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Social Media and Bigorexia: An Exploratory Ethnographic Study of High School Football Players

Introduction

The 1960s-80s marked a period known as the Golden Age of bodybuilding, where athletes, Mr. Olympians, and IFBB pros (competitive bodybuilders) all sought after muscular aesthetics as a sole goal in training. Overall, this period of time fueled what would eventually come to be an industry built on extremism, comparison, and the proliferation of performance-enhancing drugs.

Now, an estimated 2% of the population experiences Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD), most individuals developing it as adolescents.” Earlier, in 1997, Pope et al. conducted research outlining the “underrecognized form of body dysmorphic disorder,” and found the prevalence of muscularity as a sought-after factor increased. 27 years later, research shows a growing concern for muscularity, especially in adolescent males (“Muscle dysmorphia disorder [MDD] – a pathological preoccupation with muscularity”).

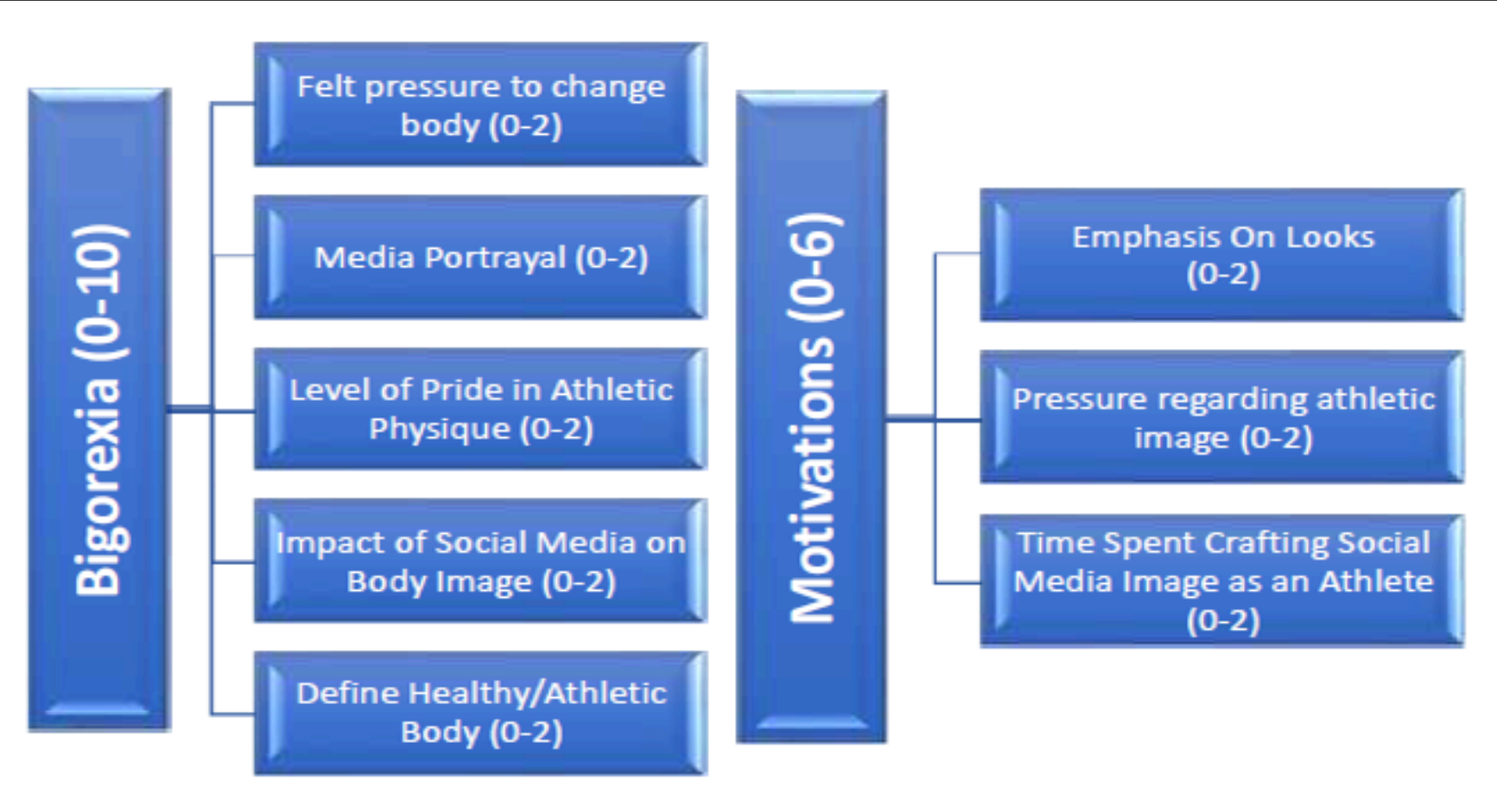
Recent research implicates social networking site (SNS) usage with elevated body dissatisfaction, the promotion of IPEDs, and the microcosmic perpetuation of unrealistic body expectations.

The existing literature reopens a once-dismissed link between more general athletic involvement and MDD, as it was often argued that bodybuilding was vastly different than sports such as basketball, football, soccer, and others. Contrary to pre-existing claims, there is **clear evidence of detrimental athletic specific stressors**, though undefined; an **increase in adolescent usage** of and **impressionability on SNS**; increased **misinformation**; growing societal concern over male bodies; and the cultivation of a new generation of potential IPED users. Yet, this area has been **neglected**.

(Himanshu et al., 2020) (Gibbs 2021; Gibbs 2023).

Methodology

The study employed an ethnographic, mixed-method design with 27 high school football players. Quantitative data was collected through surveys assessing social media usage, athleticism, and competitiveness. Qualitative data was gathered through interviews exploring future aspirations, social media impact, perspectives on athlete well-being, IPED use, body image, and health misinformation. The interviews were transcribed and coded to identify themes and patterns.



Research Question

Is there a correlation between SNS usage and Bigorexia among adolescent male athletes, and what other factors might influence MDD expression in these football players?

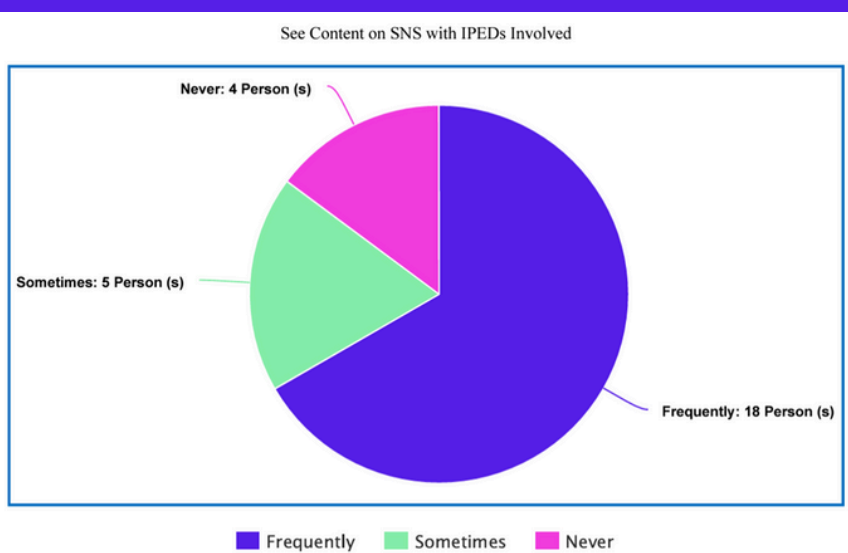
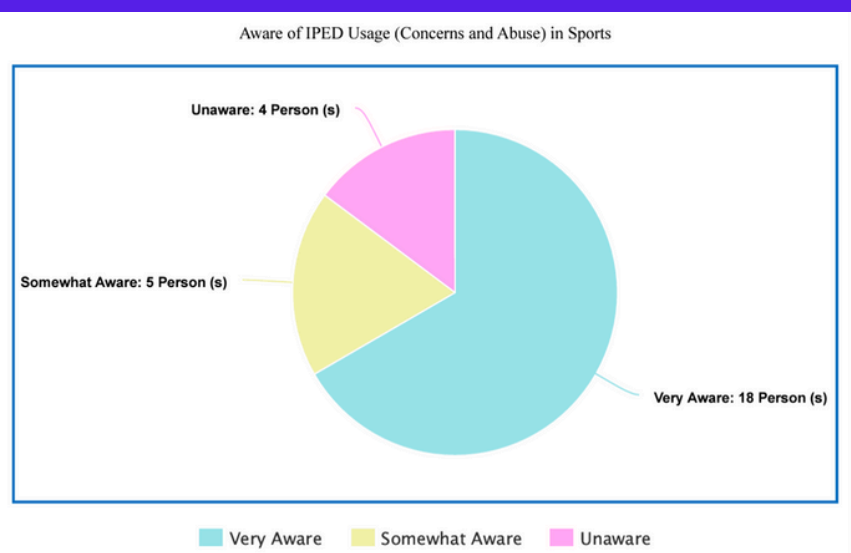
Findings

The quantitative analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between self-reported social networking site (SNS) usage and expression of Bigorexia risk factors.

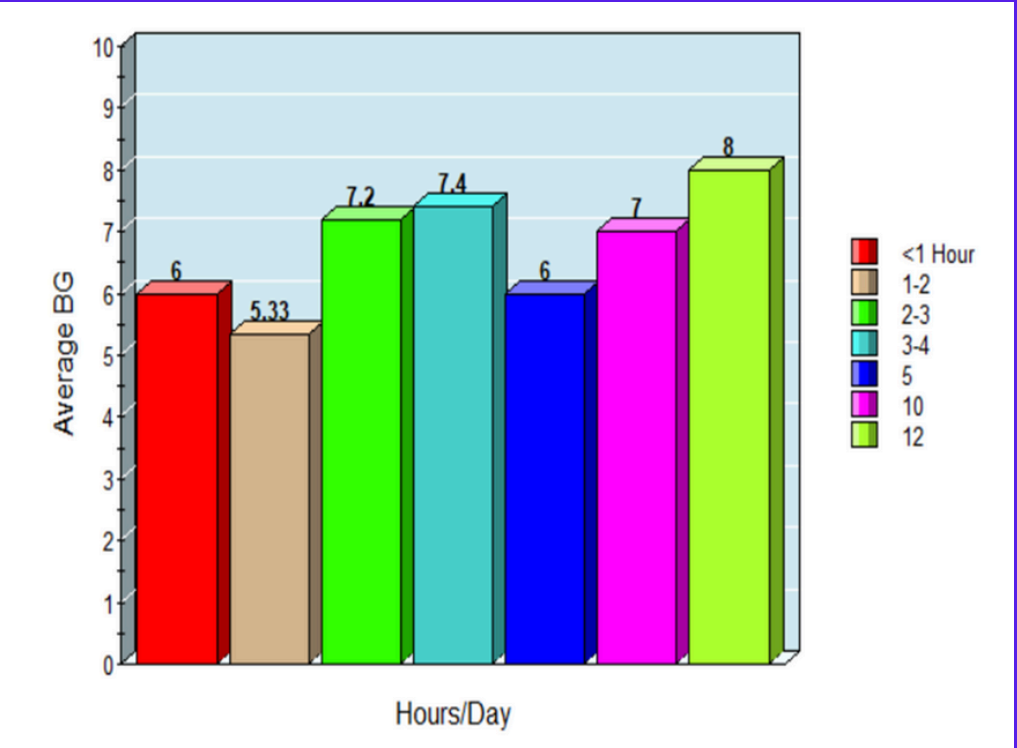
Qualitative data uncovered three major athlete-specific stressors: (1) career opportunity scarcity and competitiveness; (2) crude stereotyping and peer dynamics; (3) exposure to censorious, misrepresentative SNS content about football.

Participants demonstrated awareness of IPED risks, but gaps were identified in their ability to critically evaluate online health information.

Pictured on the left is the measured awareness of IPED usage in sports. Pictured on the right is a measurement of how often athletes saw content they flagged for IPED presence. Interestingly, the same individuals who were in the “frequently” category were in the “very aware” category; “somewhat aware” were in the “sometimes” category; “unaware” were in the “never” category.



Pictured below is the measurement of the average BG score for individuals who report a given hourly usage of SNS per day.



Conclusion

Findings highlight the need for **targeted interventions** for high school athletes. The moderate SNS usage and Bigorexia risk factor correlation underscores cultivating healthier social media habits and **media literacy**. Providing **psychoeducation** on **evaluating online health information** could address identified gaps. The three major athlete-specific stressors—career pressures, crude stereotyping/peer dynamics, and misrepresentative SNS portrayals—necessitate supportive resources and initiatives. Promoting positive body image by countering unrealistic standards, and fostering an environment for open mental health discussions, could alleviate pressures to hide struggles. Implementing such programs and fostering a positive climate could mitigate unique challenges, bolster athletic identity and well-being.



Future Research

There are a few important limitations of this research:

Selection Bias: The researcher selected a specific population for the thematic analyses and ethnographies, which may not be representative of a larger subset of high school athletes or football players due to cultural, socioeconomic, or other factors.

Hawthorne Effect and Misrepresentation: This is modeled by the possibility that athletes may have intentionally misportrayed their SNS usage or the effects of it because they felt they were under critical watch. The study acknowledges that sensitive topics, such as body image, could have led to dishonesty or reluctance from the participants to fully inform their responses to the questions. While the researcher proactively reiterated responses to confirm correct interpretation and provided a second survey to report any misunderstandings or unheard responses, the study acknowledges the possibility that some responses may have been misunderstood.

Future research could expand the study to a **larger** and more **diverse sample**, employ a **longitudinal** study design, explore the **role of coaches and support staff**, conduct **comparative studies with non-athlete populations**, and critically examine the influence of **specific SNS platforms** (this study’s population was not large enough to warrant further conclusions in this area). Additionally, further investigation into the relationship between social media and body image issues in athletes could provide valuable insights for developing effective interventions and support systems.