
Ability, Aesthetics and the Journey: Excavating Stories of Body Image Concerns among Sports Persons

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Abstract: *There have a number of studies about the positive relationship between playing sports and body satisfaction (Chávez, 2014). Less attention has been directed towards the body image issues faced by people who are into sports. The aim of this study was to fill this lacuna in the Indian context by exploring body image concerns among sportspersons and how they deal with them. Towards this end, 10 sportspersons were approached for Narrative Enquiry into their journey as sports professional so far. Two different methods were used for Narrative Enquiry. Firstly, a guided conversation was held around their journey in sports relating to body image issues using a biographical interview schedule. This data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis. Secondly, visual narrative data was collected from all the participants on their idea of 'an ideal body'. This was done in order to tap into the unique power of images to thicken interpretation by evoking imaginative understanding (Riessman, 2008). Intersections between the visual data and the oral data were analyzed, which affirmed the researchers' interpretations. Themes emerged relating to teenage insecurities involving body and their role in propelling one towards certain sports, the conflict between conventional norms of beauty and athletic norms, insecurities of the body related to various sports, the role of sports in dealing with such distress and so on. The analysis highlights the role of positive emotions, self-awareness, self-acceptance and resilience in coping with body image issues faced by the participants. This study has implications for health psychology, sports psychology and body positivity.*

Keywords: *Body Image Issues, Sports, Coping, Athletes*

The significance of our body in how our life plays out cannot be overstated. A body is where life resides; the shelter for our very being. What are we after all? That's an existentially challenging question. But, of what we've known, we are inexplicable energy that is protected inside this miraculous composition called the body. How we see, feel and think about our body is of utmost importance for how we treat our body. We generally tend to associate our perceived dignity with our outward body appearance which makes being satisfied with one's body imperative for well-being. This is where body image enters the picture. Body image is the perception that an individual holds of their appearance and the thoughts, feelings and behaviour that result from that perception (NEDC, 2017). "How we feel *in* our body, how we feel *about* our body, how we think *others* feel about our body, what *we* think about our body, what we think *others* think about our body, are all bound to be significant concerns" (Shashwati &Kapur, 2018; p. 256). Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body internalizes positive or negative body image respectively. These positive or negative body image perceptions have different physical, psychological and social implications. Research indicates that a negative perception of one's body is related with unhealthy weight reduction practices (e. g. Bulimia) and associated with weight issues not just among fat individuals but also among normal weighing or underweight persons (Stice & Shaw, 2002). Such body dissatisfaction can be linked with psychological implications like depression and eating disorders (Stice, Marti & Durant, 2011). Body image also entails in behavioural implications like exercising, diet control, altering the way one dresses etc. These may also include binge eating and purging, specified forms of calorie intake or restriction, excessive workout, and using body enhancing steroids and artificial supplements (Philips, Martin & Baker, 1997).

Body image issues have a vast pool of literature in psychological research as far as the general population is concerned. People, in general, have been shown to be significantly affected by how they evaluate themselves on the basis of body weight, body structure, skin color, hair, and overall appearance. Research suggests that sports individuals are no different, and they also struggle with body image issues (Kong & Harris, 2013). However, there's actually very little research done on exploring such issues keeping one's experience in sports as the central focus,

which is what the present study aims to do. Sportspersons are idealized for their fitness and bodies but even they experience body image issues and unfortunately, these issues are more complicated among athletes than normal population (Thompson & Sherman, 2010). This can be accounted for by two reasons, firstly because the stakes are as high for an athlete as for a non-athlete to have body images issues, adding to which are the chances of being victimized by the body image issues unique to their sport environment (Thompson & Sherman, 2010).

Gender has been seen to play an important role in body image issues. This can be traced back to the concepts of masculinity and femininity. These concepts set different standards for males and females respectively. According to masculinity men are supposed to be strong and muscular and femininity eulogizes curvy body structures with narrow shoulders and broad hips. This contrasts with the athletic bodies that individuals acquire being into sports. Therefore even among sports individuals, there are gender-specific body image issues. Female athletes have been shown to be at a higher risk of falling prey to body image issues because they have to strike a balance between conventional norms surrounding femininity with athleticism (Krane, Choi & Baird, 2004). Yet sports offers them unique advantages too. In an investigation, athletes expressed that "being feminine contrasted with being athletic. They further conveyed that as athletes, they were marginalized and perceived as different from 'normal' women. Yet, they also were proud of their strong, developed bodies and expressed feelings of empowerment that generalized beyond the sports context" (Krane, Choi & Baird, 2004; p. 315). Female athletes are also prone to develop unrealistic ideal body standards, say one which is toned and has minimum fat. They strive to strike a balance between the physical activity that their body does and the amount of food that their body is consuming. This is done by punishing themselves with exercise if they eat too much and allowing themselves to eat if only they have done their workout (Krane, Waldron & Michalenok, 2001). Even eating disorders are more predominant in sportswomen than in sportsmen according to a study conducted in Norway (Borgen & Klungland, 2004). A drive towards thinness has been seen among female athletes. According to Ryan, female athletes desire two kinds of thinness: "performance thinness" and "appearance thinness". The former propagates the idea of enhancing performance which can be achieved in a healthy way and the latter is related to sports which are evaluated by a judge and can affect how a female views her body, for example, in sports like figure skating or gymnastics where a female athlete's appearance can influence the judgment given by the judge. The latter kind of sports results in higher body image concerns and could also pose an increased risk of eating disorders (Ryan, 2017).

Dissatisfaction with their bodies is quite common among male athletes as well and they also view themselves as weak and unattractive (Galli & Reel, 2009). Male athletes desire to gain muscle mass or a muscular physique to such an extent that they start misusing steroids or weight gain supplements and this further results in faulty body image or eating disorders (Raudenbush & Meyer, 2003). Males, in general, are driven towards muscularity this can be associated with the propagation of increasing standards of male attractiveness through various forms of media (Drewnowski *et al.*, 1995; Drummomd, 1999). Social media plays a pivotal role in fabricating youth's perception about body image and their perception of beauty continues to grow by the day. They develop certain beauty standards and ideals of a perfect body because of social media. It further plays a role in contributing to the development of eating disorders and body dysmorphia in both male and female athletes (Tackett, n. d.).

Research indicates that the prevalence of dysfunctional eating habits or disordered eating is higher in athletes than in the general population (Borgen & Klungland, 2004). Especially those sports individuals who are into sports that focus on lean body structure to improve and enhance their performance or appearance (e. g. sports like gymnastics, figure skating, diving, wrestling etc.) are prone to develop disordered eating issues. If not attended to, these eating disorders may gravely compromise their health and sport's performance (Garner, Rosen & Barry, 1998). Bulimia nervosa is one of the most common eating disorder found among athletes. Bulimia is a cycle of bingeing and purging. It involves uncontrollable eating followed by ways of getting rid of what you have consumed by unhealthy methods of self-induced vomiting, using laxatives and compulsive exercising. In the case of bulimic athletes, they use exercising or working out as a predominant purging method (Jenks, n. d.).

All in all, sportspersons are not immune to body image concerns though largely, research indicates a positive relationship between playing sports and a positive body image (Chávez, 2014). However, most of the studies that have been done on sportspersons for understanding their body image concerns have been comparative studies among athletes' and non-athletes' body image concerns. There remains a gulf in research when it comes to

exploring body image among sports individuals and understanding how sports play a role in contributing to and coping with body image issues, especially in the Indian context. The present study aims to take a step towards filling that research gap. Another significance of the present study lies in the fact that it acknowledges body images issues amongst a population which often sets high body or fitness standards in the first place (Krane, Choi & Baird, 2004). Thus the objectives of the present research were to delve deeper into the understanding of the body image issues faced by athletes (both male and female) and to understand how their sport plays a role in either developing or overcoming any bodily insecurities.

1. METHOD

The sample of the study comprised of sportsmen and women within the age of 18 to 23 years. Snowball sampling was employed for approaching 10 athletes in all who fulfilled the inclusion criteria of having played their particular sport at least at the state level. Six of them were males while four were females. Maximum participants were from the sport of swimming and others also represented sports like table tennis, shooting, basketball and badminton.

The present study aimed to explore the body image concerns among sportspersons and how they cope with those issues using a qualitative approach. This was achieved by collecting data through narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry was a very interesting research strategy for this particular qualitative study. It involved journeys of the participants being narrated in an unrestricted way. Narrative inquiry was a source of very rich data as it did not constrain the participants. Two modes of narrative enquiry were employed. Firstly, a guided conversation or biographical interview was held around the participants' journey in sports. The interview focused on areas like childhood and teenage insecurities relating to body image issues, sport-specific body image issues or pressures faced by athletes, the role of media and social media, the role of their sports in coping with body image issues etc. Secondly, visual narrative data was collected from all the participants. They submitted their idea of 'an ideal body' using a visual medium of their choice. Participants were given the freedom to choose from various approaches for creating the visual data like sketching, doodling, using captions to define the visuals, using metaphors, drawing timelines etc. This was done to support the oral data with imaginative understanding.

All the data collected through - narrative inquiry was analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data. The data was familiarized by repeated readings of the interview transcripts and descriptive codes were attributed to each line. Then these codes were further analyzed and one main and striking theme was extracted out of each interview. These themes were comprehensively defined and further refined to capture the essence of the corresponding data.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sports is considered to be a respectable and vital gear of society and is used to nurture and strengthen resilience in children and the youth (Bells & Suggs, 1998). Yet sportspersons are not immune from issues that other people battle with including body image concerns. A sportsperson, after all, is still a part of the society and its shackles of conventional norms and expectations. This is reflected in Canadian Olympic marathon runner Lanni Merchant's (CBC sports, 2016) account of her struggle with societal conceptions of femininity and demands of her sport: "*What my body looks like when I'm super in season might be great for my sport but it's not sexy off the track*", "*What I do should be fierce and sexy, not how I look crossing the finish line. And I think there is a big disconnect there.*" This study was an attempt to explore the journeys of sportspersons centered on their body image. The data collected using Narrative Enquiry was analyzed using Thematic Analysis and the following themes emerged:

Fighting the battle to align aesthetics with ability

Participant's age: 19 years (Male)

Participant's sport: Swimming

"I am strong but my physique doesn't say so."

The theme revealed by this interview focused on body dissatisfaction and desire for a body more in sync with the conventional norms of a perfect body. The participant who is perfectly fit and athletic developed issues regarding his body because of the remarks he received from other people about his body being lean. People called him names like, "lamboo" and "patla" and these further stayed in his subconscious pressurizing him to be more muscular. All of this not only made the participant a prey to the prejudices of others but he himself started judging his contemporaries on the basis of their appearance. He got intimidated by those who had a muscular physique and felt his morale plummet without even having any idea about that person's performance as a swimmer. Initially in his sports career, the participant was affected significantly by what others thought of his appearance but eventually, he came to the realization that performance matters more than looks. He then started to feel more content with the body that he had and came in terms with the fact that people will have opinions but he shouldn't let it affect him. Towards the end of the interview the participant reported, "Agar main khud se acha feel karrahahoon toh baki logo ka kyakarna" or "If I feel good about myself then I should not bother myself with what others think."



The visual narrative of an 'ideal body' submitted by the participant depicted the body of his fitness idol Jeff Cavaliere.

The traits that the participant looks for in an ideal body are that it should be proportionate, vascular and the abdomen should be chiseled and moreover one should 'FEEL STRONG'.

From being conscious to being content

Participant's age: 23 years (Female)

Participant's sport: Basketball and Gym training

The participant elicited major issues about body consciousness. She stated,

"In the later school years and in the initial college phase it was really like all about body consciousness and it was a big thing in my head that I had to look my best wherever I go."

The participant used to be extremely consumed by body consciousness and how others perceived her during her teenage years. Being a basketball player she also faced a lot of resistance in accepting her short height. Tall height being a prerequisite of basketball made her conscious about her height initially. People in that sport used to judge her before even witnessing her game as not that good a player (although she was a swift player). She prompted that social media (e. g. Instagram) was one such source that coloured her conceptions of body weight and made her conscious about her own weight and diet. She developed a fear of gaining weight. This fear further unfolded in the form of a serious eating disorder called 'Bulimia Nervosa'. The participant said,

"I used to fast...at a point I was not eating chapatis which is a very normal thing to eat in Indian family, so I stopped eating that without knowing what would happen to my body. It was just that its carbohydrates might make me gain weight."

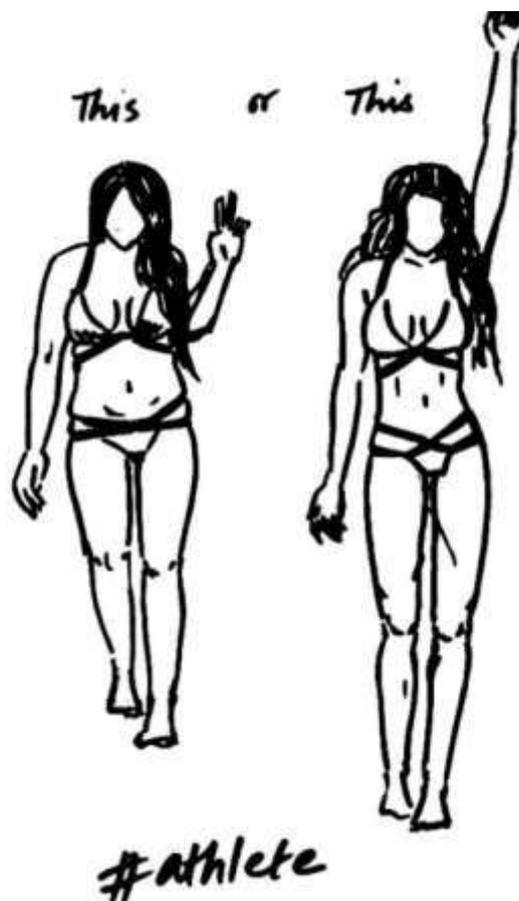
She admitted that she was trapped in the vicious cycle of bingeing and purging. This eating disorder not only had physical repercussions but also emotional and psychological manifestations like feeling emotionally weak and bolts of crying. The participant professed,

"I used to fall back in the same cycle, I used to eat after a lot of dieting. I used to eat a lot whatever was there in my hostel I used to just finish it up then I used to vomit it out and over exercise."

The participant was counseled by the doctor as to how it was unhealthy for her body. She also collected a lot of information about bulimia on the internet and realized how she was mistreating her body and that it needed to stop. Basketball and gym training pulled her out of the pit of body consciousness and made her more confident in her own body. Active training and sports made her realize the importance of discipline, capabilities of her body and importance of nutrition. It also improved her digestion and most of all it was instrumental in coping with bulimia. Presently the participant is at a much better position in her life. She herself addressed a drastic transition in her mindset and lifestyle. From binge eating to intuitive and healthy nutrition, from being conscious to being content and comfortable in her own body. The participant said that,

"I am so content in my own skin that I would not even trade it for any sort of body type you tell me but it was not like that in the past."

The journey of the participant from negative body image issues to body positivity and acceptance was clearly seen in her visual narrative of an 'ideal body', where she chose to draw her own 'athletic' body. She portrayed her body in two ways: first, at the time of crisis when she faced body consciousness and second, when she got out of it and accepted her body happily and worked on it.



Trying to conform to the conventional norms

Participants' age: 20 years (2 Males)

Participants' sport: Swimming

Two of the participants who were interviewed for the study expressed common issues regarding gaining fat and the struggles of having a tanned skin. One of them said that,

"I started getting insecure about my tanning and tan lines and all because I was getting a darker complexion."

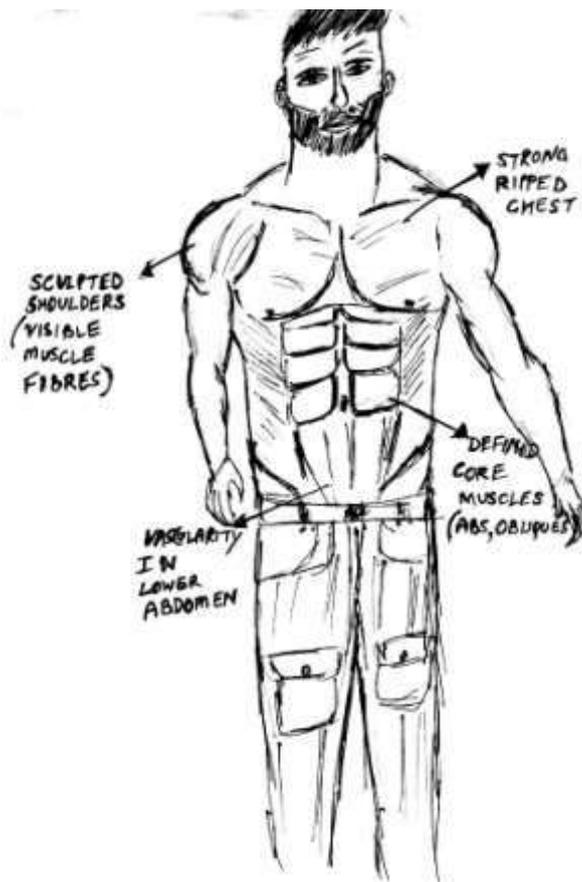
And in another participant's words,

"In India there is a thing that beauty is measured upon the skin color, so I have this tan and I sometimes feel that not every person in front of me standing and talking to me is very interested in me because of the tan."

This issue that they faced was traced back to the fear of judgment of other people and how they were not very accepting of their tanned skin. People said things like, “*tu to bohota kala ho gaya*”. The participants reported that being in a sport such as swimming required them to be extremely fit. There are certain body conventions unique to their sport swimming, like having a lean body this is because it primarily improves performance and also swimmers wear swimsuits in which their body is mostly exposed which makes them more conscious about their physique and looks. Comparison with fellow swimmers also led to certain insecurities. They have preconceived notion that taller the height better the chances of winning. This created self-doubt in them which further affected their performance. Irrespective of these issues the participants were confident and empowered in their body. They gave the credit to their sport swimming. One of them said,

“Swimming is very important for my mental stability because in swimming I just don’t think of anything else and my mind is very clear so it always helps me deal with any type of stress.”

The visual data submitted by one of the participant depicted specific details of his idea of an ‘ideal body’ which conformed with the conventional norms of a perfect body. It included sculpted shoulders (with visible muscle fibers), strong ripped chest, defined core muscles (abs, oblique) and vascularity in lower abdomen.



His stature has been his teacher

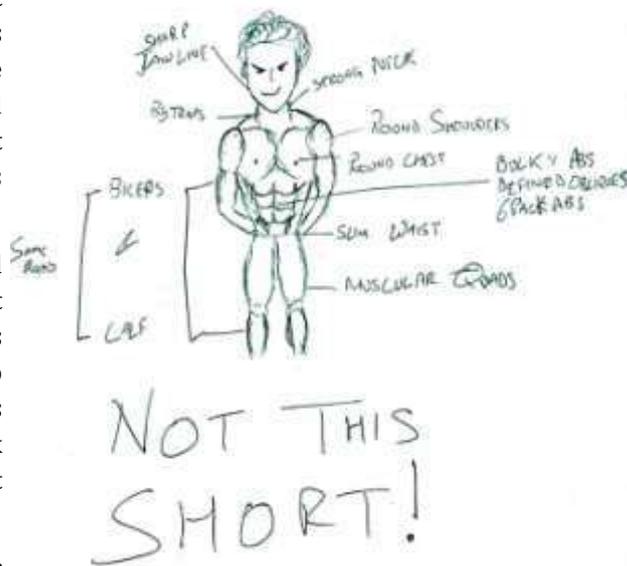
Participant’s age: 20 years (Male)

Participant’s sport: Swimming

Initially in the teenage year of his life the participant was at the prime of his swimming career. He was satisfied with his body as it conformed to the goals he had set for himself like a ripped body and six pack abs. At a later stage when he had to stop his swimming due to some injuries, he then could not maintain the same body and developed certain insecurities and body dissatisfaction.

Being a swimmer the participant faced a lot of issues and insecurities regarding his short height. Swimmers benefit from having a tall height. This being fixed in every one’s mind in the swimming circuit made it difficult for him to come in terms with his short height. His height was accounted for his bad swimming performance and his luck was accountable for his good performance. The participant expressed,

“During the competition if I used to lose a race then people



used to come and tell me that if only you were a little taller you could have won. And if I used to win they said that it was my luck. ”

People hardly gave him credit for his own skills. He internalized that his height was his short coming and that it affected his performance in sports. After reading about height and its importance in swimming he eventually realized that short height issues could be overcome and used to his benefit (frequency can be increased). The participant then got into self-actualization and tried to grow out of his insecurities. He started accepting his height, acknowledging it and empowered himself. The ‘ideal body’ for the participant is the one which should have a sharp jaw line, strong neck, big traps, round shoulders and chest, bulky six pack abs, defined oblique, slim waist, muscular quad and tall height.

Being skinny: a boon or bane?

Participants’ age: 20 years (2 Males)

Participants’ sport: Badminton / Athletics

The participants from two such diverse sports shared a common body image issue of being too skinny. Both wanted to gain muscle and have a more muscular body structure. They felt insecure about their skinny body because people outside their sport perceived them as weak.

One of the participant was associated with names like, “*hanger*”. He felt very conscious about his body because people triggered his insecurities. His lean body and height though was highly advantageous for his sport (sprint). The participant reported,

“Outside the field I am judged to be skinny and weak but in the field my body is the perfect body for the sport.”

This athlete channelized all the frustration that he had from hearing people comment on his body in a direction which helped him improve and focus on his sports performance. This helped him overcome his insecurities to a certain extent. He as an individual developed a sense of satisfaction with his body so much so that in the visual narrative he drew his own self and captioned it, *“I have come a long way to realize that my own body is the ideal body for me.”*

The badminton player also faced issues being skinny and wanted to gain lower body muscle mass. This was imperative for his sport because he was not that stable on court due to lack of lower muscle mass. The participant stated,

“In badminton, you need to have certain amount of muscle mass especially in legs and core stability is required so that’s where I lacked.”

This affected his sports performance and as a result of which he started weight training. He became very conscious about his weight and hustled hard to gain some. He said that,

“I am conscious of my body structure. My body structure is an ectomorph. Ectomorphs are typically skinny, they struggle to gain muscle mass and have very low body fats.”



- I have come a long way to realize that my own body is the ideal body for me.

The participant got into fitness because of his shortcomings in his sport. He held his sport responsible for helping him cope with failure in his sport and also in his life. The visual narrative submitted by the participant depicted his desire for a muscular body and was captioned,

"Fitness should be in our lifestyle, it should not go away from our lifestyle."

From a stout childhood to an empowered adulthood

Participant's age: 20 years (Female)

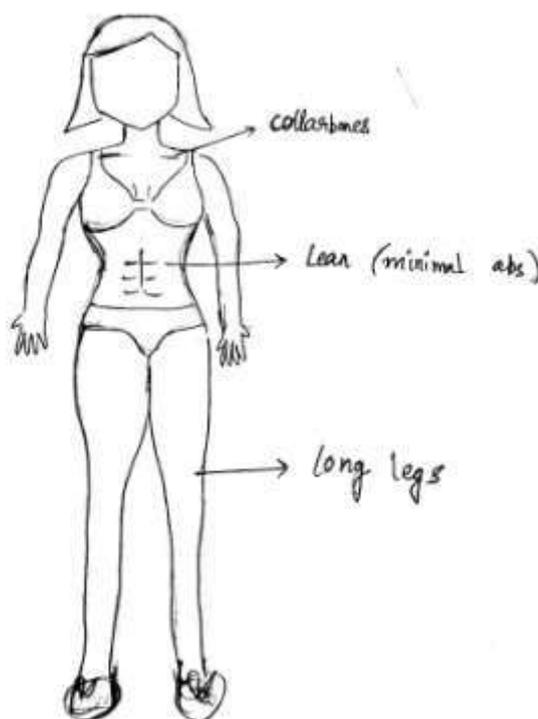
Participant's sport: Table tennis

As a kid, the participant had a stout body. She had already started playing table tennis and was also getting good at it but was not thin. From everywhere be it her family, her friends or her peers she received comments about being fat. It was so hard-wired in her mind that it resulted in her being anxious and conscious in social situations. She herself started judging herself and others on the basis of their appearance and body structure. All this affected her, she pushed herself to get in shape and prove to others that she was a sports person. The participant successfully managed to reduce her body fat by rigorous exercising and training. She focused on her game and nutrition. Table tennis taught her how to deal with stress. She said,

Table tennis is my identity, it is all that I have got. I have played my entire life so whatever I have learned so far, to deal with losses and to deal with politics in the world and it gave me so much exposure."

Presently the participant is satisfied and happy with her body. She feels empowered in her own skin. She is still working on her body to achieve her bodily goals like developing abs, a tight core overall a healthy body and mind. She expressed,

"You don't just want to look good, you want to FEEL good."



3. CONCLUSION

The present study explored body image among sportsmen and women and their journey of coping with their body image issues. The study established that though the level of their problems and the reasons for it varied across the participants, all of them had faced some kind of body image concerns in their sports career. Body image issues were sport specific amongst some and for others conforming to athleticism led to the rise of dissatisfaction with their own body. Being into sports, a desire for a very athletic body with abs was seen across the sample. Sportsmen, in particular, had an inclination for attaining a more muscular body. Some even wanted to gain fat because they had a very lean body and this did not align with the conventional athletic norms. Sportswomen having athletic or muscular body were appreciated within the sports community which is at odds with conventional femininity. Most of the participants were (presently) more or less satisfied with their bodies but had experienced insecurities in the past. Participants were resilient enough to face body image issues then come out of it and feel empowered in their own bodies. They repeatedly emphasized the importance of ability over aesthetics and sports was seen to have played a major role in this metamorphosis.

This study had a few limitations. The research topic is a sensitive one; participants might have been uncomfortable while sharing personal information. Due to resource constraints, the option for a male interviewer could not be provided to our participants. The sampling method (snowball sampling) incorporated for interviewing participants did not allow for a more diverse population.

The results of this research have noteworthy implications that can contribute to a better understanding of body image issues amongst athletes in the Indian context. The study offers a glimpse of journeys through bodily issues and out of them among athletes which can be used for body positivity interventions.

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