletes may be at a greater risk for body image disturbance than non-lean sport athletes. In a meta-analytic review of the research on female athletes and eating problems, Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble (2000) found that female athletes, lean-sport athletes in particular, may be more at risk than non-athletes and non-athletes may be protected from adopting eating disorder symptoms. In another study, lean-sport athletes expressed a greater concern for body image and weight than non-lean athletes (Reinking & Alexander, 2005). Further, lean-sport athletes have been found to diet more than non-lean sport athletes (Schwarz et al., 2005). Lean-sport athletes, such as synchronized skaters, have also been reported to self-impose weight-related pressures and weight-related pressures were directly related to social physique anxiety (Greenleaf, 2004). In a study with college and high school cheerleaders, Reel and Gill (1996) found a strong positive relationship between social physique anxiety and body dissatisfaction at both levels, as well as a higher incidence of disordered eating in high school than college cheerleaders.
As suggested above, aesthetic or lean sport athletes may perceive dieting and body image differently than non-aesthetic athletes in that dieting may be more restrictive or controlled (De Bruin et al., 2007). De Bruin et al. (2007) studied the dieting and body image perceptions of Dutch female gymnasts and non-aesthetic sport participants. They found dieting control was not related to a negative body image for the elite gymnasts but that coach pressure was significantly related to dieting. De Bruin and colleagues felt these findings could be attributed to aesthetic athletes believing that thin means a chance at winning. Further, findings of a case study of an elite gymnast by Krane, Greenleaf, and Snow (1997) suggested that female gymnasts may maintain an ego-involvement motivation, which is considered to be maladaptive when the athletes have an unrealistic goal expectation of how their body should look in order to perform well. The researchers also found that the athlete engaged in unhealthy eating habits and these habits may have been inadvertently reinforced by her coaches or parents.

In sum, research is consistent in finding differences in the body image concerns and disordered eating behaviors of female athletes involved in body salient versus non-body salient sports. However, as discussed below, research also suggests that as females, all female athletes are confronted by discrepancies that often exist between ideal sporting bodies and society’s notions of ideal feminine bodies.

**Discrepancy Between the Social and Sport Ideal Body Type for Female Athletes**

Female body ideals in any given sport and in society may be different. This discrepancy can lead to negative perceptions of the body and have a negative impact on a woman’s mental health. Athlete body image refers to an athlete’s perception of her body in relation to the body that is expected and/or valued in her sport. That is, the sport environment constructs appearance-related and performance-related stereotypes of the body, and these stereotypes vary based on the body ideals for any particular sport. For instance, a runner may identify the ideal body as tall, lean, and small hips while the ideal body for a soccer player may be tall, muscular, and wider hips.

Research indicates female athletes are aware of female body ideals within sport and society (Greenleaf, 2002; Krane et al., 2004). Greenleaf (2002) conducted a retrospective study of the socialized sport ideal bodies among former competitive female athletes. The ideal sport
body type was the body type they thought they needed to maintain within their specific sport. The ideal social body type was primarily one that was not too muscular. The ideal social and ideal sport body was assessed using Fallon and Rozin’s (1985) Figure Rating Scale. The participants in this qualitative inquiry reported a conflict between the two body types—sport and social, in that the sport body type was more muscular. Study participants’ recalled that teammates, uniforms, fitness, and coach attitudes and behaviors influenced their feelings about the ideal sport body. For example, the muscularity of the ideal sport body type was a social issue for some of the women because being muscular made it difficult to fit into clothes.

Because female athletes may struggle emotionally with the contradictions between the socially dominant and athletic ideals, leading ultimately to unhealthy behavioral health (Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997), the discrepancy between the socially dominant feminine body ideal and the strong, muscular athletic ideal was also studied in a group of current female college athletes (Krane et al., 2004). Krane and colleagues interviewed 21 female college athletes to discover how they negotiated and reconciled the social expectations surrounding their femininity with athleticism. The researchers found that the women athletes in their study took pride in their academic achievements and felt empowered by being strong and muscular because they believed such bodies enhance their athletic performance. However, these women also reported struggling with social acceptance because they were not conforming to socially valued feminine body types or behaviors. A quote from a softball player indicated the discomfort of the discrepancy between the sport body and social ideal: “You’ve lifted, you’ve run, your bodies are all, yeah they’re different, but they have that bulk, you know, but when you go out in your normal clothes and mix with all the normal people and you feel different. When your arms are stronger and your legs are stronger and you’re not the little fragile person, you do feel different” (Krane et al., 2004, p. 325). These women understood the benefits of achieving body ideals for their sport but they also perceived that they were viewed as “different” and felt discomfort related to their bodies when they stepped out of the sport culture and into society.

Krane and colleagues (2004) found that these feelings of discomfort often came from feedback from specific others (e.g., being made fun of) and from media influences and aspects of the sport environment (e.g., uniforms). In an earlier study Tantleff-Dunn and Gokee (2002)
came to the same conclusion, suggesting that receiving feedback on physical appearance and comparing oneself to others can shape an individual’s perceptions of and feelings about her body or body image. An ethnographic study explored female soccer players’ relationship with their bodies in sport and society documented this (George, 2005). George found that parents, teammates, male coaches, and male peers influenced the women’s experiences of their body as athletes and as women in society – in both positive and negative ways. For instance, while parents were emotionally and financially supportive of their daughters’ sport participation, they would also make comments about their daughters needing to lose weight. Furthermore, one athlete reported that her boyfriend was teased about her appearance and another athlete shared that her father would make comments indicating that she should be more feminine. Female soccer players also engaged in self-evaluation and spoke of the challenges of balancing a sport performance and a socially feminine body. For instance, one player noted that it was hard to fit in khaki jeans because of the size of her thighs. Similar to Krane and colleagues (1997), George concluded that female athletes’ feelings of self-consciousness and discomfort about their bodies’ appearance may set the stage for disordered eating and otherwise negatively affect their overall health.

As reported in the previous sections, body image disturbance has been documented among women, both athletes and non-athletes. Eating disorder symptoms, body dissatisfaction, and social physique anxiety are among the consequences of body image disturbance. Research also indicates interpersonal influences, including stigmatizing situations, may precede body image disturbance and result in negative consequences for the physical and mental health of women and women athletes (DeBruin, 2007; Krane et al, 1997). Hence, understanding those influences – specifically, how women experience others’ communication about their bodies – is important. Comments from others that may play a role in how athletes perceive their bodies are referred to in the sport research as *interpersonal influences*. This research is presented next.

**Interpersonal Influences on Female Athletes’ Body Image**

Female athletes’ perceptions of their bodies or their body image may be influenced by interactions with others, such as peers, family, friends, or coaches. For instance, female athletes who experience more severe critical comments from significant others report greater disordered
eating and more intense negative emotions, such as anxiety (Muscat & Long, 2008). An auto-ethnography of female collegiate-division I soccer players focused on both the sport and social environments of these women (George, 2005). Based on analysis of semi-structured one-on-one interviews and group interviews with the twenty-one women on the team, George reported that the women experienced changes in their bodies as a consequence of their participation in collegiate sport. Consistent with the findings of Krane and colleagues (2004), women in George’s study also seemed empowered by their muscular bodies because of what they were capable of doing in their sport. At the same time, they were aware of others reactions towards their bodies. This led some of the women to “self-monitor” their bodies, that is, they sought to control their appearance. They did this because finding a balance between their athletic performance and social appearance bodies was important to them. Further, based on Tantleff-Dunn and Gokee’s (2002) suggestion that receiving feedback on physical appearance and comparing oneself to others can shape body image, George (2005) also explored with the women who in sport provided them with such feedback. George found male coaches and peers, parents and teammates influenced the women’s experiences of their bodies as athletes and as women in society. Further, some of the female collegiate soccer players in her study reported that teammates would pressure them about changing their bodies to be consistent with the sport ideal. This is consistent with the findings of Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski, and McHugh’s (2009) who conducted a study of women track and field athletes’ meanings of muscularity also found that the women athletes compared their bodies with their teammates’ bodies.

The female athletes in George’s (2005) study also expressed a fear of excessive fat or muscle and, as reported in previous research, a preoccupation with fear of fat is positively related to eating disorder symptoms (Beals, 2000). Indeed, in a more recent study Peden and colleagues (2008) assessed the relationship between eating disorders and external pressures (i.e., “pressures received from other people to excel in athletic and academic endeavors and maximize attractiveness”) felt by a group of male and female college students split into an athletic sample and non-athletic sample. The relationship between these two variables was not significant when the responses of the male and female athletes were analyzed together. However, when males were removed from the analysis, external pressures and eating disorder symptoms were
positively correlated, indicating that female athletes may be more likely than male athletes to be negatively affected by external pressures to excel in sport and academics while also maintaining a particular physical appearance (Peden et al., 2008).

In summary, because pressure from others to maximize attractiveness while also excelling in sport has been associated with negative mental and physical health among female athletes it is important to understand how female athletes experience others’ communication with them about their bodies. This study sought to do that.

**Statement of Purpose**

This study explored how female NCAA DI college athletes experience and make sense of sport-specific female body ideals communicated to them by specific others. These body ideals included not only musculature but also body shape and weight. Extending George (2005), the current study explored, in depth, female college athletes’ experiences of, and responses to, what and how specific others communicate with them about their sporting bodies. The specific others of focus in this study were coaches, teammates, parents, and close significant others, such as partners. As previous research indicates, interactions with significant others may be a powerful influence affecting body image in, and the health status and practices of, female athletes. It was assumed that female athletes could provide specific suggestions for how these others “should” communicate with them about their bodies. Therefore, another purpose of the study was to explore their suggestions for communicating about their bodies and body change in sport.
Chapter 2
Methodology

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative inquiry. According to Shank (2006), qualitative inquiry is a systematic and empirical alternative to the scientific method. Most researchers engage in qualitative inquiry to seek great depth and breadth of a certain topic. This method can involve focus groups or interviews conducted in a systematic manner to collect multiple perspectives of a social phenomenon. Qualitative inquiry functions under the assumption that there is not one absolute reality. Therefore, collecting multiple perspectives about a topic is important. Further, another assumption of qualitative inquiry is that reality can be constructed and each individuals’ meaning and interpretation of a situation and experience is equally important and valid.

Schram (2006) discusses that qualitative research questions fall on a continuum from interpretive to critical (i.e., seeking understanding to seeking to change). The current research project was designed to examine the communication of body ideals in the sport context. Therefore, the current study can be considered on the “understanding” end of the interpretive to critical continuum. This research sought to understand female athletes’ perceptions of the communication of body ideals and experiences and interpretations of body comments within the sport context.

When interviewing the female athletes, the goal was to identify experiences of body comments within the sport setting, relying on the participants’ view of the situation that have been formed through their interactions with others in their organization (e.g., coaches, teammates, parents, etc.). A pattern of meaning was developed based on the participants’ responses and the principal investigator’s interpretation from background and experiences. Because the goal was to understand the perceptions and lived experiences of the communication of body ideals, a phenomenological research approach was utilized in the current project.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is an empirical form of inquiry that is grounded in experiences not reduced to states but are interpretations of a specific event meant to increase our understanding of a certain phenomenon (Shank, 2006). The purpose of a phenomenological research approach is to investigate the meaning of lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon
(Schram, 2006). Schram (2006) discusses that dialogue and reflection can reveal the underlying meaning of a shared experience. When conducting phenomenological research, the participants’ experience, description, and meaning of a phenomenon becomes the focus. Female athletes’ perceptions and experiences of the communication of body ideals specific to their lives will be the focus of the study to seek great depth of knowledge about the particular experience, thus, the current study will borrow from phenomenological methods.

There are several assumptions in phenomenology as outlined by Schram (2006). Firstly, behaviors are understandable in the context of relationships to things, people, events, and situations. Therefore, the interview gathered participants’ experiences and perceptions of others’ communication of body ideals. It is assumed that perceptions present us with evidence of how the world or lived experience is viewed by the individual and reality is tied to the individuals’ consciousness of the experience; therefore, the participants’ positive or negative perception or interpretation of the experience was sampled. A phenomenological research approach also operates under the assumption that “language is the central medium through which meaning is constructed and conveyed and the meaning of a particular experience can be revealed through dialogue and reflection” (Schram, 2006, p. 99). The previous assumption indicates that speaking to female athletes about the experiences and perceptions of the communication of body ideals may be an effective means of seeking understanding of this phenomenon, making interviews an appropriate method for gathering data.

**Interviews**

The interview guide (see appendix A) was based on the research questions of the study. According to Glesne (2011), a research question is used to formulate interview questions. The interview questions are asked to gain further understanding and ultimately answer the research questions. The general goal of the interviews was to explore participants’ experiences and interpretation of the communication of the body ideals and how female athletes make sense of their bodies in terms of these experiences. Another goal of the individual interviews was to identify their experiences and perceptions of weight-related or body-related comments from coaches or others within the sport organization as well as their responses to the comments. Additionally, strategies for communicating body change or body ideals in a positive manner
were discussed. Each question of the interview guide covers at least one purpose of the current project. The structure of the interview guide includes a general question focusing on the participants’ involvement in sport, questions about the body ideals for their specific sport, comments from others regarding their body or weight, and a question about strategies for communicating body ideals.

The way in which the interview guide is formatted and a question is worded may affect the way in which the interviewee answers the question or makes sense of the interview (Glesne, 2011). The initial grand tour question, “Could you tell me about your current sport participation – i.e., what sport are you involved in, for how long, how did you come to be involved in this sport, and why have you continued to be involved?” was asked in the beginning of the interview because this type of question is a good start to the interview because the participant is asked about experiences that are easily answered (Glesne, 2011). The subsequent questions were constructed to begin with “what,” “how,” or “do,” and not “why.” The questions were created in such a way because it allowed the participant to describe an experience or feeling. Beginning questions with “why” was avoided in order to establish a non-threatening dialogue. For instance, the interviewee may perceive the need to give an excuse about feeling a certain way and perceive judgment or feel threatened.

The interviews were set up to be in convenient, available, and appropriate locations (Glesne, 2011). Interviews were conducted in an office or room, which was quiet, comfortable and private. The building in which interviews took place was one that was familiar to all of the participants. The interviews were also scheduled at the convenience of both the investigator and participant to assure that both people would be ready to engage in a discussion. The participants were told through email that their participation included a one-time interview so there was no confusion as to whether they needed to return or contact at a later date in regards to future participation. Prior to recording the interview, participants were asked if they were comfortable with the recording of the interview. To be respectful of the participants’ time, it was important to consistently keep track of time to be sure the interview ended within the hour allotted for the meeting.
The nature of interviewing involves learning how to probe with further questions or wait for the participant to finish their thought in silence, and, more importantly, to sense the participants’ feelings and body language (Glesne, 2011). The interviews involve the full attention of the investigator because a number of things occur simultaneously in an interview. The participant is giving both verbal and nonverbal feedback and the interviewer must pick up on both types of feedback in order to progress the conversation. Glesne (2011) suggests the interviewer listen with research purposes in mind and stay attuned to current questions and future questions. Nonverbal behavior is feedback that can be given through facial expressions or body language. Noticing feelings of discomfort, boredom, or annoyance, for instance, may be indicators that the conversation must advance to a new question.

**Presentation of self.** In the attempt to reduce any personal bias during research, I presented myself as a facilitator of a discussion about the communication body ideals. During the interviews, personal disclosure was limited. Glesne (2011) suggests that the interviewer remain fully attentive in the interview so both verbal and nonverbal cues were read to probe for more information or change to a different subject. Minimal encouragers, such as “Ok,” and “right,” were provided to the participant during the discussion. Responses were paraphrased to assure that information was perceived correctly.

**Participants**

**Sampling.** The purpose of the study was to explore female athletes’ experiences of the communication of body ideals in sport; therefore, the participants in this study were female college athletes. The sample was recruited through Miami University collegiate athletics. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling methods (Mason, 2002). Purposive sampling, according to Mason (2002), is a sub-category of strategic sampling. Strategic sampling is meant to sample experiences that produce a relevant range of contexts or phenomena but not meant to represent it directly. Purposive samples allow for a construction of a sample that is meaningful empirically and theoretically. An empirically meaningful sample, in the case of this project, would be the recruitment of female college athletes and a theoretically meaningful sample would be the recruitment of female college athletes who know they are being interviewed about the body ideals in sport.
Selection criteria. One particular purpose of the current study was to examine potential differences in the perceptions of the communication of body ideals for women of different sport-types and women of different races. The types of athlete sport participation were categorized as lean or non-lean or aesthetic or non-aesthetic. The difference between the two types of sports is that aesthetic or lean sports place a large emphasis on the way the body looks in order to perform well. In general, the terms aesthetic or non-aesthetic and lean or non-lean can be labeled body-salient or non-body-salient sports. In the current study, athletes who were involved in synchronized skating and track were considered participants in body-salient sports. Athletes participating in softball and volleyball were considered participants in non-body-salient sports. The race of the participants was considered during the analysis to determine any potential differences in the communication of body ideals for Black and White women.

Participant descriptions. The participants in this study were female NCAA DI college athletes recruited through purposive sampling methods (Mason, 2002). A total of 8 participants were recruited and interviewed until “saturation” (i.e., the development of rich, thick descriptions of the themes) was reached. The mean age of participants was 19.25 (SD = 1.16). In regards to race, two participants identified as Asian, one participant identified as Black, and five participants identified as White. Representing the body-salient group were three synchronized skaters and two track athletes who identified as sprinters. The non-body-salient participants were one softball player and two volleyball players. Among the participants were freshmen (n = 3), sophomores (n = 3), and juniors (n = 2). The average grade point average of the participants was 3.24 (SD = 0.43).

The range of months spent on their current team was from nine months to 36 months (M = 20.63, SD = 10.45). Years of experience with their respective sports ranged from about four and a half years to 15 years (M = 9.95 years, SD = 3.28). The participants were asked a close-ended question regarding their body in sport, “do you believe a large emphasis is placed on the appearance of your body?” to which six responded by circling “Yes” and two responded with “No.” The participants were then given a 6-point Likert-type question (1 = “Little to no emphasis at all” to 6 = “Large emphasis”) asking, “Please rate on the scale below the extent to
which an emphasis is placed on your appearance or your body in the SPORT environment.” The average of the eight responses was 4.63 (SD = 1.30; range 2 to 6).

**Procedures**

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the athletic director and NCAA compliance officer at Miami University were contacted for permission to contact coaches and recruit athletes. After receiving permission, coaches were contacted to schedule a meeting to recruit athletes and pass out contact information. A meeting was held with each athletic team (with coach(es) present if desired) to provide further information about the study, such as research purposes and study participation. For instance, the athletes were told that if they agree to participate they would participate in a 45-60 minute interview regarding the communication of body ideals for their sport. Finally, the athletes were told that the study had been approved by the IRB at Miami.

Along with the handout containing information about the study purposes and procedures, the principal investigator’s (PI) contact information (phone number and email address) was provided. The handout indicated how the athlete should go about contacting the PI if she has further questions and/or is interested in participating. Because of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) compliance laws, the athletes were not allowed to receive any kind of incentive or monetary compensation for participating in the study. However, some athletes were also recruited through introductory level psychology classes, and because athletes were recruited through a class setting, extra credit served as an incentive for participation.

The athletes who were willing to participate emailed the principal investigator to schedule a time to be interviewed. When participants contacted the PI, the participant was asked to indicate their sport, position in that sport, and race as well as their general availability for an interview. The research questions require that sport type and race be represented in the sample of female athletes.

Before the interview, the women were given the informed consent form and a background questionnaire including demographic information, sport, height, weight, ideal weight, and the extent to which their specific sport places an emphasis on their body. The questions in the interview addressed the research purposes in the study. After each interview, the
principal investigator transcribed the interviews and three research team members read and analyzed the transcriptions to generate agreed upon themes and establish corroboration.

**Sequence of analysis: Thematic analysis & Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

**Thematic analysis.** Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data” (p. 79). A theme is a pattern in the data that relates to the research question. A theme may not be explicitly addressed by all participants but may be articulated in different ways for each individual. Braun and Clarke (2006) also mention that it is important to establish research epistemology. In the current study, a constructionist approach is taken because the research questions seek to “theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts provided” by participants” (p. 85). For instance, the purpose of the research is to seek understanding of how female athletes make sense of their bodies and interpret communication of body ideals in sport.

The process of conducting thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) include the following six steps: familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Familiarizing with the data involves transcribing the data and generating initial codes involves coding features in the data set that answer specific research questions. Codes are collated into potential themes to begin searching for general themes that are reviewed by checking if the themes are prevalent among most or all of the participant data. Themes are defined and named, and a report is produced to relate the final analysis to the research questions and extant literature. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research, however, there is no one agreed upon analytic method. A particular method used in thematic analysis is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2004).

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis.** A form of thematic, phenomenological research used in the current study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004). Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate that IPA allows the researcher to focus on the participants’ experience of reality in order to understand a certain phenomena. Further, IPA can be described as idiographic, inductive, and interrogative; it is considered idiographic in that researchers work with a small sample and are interested in exploring the social phenomena in
great breadth and depth. The process is interrogative in that questioning is semi-structured and allows the researcher to probe certain areas or topics brought up by the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The inductive approach of IPA is the process of studying patterns of data for themes and categories to be put into abstract units of information (Shank, 2006). Data is generated from “condensing extensive and varied raw data into a brief summary to establish links between research objectives and summary findings” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). The data generated from the interview questions will result in related generated themes that describe the process of communicating the ideal body type and the consequences or reactions to the communication. The process of IPA allows new themes to emerge from the data that may have not been considered before conducting the interviews (Shank, 2006).

The five-step process of analysis in phenomenological inquiry, according to Groenewald, involves bracketing, generating meaning units, clustering units to form themes, summarizing each interview, and making a composite summary (Groenewald, 2004). Bracketing involves carefully filtering out personal point of view when “listening to” the data and paying attention to the participant’s point of view and voice. Forming meaning units involves identifying sometimes frequent and similar, but most importantly significant and resonant, meanings both within and across interviews. “Ambiguous” data are initially set aside leaving the researcher with meaningful concepts. As the iterative process continues, the meaning units are organized and reorganized, classified and reclassified, and eventually clustered into areas of significance. Areas of significance are used to establish emerging themes from the data. Once themes are generated, it is important to go back to the data and summarize the interviews to make sure that the themes are representative of the participants’ words and stories. Lastly, a composite summary is created that outlines the common themes by conceptualizing the interview summaries together in terms of meaning and context (Groenewald, 2004).

As outlined in Groenewald (2004), four types of field notes will be produced after each interview: observational, theoretical, methodological, and analytical. Observational notes recorded important occurrences throughout the interviews, such as the participant’s tones, responses, and physical expressions. Theoretical notes were personal interpretations and reflections of the meanings of constructs, such as body image. Methodological notes were
reminder notes for interview purposes. Analytical notes were a summary of the interview sessions including the main issues or themes from the interview, the demeanor of the participant, and impressions about the participant or interview.

**Trustworthiness of data: Establishing validity**

**Researcher reflexivity.** As the primary investigator, it is important to disclose personal biases as well as the role of a researcher in this particular study (Shank, 2006). Reflexivity is crucial to develop self-awareness about biases about the investigated social phenomena (Shank, 2006). Engaging in “critical self-reflection about his or predispositions” (Johnson, 1997, p. 160) is necessary in order to eliminate researcher bias. Because the principal investigator’s preconceptions of the communication of body ideals in sport as well as the background information of past experiences and biases about the social phenomena will influence the process of generating themes and sub-themes, this information was disclosed.

**Personal disclosure addressing researcher reflexivity.** I am a Caucasian college-aged female in her early 20s. I have been involved in a sport organization for most of my life although not the same sport or team. As an adolescent, I was involved with soccer and swimming. In college, I was a rower. My research is guided by the way that I make sense of my body and the experiences I have had in sport and the influence of teammates, other athletes, and coaches. I am aware of the struggles of the body that women try to cope with by making unhealthy changes to their weight. Furthermore, I am aware that the body-related pressure experiences of women athletes are at times embedded in the sport environment.

My previous research experience has also influenced my preconceptions about body-related comments in sport. The purpose of creating this study was to extend my research from an undergraduate thesis. In this thesis, I examined female college athletes’ experiences with weight bias, otherwise known as weight stigma or the negative perceptions of someone because they’re viewed as overweight. Female athletes were selected because women with a normal BMI may still be considered overweight within the sport environment, particularly sports that place a huge emphasis on the body (i.e., body-salient sports). Furthermore, athletes can still be ridiculed if they are perceived as overweight just as much as an overweight or obese individual. Women athletes were experiencing weight stigma and the detrimental associations that accompany
weight stigma, such as low self-esteem and depression. I knew that women athletes were stigmatized because of appearance in the sport environment; however, I knew it was a complex and context-specific experience. To understand stigma related to the body in sport, it is important to understand how women perceive negative comments or positive comments from communicating with others.

My assumption is that the female athlete perceives her body as ideal or not ideal in the sport context, and these perceptions can lead to either positive or negative interactions with others, perceptions of the self, and behavioral consequences. The athlete will either perceive that she has the body ideals for their specific sport or will not perceive that she has the body ideals. If she and others perceive that she maintains body ideals for her sport she will encounter rewarding situations or praises from others producing positive perceptions. However, the athlete and others may not perceive that she is maintaining body ideals and she will encounter weight-related or body-related comments about her current body or ways in which to change her body producing negative perceptions. In both situations, the athlete may experience positive or negative consequences. The hypothesis stems from previous research and the idea that athletes who have the sport-specific body ideals or do not have the ideals may perceive pressure to maintain or attain body ideals and can engage in maladaptive eating behaviors like cutting calories or taking diet pills. Athletes may also perceive negative or positive body image and engage in healthy exercising and dieting to maintain or attain body ideals.

The biases and assumptions about the process of body ideals were discussed with the researchers involved in analyzing the data. The two researchers involved in triangulation were given a model of the hypothesized process of communication and interpretation of body ideals for female athletes. The researchers were also given information about the process of analysis and background information about the principal investigator. The information was shared in an effort to establish trustworthiness of the data otherwise known as validity.

**Interpretive and descriptive validity.** Validity is addressed in qualitative research to reduce researcher bias. Triangulation, or crosschecking data and conclusions from the data through multiple sources, is used in qualitative research to ensure interpretive validity. When all three sources or researchers agree upon the conclusions, “corroboration” has been established
To ensure interpretive validity, a graduate assistant and professor were recruited to engage in triangulation. Many qualitative researchers do not think about issues of validity, reliability and generalizability in the same way as quantitative researchers because of the different assumptions of qualitative and quantitative paradigms. However, according to Schram (2006), all qualitative researchers are concerned about the credibility and trustworthiness of their data and those conducting qualitative science (as opposed to inquiry) often use a number of strategies parallel to those used in quantitative research to address these concerns (Schram, 2006). In this study researcher triangulation was used in order to enhance the study’s interpretive validity. The first and third authors of this manuscript and a graduate student trained in qualitative research methods read and analyzed the transcriptions to explore the meanings of the data and construct themes. In addition, to establish descriptive validity, verbatim quotations are provided.

**Generalizing findings.** A challenge in terms of generalizing the findings involves the sample of women. The participants were young, college-aged females from one Division I mid-west university. The lived experiences and perceptions of these women are important to make sense of the context-specific and complex situation of stigmatizing situations in the sport environment; however, the experiences of these women may be different from women who participate in sports from different NCAA divisions or parts of the United States. Further, this qualitative inquiry based study does not seek to generalize findings but gain understanding of the process of communication.

**Ethical concerns**

Concerns regarding not only the validity of a research project but also the well-being of participants should always be addressed when engaging in research. In qualitative research, presenting one self to the participant is necessary in order to establish rapport and address any questions concerning participants. As a researcher, I have an obligation to ensure the confidentiality of data and to address the benefits and potential costs of participating in a study. For instance, women athletes who discuss weight or body-related comments from others and reactions to the comments may stir up unwanted negative feelings.
**Participant well-being.** Discussing experiences and perceptions of body ideals and specific situations in which body ideals are communicated can make a participant feel discomfort and anxiety. To alleviate feelings of discomfort, I verbally presented my self and intentions to the participant in the beginning of the interview. I explicitly described that the participant can ask me any questions regarding the study to establish rapport and alleviate any feelings of concern that the participant is experiencing. For instance, in the beginning of the interview I went through the informed consent with the participant and answered any questions they had. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they can refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time without any consequences. Following the interview, I explained the research and practical purposes of the study, answered any questions, and expressed that their feedback is invaluable to the research process. The participants were thoroughly debriefed in order to alleviate any negative feelings or concerns. The participants were given a debriefing sheet with references of articles about the topic and a number to counseling center.
Chapter 3
Manuscript

Communication of sporting body ideals: Experiences of female NCAA Division I college athletes
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Abstract

The current study explored female college athletes’ experiences of specific others’ (i.e., coaches, trainers, teammates, and parents) communication about their female sporting bodies and how they make sense of their bodies in relation to this communication. How they believed specific others in the sport environment should communicate with them about their bodies was also examined. Eight female National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I college athletes from four different sports were recruited using purposive sampling methods. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted, and the five-step process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 2004) as outlined by Groenewald (2004) was used. Participants reported both supportive and unsupportive experiences of communication from others about their bodies. Individualized athlete-centered training, recognizing body change, and relationship development were viewed as supportive or positive means of communicating about sporting bodies, whereas comparing athletes’ bodies, critical comments, and threatening sport participation were perceived as unsupportive or negative. These athletes experienced the sport environment as emphasizing healthy “fit” bodies and bodies ready for successful sport performance in a variety of ways. Further, participants perceived conflicts between sport performing body ideals and dominant social ideals of feminine bodies. Practical implications of these results are discussed.
Communication of sporting body ideals:
Experiences of female NCAA Division I college athletes

Extant research indicates women are more likely to experience body image disturbances than men (Cash, Phillips, Santos, & Hrabosky, 2004), particularly when they internalize the thin-ideal and maintain a drive for thinness (Stice, 2002). However, research also indicates women today want to be more toned (Kyrejto, Mosewich, Kowalski, Mack, & Crocker, 2008); that is, the thin-ideal is being replaced by one of fitness. At the same time many women do not want to be “overly muscular” and recent research has investigated this “new” drive for leanness among females (Elliot et al., 2006; Smolak & Murnen, 2008). This drive for leanness refers to \textit{body tone} and, according to some, may be a healthier engagement in body change, perhaps in no small part because a \textit{drive for thinness} is an eating disorder symptom, according to the Eating Disorder Inventory (Garner et al., 1983). Although there are men who also report symptoms of muscle dysmorphia and “unhealthy” behaviors, such as taking supplements, in pursuit of attaining the muscular or lean masculine ideal (Cafri, Thompson, Ricciardelli, McCabe, Smolak, & Yesalis, 2005), some claim females might be at a greater risk of body image disturbances such as eating pathology, sub-clinical weight concerns, and body dissatisfaction because of societal norms around female bodies (Cash et al., 2004; Hausenblas & McNally, 2004; Pritchard, Milligan, Elgin, Rush, & Shea, 2007). Indeed, women have been found to be more likely than men to respond to negative pressure from others about their bodies by exhibiting eating disorder characteristics (Peden, Stiles, Vandehey, & Diekhoff, 2008).

Media are one way dominant cultural body ideals are communicated and these ideals vary for men (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005) and women (Tiggemann, 2002). In North America, media images typically convey to women a slimmer, less muscular ideal, in contrast to the more muscular ideal presented for men. However, it must be noted that research has suggested that such ideals may vary by race and ethnicity (Demarest & Allen, 2000; Overstreet, Quinn, & Agocha, 2010). The cultural messages constructed and conveyed by media may negatively influence women’s mental and physical health (Tiggemann, 2002). Indeed, there is evidence that media images do negatively influence women’s body image, specifically if the women engage in
social comparison or internalize the media-ideal (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2004). Fallon and Rozin (1985) found in their study over two decades ago that when a female perceives a discrepancy between the ideal body type and her perceived body, body image disturbance might develop. Research by Petrie (1993) using a sample of female college athletes found that if the ideal bodies portrayed in media messages were internalized by these women, there was a greater likelihood of their reporting symptoms of eating disorders.

While college women in general (including college women athletes) might feel pressure from others in society to attain a body type that is consistent with societal expectations of the feminine ideal, at the same time college women athletes likely feel pressure from those within the sport organization, such as coaches, to develop a particularly sporting body. Self-Presentation Theory (Leary, 1992) is one theory that describes the process by which sport participants monitor and control how others perceive their body in sport in an attempt to present a desirable image. Female athletes may seek to achieve the dominant cultural feminine body ideal (Bordo, 1993) and/or the body ideals for their specific sport. When these body ideals differ this discrepancy may impose even more stress and negatively impact an athlete’s perceptions of her body and her self and ultimately, her mental and physical health. That is, female athletes may feel discomfort and struggle emotionally with the contradictions between the socially dominant female body ideal and the athletic body ideal, leading ultimately to unhealthy behaviors (Krane, Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997).

Certainly research shows that body image is multidimensional (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, Stiles-Shipley, 2001) and that female athletes are aware of differences in body ideals that exist in sport and in society (Greenleaf, 2002; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Krane et al., 2001). In an examination of this contention, Greenleaf (2002) studied what former high school and college female athletes believed was the ideal body for their sport (i.e., the body that should be developed and maintained for their sport) and the ideal or valued female body in society. These athletes’ perceptions of ideal sport and social bodies were assessed using Fallon and Rozin’s (1985) Figure Rating Scale. Greenleaf indicated that the women reported a conflict between the two body types (sport and social) in that the ideal sport body type was seen as more muscular while the ideal social body type was viewed as not too muscular. Some of the
women also reported that the muscularity of the sport body type ideal was an issue for them because they felt being muscular made it difficult to fit into clothes. In addition, in her analysis Greenleaf found teammates, uniforms, fitness, and coach attitudes and behaviors influenced these former female athletes’ perceptions of the ideal sport body.

Subsequently, Krane and colleagues (2004) studied the discrepancy between the socially dominant feminine body ideal (slim, non-muscular) and the athletic ideal (strong, muscular) in a sample of current female college athletes. In this study the researchers interviewed 21 female college athletes to discover how they negotiate and reconcile the social expectations surrounding their femininity with their athleticism. The researchers found that the women athletes in their study took pride in their academic achievements and felt empowered by being strong and muscular because they believed such bodies enhanced their athletic performance. However, these women also reported struggling with social acceptance because they were seen as not conforming to socially-valued feminine body types or feminine behaviors. A quote from a softball player indicated the discomfort the discrepancy between the sport body and social ideal engendered: “You’ve lifted, you’ve run, your bodies are all, yeah they’re different, but they have that bulk, you know, but when you go out in your normal clothes and mix with all the normal people and you feel different. When your arms are stronger and your legs are stronger and you’re not the little fragile person, you do feel different” (p. 325). Krane and colleagues found that these feelings of discomfort often came from feedback from others (e.g., being made fun of) but also from media and aspects of the sport environment, such as uniforms. In an earlier study Tantleff-Dunn and Gokee (2002) came to similar conclusions, suggesting that receiving feedback on physical appearance and comparing oneself to others can shape individuals’ perceptions of and feelings about their bodies or body image.

Given the findings of these earlier studies, George (2005) conducted an auto-ethnography designed as semi-structured one-on-one interviews and group interviews with 21 female college Division I (DI) soccer players that focused on both the sport and social environments of these women. George (2005) found that parents, teammates, male coaches, and male peers influenced the women’s experiences of their body as athletes and as women in society – in both positive and negative ways. For instance, while study participants saw their parents as emotionally and
financially supportive of their sport participation, they also said that some parents would make comments about their daughters needing to lose weight. Furthermore, one athlete reported that her boyfriend was teased about her appearance and another athlete shared that her father would make comments indicating that she should be “more feminine.” These female soccer players also engaged in self-evaluation and spoke of the challenges of balancing a sport performance and a socially feminine body. For instance, one player noted that it was hard to fit in khaki jeans because of the size of her thighs. Similar to Krane and colleagues (1997), George concluded that female athletes’ feelings of self-consciousness and discomfort about their bodies’ appearance might set the stage for disordered eating and otherwise negatively affect their overall health.

As noted, feedback from others can positively or negatively influence athletes’ perceptions of their bodies (Krane et al., 2001; Peden et al., 2008). In a study including current and retired female gymnasts, Kerr and colleagues (Kerr, Berman, & De Souza, 2006) found that gymnasts who received critical body-related comments from coaches engaged in more eating disorder patterns than those who did not. Further, Muscat and Long (2008) found that female athletes who experienced more severe critical comments from significant others reported greater disordered eating and more intense negative emotions, such as anxiety. Peden and colleagues (2008) assessed the relationship between eating disorders and the external pressures (i.e., “pressures received from other people to excel in athletic and academic endeavors and maximize attractiveness”) felt by a group of male and female collegiate athletes. External pressures and eating disorder symptoms were positively correlated for the group of female athletes only, indicating that female athletes may be more likely to experience negative consequences from such external pressures than males (Peden et al., 2008). Yet, earlier research by Krane et al. (2001) found that in some cases, female athletes’ perceptions of interactions with others regarding their bodies can be positive. Specifically, the female DI college athletes in their study felt that coaches instill a positive body image by providing a supportive environment, that is, an environment in which coaches do not care about female athletes’ weight as long as there is not an issue of being underweight or overweight or, if there is such an issue, address it with the athlete individually.
It is not only coaches but also teammates who may influence how a female athlete feels about her body. Women athletes have been found to compare their bodies to their teammates’ bodies (George, 2005; Mosewich, Vangool, Kowalski, & McHugh, 2009). For example, George (2005) found that the female collegiate soccer players in her study reported that teammates would sometimes pressure each other about changing their bodies and expressed a fear of excessive fat or muscle. As noted by Beals (2000), a preoccupation with or fear of fat is positively related to eating disorder symptoms. Female athletes (as well as females in general) have also been found to engage in “fat talk” (Smith & Ogle, 2006), or negative, self-degrading comments about their bodies in comparison to an ideal (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006). George (2005) found that as some of the female soccer athletes experienced changes in their bodies (as they trained for their sport), they became preoccupied with body image. Still, consistent with the study of women athletes by Krane and colleagues (2004), George noted that the female athletes in her study also seemed empowered by their muscular bodies because of what they were capable of doing in their sport. At the same time, they were aware of others’ reactions towards their bodies. This led some of the women to “self-monitor” their bodies (i.e., seek to control their appearance). They did this because finding a balance between their athletic performance and social appearance bodies was important to them.

Body-salient (or aesthetic or lean-sport) female athletes, that is, athletes whose performance depends on bodily appearance, may be particularly prone to self-monitoring or negative body image. This is because body-salient athletes “need” to maintain a certain weight or physique to compete because of the large emphasis placed on the body in performance (Petrie, 1996). Lean-sport athletes (e.g., those involved in track) or aesthetic athletes (e.g., those involved in dance) may be at a greater risk for body image disturbance than non-lean sport athletes. In a meta-analytic review of research on females and eating problems, Smolak, Murnen, and Ruble (2000) found that female athletes, and lean-sport athletes in particular, may be more at risk for body image disturbance than non-athletes and non-athletes may be more protected from adopting eating disorder symptoms. Lean-sport athletes, such as synchronized skaters, have been reported to self-impose weight related pressures and weight-related pressures have been found to directly relate to social physique anxiety (Greenleaf, 2004).
In general, it seems that performance and weight or appearance are linked in that athletes themselves, or others within sport, critique the body in the belief that a particular weight and/or appearance positively affect performance. In sport, and in NCAA DI athletics, there is often an evaluation of the body, either through physiological testing or progress in the weight room. In fact, it has been reported that excess body fat, as represented by a higher body fat percentage, can inhibit performance in some sports (Potteiger, Smith, Maier, & Foster, 2010). However, it must be noted that Potteiger and colleagues studied male ice hockey athletes. Whether such holds true for female athletes has been little explored. If so, perhaps it is not surprising that many athletes feel a lean or muscular body is needed to perform well. Still, for female athletes this issue may not be so simple. Given culturally dominant notions of ideal femininity and female bodies, female athletes may experience particular conflicts around their sporting bodies.

Whether a sport-specific ideal is perceived as necessary for any given athlete or not, communication about a female athlete’s body from specific others in sport or in society can positively or negatively impact her perceptions of her body (sporting and/or social) and her self. For instance, in a survey investigating perceptions of body size and coaching behavior in a sample of adolescent female gymnasts, Cumming and colleagues (Cumming, Eisenmann, Smoll, Smith, & Malina, 2005) found that gymnasts perceived that greater body size of the athlete was associated with less positive support from the coach. In another study of gymnasts, Kerr et al. (2006) found that the gymnasts in their study suggested that because every athlete has a different body, it may be important to stop pressuring athletes and talking to athletes about their “fatness” as this is not necessarily helpful or constructive feedback. Research examining interactions between coaches and female adolescent cross-country athletes found that coaches tended to avoid discussions about the body with athletes (Smith & Ogle, 2006). However, Yukelson (2010), contends that coaches should take the time to get to know athletes in order to create a positive environment for the athlete and team; thus, discussing body issues with athletes may actually improve coach-athlete communication and solve any misunderstandings about the coaches’ communication about the sporting body.

Study Rationale and Statement of Research Purpose
The research reviewed above indicates that female athletes are aware of the types of bodies that are valued in sport and valued in society for females. Further, they often see these ideals as not just different but as contradictory or in conflict. Pressure to conform to these contradictory ideals may contribute to their having negative perceptions of their bodies and to disordered eating and other unhealthy practices. At the same time, studies of female athletes indicate that their communication with significant others (such as coaches, parents, teammates and friends) about their bodies is influential. However, just how and why communication with others shapes their experiences of their bodies, and may be experienced as supportive or detrimental, needs further study. Knowing how to discuss body change with female athletes may enhance coaches’ and others’ interactions with them, as well as their sport performance, and may subsequently support athletes’ health and development of a positive sense of self.

Extending the work of George (2005) and others then, the current study was an in-depth exploration of how female NCAA DI college athletes experience the sport-specific female body ideals communicated to them by specific others and how they make sense of the their bodies in relation to this communication. These body ideals include not only muscularity but also body shape and weight. The specific others of focus in this study are coaches, trainers, teammates, parents, and close significant others, such as partners. In exploring DI college female athletes’ experiences of communication with these individuals, this study also examined what the athletes believed would comprise supportive and helpful communication about their bodies.

**Methods**

**Recruitment and Description of Study Participants**

The participants in this study were 8 female NCAA DI college athletes recruited through purposive sampling methods (Mason, 2002); that is, they were recruited because it was believed they would be able to discuss the phenomenon of interest and to explore factors previous research on the topic has found important. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the athletic director and NCAA compliance officer at a NCAA DI university were contacted for permission to contact the head coaches of all female sports at the university. After receiving permission, the primary author contacted the coaches to explain the purpose of the study, ask permission to recruit study participants from among their athletes, and (if permission
was given) to schedule a meeting with the athletes. A meeting was held with each female athletic team (with the coach[es] present if desired) to provide further information about the study. During the meeting, the principal investigator’s contact information was provided and athletes interested in participating in the study contacted the principal investigator through email to schedule the interview.

Previous research has suggested that a number of factors may shape or distinguish female body ideals and female sporting body ideals. Hence, these factors guided the negative case sampling (Glesne, 2011; Johnson, 1997) used in this study. For example, because existing research indicates that race may be influential in women’s perceptions of ideal bodies (Overstreet et al., 2010), participants were recruited for racial diversity; specifically, two participants identified as Asian-American, one participant identified as African American, and five participants identified as White. Further, given that previous research has found that body ideals/image and eating disorder symptoms vary by type of sport (i.e., body-salient vs. non-body-salient sport), participants were recruited from both types of sport (body-salient sport: 3 synchronized skaters and 2 track athletes who identified as sprinters; non-body-salient sport: 1 softball player and 2 volleyball athletes). Believing that year of athlete may also be important to individuals’ sport experiences (e.g., in terms of willingness to comply with coaches’ wishes or perspective on their collegiate sport career) participants included 3 first year students, 3 sophomores, and 2 juniors.

The mean age of participants was 19.25 (SD = 1.16). The range of months spent on their current team was from nine months to 36 months (M = 20.63, SD = 10.45). Years of experience with their respective sports ranged from about four and a half years to 15 years (M = 9.95 years, SD = 3.28). The participants were asked a close-ended question regarding their body in sport, “do you believe a large emphasis is placed on the appearance of your body?” to which six responded by circling “Yes” and two responded with “No.” The participants were then given a 6-point Likert-type question (1 = “Little to no emphasis at all” to 6 = “Large emphasis”) asking, “Please rate on the scale below the extent to which an emphasis is placed on your appearance or your body in the SPORT environment.” The average of the eight responses was 4.63 (SD = 1.30; range 2 to 6).
**Interview Guide and Process**

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed based on the study’s research questions and previous research on this topic. It was piloted with two female athletes and some questions were revised and extended. The initial “grand tour” question (Spradley, 1979), “Could you tell me about your current sport participation – i.e., what sport are you involved in, for how long, how did you come to be involved in this sport, and why have you continued to be involved?” was asked to gain insight into the background of each participant’s sport participation and create a rapport and establish a level of comfort before proceeding (Glesne, 2011). Subsequent interview questions addressed the topics of body ideals for their specific sport, their perceptions of and feelings about their sporting bodies, communication from/with others regarding their bodies (weight, size, and muscularity), and strategies or their recommendations for how others should communicate with them about their bodies.

Following the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004), interviews were conducted as “conversations with a purpose” (Mason, 2002). While the topical questions guided the discussion, the flow of the interview was interactively determined and probing and follow-up questions were used to generate rich, thick data (Spradley, 1979) on the phenomena of interest.

The primary author conducted the interviews in a quiet location that was convenient for each study participant. Before each interview, the female athlete was given the informed consent form that she was asked to sign as well as a background information survey that she was asked to complete. Each interview was audio tape-recorded following the participant’s verbal consent to record the interview. Each interview ended when the various topics of the interview had been discussed and it appeared that the participant had nothing more to say. On average, the interviews were 51 minutes.

**Analysis**

After each interview, the principal investigator (first author) transcribed the interviews verbatim. As noted above, the process of IPA (Smith, 2004) was used to generate and analyze the data. IPA can be described as idiographic, interrogative, and inductive. It begins with the selection of study participants and is *idiographic* because researchers work with a small sample
and are interested in exploring the social phenomena in great breadth and depth. It is
*interrogative* in that questioning is semi-structured and allows the researcher to probe certain
areas or topics brought up by the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The *inductive* approach of
IPA is the process of studying patterns of data for themes and categories that are constructed into
more abstract and conceptual units (Shank, 2006). Results are generated from “condensing
extensive and varied raw data into a brief summary to establish links between research objectives
and summary findings” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). The extensive and varied data generated from the
qualitative interviews conducted in this study were condensed into related themes that describe
these female athletes’ experiences of specific others’ communication about ideal sporting bodies,
how they believe others should communicate with them about their bodies, and how they make
sense of the their bodies in relation to this communication. Perhaps most importantly, the
process of IPA allows new themes to emerge from the data that may have not been considered
before conducting the interviews (Shank, 2006).

As outlined in Groenewald (2004), four types of field notes should be produced after
each interview: observational, theoretical, methodological, and analytical. Observational notes
recorded important occurrences throughout the interviews, such as the participant’s tones (e.g.,
optimistic), responses (e.g., helpful), and physical expressions (e.g., excitement). Theoretical
notes were personal interpretations and reflections of the meanings of constructs, such as body
image (e.g., more muscular ideals as opposed to lean or toned…). Methodological notes were
reminder notes for interview purposes. For instance, there were notes about what questions
should be added to subsequent interviews, such as “How do you think we should educate
coaches about suggesting body change?” Analytical notes included a summary of the interview
session. The main issues or themes from the interview, the demeanor of the participant, and
impressions about the participant or interview were recorded (e.g., interviewee appeared to
maintain a positive body image but felt that coaches could be more sensitive about body change).

Many qualitative researchers do not think about issues of validity, reliability and
generalizability in the same way as quantitative researchers because of the different assumptions
of qualitative and quantitative paradigms. However, according to Schram (2006), all qualitative
researchers are concerned about the credibility and trustworthiness of their data and those
conducting qualitative science (as opposed to inquiry) often use a number of strategies parallel to those used in quantitative research to address these concerns (Schram, 2006). In this study researcher triangulation was used in order to enhance the study’s interpretive validity. The first and third authors of this manuscript and a graduate student trained in qualitative research methods read and analyzed the transcriptions to explore the meanings of the data and construct themes. In addition, to establish descriptive validity, verbatim quotations are provided.

Results

This section presents the themes generated from the interviews with the female athletes’ who participated in this study and the relationships among these themes. Themes, and the sub-themes that comprise them, describe the meanings that these athletes made (or their experiences) of specific others’ (i.e., coaches, trainers, teammates, parents, and close significant others, such as partners) communication about their female sporting bodies, how they make sense of their bodies in relation to this communication, and how they believe specific others in the sport environment should communicate with them about their bodies. How these athletes believe coaches and others should communicate with them about their bodies both emerged in their discussions of their experiences of communication with specific others and from directly asking them for their suggestions.

As shown in Figure 1, study participants’ Experiences of Their Sporting Bodies were described in terms of achieving and maintaining both Healthy “Fit” Bodies and Sport Performing Body Ideals, and the latter was often seen as conflicting with what they believed to be Social Feminine Body Ideals. Their notions of Healthy “Fit” Bodies and Sport Performance Body Ideals were reinforced by the Sport Environment in a variety of ways; specifically, through the Sport Training in which they were involved, the Others in Sport with whom they interacted, what they saw in Media, and their awareness and perceptions of Successful Athletes in their sport.

These Female Athletes’ Experiences of Communication From Others About Their Sporting Bodies (particularly from coaches and others within the sport environment, such as teammates, as well as female family members) were central to their experiences of themselves as athletes and as women (see Figure 2). They experienced what they perceived as Supportive
communication and *Unsupportive* communication about their bodies from these individuals. Specifically, supportive communication about their bodies involved *Individualized Athlete-Centered Training, Recognize Body Change, and Relationship Development*. Unsupportive communication was experienced in specific others’ *Comparing Athletes’ Bodies, Critical Comments, and Threatening Athletes’ Sport Participation*. Further explanation and evidence of these themes and their relationships to one another are provided next. In discussing their experiences, what the athletes believed would comprise supportive and helpful communication about their bodies from coaches and others was revealed. In order to maintain anonymity, participants are not referred to by name but by the code they were assigned in the interview process. Each participant’s code along with their sport-type (body salient or non-salient) and year in college are listed in Table 1. However, given the relative lack of racial diversity of the university’s women’s sport teams, other identifying information (i.e., race and specific sport) is not provided for individual athletes in order to maintain their anonymity.

**Female Athletes’ Experiences of Their Sporting Bodies**

These athletes’ experiences of their sporting bodies were shaped by notions of *Healthy “Fit” Bodies and Sport Performing Body Ideals* (that often were seen as conflicting with *Social Feminine Body Ideals*) and were produced and reproduced by the *Sport Environment* through *Sport Training, Others in Sport, Media, and Successful Athletes* in their sport. Evidence of these themes and sub-themes are provided below.

**Healthy “Fit” Bodies**

Apparent in the stories of study participants was the centering of health and fitness – both by specific others in sport and the athletes themselves. That is, they appeared to embrace this discourse produced in the sport environment and employed it in explaining their behaviors. The meanings of attaining healthy “fit” bodies had to do with their ability to maintain energy and “take care of” their bodies in terms of exercise and nutrition so as to be prepared for sport performance. Maintaining energy was key to how the athletes made sense of the expectations they faced for achieving a sport performing body ideal. For example, when discussing coach comments regarding their body in sport, (P#5) stated:
I try to make sure I actually eat instead of like avoiding breakfast at eleven o’clock after practice, so, so umm, there just a, I guess I just changed, it’s like a reminder as to what I should be eating and what I shouldn’t they (coaches) always remind us to eat because they don’t want zombies at like six o’clock in the morning.

The athletes consistently talked about the emphasis that was put on proper nutrition and eating habits to sustain themselves during workouts and competitions as (P#1) described:

I think gaining weight and umm when you know that you’re eating the right things and that you’re doing the right things and that you’re doing the right work out, then I feel like it’s contributed more to muscle, but if I weren’t eating the right things or if I weren’t, umm, giving my all in the weight room I would say oh it’s cuz I’m just eating a lot.

When discussing strict diets of professional athletes, (P#4) indicated:

I think there’s a point in being healthy and then being to the extreme and ‘ya know with like food restriction I think it’s really important to like to make sure that you’re, even though you may be restricting yourself…it’s important to still get like proper nutrition and everything that you need because we are, we are athletes and we do ‘ya know use a lot of energy and use a lot of calories and then it’s like we need to keep…like fulfilling our body with all its, all its like nutrients.

Not just nutrition but also exercise was viewed as necessary to building power or strength in order to perform well. For example, when asked about established body ideals for their specific sport (P#7) stated, “you still want to have a fit body to be able to perform well but the way your body looks is not based, is not like part of the sport like you’re not graded on if your skinny or tall or short…”

**Sport Performing Body Ideals (vs. Social Feminine Body Ideals)**

Perceptions of the ideal sport performing body varied by athlete and their particular sport. Some of the athletes defined the ideal as a very lean (low-fat), muscular body. For example, (P#2), when talking about sport-specific body ideals stated:
I mean not everyone fits into them, but there’s always this, umm, you know very like slender, small, like kind of stereotype… I personally don’t fit that as much, but umm, you know, a lot of things are, I know a lot of stigmas are bigger butt, bigger quads …but definitely like a small, ‘ya know, stomach and like abs and very kind of petite but like strong at the same time and so like lean I guess very compact body.

However, other athletes described the ideal performing body as bigger. For instance, (P#3) stated that athletes could be, “different weights… but bigger girls are probably thicker, more muscular.” Athletes within the same sport and on the same team viewed body ideals differently, suggesting that notions of ideal female sporting bodies can be contradictory and are complex. Although athletes had differing opinions about what was considered ideal, the process of making sense of body ideals was similar in that body ideals related back to sport performance.

For example, the athletes discussed that they could make judgments about other athletes’ performance or athletic abilities based on their appearance. (P#3) stated, “You can tell that like some people you can just tell that they’re fast just by looking at them for some reason…” Furthermore, (P#3) went on to describe that looking at others helped her with her own performance. She said, “When I’m on defense that (opponent’s appearance) affects the way I’m gonna play defense….” For (P#6), the ideal was being “fit” or in shape; there were not certain muscular or lean body ideals. In fact, judging other female athletes based on stereotypes of what was ideal was looked down upon by some of the athletes. For example, (P#6) emphatically stated:

I wouldn’t want anyone to think that [negatively] of me if I were bigger and I don’t want anyone thinking just because I’m skinny or we even have like really short people on the team, they’re being underestimated and I feel like that, if that wasn’t, if their body shape wasn’t the case, they wouldn’t be judged that way.

Female athletes in this study took into account what they saw as dominant social feminine body ideals when making sense of their sporting bodies and often these social feminine body ideals were viewed as very different from sport performing body ideals. As noted previously, study participants believed “proper” nutrition and exercise were ways they took care
of their bodies or knew their bodies and these practices were part of the discourse of having the “proper” body for sport performance. However, given dominant social feminine body ideals, while such practices were seen as “healthy” they also could lead to bodies about which the athletes had conflicted feelings as (P#6) explained:

You have to eat right and you have to do your, get your weightlifting in but you don’t have to be like “muscle woman” like you can be just an, like an average person you don’t have to have abs and like, all your muscles like bulging out of your shirt or anything like that but at some point you do have to have muscles there.

The college environment generally and Greek culture in particular were cited as contributing to these conflicted feelings. In reflecting on the difficulty of discussing body image, (P#4) stated “you have the sorority girls who are super, super skinny and you have the athletes like you can easily walk out of (the building) right now and you can easily point out who’s in a sorority and who’s on an athletic team …” The athletes described what they saw as the difference between the sport body ideal and social feminine ideal. (P#1) indicated that within her specific sport they (athletes) are…

…all encouraged to umm, just get as much muscle as you can, but umm, I feel like outside of the sport realm like when we are with our other friends or umm, like going out or whatever, it’s umm, like it’s good to look toned but not so much muscular to the point where I think umm, it like can put you as a “manly” type of thing.

The sporting body ideal was something they felt they had to accept as (P#8) stated:

I did not want to gain muscle, because it’s not exactly the most feminine thing to do to gain ten pounds of muscle so at first, I didn’t reject it, but I wasn’t excited about it um, I wasn’t excited about lifting really heavy in general, but I knew that was something I would have to embrace or else, I was gonna be miserable for four years, now I see my body as, right now I have an athletic body um a muscular, Division I body, but I’m looking forward to the day where I can have smaller arms.
Being around other female athletes, however, did give the participants some comfort. For instance (P#8) thought about the day when her college athletic career would come to an end and commented that “(what) I’m gonna miss so much is having people that look like me that have so much in common, in terms of um body type, cuz I wear heels around my team and nobody thinks I’m tall exactly because we’re all the same.”

**Sport Environment**

Athletes in this study discussed many practices within the sport environment that produced and reproduced their notions of Healthy “Fit” Bodies and Sport Performing Body Ideals. These included the Sport Training in which they were involved, the Others in Sport with whom they interacted, what they saw in Media, and their awareness and perceptions of Successful Athletes in their sport.

**Sport training.** Within the sport environment, the athletes’ process of training and the evaluation of their training contributed to their experiences of their sporting bodies. The training process included the technical training or weight training that was undertaken to enhance their sport performance (e.g., focusing on breathing or engaging the core). (P#5), in talking about training center workouts indicated, “We focus a lot on core and upper body so that our arms are strong enough to hold things together, ya know, (perform) as well as our core is strong enough to keep us ya know going.” The process of sport training was mainly viewed as positive. For some, tracking one’s physical development led to confidence regarding their performance and bodies. For example, when asked about sporting body ideals (P#1) said that she tracked progression with weight sheets and explained:

I guess, throughout the year they give you a new weight sheet that says like what your new max is and umm we test throughout the season like okay, my maximum squatting is [weight] or whatever and then the next time we test, it should be higher and umm, so seeing that increase, I guess builds confidence.

Sport training included exercise and other physical performance tests as well as weigh-ins and contributed to how these female athletes experienced their sporting bodies. For instance, when describing how often she was evaluated (P#7) said, “we have testing umm a few times a year, I would say like three, something like, before you start your season, after your season, like in the
summer, right before like your peak point… it could be with anything that we test, with like things like bench press, squat, like, jump, how high you can jump.” (P#6) preferred to test her body fat percentage and she noted, “I feel to be on my top performance I need it to be below a certain level (body fat percentage) and our weightlifting coach, he leaves that to us, if we want to check it, we can check it, and if—and if you ask him a question about it, if it’s good, he’ll let you know.” Furthermore, some teams used “group weigh-ins” and for some this was a new experience that also influenced how they made sense of their sporting bodies. This practice was a new and somewhat surprising experience for (P#8): “I’ve never had my weight acknowledged or weighed in front of other people before, that was usually like [something] we see as a personal thing.”

**Others in sport.** Other people within the sport environment, predominantly coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, and teammates, contributed to how the athletes experienced their sporting bodies. The influence was in the form of either encouragement to maintain a “healthy” body state or judgment of athletes’ bodies or eating habits. Strength coaches and coaches played a direct and central role in these athletes’ experiences of their sporting bodies. For example, (P#8) talked about where she thought weight and body ideals came from and stated, “We’re taught what is ideal by what our coach says and our strength coach saying what they think is a good weight and how much muscle you should have and how, and what we should strive for…” In addition, the athletes reported that coaches encouraged them to eat properly. For instance, (P#7) stated, “[coach] just like makes suggestions about like eating right, eating healthier, certain like meals like, always have breakfast, don’t cut out meals, don’t skip meals, but still be healthy when you’re eating.” Furthermore, along with their teammates, they were encouraged to exercise to gain muscle. For example, when asked about successful athletes that maintains sporting body ideals, (P#1) stated that coaches encourage looking like certain athletes:

I’ve been encouraged, through coaches and stuff, like, okay, ‘she was fast when she was little but when she went to the weight room and she started working out and doing things to perfect her body type for her sport like then she got faster’ and
so I guess that’s the way that coaches encourage us to, umm, to get buff, or whatever for our sport.

Additionally, coaches encouraged exercise by sending information to athletes as (P#1) noted, “They’ll [coaches] send us video of umm, different, umm athletes and stuff and umm how their body make up affects their [performance].” A coach sending information was often viewed positively and these athletes believed coaches sent them information about exercises, for example, to help them maintain a fit body. As noted by (P#6), “It’s all about strength and getting stronger”. However, some messages from coaches were perceived as negative (i.e., as somewhat judgmental or critical). For example, (P#6) also stated, “we’ll get emails and stuff saying this is what you should look like and stuff… we’re kind of like okay, well, we’re trying, we’re weightlifting, we’re running continuously but…(coach) still wants us to have, bigger muscles and eat right and stuff like that.” Similarly, some of the athletes talked about coaches making comments about the athletes’ concerns with not getting “too muscular” or appearing “feminine”. For example, (P#1) recalled, “I remember one time our coach told us you only have four years in college, and umm, so you can either use this four years to, to build up your body the right way… or you can I guess, [coach] said, try and look cute.”

In addition to coaches, teammates influenced these athletes’ perceptions of their bodies through body judgment or discussions about weight. A general theme for the athletes was that “girls were catty” and had a tendency to judge each other as noted by (P#7), “I mean girls always judge people…” Some athletes also referred to the “fat talk” that occurred on teams but also seemed to appreciate the support they received from teammates. (P#2) remembered that:

Someone would be like ‘Oh, like, like I feel fat today’ or like ‘I’m bloaty’ and people will be like ‘no, you’re fine’ like ‘Come on like we work out all the time’ and people have, if you say like ‘Oh, I like ate too much, gosh, I’m gonna gain so much weight’ or something people say things like that and it’s like you know we work so hard all the time like how could you even possibly like think that you’re gonna gain all this weight just from one meal or something like that.

Media. The female athletes also discussed that they came to their notions of sporting body ideals by watching athletes on television. When asked about how she comes to her beliefs
about sport-specific body ideals, (P#2) stated, “growing up watching these things (competitions) like as a little (athlete) watching…things on TV and the Olympics…” However, some also believed that it was up to them to interpret or make sense of the female athletic bodies they see as (P#5) stated, “[body ideals] is honestly just making your conclusions from what you see on TV and what you see in person and the results that the top people are getting versus the results that the people at the bottom are getting.” Furthermore, notions of the ideal sporting body were perceived as different from the ideal feminine body presented in the media. For example, when discussing the differences between the social and sport ideal, (P#1) stated, “Different body types like, the way that you’re built is different than other sports, and, umm, it may not be what, I guess the media says is attractive…it’s not toned it’s more muscular.”

**Successful Athletes.** During the interview, study participants either mentioned or were asked who they considered to be a successful female athlete in their particular sport. The athletes who the participants viewed as successful were predominantly professional female athletes. These “successful” athletes were defined as having good performance outcomes. The bodies of these successful athletes were seen by the others with whom they interacted in sport (e.g., their coaches, teammates), and/or by the athletes themselves, as the body ideal for successful performance in their specific sports. (P#1) stated, “When you see a certain athlete do really well, umm, and you look at their body make up, as an amateur athlete I guess college athletes are still amateur athletes we’re not getting paid, umm, you’re encouraged to look like them because they’re doing well in their professional sport.” Media influence was also discussed in conjunction with the influence of successful athletes. (P#5) talked about the successful athletes she watches on TV: “I’ve seen girls, I’ve seen teams…over the years…just in the US and then I watch (competition) a lot…every year it’s on…on TV.”

**Female Athletes’ Experiences of Communication About Their Sporting Bodies**

In talking about their experiences of sport participation and their bodies as sporting bodies, the female athletes in this study reported, and were asked about, their perceptions of the communication they had from specific others in sport (i.e., coaches, trainers, teammates, parents, and friends) related to their bodies. Some of this communication was viewed as supportive while some was experienced as unsupportive. Evidence of what these athletes meant by supportive...
and unsupportive communication is presented next. In addition, these experiences provide insight into how they believed specific others in sport should communicate with them about their bodies.

**Supportive communication.** The athletes described supportive communication from others as *Individualized Athlete-Centered Training, Recognize Body Change, and Relationship Development*. Each of these held a variety of meanings (i.e., was comprised of various sub-themes) as discussed below.

*Individualized Athlete-Centered Training.* Recognizing individual differences, Giving constructive feedback or suggestions, Encouraging healthy “fit” bodies, and Setting goals were experiences these athletes perceived as supportive or positive communication from others, and ways they believed that coaches and others could positively communicate with them, about their bodies.

*Recognizing individual differences.* Athletes indicated that individual differences are important to consider when developing training plans. (P#8) explained:

> I think we all recognize the individual differences, we all notice when someone’s stronger in certain areas, like I have better upper body strength than someone, and someone else has really good lower body strength so when we’re testing lifts and…stuff like that, if one girl can only get two chin ups but then she has like two hundred fifty squat, we, we understand that we are just different that way.

Some of the athletes also believed that they needed to stay focused on themselves, their own sport performance and not worry about others. (P#1) discussed the importance of being self-focused during the process of body change in the sport environment, “I feel like I do better when I’m just focusing on my own, my own getting better…and not comparing myself to other people and like even in practice.”

*Giving constructive feedback or suggestions.* Athletes also felt that receiving constructive feedback and suggestions about changing the body would be helpful when others communicated with them about the “need” to change their bodies for sport performance. For example, (P#2) stated:
Making a suggestion like maybe try this instead of that and things like that…or like if they suspect someone’s gaining a lot of weight or like there could be other factors besides food or there could be like stress and like peer things and stuff like that so just I mean getting to understand someone on a deeper level.

It was also noted that others should be sensitive about suggesting body change. In discussing strategies for communicating body change, (P#1) felt that coaches needed to “be more sensitive, but still be constructive and like, umm, there’s a way to go about it when you’re not yelling at them but you’re getting, you’re getting your point across.” She went on to say that body change could be suggested in a conversation:

It’s more of a longer conversation than just a comment; I feel like the comment would evoke a negative reaction to the point of feeling like, like I was saying inadequate as opposed to like you want me to get better, umm, I guess like if a coach sitting down and saying like umm ‘I’ve noticed that umm, you’re doing really well in this, you’re doing really well’ in like I guess prefacing it with a whole bunch of positives before I guess going straight to what they want to encourage you to do like I guess they, ‘you’re doing really well…, I’ve seen you improve here, but I feel like you can do better if umm we together worked out something that you could do to, to perfect this part of you, your body…

Encouraging healthy “fit” bodies. Another form of supportive communication from others experienced and recommended by these athletes was encouragement to maintain healthy “fit” bodies and overall wellness. (P#1) thought it was important that coaches encourage wellness and suggested that coaches should tell their athletes, “We want you to be the best you can, so these are things you can do also in order to do that.” Strength and conditioning coaches were also seen as playing an important role in this regard. (P#3) provided an example:

I went to my strength and conditioning coach on my own because I wanted to shed a few pounds and [strength and conditioning coach (SCC)]…was supportive about it and told me healthy ways to do it…[SCC] gave suggestions and was just positive about it, [SCC] didn’t really judge me on why, [SCC] didn’t ask me why I decided to do it.
In other words, supportive communication from others was not only about encouraging healthy “fit” bodies but also was experienced when others provided support and know-how (i.e., gave them “healthy ways” to do so) and did not question an athlete’s interest in losing weight. Further, “shedding a few pounds” in “healthy ways” was equated with healthy “fit” bodies.

**Goal-setting.** Goal-setting was presented as another way coaches and others could be supportive in communicating with them about their bodies. Particularly when bodily changes were expected, coaches were seen as playing an integral role in motivating them with goal-setting. For example, some felt coaches should encourage athletes “to stick through it and keep…fighting for the goal that they want to achieve” (P#3). (P#3) then went on to say that “(Coach) didn’t want me to like just give up when it was hard because that kind of correlates to the stuff in real life ‘ya know like you’re not, if your job is gonna’ get hard, you’re not just gonna go and quit, you have to fight through the obstacles in your life to become like a better person and stuff.” Goal-setting for an ideal weight range (as opposed to specific weight) was also viewed as positive communication by some athletes. For instance, (P#8) indicated, “We did talk about it [an ideal weight range] with our coaches, we set a goal in the beginning of the year and, and I guess if you don’t meet your goal then you talk to them again. I never had that problem, I’ve been lucky to stay within my ideal body weight.” She went on to say that “choosing the actual number is technically up to us, but we’re definitely encouraged to keep finding it.”

**Recognize body change.** Some of the athletes indicated that supportive communication occurred when specific others in sport directly Discussed the body change that was expected of them as collegiate athletes and when Education about body change (specifically, eating and exercising) was provided.

**Discuss body change.** When asked to talk about the process of body change in sport, (P#8) shared:

If I was more aware of how much my body would change, I think I would have accepted it faster, so if there was a talk that like ‘your body is going to change and we need it to change to compete at a high level so we need you to embrace it’ and, and have fun with it, make it a competition with their friends like…we joke that we’re meatheads, we’ll talk about how much we can bench at dinner and there’s
some like non-athletes like we just joke about that I guess if they can show people how we can be a culture and how you can relate to each other I think that would…be nice.

Athlete #1 expressed how she felt that recognizing body change was needed because “our bodies are really important to us and how we are perceived by others and that could be a good thing or a bad thing.”

Discussing body change and body issues with parents and other family members was another experience described. For example, some athletes mentioned their mothers and sisters as people they turn to. (P#8) stated, “I’ve had emotional moments with my (mother) saying I’m, my weight’s gone up, and I’ve tried so many things to get it back down but it’s not working and she’ll talk me through it and suggest little, little tips to get it back to where I want it to be.” She continued, “I will seek other people’s opinions or methods, my sister was [an athlete] so she had a very similar body to me.” While study participants were questioned about communication from close friends, only one athlete talked about her boyfriend who, she said, never made body-related comments, “I have a boyfriend, he’s never said anything about me being too skinny or too fat or anything like that so…” (p#6).

Education about body change. Overall, the athletes did not feel that they received enough direction from their coaches and trainers about eating properly. For instance, (P#2) was adamant when she stated, “I feel like they don’t teach us enough what to eat. I mean I feel like most of us, yeah, we do have a healthy body image but I don’t know if everyone really eats the right things and the right amount of things a day.” The athletes cited nutritionists as individuals who could help them understand healthy dietary habits. For example, when asked how coaches could communicate information about the body or eating habits, (P#2) stated, “I wouldn’t mind having a nutritionist come in or like maybe a like…a doctor like telling people like how to eat better.” Athlete #8 also said that “it’s nice if there’s a nutritionist or someone knowledgeable in that region that will be willing to work personally with an athlete to come up with a plan if that can be encouraged, because, I don’t really like going to the nutritionist once a year, saying these are the, this is what you should be eating, cuz it’s not very personal.” In some cases, their coaches had recommended nutritionists and nutritionists also spoke to the team as a group.
However, the athletes felt that unless there was some kind of “follow-up” on the part of the coaches afterwards, the information would be misused or forgotten, as (P#4) noted:

When we did have the nutritionist come in it was like okay, like we’re gonna have you talk to the nutritionist now and then it was like after that like, nutrition was never mentioned again like…repeated throughout the season ya know make sure you’re still, ‘ya know, being healthy and…you’re not overdoing it…, or else, I think it, or I think it gets lost.

**Relationship development.** The athletes indicated that positive, close relationships with coaches are important for better communication about body change or body issues. That is, athletes saw coaches as significant influences in their lives whether as a *Role model*, someone who showed *Care and involvement for an athlete*, or someone who treated the *Athlete as a person*.

**Athlete care/involvement.** The athletes believed that coaches should be caring and be involved with them. For instance, (P#3) stated:

When it comes to the communication between athlete and coaches, just like try and make sure everything positive cuz if you go and talk to your coach and they kind of like put you down or something or are kind of negative and show they don’t really care, that they’re preoccupied or something, it kind of puts you off and you don’t feel comfortable going to them in other situations so as long as they’re like open to talk to you and actually like they want to be there for you, I think that’s encouraging…

Athletes also indicated that they wanted to build a close relationship with coaches in order to discuss body image or other concerns. For instance, (P#2) stated:

I think close relationships with coaches are better than not and sometimes it’s harder, …but, at the end of the day, ya know, if you spend that much time with your coach I would like my coach to be someone I can go talk to about like anything whether it’s my body image or something that happened in a relationship or something.

Some did experience their coaches this way as the statement of (P#3) illustrates:
[Our] coaches are really, like, into our lives, like they wanna know, how we’re doing in school and what’s up with our lives, they wanna make sure we’re happy and we’re not struggling or anything…” In fact, the athletes reported responding more positively to coaches who were caring. For example, (P#5) indicated, “one of the coaches…the coach is) like a very positive person, I try to give it one hundred and ten percent and respond.”

**Athlete as person.** As suggested in some of the previous quotes, the athletes felt that in order to show care coaches needed to recognize the athlete as a person or an individual. They felt that so doing would build relationships and trust. That is, athletes felt coaches needed to show “how they’re invested [in us] beyond [the sport], show interest beyond the sport” (P#8). (P#1) concurred, stating that “our goal is to do well in our sport but we also have other things that we wanna accomplish in college” and she thought coaches needed to recognize this.

**Coach as role model.** Another experience some of the athletes had with coaches that they felt helped develop their relationship with the coaches and led to positive communication about body issues was the coach as a role model for diet and exercise. For example, (P#2) felt that her “Coaches have tried to be pretty good role models…the coach has] been setting a good example.” Strength and conditioning coaches in particular were seen as models for healthy eating. (P#6), for instance, was enthusiastic about this characteristic of her weightlifting coach:

> My weightlifting coach [WC], every time I see [WC], [WC] is eating like lean steak, or [WC] is eating a bell pepper, which normal people sometimes don’t even do that but [WC] is trying to show us, [WC] is like practicing what [WC’s] preaching, [WC’s] not saying ‘Oh, do this’ and then behind closed doors [WC’s] doing something else.

Additionally, coaches served as role models by giving recommendations to athletes (when they requested such) about exercising using their own experiences of weight loss as illustrated by (P#3’s) experience: “They [the coaches] would give me examples of how they (lost weight) when they were, in the past, and what helped them and they would encourage me to try it.”

**Unsupportive communication.** Communication that was perceived as unsupportive and thus negative was that which was experienced as judgmental and discriminatory. Such judgment and discrimination occurred in several ways, according to study participants. They occurred
when coaches *Compared athletes’ bodies*, when coaches made *Critical comments* about an athlete’s appearance and/or eating, and when coaches *Threatened athletes’ sport participation* (i.e., playing time, starting position, or scholarship).

**Comparing athletes’ bodies.** When coaches compared athletes’ bodies with the bodies of other athletes, it was generally viewed as negative. For example, when asked about how coaches have made comments about athletes’ bodies (P#8) said:

> [Coach] even made an announcement to the team that, [coach] pointed out a few of us that …, that we were ‘in shape’ so that has to do with not only fitness level but also implying that [we had achieved] our ideal body weight, because then [coach] mentioned that right after, that everyone should be striving for their ideal body weight.

Athlete #8 went on to say that she realized “if I was on the opposite end of that, per se, that would annoy me if [coach] was pointing out someone else’s weight especially if I had been working hard and I felt that I was at an ideal weight…that probably would have upset me.” Body comparisons that teammates made among themselves could also be experienced as judgmental and thus unsupportive. (P#4) recalled, “I know like a lot of girls on my team have ‘ya know a bigger upper body and a smaller lower body and I have the opposite and it’s ‘ya know, it’s funny how we always wish we had the other.”

**Critical comments.** Critical remarks came from coaches or teammates, as well as parents. Specifically, some of the athletes discussed comments coaches had made to them, or that they had heard coaches make to other female athletes, about their bodies. For example, (P#1) remembered:

> One of the girls on the team she’s, she has really really big thighs and she knows it and I feel like she feels self conscious about it and umm, like [coach] told her … ‘Oh, watch out, oh, she’s coming through’ things like… I don’t think [coach] understands…that that’s kind of rude (laughs) or it could affect her self-esteem or something like that.
Regardless of their level of performance or athletic skills, some of the athletes were critiqued about their weight status. Athlete #4 discussed her frustration with an experience of criticism from parents and coaches that she had observed:

We still have those girls who are a little bit on the heavier side but are really good but they still get criticized for being overweight…. even though they’re great…. which kind of ‘ya know…kind of makes me frustrated just because like, like they are such great [athletes] and assets to our team.

Moreover, study participants reported that coaches sometimes criticized athletes in an attempt to deter unhealthy eating habits. For instance, (P#6) recounted:

[Coach] sent [an email] to everyone on the team …[Coach] was not very happy with [us eating junkfood] so we all received an email with a picture of a lady…she’s very fit, and was like ‘ya know ‘this is what you should look like.’

(P#6) was unhappy about this communication as she saw it as unfairly judgmental and controlling:

I don’t feel like that [eating junkfood] was the reason for [coach] to just judge everyone… I understand that [coach wants [us to build muscle] for our best performance, but it’s also, it’s what we want, and if we don’t want to look like that or we don’t want to do certain things, we don’t have to do it.

**Threatening athletes’ sport participation.** In the athletes’ stories of unsupportive communication with others about their sporting bodies, some shared that there were times when coaches had threatened their (or teammates’) sport participation because of their “not ideal” sporting bodies. For example, while discussing communication of body and weight ideals (P#8) expressed her concern with what a coach had said:

The [coach] did basically imply to someone that, that she would not be [participating] if she didn’t lose weight… I feel like sometimes those situations are what push girls into extreme diet modes and unhealthy habits…. I do not respect those ways at all.

The athletes perceived that discrimination based on weight did occur and felt that it made no sense as (P#4) stated:
It was rumored…that [coach] wouldn’t move [athlete] up because she was overweight…the fact that just her weight was holding her back like is kind of hard to believe that ‘ya know somebody would pick umm, would put a girl who’s maybe less, less qualified to be on [the team] just because she’s skinnier….

**Discussion**

This study explored female college athletes’ experiences of specific others’ (i.e., coaches, trainers, teammates, parents, and close significant others, such as partners) communication about their female sporting bodies and how they make sense of the their bodies in relation to this communication. How they believed specific others in the sport environment should communicate with them about their bodies was also examined. In general, what others in sport (e.g., coaches, trainers, parents) and they themselves expected of their sporting bodies was framed by these athletes as being due to the desire to enhance their sport performance – and to learn the lessons that controlling and managing the body (and sport) might teach. How the athletes made sense of (or thought about) their sporting bodies appeared to be influenced by the supportive and unsupportive communication they had with specific others, mainly head coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, and female family members – but also teammates and the many others (e.g., sorority girls, fellow students out at night at the bars) that comprise the college environment. However, only one athlete discussed a boyfriend and said that he did not make comments about her athletic body. The athletes experienced individualized athlete-centered training, open recognition of body changes, and relationship development as ways coaches have communicated and should communicate about their bodies with them. Comparisons of athletes’ bodies based on appearance or weight, body-related criticisms, and threatening athletes’ sport participation in one way or another were considered unsupportive ways for coaches to communicate with them – and with them as *female* athletes, specifically – about their bodies. Although others’ communication with them about their bodies was an important factor in how these female DI college athletes made sense of their sporting bodies, other dimensions of the sport environment (e.g., their training, media) also presented to them notions of healthy “fit” bodies and sporting body ideals which were believed to be in conflict with social feminine body ideals.
Findings of this research are consistent with previous research that has found that a female athlete’s perception of her body or body image is multidimensional (Krane et al., 2001). That is, the athletes in this study were aware of their bodies as athletes and as women. They also recognized the conflict that exists between sporting body ideals and dominant social feminine body ideals (Greenleaf, 2002; Krane et al., 2004). While several of the study participants maintained that their current bodies were considered the sporting body ideal, all but one expressed tensions about developing/maintaining a sporting body that was contradictory to the social feminine ideal. The one who did not experience such tension herself, but believed it existed for others, was African American. She felt that her White teammates had conflicts about their sporting bodies that she did not have because of the different ideal of feminine attractiveness available to her as an African American woman. This is consistent with the research of Parker and colleagues (1995) who concluded that the dominant feminine “thin-ideal” in Western society was not salient in black culture. At the same time, the White and Asian American study participants did not discuss race or racial differences but seemed to assume their experiences were the experiences of all female athletes.

“Fat talk” (Britton et al., 2006; Smith & Ogle, 2006) was also evident among the athletes in this study, especially those within body-salient sports. According to Petrie (1996), being lean is a desirable trait in both body-salient sports and society. Thus it makes sense that body-salient athletes in particular would engage in self-degrading comments about the body if any deviations from this ideal were perceived. As also suggested by the extant literature (Tiggemann, 2002), the athletes in the current study experienced media outlets, such as television or magazines, as conveying the social feminine ideal. Female athletes in this study reported that sporting body ideals were conveyed through media as well, through watching successful athletes and sporting events on TV. The athletes in this study compared their bodies with those of the professional athletes who they admired and saw as possessing the sport performing body ideal. The bodies of professional athletes seemed to allow these female collegiate athletes to feel “okay” about their sporting bodies and to be one way they made sense of their sport training. As noted, there is a strong evaluative component of sporting bodies in DI college athletics and some research on
male athletes (ice hockey, specifically) suggests leaner bodies can enhance performance (Potteiger et al., 2010). Such beliefs (whether tested or not) are likely what motivate coaches and athletes to evaluate the “progression” of their bodies by checking body fat percentages, tracking weight lifting, and holding weigh-ins. Such beliefs are also the source of the athletic bodies about which the White and Asian American athletes in this study felt conflicted.

**Healthy “Fit” Bodies**

Although sporting body ideals provided the standard against which these female athletes assessed and experienced their sporting bodies, notions of a healthy “fit” body – that is, a body with the energy necessary for optimal sport performance that was achieved through healthy eating and regular exercise – was also communicated to these athletes by others in sport as a valued body – and these athletes embraced this thinking. Certainly “healthfulness” or healthy eating and exercise have been perceived as what is required to perform well athletically (Smith & Ogle, 2006). Athletes in the current study perceived that “looking healthy” and being healthy were central to their sport performance. A healthy “fit” body was also related to how they felt in that having a healthy “fit” body seemed to help them feel positively about their sport performing body. In fact, the athletes suggested that coaches should encourage exercising and eating healthy to improve sport performance rather than emphasizing weight loss to achieve a sporting body ideal. Athletes saw their strength and conditioning coaches as the ones mainly concerned about the their progression in the weight room, healthy eating habits, and overall healthy “fit” bodies. Although the process of achieving sport performing body ideals through maintaining healthy “fit” bodies was viewed positively, the athletes indicated they would like to have more guidance about eating healthy and wanted coaches to openly discuss with them the body changes that were expected of them.

**Critical Comments and Threatening Athletes’ Sport Participation**

Two types of communication from others that athletes experienced as unsupportive were critical or unhelpful comments about their bodies and threatening their sport participation because of their appearance. Such communication was viewed as judgmental and at times nonsensical, and challenged the athletes’ view of their sporting bodies. Smith and Ogle (2006) found that female athletes experienced many of coaches’ comments about their bodies and
ability as “condemnations and censures.” A similar experience in the present study was when the coach sent an email to athletes about how their bodies should look. Although the athlete felt that the coach had strong coaching qualities and positively influenced her sporting experience in general, this was an incident that was viewed as negative and unhelpful because the athlete felt that she and her teammates put in hours of hard work and thus did not deserve such ridicule. This supports that there are helpful and unhelpful ways in which to communicate diet and exercise changes. The same can be said with the instances of threatening and discriminating based on the appearance of an athlete’s body. These particular experiences did not make the athletes view coaches poorly in general, but were specific examples of poor communication about the body. To this end, there is evidence that there are more effective means of communicating body change, such as recognizing body change and focusing on the individual differences of athletes during training.

**Recognize Body Change**

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to respond to the question: “Do you believe a large emphasis is placed on the appearance of your body?” The participants were then given a 6-point Likert-type question (1 = “Little to no emphasis at all” to 6 = “Large emphasis”) asking, “Please rate on the scale below the extent to which an emphasis is placed on your appearance or your body in the SPORT environment.” Responses to these questions indicate that most of the athletes in the current study believed that a large emphasis is placed on the body in the sport environment. Yet, in the interviews these athletes indicated that coaches did not directly discuss with them the bodily changes that were expected of them in order to develop the ideal sporting body the coaches valued. Recognizing body change by discussing the process of body change with athletes and educating athletes about the body and proper nutrition was viewed as positive and useful communication. Smith & Ogle (2006) found that coaches of female adolescents engaged in “deferential avoidance” or tended to shy away from discussing anything about the body with the athletes. The college female athletes in the current study actually suggested that discussing body change would make them feel more comfortable with building muscle for sport. Furthermore, providing athletes with suggestions about proper dietary habits based on individual differences was suggested. The nutritionists were only perceived as needed
when athletes had a problem with dieting and nutritionists were only seen once a season to talk to the athletes as a group. The female athletes in the current study wanted more encouragement from coaches to see a nutritionist frequently in order to receive feedback about proper dieting, especially when they wanted to make changes to their body during training.

**Individualized Athlete-Centered Training**

During training, the athletes perceived that it was important to focus on the individual athletes’ needs and recommendations for communicating diet and exercise. In the current study, the athletes recognized individual body differences and mentioned that coaches also recognized individual differences. Focusing on the individual athlete when confronting issues with the body was also viewed as positive in previous literature (Krane et al., 2001). Goal-setting, which was viewed as a positive and effective way to communicate and encourage body change, may be a means of including individual differences in training. According to Gould (2010), it is important for goals in sport to be specific in measurable and behavioral terms. In the current study, some of the athletes set goals for an individual ideal weight range; however, there are many aspects that impact performance other than the shape of one’s body that can be included in a goal-setting plan, such as a skill for specific sport-related tasks or diet and exercise goals. One of the athletes in the current study stated that the coach originally wanted her to gain five pounds, but after training in college, she ended up gaining ten pounds, which the coach was still fine with. It can be argued that setting an outcome goal to be within an ideal weight range is rather ambiguous considering there are many factors involved with body change, such as increasing muscularity, that can contribute to weight gain or weight loss. Process goals are short-term, specific, behavioral goals that help athletes achieve a long-term outcome goal (Gould, 2010). While setting a goal for an individualized weight range may be viewed as positive and helpful for some athletes, it may also be beneficial to set performance outcome goals, such as squatting 200 pounds or decreasing a mile run by 10 seconds, along with diet and exercise process goals.

**Future Research**

Findings in the current study provide directions for future research on female athletes’ experiences of their bodies or body image. In terms of the complexity of body image in sport, this study suggests that female athletes’ perceptions of their body in sport not only has to do with
the way they look, but also how they feel. The athletes indicated that if they felt they had a healthy “fit” body, this led to confidence about their sporting bodies and performance. This study also indicates that strength in sport may not necessarily be about muscle strength, muscle tone, or physical capabilities, but also about perceptions of how they feel health behaviors, such as diet and exercise, have impacted their body and performance. Future research exploring female athletes’ perceptions of their body should further examine perceptions of a healthy “fit” body by uncovering specific health behaviors contributing to overall athlete wellness.

At the same time, it might also be important to ask athletes if coaches’ encouragement of a healthy “fit” body is perceived as controlling. In the current study, encouragement of overall athlete wellness without criticism was viewed as positive, but many athletes may still perceive that others are trying to control their appearance. Future research should examine the perceptions of encouragement of sporting body ideals and healthy “fit” bodies to explore perceptions of control of athletes’ bodies, using Objectification Theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), for instance.

Heterosexism and homophobia in relation to female athletes’ experiences of body ideals (sport and social) should also be considered. According to Griffin (1998), in western culture sport is a context of muscularity and muscularity is often associated with manliness or “looking like a lesbian.” While no one in the current study talked about experiences of looking like a lesbian or hearing from others that they look like a lesbian, some athletes did talk about looking “manly” or “not feminine” when discussing the discrepancy between the social feminine body ideal and sporting body ideals. Future research examining female athletes’ experiences of communication from others about their bodies should be informed by the scholarship on heterosexism and homophobia as these shape notions of masculinity and femininity, especially in the sport environment, and influence sporting body ideals.

The athletes’ status in terms of scholarships as well as year in sport should also be examined. In the current study, it was noted that scholarship and non-scholarship athletes might maintain different perceptions of discussing coach communication strategies. For instance, athletes who were walk-ons may be more likely to critique coaches’ communication of body ideals because they do not have to worry about losing a scholarship. Future research could
sample specific cases of walk-on or scholarship athletes in order to explore differences and similarities in their perceptions of the communication of the body. Furthermore, it was noted in the current study that athletes would have like to discuss body change before they entered the Division I level, indicating that the issue of negative body perceptions can be different based on year in sport. In terms of the purposes of the current study, there were no differences between the athletes’ year in sport and their perceptions of their sporting bodies or experiences of communication about their sporting bodies.

Future studies exploring the communication of sporting ideals should also take into consideration the sport organization as a whole, coaches and strength and conditioning coaches beliefs about athletes’ ideal body, coaches’ willingness to change communication strategies, and race and body ideals. In the current study, two athletes from the same sport and team had very different perceptions of the communication of body ideals. Future research should observe the sport organization or team as a whole, including interactions with strength and conditioning coaches and experiences with significant others in sport in order to learn more about how athletes process communication differently. Furthermore, the athletes cited having a body fat percentage below 20%, as criteria for a sport performing body. However, when asking athletes where coaches received this information, they were unable to cite a source or reason for the criteria. Future studies should explore how coaches or strength and conditioning coaches come to their beliefs about athletes’ ideal body criteria. To this end, coaches’ willingness to change communication of body change should also be explored. For instance, goal-setting for an ideal weight range was used to communicate body change to some athletes; however, this goal may not be effective for other athletes. Researchers should consider how coaches come to their communication strategies and identify their willingness to alter their methods of communication.

Race should also be explored in future research. In the current study, the participant who was African American felt that there were similarities between the body that was seen as ideal for her sport and the African American feminine body ideal. She also believed that was not the case for her teammates who were not African American; that is, she perceived that her non-Black teammates experienced conflicts between the ideal sport body and the ideal social feminine body. Negative case sampling (Glesne, 2011), or interviewing women who may have had
different experiences than the experiences of the non-Black women in this study – and directly exploring race with all study participants – would have strengthened the results of the current study. However, the results do indicate that future research should examine the intersections of race and gender in order to more fully understand how female athletes come to make sense of their bodies in relation to sporting body ideals.

**Challenges of Research**

As with all research, the current study presented several ethical issues that framed how it was conducted and how it is presented here. Of specific concern in this study was participant well-being and confidentiality. In terms of the former, it was expected that participants might discuss sport experiences that evoked intense and even painful feelings. Hence, in conducting the interviews, participants were assured that any questions could be skipped. The interviewer also sought to validate participants’ experiences and feelings.

In terms of confidentiality, in doing qualitative research on body image it is imperative to recognize that while giving participants the opportunity to share their experiences and honoring those experiences by authentically representing their “voices” is important, it is also necessary to protect their identities. The athletes in the current study are from one medium-size university with little racial diversity on the women’s sport teams. Participants expressed concerns about how the data would be used and who would see the results or read the study. Some of them were scholarship athletes and may have been concerned that if they were critical of their coaches there could be negative consequences. Hence, the researchers went to great lengths to ensure that any references to coaches and athletes in the quotations that might identify them (e.g., gender of coach, sport of the study participant) were removed. Further, personal information about the athletes was not tied to their quotes, some quotes were not used, and individual athlete profiles were not reported. We understand that such restrictions changed the story we could tell but the change was one of breadth of evidence and not substance or meaning.

**Implications for Practice**

The current study provides insights into specific female athletes experiences of communication about sporting bodies that is paired with suggestions of supportive and unsupportive communication strategies about body change or body ideals. It can be concluded
that how female athletes make sense of their sporting body is complex and coaches should consider discussing body change with athletes individually. Furthermore, there are certain ways to communicate body change. Communication of body ideals or body change in sport may not be supportive or unsupportive. In fact, communication strategies should instead be considered either appropriate or inappropriate for an individual athlete. Furthermore, encouraging healthy “fit” bodies through diet and exercise to maintain energy for performance was considered a positive, useful form of communication, if coaches were not critical, judgmental, or comparing athletes’ bodies in the process. Consistent with Kerr et al. (2006), the athletes in the current study indicated that they are willing to change their body but want more guidance on how to do so. The nutritionist was someone the athletes wanted to use as a resource to change dietary habits; thus, personalized visits with nutritionists should be encouraged not only to deter unhealthy eating habits but also to establish healthy eating habits. To encourage healthy “fit” bodies for performance, a goal-setting plan can be created that incorporates diet goals from the nutritionist and exercise or performance outcome goals from the strength and conditioning coach.

Discussing body change may not come easy for athletes; thus, similar to Yukelson (2010), the athletes in the current study also suggested that it is important to build a relationship with coaches in order to build trust and a sense of security needed for an athlete to confide in coaches about body image issues. To build a relationship, the athletes wanted coaches to recognize them as a person and to remain involved in their life and show care for them. Athletes also indicated that coaches serve as a role model for diet and exercise habits and athletes indicated that they mostly benefited from the advice given about the coaches’ personal experience with body change. Coaches play a significant role in the athletes’ experience of their sporting bodies. However, to build positive body image, athletes and coaches must work together to establish appropriate means of communicating body change and to develop training plans including both healthy diet and exercise strategies.
References


Petrie, T. A. (1996). Differences between male and female college lean sport athletes, nonlean sport athletes, and nonathletes on behavioral and psychological indices of eating


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References


Appendix A. Interview Guide

1. Could you tell me about your current sport participation – i.e., what sport are you involved in, for how long, how did you come to be involved in this sport, and why have you continued to be involved?

2. Do you think there are established body ideals for your sport? Can you think of a famous athlete that maintains the body ideals for your specific sport?
   a. **If no:** So your sense is that anyone of any size and shape participates and can participate?
   b. **If yes:** Could you tell me about that? What does that include/look like?

3. Do you think **YOU** have body ideals for your sport? How so/not?

4. **If YES to #2:** How do you think you came to these beliefs, that is, where do you think your beliefs about this come from?
   a. PROBE: Do you think others “let you know” about the ideal body for your sport/that you should have? How so? How have you experienced body ideals being communicated in your sport?
   b. Have you witnessed or experienced any comments or responses from (1) coaches, (2) strength and conditioning coaches, (3) athletic trainers, (4) parents, (5) judges, (6) teammates, or (7) significant others regarding your body in your specific sport?
      i. **If yes:** Can you tell me more about that? How is that communicated to you? Could you give me some examples (i.e., where have they occurred and when)?
         1. How have these comments made you feel?
         2. How did you respond to these comments (behaviorally, mentally)?
      ii. **If no:** Is there any other way (that the body ideals you have) have been communicated to you? Could you give me some examples?
         1. How have these comments made you feel?
         2. How did you respond to these comments (behaviorally, mentally)?
5. Have you witnessed or experienced any comments or responses from (1) coaches, (2) strength and conditioning coaches, (3) athletic trainers, (4) parents, (5) judges, (6) teammates, or (7) significant others regarding weight that have suggested weight loss OR weight gain in the sport setting?
   a. If yes: How is that communicated to you? Could you give me some examples (i.e., where have they occurred and when)?
      i. How have these comments made you feel?
      ii. How did you respond to these comments (behaviorally, mentally)?
   b. If no: Is there any other way (that the weight ideals you have) communicated to you? Could you give me some examples?
      i. How have these comments made you feel?
      ii. How did you respond to these comments (behaviorally, mentally)?

6. How do you think others, such as a coach or athletic trainer, could suggest changing your body without making you (or other female athletes) feel uncomfortable or anxious?

7. Is there anything else you can tell me about your experiences of the communication of body ideals in your sport that you haven’t had a chance to say that you think would help me better understand this issue?
### Table 1. Participant Number, Sport-Type, and Years of Experience in Sport

<table>
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<th>Sport-Type</th>
<th>Years in Sport</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Body-Salient</td>
<td>13 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Non-Body-Salient</td>
<td>15 years</td>
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<td>Non-Body-Salient</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Non-Body-Salient</td>
<td>10 years</td>
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</table>
Figure 1. Female NCAA Division I Athletes’ Experiences of Their Sporting Bodies
Figure 2. Female NCAA Division I Athletes’ Experiences of Communication about Their Sporting Bodies