



Sporting bodies, societal norms in history: Examining body image and identity

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ABSTRACT

The historical exploration of the body in sports hinges upon the value attributed to the body throughout time and converges various social science approaches, encompassing philosophical, religious, educational perspectives, and intersecting histories that involve political, sociological, economic, and medical dimensions. Sports, as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, hold profound sociocultural significance, reflecting prevailing attitudes towards the human body. The study of body image in sports history becomes a nexus where anthropology, sociology, psychology, and sports science converge, offering valuable insights into the evolution of body ideals and their implications on athlete identity. This examination delves deep into the annals of sports history, unearthing the evolving notions of body image and its impact on athlete identity, shedding light on the implications of historical body image ideals for contemporary sports culture and proposing recommendations for fostering a positive body image and identity in sports. The objectives of this narrative review include unearthing the historical evolution of body image ideals, examining the influence of societal norms on perceptions of athletic bodies throughout history, unravelling the role of media, technology, and popular culture in shaping body image ideals in sports, and identifying the intimate connection between body image and athlete identity, exploring its profound ramifications on athletic performance and overall well-being. By synthesizing findings from existing systematic reviews and scholarly works, this exploration aims to illuminate the intricate interplay between sporting bodies and societal norms throughout history and their enduring legacy on sports culture in the present day.

Keywords: Sport history, Sporting bodies, Societal norms, Body image, Athlete identity, Historical evolution.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the realm of sports, the human body emerges as a ubiquitous factor. Its capabilities are revered, celebrated, and often desired. Moreover, the human body becomes a focal point of substantial debate and regulation. This includes contentious deliberations concerning the classification of disabled bodies for competitive purposes, as well as the rigidly upheld binary sex categorization, which is subject to seemingly insurmountable challenges and exclusions. While sociologists and philosophers of sports have actively pursued scholarly endeavours related to the body across diverse contexts, historians have displayed comparatively diminished enthusiasm. Nonetheless, a substantial body of work pertaining to the body in physical education, and often extending into the realm of sports, has been carefully examined by educationalists and sport historians (refer to *History of Education*, Volume 36, Issue 2, 2007).

The historical exploration of the body in sports inevitably relies on the underlying principles of the body's philosophy and sociology throughout time. Crucially, it hinges upon the value attributed to the body, or specific bodies, during various periods. A convergence of social science approaches converges in the analysis of the body, encompassing philosophical, religious, and educational perspectives, alongside intersecting histories of the body that encompass political, sociological, economic, and medical dimensions, among others.

The significance of the body becomes evident, as keenly acknowledged by Douglas Booth, who remarks that *"the body is the primary means by which individuals announce who they are to the world"* (Booth, 2001). In the immediate and contemporary context, the body, whether in person or through mediated means, serves as a central vehicle for self-identification, self-representation (Elben & Stieglitz, 2018), alignment with ideologies, a means of attracting like-minded individuals, and a medium for conveying countless other messages.

In the realm of human endeavours, sports have evolved into a multifaceted cultural phenomenon, encompassing diverse disciplines, talented athletes, and enthusiastic spectators. Beyond the physical prowess displayed on the field, sports hold profound sociocultural significance, shaping and reflecting prevailing attitudes towards the human body. As a conduit for societal norms and values, sports history serves as a unique lens through which we can explore the intricate relationship between body image and identity.

Body image, a multifarious construct, encompasses an individual's perception, thoughts, and feelings regarding their own body. Historically, the embodiment of an athlete has been central to their identity, reflecting a wide array of aesthetic and functional ideals. From ancient times to the present day, the perception of sporting bodies has undergone dynamic shifts, often mirroring the broader sociocultural landscape.

The significance of body image in the context of sports history is evident in the mounting body of research exploring its role in physical activity and sports engagement. A systematic review conducted by Foley Davelaar (2021) highlighted the critical link between body image and participation in physical activity, emphasizing the reciprocal influence of body image on athletic involvement. Similarly, Zaccagni and Gualdi-Russo (2023) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis, underlining the impact of sports involvement on body image perception and ideals.

Sports history, as an interdisciplinary field, delves into the complex interplay between the human body and societal norms across different historical periods. The study of body image in sports history is a nexus where

anthropology, sociology, psychology, and sports science converge, offering valuable insights into the evolution of body ideals and their implications on athlete identity.

Historical explorations into the body in sports are embedded within a broader historical context. Vigarello (2013) emphasized the dynamic nature of societal representations of the body, demonstrating how these representations have continuously evolved over time. Understanding the body in sports history necessitates a nuanced analysis that considers the cultural, political, and philosophical forces that have shaped body ideals and perceptions.

From classical antiquity to the Renaissance and the modern age, diverse civilizations have endowed athletic bodies with particular virtues, often intertwined with prevailing ideals of beauty, strength, and discipline. Osborne and Litchfield (2022) emphasized the historical underpinnings of the cultural significance of sports bodies, shedding light on how sports became a powerful arena for the negotiation and expression of societal norms.

The construction of body image in sports history has also been shaped by gender norms, race, and power dynamics. The works of Imhof (1984) and Stolberg (2001) provide valuable insights into the ways in which sports have been entwined with notions of masculinity, femininity, and racial hierarchies, affecting how athletes perceived themselves and were perceived by others.

In the modern era, the mass media, advertising, and technological advancements have significantly impacted body image ideals in sports. The works of Cash (2004) and Thompson et al. (2022) underscore the profound influence of media representations, raising questions about the potential consequences of these portrayals on athletes' self-perception and societal expectations.

As society progresses, so too must our understanding of the multifaceted relationship between body image and identity in sports history. While previous research has laid essential groundwork, there remain gaps and opportunities for further exploration. Understanding how body image ideals have shaped sports participation, performance, and overall well-being provides a basis for fostering healthier athletic environments and promoting positive athlete identity.

Thus, this narrative review aims to delve deep into the annals of sports history, unearthing the evolving notions of body image and its profound impact on athlete identity. By synthesizing findings from existing systematic reviews and scholarly works, this exploration aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how societal norms have influenced body image in sports history. Additionally, it endeavours to shed light on the implications of historical body image ideals for contemporary sports culture and to propose recommendations for fostering a positive body image and identity in sports.

In the following sections, this narrative review will detail the research objectives, the methodological approach, the presented results, and, finally, the conclusions derived from this endeavour. The aim of this examination is to try to illuminate the intricate interplay between sporting bodies and societal norms throughout history and their enduring legacy on sports culture in the present day.

Objectives

The historical evolution of body image ideals will be unearthed in this narrative review. Primary sources, historical accounts, and expert analyses will be explored to discern the ancient celebrations and sculpting of the athletic form, intertwined into the tapestry of sporting history. Shifting body image perceptions across

time, from the gladiatorial arenas of Rome to the courtly competitions of medieval Europe and beyond, will be unravelled. The objective is to reveal the ethereal beauty and stringent demands imposed by historical body image ideals upon athletes and society.

The influence of societal norms on the perception of athletic bodies throughout history will be examined through the analysis of cultural, religious, and political forces, with the aim to understand how certain body types were accentuated as ideals of physical prowess and beauty. The collective gaze upon the athletic physique will be illuminated by juxtaposing societal norms against the backdrop of sports history.

The transformative role of media, technology, and popular culture in shaping body image ideals in sports. The intricate interplay between imagery and identity will be unravelled through exploration of archival records, contemporary media sources, and technological advancements. The impact of visual representations in print, film, and digital media on societal perceptions of sporting bodies across time will be untangled.

The fourth objective aims to identify the intimate connection between body image and athlete identity, including its profound ramifications on athletic performance and overall well-being. Thorough examination of academic studies and empirical evidence will strive to uncover how an athlete's perception of their own body influences their self-concept, mental fortitude, and dedication to their craft. The impact of body image on an athlete's resilience, determination, and capacity to thrive within the realm of sports will be explored.

METHODOLOGY

To accomplish this narrative review, appropriate keywords were identified to find individual studies that were pertinent to the current aim of the review. The search used the terms "*body image history*" OR "*sports culture evolution*" OR "*athlete identity*" AND "*body image*". In the last 20 years (January 2004–June 2023), a search of the literature has been conducted drawing from the databases MEDLINE (PubMed) (n = 7), ERIC (n = 177) as primary sources, and Google Scholar (n = 785) as a secondary source. Abstracts and main texts have been reviewed immediately after all duplicates were removed. The overall 73 articles focusing on body image history, sports culture evolution, athlete identity, and body image have been synthesised and integrated into the main text, which was organised in sections following a narrative style (Demiris, Parker, Oliver & Washington, 2019).

The inclusion criteria for selected studies will be based on relevance to body image through history. Data has been extracted from the selected studies and organised thematically to address the specific objectives of the review.

The synthesis of findings will be conducted using a narrative approach, providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of body image through history. The review will also consider the cultural and regional diversity across epochs.

The limitations of this review include potential language bias, as prevalent English-language publications will be considered, and the possibility of publication bias, where positive results are more likely to be published (McShane, Böckenholt & Hansen, 2016).

The synthesis carefully considers the contexts, cultural nuances, and societal forces that have shaped the embodiment of sporting ideals throughout history, steering away from undue speculation and adhering to the grounded insights derived from the literature.

RESULTS

Historical overview of body image ideals in ancient and early modern periods

Numerous scholarly works in the domain of sport and bodies have focused on specific historical contexts and regions. Notably, these include investigations into Ancient Greek athletic bodies, bodies in sport during nineteenth-century England, and works pertaining to the first half of the twentieth century, particularly concentrating on Nazi Germany and the idealized Aryan physique (Heck, 2011; Daley, 2003; Bale, 2002; Bandy, Hoffman & Krüger, 2008).

The historical overview of body image ideals in ancient sports and early modern periods unveils a fascinating tapestry of beliefs and practices that shaped the embodiment of athletes and societal perceptions of physical prowess. In the ancient Greek world, health and physical excellence were esteemed virtues, evident in the writings of Hippocrates, the father of medicine. His works emphasized the harmonious relationship between body and mind, advocating for a balanced lifestyle and moderation in athletic pursuits (Kleisaris et al., 2014).

Sports in ancient Greece were infused with cultural and religious significance, transcending mere physical contests. The ancient Olympic Games, held from as early as 776 BCE, became a platform for displaying human potential and embodied ideals. Athletes endeavoured to sculpt their bodies to conform to an aesthetic standard, emphasizing symmetry and proportion (Mosz, 2009). The portrayal of athletes in ancient art exemplifies the admiration of the human form, with sculptors capturing the grace and strength of athletic bodies.

The philosophical musings of Plato and Aristotle further contributed to the discourse on sports and the human body. Plato, in his "*Republic*," advocated for physical education as a means of producing a well-rounded citizenry, while Aristotle acknowledged the importance of physical training in cultivating virtue and character (García Romero, 2013). Their writings underscored the inseparable connection between the cultivation of the body and the development of the individual's moral and intellectual faculties.

Considerable academic efforts have been dedicated to exploring the Ancient Greeks' fascination with athletics and their pursuit of shaping male bodies to mirror the physical perfection of the gods. The Ancient Greeks were one of the few civilizations that embraced nudity during athletic performances, and they portrayed athletic bodies through various artistic representations (Mouratidis, 1985). Many of the studies examining Ancient Greek athletics originated from the works of classical historians with a specific interest in sports and athletic endeavours (Christesen, 2012; Golden, 1998).

Within ancient cultures, depictions of corporeality as patterns of the sporting body can be observed, particularly in Greek sculpture and vase painting. Among the preserved Greek cultural artifacts, three examples of male corporeality patterns and one example of female corporeality related to the sporting world are worth noting. These examples include Polyclitus's sculptures "*Doryphorus*" and "*Diadoumenos*," Myron's sculpture "*Discus Thrower*," Lysippus's sculpture of "*Heracles Farnese*," and a painting featuring Atalanta. These ancient patterns of the sporting body have persisted in the European cultural landscape from the Renaissance to the 20th century. Each artifact embodies distinct aspects of the sporting world: Polyclitus's sculptures portray the beauty of the body, Myron's sculpture captures sporting movement, Lysippus's sculpture symbolizes power, and the figure of Atalanta represents the first gender pattern in the realm of sports. These ancient patterns serve as cultural archetypes in the contemporary world of sports. The modern sporting body is perceived and interpreted through the symbolic layer of ancient corporeal images. Some of these corporeal patterns have lost their sporting references in European culture, which were evident in Greek

civilization. This is particularly applicable to Polyclitus's sculptures and the figure of Atalanta, which acquired different semantic contexts through Renaissance and Baroque art.

As the ancient world gave way to the early modern period, the Renaissance witnessed a revival of interest in human anatomy and artistic representations of the body. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci dissected cadavers to gain a deeper understanding of human anatomy, leading to more anatomically accurate portrayals of the human body in art. This newfound appreciation for the physical form extended to sports, as the Renaissance saw the emergence of organized sports competitions and the glorification of athletic achievements.

The Enlightenment period introduced a shift in the perception of the body, aligning with the rationalistic ideals of the time. The emphasis on reason and intellect led to a devaluation of physicality, with the mind prioritized over the body. However, this perspective was not universal, and some philosophers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, championed the natural state of the human body and its connection to physical activity and outdoor pursuits.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the emergence of modern sports and the influence of industrialization brought new dimensions to body image ideals. Sports began to be organized for mass participation, and the focus shifted from aesthetic ideals to performance-based achievements. With the advent of photography and mass media, the athletic body became a spectacle for the public, further shaping societal perceptions of physical beauty and athleticism.

Investigating the cultural aspects of sports necessitates reconstructing their sporting genealogy to establish broader interpretative contexts for contemporary corporeality. The concept of the "*archetype of the sporting body*" in European culture is enriched with a differentiated objective layer, comprising ancient patterns of the sporting body ingrained in the social consciousness of European art. Additionally, nineteenth-century England has been a focal point for historical research on sport and the body. During the latter half of the Victorian era, sport, athleticism, and muscularity were interconnected themes that captured the attention of sport historians in the final quarter of the twentieth century. The concept of Muscular Christianity played a significant role in connecting sport education and nationalism, promoting the idea of a strong, healthy, and, above all, manly body achievable through sports participation. Team sports, thriving in English public schools, were embraced under this educational philosophy, which linked character development and appropriate religious beliefs to the appearance and performance of the body. This period and location stimulated the interest of sport and education historians, particularly regarding the cultivation of the masculine body through sports (Chandler, 1996; Dunning & Sheard, 2005).

The historical journey of body image ideals in ancient sports and early modern periods reveals the intricate interplay between cultural, philosophical, and societal factors in shaping perceptions of the human body. From the reverence for physical excellence in ancient Greece to the rationalistic approaches of the Enlightenment and the advent of modern sports, the ever-changing landscape of body ideals reflects the evolving values and aspirations of human societies (Osborne & Litchfield, 2022).

The historical overview presented invites to contemplate the profound impact of cultural and intellectual currents on the perception of the human body in the realm of sports. The journey through time illuminates how the embodiment of athletic ideals has been intertwined with broader philosophical, artistic, and societal developments, leaving an indelible mark on the multifaceted relationship between the sporting body and the human experience.

Analysis of body image representations during significant eras in history

The analysis of body image representations during significant eras in history offers a captivating journey through time, exploring the diverse perceptions of the human body in various epochs.

The ideal body type in Ancient Greece was highly valued and considered a symbol of physical and moral superiority. The male athletic body was frequently stereotyped as a central attribute of manliness and a token of physical and moral superiority (Papakonstantinou, 2012). In Athens, masculinity was enacted through group displays of physical fitness and coordination performed at the Panathenaea festival. However, there also existed a different strand, visible in genres such as comedy and medical literature, which viewed the athletic body as food-devouring, over-trained, and muscularly disfigured (Papakonstantinou, 2012). Polyklitus, a Greek sculptor, represented the ideal male form by means of superimposition of anatomical parts of twenty individuals (Michels, 2000; Kruszewski, 2023). Sculptors suddenly set out to depict the details and proportions of the human body with mathematical precision and deliberate exaggeration (Gunther & Bagna-Dulyachinda, 2020). The ideal female beauty was also highly valued in Ancient Greece, and the extant remains from both Classical and Hellenistic periods portray a body of a Greek woman in all its beauty (Korečková, 2019). The ideals of physical beauty in Ancient Greece were characterized by physical fitness, coordination, proportionality, and youthfulness. The extant remains from both Classical and Hellenistic periods portray a body of a Greek woman in all its beauty. The ideal female beauty was characterized by a youthful appearance, a small waist, and a full bust. Greek tombstone inscriptions captured female beauty for future generations, and they show that a beautiful woman had a high value in the ancient society. However, the freedom of expression gradually disappeared, and a body was exposed only when portraying a woman with a colourful past to show her failures. Emerging Christianity also reacted to the Greek ideal of beauty, and some ideas were adopted while others were firmly rejected (Korečková, 2019). The ideal male form was represented by means of superimposition of anatomical parts of twenty individuals. The male athletic body was frequently stereotyped as a token of physical and moral superiority and as a central attribute of manliness (Papakonstantinou, 2012).

During Roman period the perception of the body underwent influences from a diverse range of factors, encompassing cultural, social, and religious beliefs. Within this context, certain key aspects emerge. The ancient Roman society bestowed considerable importance upon physical beauty, particularly within the higher echelons of society. A well-proportioned and healthy body was regarded as a reflection of an individual's moral character and social standing. Both genders strove to attain an ideal physique by means of exercise, grooming, and adhering to a proper diet. Contrary to modern taboos, nudity held a different connotation in ancient Rome, especially in specific social settings such as public baths and athletic events. It symbolized freedom and a natural state of being. Nevertheless, modesty remained an expectation in everyday life, with public nudity outside of designated contexts generally disapproved of. Personal grooming and hygiene held a paramount place in Roman culture. Daily bathing rituals were a customary practice, and the Romans gained renown for their elaborate public bathhouses. They also employed an array of cosmetics, perfumes, and oils to enhance their appearance and maintain cleanliness. Attire in ancient Rome served as a means to signify social status and identity. For instance, the toga, worn by Roman citizens, was associated with respectability and authority. Distinct garments were worn based on gender, age, and occupation. The Romans adhered to a robust belief in preserving good health. They engaged in diverse physical exercises such as swimming, running, and wrestling. Although their understanding of medicine was rudimentary, they recognized the significance of a balanced diet and proper hygiene for overall well-being. Religion played a pivotal role in shaping the perception of the body in ancient Rome. The Romans espoused the concept of numina, divine spirits believed to inhabit all aspects of life, including the human body. Rituals and sacrifices were practiced appeasing the gods and maintain spiritual and physical harmony.

The body and health during the Middle Ages were shaped by a combination of spiritual and medical ideas. The body was seen as a vessel for the soul, and health was closely linked to spiritual well-being. The four humours theory and the miasma theory of disease were dominant medical beliefs, and the body was seen as vulnerable to external influences. The importance of diet and exercise was recognized, but moderation was emphasized. The body was seen as a vessel for the soul, and health was closely linked to spiritual well-being. Illness was often seen as a punishment for sin, and prayer and religious rituals were used to treat ailments (Karim-Cooper, 2016). The four humours theory was a dominant medical belief during this period. It held that the body was made up of four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile), and that an imbalance of these humours caused illness. Treatments focused on restoring balance through diet, exercise, and bloodletting. The miasma theory of disease was also prevalent during the Middle Ages. It held that disease was caused by bad air or "*miasma*" that arose from decaying organic matter. This led to a focus on cleanliness and hygiene as a means of preventing illness. The body was seen as vulnerable to external influences, such as the weather, the alignment of the planets, and supernatural forces. Astrology and other forms of divination were used to predict and prevent illness (Pryor, 2020). The importance of diet and exercise was recognized, but the emphasis was on moderation rather than extremes. Overindulgence in food or drink was seen as a cause of illness, and excessive exercise was thought to be harmful.

As stated by Paluzzi et al. (2007) the perception of the human body during the Renaissance was multifaceted, encompassing scientific inquiry, artistic beauty, symbolism, and a connection to the divine. The body was seen as a source of inspiration and a subject of study, leading to advancements in both art and science. Renaissance scholars realized the importance of direct observations on dissected cadavers. Artists and scientists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, conducted experiments to reveal the anatomy of the human body, including the brain and its ventricular system. This led to a greater understanding of the structure and function of the body. The Renaissance was characterized by a renewed interest in the human form and its beauty. Artists studied anatomy to create realistic and proportionate depictions of the body. The concept of ideal proportions, such as the "*Vitruvian Man*" by Leonardo da Vinci, became popular. The human body was often used symbolically in Renaissance art. Artists incorporated anatomical details to convey deeper meanings or allegorical messages. For example, the heart was often depicted as a symbol of love or the soul. Connection to the Divine made a shift from a purely religious view of the body to a more humanistic perspective. The body was seen as a creation of God, but also as a vessel for human potential and expression. This led to a greater emphasis on individualism and the celebration of the human body. The Renaissance was a period of intellectual curiosity and scientific exploration. The human body was studied through dissection and observation, leading to advancements in the understanding of anatomy and physiology. This scientific approach to the body contributed to the development of fields such as physiology and medicine. The intellectuals of Humanism and the Renaissance, ideally reconnecting with classical antiquity, presented a new and modern vision of physical activities and arts based on the expressiveness of the human body. They embarked on this journey driven by a profound interest in the totality of man, reevaluating the psychophysical unity and regarding the perfection of the body (reproduced in sculpture and painting) as a reflection of inner virtue. The educational systems conceived during the Renaissance, therefore, aimed to cultivate both the physical and spiritual aspects of individuals, shaping them into skilled statesmen, military leaders, and accomplished courtiers (Aiello, 2004, p. 114-115). The Renaissance era witnessed the rediscovery of the preservative and therapeutic value of physical exercise and medical gymnastics (Mercuriale, 2006). Furthermore, it encompassed the description and theorization of physical and sporting activities that the Middle Ages had preserved and transmitted, or even independently developed. However, these activities were generally stripped of their original political and civil significance and reduced to mere games and forms of entertainment.

During the Enlightenment period, which took place in the 18th century, there was a shift in the perception of the body from a religious and spiritual perspective to a more scientific and rational one. The body was seen as a machine that could be studied and understood through scientific inquiry. This led to a greater emphasis on anatomy and physiology, and the development of new medical technologies and practices. The perception of the body emphasized reason, individualism, and human rights. The body was seen as an individual possession, and there was a growing interest in personal health and hygiene. Additionally, the idea of the "perfect" body became more prevalent, with a focus on physical fitness and beauty (Aiello, 2004, p. 147). The body image in the 18th century, is inspired by a materialistic or naturalistic conception. According to the philosophers of nature, man receives a priori, that is, before the intervention of reason and experience, a natural impulse that directs his behaviour and should simply be followed through education. The materialists, on the other hand, liken man to a blank slate. A suitable education should then guide his psychophysical development. The philosopher who has had the most influence on the pedagogy of that time was Jean Jacques Rousseau.

In the 19th century, the body image was shaped by various cultural, social, and ideological conceptions of the time (Reel, 2013, p. 76). Notably, perceptions of beauty and bodily expectations varied significantly depending on the social and geographical context. However, several key points regarding the body image in the 19th century can be highlighted. The concept of feminine beauty was often linked to an ideal of fragility and delicacy. Women were encouraged to present themselves as slender and graceful, epitomizing an idealized form characterized by a small waist, full bust, and rounded hips. To achieve this shape, corsets were popular, moulding the figure and cinching the waist inward (Martin, 1984). Fair and pale skin was deemed a sign of beauty and refinement, particularly among women. Women sought to shield their skin from the sun and utilized various remedies to achieve a pale appearance. The fashion trends of the era played a significant role in shaping ideas of beauty and body image. Garments of the time often accentuated the desired figure, with voluminous upper-body attire and wide skirts creating the illusion of a narrower waist and rounder hips (Skårderud, 1994). Even for men, physical appearance was emphasized, but expectations for the male body were less stringent compared to those for women. Men were frequently associated with an ideal of robustness and strength, yet the male body image was not subjected to as much aesthetic pressure as the female body image (Bojorquez & Unikel, 2012). The body image in the 19th century was also influenced by social status and class conventions. Women of different social classes had distinct standards of beauty and body expectations, with members of the upper class often associated with an image of elegance and refinement (Moeschl, 2004). Bodybuilding, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, introduced a paradigm shift in body image representations. Pioneers like Eugen Sandow, considered the father of modern bodybuilding, celebrated the sculpted and muscular physique as a testament to physical prowess and strength. The advent of bodybuilding competitions showcased bodies meticulously chiselled through rigorous training and discipline. This era marked the popularization of muscular physiques as a symbol of aesthetic beauty and fitness. The portrayal of bodybuilders in art, photography, and media further influenced societal perceptions of the ideal body (Cereda, 2023).

The body image in the 20th century has been characterized by augmented intricacy and diversity compared to the preceding century, with a fusion of cultural, media, and social influences that have melded the perception of physical appearance and the ever-changing ideal of beauty. The trends of feminine beauty have undergone remarkable transformations. From the 1920s, with the emergence of "flappers" sporting more androgynous physiques and short hairstyles, to the 1950s, epitomizing the curvaceous and shapely woman, to the leaner and slender fashions of the 1960s and 1970s, and further evolving into the fitness-oriented and slender trends of the 1980s and 1990s. These shifts have contributed to the continual evolution of beauty ideals (Polenghi, Németh & Kasper, 2021).

The advent of mass media, such as television and advertising, has exerted a significant impact on body image. Images of retouched women and men moulded according to unrealistic standards of beauty have propagated unattainable ideals and influenced the perception of one's own body (Harris & Sanborn, 2014). Throughout the twentieth century, movements for women's rights and female emancipation have brought about a change in the perception of women's roles in society. This has also influenced the portrayal of the female body, advocating for greater acceptance of individuality and diverse body shapes (Mattioni, 2021). With the increasing awareness of health and physical exercise in the twentieth century, a culture of body and physical fitness has emerged. The focus on health and fitness has led to a growing interest in the athletic and toned body as an ideal of beauty (Thompson, Schaefer & Menzel, 2012; Hale & Smith, 2012).

Societal influences on body image perception in sports

Sport provides a significant, albeit underutilized, contribution to the physical activity of individuals of all ages (WHO, 2018). Athletes engage in structured and planned physical activity with important influences on their physical and mental health. In general, a positive Body Image (BI) is associated with increased participation in physical activity and sports (Sabiston et al., 2019). BI is considered a multidimensional construct centred on the aspect and function of the body. Body dissatisfaction regarding one's physical appearance and body size, as well as the discrepancies between actual and ideal dimensions, are cognitive, affective, and perceptual indicators of a negative BI (Marschin & Herbert, 2021). Essentially, a negative or positive BI is manifested through the perceptual dimension (how I see myself) and the cognitive and affective dimensions (how I think and feel about my physical appearance).

In a sports context, a more favourable BI would depend on actual physical changes resulting from the practiced sport (e.g., body shape), perceived physical changes, and the development of self-efficacy and confidence. However, this relationship is far from simple: while engaging in physical activity contributes to increased self-confidence through perceivable physical changes (e.g., an increase in lean mass) leading to improved BI satisfaction, BI can, in turn, influence motivation or deterrence toward physical activity and sports participation. For example, exercise dependence arises from a misguided perception of BI (Badau & Badau, 2018) and can also result in reduced performance due to physical overload and burnout (Angeli et al., 2004).

An important aspect to consider is whether dissatisfaction is influenced by the type of exercise practiced. Some differences in body dissatisfaction observed among practitioners of different sports (Morano, Colella & Capranica, 2011) might be linked to the significance of body weight and leanness within that sport (Dyremyhr, Diaz & Meland, 2014). A particular relevance of physical appearance can be found in aesthetic sports, such as rhythmic gymnastics. In this case, the evaluation of the athlete takes into account their morphokinetic abilities based on well-codified aesthetic requirements. Therefore, apart from performance, the athlete's physical appearance heavily contributes to the assessment, resulting in several studies reporting a prevalence of dissatisfaction among athletes engaged in aesthetic sports (Lepage & Crowther, 2010; Francisco, Alarcão & Narciso, 2012). Specifically, regarding the female gender, a higher risk of physical problems has been observed in gymnastics compared to long-distance swimming and running (Varnes et al., 2013). However, in these cases, it is important to distinguish between "*sport-specific*" body image dissatisfaction (sport-BID = perceived discrepancy between the current body size and the ideal size for the sport) and general body image dissatisfaction (BID) (de Bruin et al., 2011; Zaccagni, Barbieri & Gualdi-Russo, 2014). Literature shows that athletes, especially in aesthetic sports, are driven not towards pathological dieting and weight control due to general BID, but rather due to the specific demands of the sport they practice (Greenleaf, 2002). Greenleaf distinguishes an athlete's body image within an athletic context from a social body image, which relates to everyday life. Therefore, satisfaction/dissatisfaction with one's body image will depend not only on their physical appearance but also on the social or sportive environment of reference.

While athletes tend to be more satisfied than non-athletes in the social environment (Hausenblas & Symons Downs, 2001), in the sporting context, athletes are often under pressure from coaches and athletic trainers to achieve and maintain a body that is favourable to their respective sport (Brown, Muir & Gammage, 2023). For instance, in aesthetic sports, it has been found that the ideal athletic figure for female gymnasts does not coincide with the ideal figure in everyday life, being leaner (Zaccagni et al., 2014).

Influence of media, advertising, and technology on shaping body image ideals in athletes

Body image is a critical aspect of an athlete's self-perception and performance. In recent years, the media, advertising, and technology have become powerful influencers in shaping body image ideals among athletes (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016)

Social media has emerged as a dominant platform that significantly influences body image perception in athletes. Studies such as the work by Klier et al. (2022) and Vandenbosch et al. (2022) have explored the concept of "*#fitspiration*" on social media platforms. These studies found that fitness-focused content, which often idealizes lean and muscular body types, can lead to body dissatisfaction and negative body image among young athletes. The constant exposure to edited and curated images of athletic bodies on social media can create unrealistic beauty standards that athletes feel compelled to conform to.

Advertising also plays a crucial role in shaping body image ideals among athletes. Cataldo et al. (2021) conducted a narrative review, highlighting the risks associated with "*fitspiration*" on social media. They pointed out that advertisements featuring highly toned and athletic bodies can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and pressure to attain similar physiques. Such advertisements promote the notion that achieving a specific body type is essential for athletic success, which may lead to unhealthy behaviours and attitudes towards body image.

Moreover, technology, particularly the use of mobile devices and apps, has magnified the impact of media and advertising on athletes' body image. Leggett-James and Laursen (2023) explored the effects of social media use during the transition into adolescence. They found that excessive screen time and social media use were associated with increased body dissatisfaction and decreased physical activity in adolescents. The constant comparison with others' bodies on social media platforms may lead to body dissatisfaction and a distorted self-perception among athletes.

Fat talk, a form of negative body-related conversation, has been linked to social media use and body image among young women (Kennedy et al., 2023). Social media platforms may perpetuate fat talk among athletes, leading to increased body dissatisfaction and a focus on physical appearance rather than performance. The pressure to conform to body image ideals portrayed on social media can negatively impact an athlete's mental well-being and self-esteem.

Moreover, social identities and user characteristics can modulate the effects of social media on body image (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022). Athletes belonging to specific sports communities may experience unique pressures related to body image ideals within their respective sports. For instance, sports that prioritize aesthetics and physical appearance, such as gymnastics or figure skating, may foster different body image ideals compared to sports that emphasize strength and power, like weightlifting.

The media, advertising, and technology significantly influence body image ideals among athletes. Social media, with its constant stream of curated content, can promote unrealistic beauty standards and contribute to body dissatisfaction (Fioravanti, Bocci Benucci & Casale, 2022). Advertising reinforces the importance of

attaining specific body types for athletic success, leading to negative self-perceptions. The use of technology and social media may intensify these influences, affecting an athlete's mental well-being and self-esteem. Athletes, coaches, and sports organizations must be aware of these influences and work towards promoting a healthy body image and positive self-perception in sports environments. Encouraging a focus on performance, skill development, and overall well-being, rather than just physical appearance, can help athletes develop a more balanced and positive body image.

CONCLUSIONS

The journey through the historical overview and analysis of body image representations in sports history reveals a dynamic and multifaceted relationship between the human body, societal norms, and cultural influences. Throughout different eras, body image ideals in sports have evolved, reflecting the values, beliefs, and aspirations of the societies in which they emerged.

The exploration of ancient sports and the early modern period highlights the reverence for physical excellence in ancient Greece, where the harmony between body and mind was celebrated. Sports in ancient Greece transcended mere physical contests, becoming a platform for displaying human potential and embodied ideals. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle further emphasized the inseparable connection between the cultivation of the body and the development of an individual's moral and intellectual faculties. The Renaissance witnessed a revival of interest in human anatomy and artistic representations of the body, leading to more anatomically accurate portrayals of the human form in art. The Enlightenment period introduced a shift in the perception of the body, prioritizing reason and intellect over physicality, although some philosophers like Rousseau championed the importance of physical activity and outdoor pursuits.

The age of bodybuilding heralded a paradigm shift in body image representations, celebrating the sculpted and muscular physique as a symbol of physical prowess and strength. Bodybuilding competitions showcased bodies meticulously chiselled through rigorous training and discipline, influencing societal perceptions of the ideal body. The mid-20th century witnessed the rise of women's liberation movements, impacting body image representations in sports and beyond. Female athletes defied conventional norms, challenging traditional notions of femininity and athleticism. The athletic body became a symbol of empowerment and liberation, shaping a new ideal of the strong and capable woman.

As sports progressed into the latter half of the 20th century and the 21st century, the focus shifted towards performance and achievement, embracing a broader acceptance of various body types. The athletic body was no longer confined to a singular aesthetic but celebrated the unique attributes necessary for excelling in a particular sport. Athletes from different disciplines displayed a wide range of body shapes and sizes, each exemplifying the specific demands of their respective sports.

The advent of digital media and social platforms in the 21st century further transformed body image representations in sports. Athletes had more agency in shaping their image, using platforms like Instagram and YouTube to share their training routines, nutrition practices, and personal experiences. This direct connection with fans allowed athletes to challenge traditional beauty norms and advocate for body positivity and inclusivity.

The analysis of body image representations in significant eras of sports history also underscores the power of sports in shaping societal perceptions of physical beauty, strength, and human potential. Sports have served as a canvas on which cultural, social, and historical values are depicted and celebrated. From ancient

Greece to modern times, the human body in sports has been an emblem of the ideals and aspirations of the time.

Body image ideals are not fixed or universal but rather dynamic and influenced by the ever-changing landscapes of culture and society. The historical overview and analysis highlight the importance of considering the broader context in understanding body image representations in sports. It is crucial to recognize the impact of societal norms, cultural beliefs, and historical developments on the perception of the human body throughout different eras.

Furthermore, this exploration sheds light on the importance of promoting a more inclusive and positive body image culture in sports. As athletes continue to inspire and influence society, it is essential to embrace the diversity of body types and celebrate the unique attributes that contribute to excellence in sports. By challenging unrealistic beauty standards and promoting body positivity, sports can play a pivotal role in fostering a healthier and more inclusive understanding of body image.

The analysis of body image representations in sports history invites to appreciate the ever-evolving nature of human perceptions of the body. From the ancient reverence for physical excellence to the modern celebration of diverse body types, sports have been a mirror reflecting the values and ideals of their time. As we move forward, let us continue to promote a more positive and inclusive body image culture in sports, celebrating the unique beauty and capabilities of every athlete, regardless of societal norms or aesthetic standards. In doing so, sports can truly become a powerful force for empowerment, inspiration, and unity, transcending boundaries and uniting individuals from all walks of life under the universal banner of human potential.

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