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**Exploring the Role of Social Media in Body Image Perceptions and Eating  
Behaviours: Lived Experiences of Female Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** As social media use among adolescents and young adults has increased, body image dissatisfaction (BID) and eating disorders (ED) have risen. Existing research suggests female athletes are at greater risk of ED yet report lower levels of BID than non-athletes.

Despite a growing body of research examining the relationship between social media, body image, and eating behaviours in the general population, few studies have examined its role in the experiences of female athletes.

**Aim:** This qualitative study explored the dynamic relationships between social media use, body image, and eating behaviours of competitive female athletes in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Methodology:** Eight semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted with female athletes between the ages of 18 to 24. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), informed by my background as a former competitive athlete.

**Analysis:** Three overarching themes were identified: 'Risk Factors', included the sub-themes of cultural normalisation of unhealthy ideals, coaches/family influence on training and nutrition, and misinformation and inadequate education; 'Protective Factors' consisted of social support, access to guidance and resources, and self-regulatory strategies; and 'Navigating Social Media Pressures on Body Image and Eating Habits', included comparison on social media and in person, internalisation of appearance norms and expectations, and disordered eating and exercise behaviours.

**Conclusion and Implications:** Findings of this research indicated that athletes experience pressure to meet the athletic ideal, intensified and complicated by social media's unrealistic expectations of the feminine body. Comparison was habitual, as athletes analysed their bodies, training, and food intake against peers and social media accounts, which in some

cases led to changes in eating behaviours. A key finding highlighted that repeated social media exposure, even without direct engagement, contributed to the development of ‘imagined’ content, which elicited guilt on low-volume days, based on perceptions of others’ behaviour. Most athletes reported limited or no access to formal nutrition advice, with many turning to social media platforms for guidance. Coaches and family were identified as influential in supporting a balanced relationship with food and training. Developing online training modules focused on nutrition, body image, and social media awareness, alongside delivered workshops, are recommended to serve as an early intervention for adolescent girls, by addressing identity pressures, perceptions, and behaviours as they emerge before adulthood.

## **Acknowledgements**

A year ago, I was determined to pursue research in a field I was passionate about but had not yet found the right supervisor. After reaching out to Dr. Sarah Choi and receiving a positive response, it became clear in our first meeting that she was someone whose expertise I could truly learn from. To my supervisor, Sarah Choi, thank you for your time spent offering your expertise and guidance on researching in this area of psychology. I am excited for the opportunity to continue learning from you as I embark on my PhD journey in 2026.

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always offering encouragement, and being there for me when I needed a walk break or a laugh.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge those who are struggling with body image and disordered eating. You are not alone and your experiences matter. I am hopeful that greater awareness of the influence of social media on body image and eating behaviours will encourage the development of stronger support systems to help individuals manage these challenges.

### Personal Disclosure

As the primary researcher of this study, I am aware that my personal background and experiences may influence my perspective in the research process. Having spent most of my adolescence and early adulthood as a competitive athlete and now transitioning into a coaching role, I recognise that my experiences with social media and body image may guide the way I interpret aspects of this research. My personal experiences have been the foundation for pursuing this research, as I aspire to contribute to the existing literature on the intersection of social media, body image, and challenges encountered by female athletes.

I identify as a New Zealand European/Pakeha and acknowledge that my culture positions me as a researcher with the privilege that is granted to Western Academic Scientific Psychology (WASP). In turn, I also recognise the significance of decolonising dominant research practices and responding in a culturally responsive manner throughout this research. As a white-presenting (Pakeha) researcher, I acknowledge that my positionality may have influenced the extent to which participants of Māori or other ethnic groups felt comfortable with expressing how their perspectives of the mind, body, health, and wellbeing intersect with the pressures of social media and body image. This research is guided by the kaupapa Māori principles of *whanaungatanga* through reciprocal sharing of stories, and *kaitiakitanga* by ensuring knowledge is respected and protected by the researcher.

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## **Exploring the Role of Social Media in Body Image Perceptions and Eating**

### **Behaviours: Lived Experiences of Female Athletes**

#### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Concerns about physical appearance have become an increasingly significant psychological concern for young women, who are at a critical stage in forming lasting health behaviours (Malloy et al., 2024). Body image can be defined as an individual's self-perception and emotional response regarding their physical appearance, contributing to both high and low self-esteem and influencing their mental well-being (Bailey et al., 2017; Dames et al., 2024; Malloy et al., 2024). This perception can fluctuate between positive, negative, or neutral and is shaped by various individual, cultural, contextual, and situational factors throughout the lifespan (Hardie et al., 2022). Research suggests that 34% of adults report feeling anxious or depressed about their physical appearance, while one in eight have experienced suicidal thoughts related to their body image (Cohen, 2025; Mental Health Foundation, 2019). Body image dissatisfaction (BID); the negative perception of one's body, commonly involves three elements: a behavioural component, such as bodychecking; a perceptual component, such as evaluating body size; and cognitive-affective components, including personal attitudes and feelings towards one's own body (Carey & Preston, 2019; Hamamoto et al., 2022; Quittkat et al., 2019). BID is associated with harmful disordered eating behaviours including caloric restriction, fasting, self-induced vomiting, binge eating, and compulsive exercise; in addition to improper use of laxatives, diuretics, or diet pills (Power & Power, 2024).

The significant role that self-perception plays in expressing identity, experiencing emotions, and facilitating self-expression has been well-established in academic literature (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Hardie et al., 2022; Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2017; Palmeroni et

al., 2020). Research has emphasised the significance of traditional media such as magazines and television as contributing factors to body dissatisfaction; however, in recent decades, research has shifted to investigating the role of social media in shaping eating behaviours (Harriger et al., 2023). Social media has become a fundamental platform for communication, collaboration, marketing, and self-expression, in an increasingly digitally interconnected world. In the United States, 7 out of 10 Americans use social media to connect with others, share content, and for entertainment purposes (Bekalu et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2024).

While social media creates a platform for individuals to overcome time and distance barriers to social and interpersonal connection, its constant accessibility can lead to negative outcomes for well-being (Adjanin & Beemer, 2024; Malloy et al., 2024). Significant research suggests that social media can trigger addictive behaviours (Chai et al., 2019) which can develop subtly, and often goes unnoticed by others (Alutaybi et al., 2018). Higher social media use has been associated with adverse mental health outcomes (Khalaf et al., 2023) and problematic behaviour (Sametoğlu et al., 2023). The growing body of evidence has sparked broader discussions around how to safeguard young people from the psychological and emotional risks associated with persistent social media use.

To address and minimise this, the Australian government recently passed the *Online Safety Amendment* in November 2024. This legislation includes a mandatory ban on social media for children under the age of 16, which came into effect December 2025, banning access to platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook (UNICEF Australia, n.d.). Similarly, New Zealand's National Party has introduced a bill proposing a ban on social media use for children under the age of 16 (Melo, 2025). Similar restrictions have been adopted in France, Spain, Norway, Italy, and Denmark (Cheng, 2025). This

political response reflects the growing concern regarding the psychological and emotional risks associated with early and unrestricted social media exposure. Such concerns are reflected in adolescents accounts of harmful online experiences. For example, 19% of New Zealand adolescents reported experiencing harmful online interactions that negatively interfere with their day-to-day routines (Netsafe, 2018). Those who experience bullying in childhood and adolescence may adopt risk-taking behaviours that increase vulnerability to depression and other mental health-related outcomes, and cyberbullying has been linked to mistrust in others (Juvonen & Galván, 2009).

Adolescents and young adults are at higher risk due to their frequent engagement with social media, exposure to idealised body images, and the influence of peer comparison within their social groups (Malloy et al., 2024). In particular, studies suggest that social media can be detrimental to both the physical and mental health of athletes, leading to depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, and eating disorders (Adjanin & Beemer, 2024). Athletes in general, and female athletes in particular, often face unique physical and aesthetic pressures, which can increase the prevalence of disordered eating behaviours, such as meeting specific and narrow selection criteria for teams, conforming to idealised body types for their sport, meeting performance expectations set by adults, and other external, gendered influences (Bjornsen & O'Connor, 2023).

The purpose of this research is to explore the psychological impact of social media use on high performance female athletes in Aotearoa, New Zealand (NZ). More specifically, this research will examine how social media may influence experiences of body image and eating (and exercise) behaviours in female athletes, and the unique pressures that they experience from exposure to content on social media platforms. This research will utilize a

reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted with competitive female athletes in NZ.

As part of this exploration, I will incorporate insights from my past experiences of body image dissatisfaction (BID) during my career as an international athlete and coach, while connecting these to theoretical frameworks that are used to conceptualise body image in the literature. By actively responding to the limited research on body image as experienced by female athletes specifically, I aim to explore the questions and concerns that I, alongside many other athletes, wish had been addressed throughout our sporting careers. The following literature review provides an overview of the gender roles and historical contexts that underpin this topic.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Femininity and Athleticism**

For the present research, it is important to consider the historical context in which contemporary gender roles and associated ideals have developed, particularly for female athletes.

In the late 1800s, Western constructions of the ideal female body featured a small frame, corseted waist, and delicate feet, all of which were associated with high social class and moral values. In the early 1920s, these corsets shifted to undergarments that bound the breasts to create a flat-chested appearance (Swami, 2013). During this time, the beauty ideal within Western nations focused on extreme slenderness, which led to unsustainable and restrictive starvation diets. By the 1940's, slim legs became the ideal, and researchers, including Schilder (1936), began documenting the emergence of body image dissatisfaction, with women striving to attain a smaller body size. From the 1970s, the ideal female body physique shifted towards a leaner and more muscular appearance for both men and women (Swami, 2013). In contemporary Western culture, the idealisation of a well-disciplined body is shaped by consumerism, secularism, and industrialisation, reflecting cultural expectations around self-control, productivity, and success (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Marshall et al., 2018).

By the 1990s, the ideal feminine body was increasingly defined by the thin ideal, characterised by extreme slenderness aligning with clinically underweight Body Mass Index (BMI) criteria (Swami, 2016). BMI is calculated by measuring an individual's height and weight to generate a numerical value, which is then classified into categories: severely underweight (<16.0), underweight (16.0-18.5), healthy weight (18.5-24.9), overweight (25.0-29.9), moderately obese (30.0-34.9), severely obese (35.0-39.9), and morbidly obese (>40.0).

BMI can estimate body fat relative to height and weight; however, it can also be a misleading tool as can overestimate body fat in individuals with greater lean muscle mass, such as athletes. Furthermore, BMI is less reliable for people of short stature and overlooks gender-based and ethnic differences in body composition (Zierle-Ghosh & Jan, 2023). More recently, the ideal body type for girls and women has been shifting toward a more thin-muscular appearance, increasing pressure to appear both *thin* and *fit* (Aanesen et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2019), which is challenging to achieve (Barnes et al., 2023), especially if optimal fitness performance requires more muscle. Furthermore, research has suggested that the muscular ideal does not decrease the risk of BID and disordered eating behaviours as women feel pressure to achieve both a thin and muscular appearance (Roberts et al., 2022).

Up until the early 1900's, women's sport was commonly resisted and viewed by society as insignificant in relation to men's sport. Women were limited to disciplines such as sprints, hurdles, and track until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with women's rugby receiving some, but limited recognition in the 1980's (Shaw, 2016). Women had to actively resist and challenge dominant discourses that deemed many sports and physical activities unsuitable for them based on their sex.

Through analysing public discourses from the 1890's to the 1940's, Jungnickel (2023) found that women were frequently overlooked and ridiculed for a *presumed* lack of strength and athletic ability, thereby restricted from participating in sports that were considered too physically demanding. Instead, women were encouraged to participate in activities such as ballet, swimming, and gymnastics, sports that were socially constructed as graceful and aligned with traditional notions of femininity.

Historically, women who exhibited strength and muscularity were viewed as deviating from traditional feminine norms, reinforced by hegemonic masculinity and the

privileged status of men (Knowlton & Newland, 2024). These norms were reflected at the 1900 Paris Olympics, where only 22 out of 997 athletes were women, competing in five disciplines: sailing, tennis, croquet, golf, and equestrianism. By 2016 Rio Olympics, women represented 45% of competitors, highlighting a significant rise (International Olympic Committee, n.d.). This progress reached a historic peak in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, which achieved full gender parity with an equal distribution of spots for both male and female athletes (Bach, 2024).

Recently, many Western-influenced societies have observed a shift towards an egalitarian model, whereby domestic and professional roles are assigned more equally, irrespective of gender (Friberg & Jahanlu, 2023). Despite these shifting attitudes, women predominantly continue to take on most care and domestic work (Ullrich et al., 2022). This has been conceptualised by Arlie Hochschild in 1989 as the “second shift”, whereby employed women in a heterosexual relationship take on further unpaid care work, including household duties and parental responsibilities. The concept of the second shift refers to women engaging in paid employment - the first shift, while simultaneously managing household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caregiving responsibilities - the second shift (Brailey & Slatton, 2019). As a result, women tend to experience fatigue and burnout from balancing professional duties with domestic obligations (Artz et al., 2021).

These findings suggest that traditional gender roles are perpetuated across both public and domestic contexts, creating long-term unsustainable expectations for women. These expectations extend to physical appearance, where women are expected to uphold certain beauty standards in their work environment, to be perceived as competent and respected in professional settings (Johnson et al., 2018). Together, these pressures can contribute to body dissatisfaction and guilt when women are unable to meet the rigid and unrealistic body

standards embedded across work, family, and social roles, particularly when combined with (social) media influences.

### **2.1.1 Gender Roles**

As both a psychological and social construct, gender roles reflect societal norms and cognitive frameworks (Ullrich et al., 2022). According to social role theory, gender stereotypes arise from recurring patterns in the social roles occupied by men and women (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). Hegemonic gender norms, particularly in Western societies, have positioned women as the primary homemakers and caregivers, while men have been socially conditioned to embody the role of the provider and protector (Zhu & Chang, 2019). Those who fall outside of these brackets are viewed as deviating from societal norms, often facing judgement and exclusion. These conventional views of masculinity and femininity reflect widely held beliefs considered suitable for men and women (e.g., strength, dominance, and emotional control for men, and nurturance and emotionality for women). Consistent with these roles, femininity is linked to qualities such as empathy, kindness, and compassion, and these associations are learned and reinforced over time as norms and expectations that shape individuals' actions (Delgado-Herrera et al., 2024).

From a young age, children observe gender stereotypes and internalise them (Ullrich et al., 2023), learning to adopt behaviours that align with expectations of their gender (Hentschel et al., 2019). Research suggests that parental gender beliefs and socioeconomic status (SES) are prominent factors in influencing traditional gender role attitudes (Ullrich et al., 2023). These early experiences can contribute to the development of gendered identities, which may influence later life choices, such as sporting aspirations, social connections, and self-perception. Budhreja et al. (2025) highlighted how traditional gender roles emphasise

domestic responsibilities and modesty in Indian populations, which limit opportunities to exercise and public exposure for women.

In advertisements, women are often portrayed as domestic figures, caregivers, or sexual objects, with their worth predominantly based on their appearance and conformity to gendered expectations (Dai et al., 2025). This can exacerbate a negative self-perception of body image by reinforcing a narrow and constrained view of femininity, thereby contributing to the ongoing internalisation of gender stereotypes. Previous studies have reported moderate effects of traditional advertising (magazines, billboards), however findings from Dai et al. (2025) highlight that these effects are escalating through digital social media advertising. In contemporary society, the average individual is exposed to both traditional and digital media advertising, resulting in more complex and far-reaching effects (Dai et al., 2025). This has led to the female body being conceptualised as requiring control, resulting in the implementation of strict diet and exercise regimes to achieve the desired physique of (hetero)normative femininity (Marshall et al., 2018).

## **2.2 Social Media**

Emerging adulthood, defined as the late teens to mid-twenties is a pivotal stage for identity development and psychological maturation (Keum et al., 2023). This period is particularly pertinent when considering the influence of social media, when individuals are establishing core components of their self-concept, including their social identity (Keum et al., 2023). Social identity can be conceptualised as “the part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). With growing dependence on digital devices, particularly from an early age, social media platforms have become the primary source for younger generations to access information and connect

with others (Laczi & Póser, 2025). Recent estimates suggest that an individual will spend an average of five to six years of their lives on social media platforms (Blackburn & Hogg, 2024).

Valkenburg et al. (2021) identified two broad forms of social media engagement: active and passive use. Active use involves actively interacting with others, such as sharing content, commenting, or posting, whereas passive use is characterised by consuming content without direct interaction. Passive use has been associated with deteriorated emotional well-being whereas active use was not (Valkenburg et al., 2021). This difference may be explained by the role of social comparison, as passive users are more likely to experience envy, while active users engage in social interaction, which can foster a sense of belonging and connection (Godard & Holtzman, 2023).

In contrast to traditional media, social media enables individuals to create a unique online profile and actively engage in messaging and content sharing. Researchers have highlighted the potential for social media platforms to encourage reminiscence and contribute to a greater sense of meaning in life (Keum et al., 2023). By creating profiles and engaging in content, users can actively engage in social interactions, which may indirectly enhance feelings of relatedness and support emotional well-being.

### **2.2.1 Risks of Social Media**

Although social media provides a platform for connectivity that may not otherwise be possible, it also presents risks by exposing individuals to harmful and misleading content. Exposure to such content has been associated with an increased risk of disordered eating behaviours and other health-related risks such as vaping and smoking (Tang et al., 2024). Excessive use of social media can lead to a variety of physical and mental health consequences, and in severe instances can lead to social media addiction (SMA). Though

SMA was not recognised in the latest Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), it has been characterised as a behavioural addiction, defined by the inability to effectively regulate usage, leading to consequences in interpersonal relationships, professional responsibilities, and academic performance (Zhang et al., 2023). Research from Beyans et al. (2022) and Reich et al. (2021) suggest that adolescents absorb and model social media behaviour and attitudes from their parents, emphasising the impact of parental digital behaviour on how children interact with, and interpret digital content (Cohen et al., 2023).

Social media platforms use algorithms to curate personalised and relevant content for each user (Harriger et al., 2023), which can increase exposure to potentially misleading and harmful material. Many pre-teens and young adults turn to social media for guidance, consuming health, fitness, and nutrition advice to achieve socially normative body ideals (Klier et al., 2022). This can be particularly harmful, as images of slim women are often heavily edited, filtered, photoshopped, and frequently promote unsustainable and stereotypical beauty standards (Jiménez-García et al., 2025; Ozimek et al., 2023). Furthermore, the presence of peers on social media, rather than celebrities commonly featured in traditional media, can have a particularly strong negative impact, as peer comparisons are often more influential in everyday life (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). This greater influence arises from peers being a part of our everyday environments, both online and offline (explored further in the following sections).

Jong and Drummond (2016) reported that health and fitness content on social media emphasised personal responsibility, pressuring individuals towards constant self-improvement, excessive-exercise, and weight regulation. This can be linked to ‘hustle culture’, a widely prevalent phenomenon on social media that can encourage an all-or-nothing approach to self-improvement and may contribute to increased stress and anxiety

(Molina, 2023). Hustle culture reinforces the expectation that every effort an individual makes must be intentional and productive, with time being used to maximise productivity and achievement (Burgess et al., 2022).

While American adults average 127 minutes per day on social media (Merrill & Faustin, 2023), recent research suggests that adolescents are engaging more heavily. Mougharbel et al. (2023) found that 48% of adolescents spent three or more hours a day on social media, and 43.7% experienced moderate to severe psychological distress, with prevalence higher among females (54%) than males (31%). Furthermore, research has suggested that the average age for onset of eating disorders (ED) is now 12 to 13 years old (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Garousi et al., 2016), and medical professionals are reporting an increase in the diagnosis of children as young as 5 (Mental Health Foundation, 2019). This trend may reflect a possible link between increased access to social media from a younger age in the modern digital environment. As a population, athletes tend to exhibit higher social media (SM) usage, with over 80% using SM for at least two hours a day, with a mean of four hours per day (Merrill & Faustin, 2023). Furthermore, research suggests that SM can encourage young women to actively pursue the monitoring, regulating, and controlling of their bodies in ways that reflect dominant and continually evolving beauty standards (Kurghan & Thorpe, 2025)

While content across platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat has been linked to body image dissatisfaction (BID), TikTok presents a distinct context due to its popularity among younger users and its highly algorithmic, rapid content-delivery structure. The platform appeals to a younger audience, with approximately 25% of users in the United States aged between 10 and 19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok became increasingly saturated by white, thin, and privileged female influencers, with the platform's

algorithm marginalising those who did not align with these dominant ideals of femininity (Kennedy, 2020). Recently, TikTok has come under scrutiny for their generation of algorithms that personalise content based on viewing patterns, exposing users to progressively extreme and unregulated content (Harriger et al., 2023). While studies specifically exploring a relationship between TikTok and body dissatisfaction are still limited, there is reason to believe that appearance-based content may perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards that can influence an individual's self-perception and eating behaviours. Findings from Woods and Scott (2016) suggest that adolescents experienced decreased self-esteem with higher levels of social media use. Self-esteem is defined as the internal evaluation of one's worth, accepting their abilities, and developing love and respect for themselves (Colak et al., 2023).

Increased social media use is also associated with shorter sleep duration and increased daytime tiredness in adolescents (Garmy et al., 2012). Colak et al. (2023) found that SMA had a direct and significantly negative effect on adolescents' self-esteem. These findings highlight the multidimensional impact social media can have on adolescent well-being, which may have potential long-term implications that could extend into adulthood.

Athletes' bodies are often shaped by the institutional environments of their sport, team, or club and appearance-based pressures can be exacerbated by engaging in mainstream media and social media platforms (Hardie et al., 2022). As mentioned, increased exposure to idealised body types on social media is associated with body dissatisfaction, restrictive, and binge eating behaviours (Malloy et al., 2024). A recent meta-analysis highlighted that 34% of competitive athletes experience depression or anxiety, 26% suffer from sleep disturbances, and 20% encounter psychological distress (Stevens et al., 2024). In considering such findings, it appears that the elevated pressure to maintain an athletic appearance on social media

combined with the competitive nature of sport can increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. However, few studies have directly explored the role that social media plays for athletes' well-being. Athletes are often required to continually improve athletic characteristics, such as muscle mass and strength, which in many instances can contradict the implicit beauty standards in Western society, that emphasise thinness and delicate femininity (Abdoli et al., 2024). As a result, female athletes may experience an internal tension between meeting the physical demands of their sport, and conforming to normative ideals of femininity perpetuated in wider society.

### **2.3 Body Image and Eating Behaviours**

The concept of “normative discontent” describes the widespread dissatisfaction with body image, suggesting that negative self-perception has become so common, it is now considered normal (Tantleff-Dunn et al., 2011). Body image dissatisfaction (BID) is the most common predictor of disordered eating and clinically diagnosed eating disorders (Saunders et al., 2020). BID arises through a misalignment between an individual's perceived body image and their ‘ideal’ figure (Riyami et al., 2024). Peterson and Lupton (2000) suggest that young individuals invest substantial time and energy into behaviours that shape their appearance and health, which is linked to a rise in ED for this demographic. Adolescents tend to engage in disordered eating behaviours to reduce their BID and protect themselves from weight-related victimisation (Babbott et al., 2023). Higher levels of BID are observed in Western countries compared to Eastern cultures (Hanson et al., 2024); however, growing exposure to Western norms has been associated with higher levels of BID and disordered eating behaviours in Eastern societies (Malloy et al., 2024). Western cultures often associate a lean physique with health and success, and this assumption has slowly influenced cultural standards in other parts of the world (Dunkel et al., 2010).

Research suggests that for some athletes, distorted body image occurs even when their body mass index (BMI) falls within a healthy range and aligns with cultural expectations, leading to BID (Borowiec et al., 2023). Athletes frequently face scrutiny regarding their body composition and physique, and this experience is particularly prevalent in aesthetically judged sports (e.g., gymnastics, figure skating, cheerleading), weight-categorised sports (e.g., boxing; rowing) and endurance sports (e.g., running, cycling). Body dissatisfaction is an internal process, moulded by environmental influences, including family, peers, significant others, and media exposure (Irvine et al., 2018). In athletes, BID may arise from various triggers, however is often a combination of self-imposed expectations to meet a specific physique in sport, and external demands from coaches, peers, and family. Athletes are also at an increased risk of developing low energy availability (LEA), a condition in which caloric intake is not sufficient for their lean mass and energy output (SantaBarbara et al., 2024). This can stem from disordered eating or a misunderstanding of one's nutritional needs (Gaudiani, 2018). LEA can lead to RED-S (relative energy deficiency in sport) and associated health consequences, including impaired metabolism, reduced bone density, hormonal imbalances, and hypothalamic amenorrhea (Prnjak et al., 2019).

Athletes report experiencing both an athletic and social body image, providing a basis for measuring body image in the distinct contexts of sport and everyday life (Kantanista et al., 2018). Petrie and Greenleaf (2007) proposed a sociocultural model for eating disorder development in athletes, outlining two contributing and at times opposing factors; namely, the internalisation of societal beauty standards, and body composition pressures in sport. Sports such as gymnastics, track, and figure skating frequently emphasise low weight and body fat percentage for appearance and biomechanical reasons which can lead to unhealthy physiological and psychological consequences. Furthermore, self-objectification - the

tendency to focus on one's body in terms of external traits (appearance) rather than internal traits (what it can do), encourages ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the body as an object. This is reinforced by objectified portrayals of female athletes in the media, which shape how women and girls internalise and critique their bodies (Harrison, 2003).

Pressure in high-performance sport is natural; however, the way an athlete perceives and handles such pressure can determine its impact (Wolf & Utesch, 2024). Heightened perfectionism is commonly observed in individuals with ED symptomatology and can be considered in both adaptive (healthy) and maladaptive (unhealthy) dimensions for athletes. Perfectionism can be defined by the presence of overly high standards combined with harsh self-expectations and encompasses both an intrinsic motivation for excellence, and an extrinsic concern about meeting self-perceived standards (Núñez et al., 2024). Adaptive perfectionism has been associated with greater athletic performance and reduced stress, while maladaptive perfectionism can be a risk factor to developing coping mechanisms such as exercise addiction (EA). Perfectionism, motivation, achievement, and competitiveness have been identified as psychological risk factors in eating disorder symptomatology (Prnjak et al., 2019), which are traits that are typically perceived positively in athletes. For example, a figure skater may focus on the extension of their free leg in a spin, creating an elegant line that helps produce the aesthetic effect expected by judges and audiences (Toner & Montero, 2020). The performance evaluations made by judges are influenced by athletic body image expectations, which are derived from sport ideals that have long prioritised shorter, lighter, leaner, and smaller physiques (Voelker et al., 2024). This phenomenon is also known as aesthetic injustice, whereby implicit bias and prejudicial criteria influence judges' scores, meaning athletes performing at the same level may not be evaluated equally if one has a less 'athletic' body type. Consequently, sport may become an environment where body image is

tied to success or failure, and where external standards from judges define success and worth (Whitten & Holt, 2021).

Research in New Zealand suggests that certain athletic uniforms may contribute to increased anxiety in female athletes, specifically in relation to body image, visibility of menstrual blood, and undergarment exposure. In response to these issues, recent regulatory changes by Gymnastics New Zealand, have allowed athletes to wear shorts or leggings over leotards in competition without penalty. These changes are intended to allow athletes to feel safe and comfortable, and encourage inclusivity within the sport (Batty et al., 2024). By challenging longstanding appearance-based rules and allowing athletes to have greater autonomy over their appearance, such changes can reframe the perfectionistic and physique-orientated expectations prevalent in many sporting environments.

### **2.3.1 Sociocultural Influences on Body Image**

#### ***Coaches and parental influences***

While individuals are vulnerable to media representations and narratives that perpetuate the thin-ideal, female athletes are also influenced by the interpersonal relationships that they engage in, and through which they may seek support and advice. Recent applications of ecological models in sports by Stevens et al. (2024) have presented four broad categories of factors that impact the mental health of elite athletes; specifically, (i) the athlete's personal characteristics, (ii) the microsystem (coaches, peers), (iii) the exosystem (the sport), and (iv) the macrosystem (international sporting environment, social media). Research (Coussens et al., 2024; Wood, 2020) has highlighted the influential role that coaches play in the lives of their athletes, shaping their self-perception and identity. Coaches often take on multiple roles in an athlete's life, including being a mentor, parental figure, psychologist, and authoritative figure (Beckner & Record, 2016), therefore playing a

significant role in how athletes perceive and feel in their bodies in sport and wider environment. Muscat and Long (2008) and Willson and Kerr (2021) reported that coaches often, intentional or otherwise, promote harmful appearance expectations. Coaches may often compare athletes' appearances to others and fail to address body-related discussions among team members, which can lead to BID, burnout, anxiety, stress, and retirement or withdrawal from their sport (Schneider et al., 2023). Furthermore, Brown (2015) found that some coaches in NZ encouraged and reinforced body ideologies, which made elite athletes associate fit and muscular bodies with self-discipline, high achievement, and moral responsibility. Participants involved in Brown's (2015) study described the body-related differences between those selected for elite athlete programmes, revealing how systems of power operated through categorisation, inclusion, and exclusion. Given the strong influence that coaches have on their athletes, athletes may internalise body practices overtime, shaped by societal discourses around obesity, healthism, and body pedagogies (Brown, 2015).

Parental influences such as weight-related comments and pressure to diet are associated with a higher risk of developing ED pathology. Mother-daughter relationships are among the most influential socio-cultural factors affecting self-perception, dieting behaviours, and eating disorders in young girls and adolescents (Maor & Cwikel, 2016). Mothers have a significant impact on their children's perception of body image, food, and weight, through the modelling of their own eating behaviours and weight-related attitudes. Other research suggests that the modelling of thinness by mothers is correlated with bulimic symptoms in their daughters (Spivak-Lavi et al., 2023). In line with these findings, Boudreault et al. (2022) found that 19.7% of young female athletes reported engaging in extreme weight-control behaviours, with 8.4% experiencing weight-control mistreatment from parents and coaches.

Despite these findings, families also provide a range of protective factors. They are considered a key source of support in ED recovery interventions. Strong family connectedness, clear family boundaries, and parental support provide core protective factors against the development of eating disorders. Regular family meals can decrease the prevalence of disordered eating behaviours in girls, alongside fostering a mindful nutrition approach (rather than focusing on weight), which can nurture a healthier relationship with food (Langdon-Daly & Serpell, 2017). However, limited research examines the role of family-based protective factors among athlete populations, where sport-related expectations and pressures may influence family dynamics.

Athletes often hesitate expressing personal health concerns as they fear disappointing teammates and coaches, losing their ability to compete, or jeopardising their scholarship (Bjornsen & O'Connor, 2023). For many, these fears are intensified by the strong connection between athletic identity and self-worth. Such concerns, compounded by the broader shame and stigma surrounding mental health, make it even more difficult for athletes to seek support. Despite growing awareness of the performance and well-being benefits associated with sport psychology, some athletes, coaches, and parental figures continue to hold negative perceptions of psychological services and those who access them (Richardson et al., 2024).

### ***Peer influences***

In addition to parental influence, athletes have been found to subconsciously internalise their teammates' eating behaviours, leading to an increased tendency of engaging in similar patterns themselves. A recent systematic review outlined how teammates can positively guide others' eating behaviours (Scott et al., 2020). Additionally, teammates can negatively influence eating psychopathology, as pressure from teammates to lose weight has been associated with an increased risk of disordered eating and compulsive exercise in efforts

to meet socially perceived standards. Scott et al. (2022) found that 19% of athletes reported that negative remarks from peers about their weight or body size contributed to the onset of their disordered eating behaviours. Further research (e.g., Higgs, 2015; Stok et al., 2016) has indicated that individuals may modify their food selection and intake based on who they are with, as well as the eating patterns of their peers.

Eating behaviour and pattern changes may develop through modelling such as internalising dietary habits (Cruwys et al., 2015; Stice, 1998), social facilitation such as eating in differing social environments (Herman, 2015), creating a positive impression (Stoeber et al., 2017; Vartanian, 2015), and following social norms regarding appropriate food selection and consumption (Higgs, 2015). Among athletes, research has established a connection between teammates influencing eating attitudes, through normalising such behaviours (Arthur-Cameselle & Quatromoni, 2011). Supporting this, Scott et al. (2019) reported in their meta-analysis that competitive sporting environments can encourage comparative processes between peers and teammates, specifically in appearance and weight. In team environments, athletes are susceptible to social indispensability, where they feel personally responsible for their team's success (Wolf & Utesch, 2024). Athletes with existing disordered eating or negative body image may feel a heightened expectation to change their current body shape to be perceived more favourably and meet the aforementioned norms, particularly if others on the team are seen to be making similar 'sacrifices'. This can create an atmosphere where the pressure to fit a team standard is viewed as dedication and success, which can make it challenging for athletes to recognise when harmful behaviours have become a normalized part of the team environment.

## 2.4 Exercise Addiction

Regular engagement in physical activity can increase physical and mental health if it is of recommended duration and intensity (Zaccagni & Gualdi-Russo, 2023). In a world that faces a global obesity pandemic, whereby one in eight people are currently obese (World Health Organization, 2024), physical activity provides a means for self-care and prioritising health. Individuals may exercise for various reasons, including increasing strength, improving fitness, relieving stress, and managing weight (Chhabra et al., 2024). Although the significant benefits of exercise for both physical and mental health are widely established in academic literature (Donovan et al., 2020), social media has contributed to the glorification of constant movement and activity, undermining the importance of rest and recovery.

Athletes are particularly susceptible to exercise addiction (EA), characterised by prolonged, high-intensity, and frequent exercise behaviours that can cause physical, psychological, or social discomfort or harm. EA was first academically conceptualised by Baekeland (1970), who conducted a study examining the effects of one month of exercise deprivation on sleep. Research in EA is continually growing, especially over the past twelve years (Weinstein & Szabo, 2023) and although widely established in academic research (Colledge et al., 2020; Juwono et al., 2021; Weinstein & Szabo, 2023), inconclusive findings have prevented EA from being included in the most recent publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). The development of EA is often linked to concerns with body image, distress, and depression (González-Hernández et al., 2021), and often commonly occurs alongside disordered eating (Scott et al., 2022). According to a recent meta-analysis, an estimated 13% of physically active individuals may experience EA (Godoy-Izquierdo et al., 2021). EA can emerge from an individual's need for control, and exercise may function as their primary coping mechanism. An individual experiencing EA

tends to: (a) have withdrawal symptoms when exercise is limited, (b) view physical activity as the most important component of their life, (c) experience tension with self and others from a lack of excessive exercise, (d) feel euphoric following exercise, (e) increase volume of exercise to feel satisfied, and (f) revert back to former patterns of excessive exercise following a period of reduction (De la Vega et al., 2016). EA typically follows a developmental pathway whereby exercise begins for enjoyment (“want to”), progressing to increased obligation (“need to”), and eventually advancing to a psychophysiological dependence on exercise (“must do”) where exercise becomes disconnected from enjoyment or performance outcomes.

EA can lead to a range of adverse physical outcomes including overtraining, chronic fatigue, somatic discomfort, injuries, stress, sleep dysfunction, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Godoy-Izquierdo et al., 2021). Studies highlight that the risk of EA for athletes increases with more competitive sporting environments (De la Vega et al., 2016). Athletes are often praised for their dedication to training and their appearance through physique-based comments by peers and coaches (“you look great”, “train more”), which can lead to the normalisation of EA in sporting environments. Athletes may normalise and conceal excessive exercise, as such routines are socially accepted and encouraged practices associated with being a *disciplined* and *dedicated* athlete.

#### **2.4.1 Healthism**

In recent decades, healthism has become increasingly salient largely due to the pervasive influence of social media in everyday life. Healthism was first conceptualised by Crawford (1980), highlighting an expanding societal shift toward individual health consciousness. As a concept, healthism reflects the societal expectation that individuals are responsible for their own health, with self-regulatory behaviours such as dieting, exercise,

and weight management framed as moral obligations (Crawford, 1980). Nonconformity to these ideals often results in individuals being labelled as undisciplined and lazy (Kurghan & Thorpe, 2025). This individualistic mindset is reinforced through hustle culture narratives prominent in social media, where success is viewed as a reward for discipline and ongoing self-improvement.

Normative health discourses have framed foods as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, constructing the narrative that consuming ‘healthy’ food is regarded as morally correct (Arguedas, 2020). Aligned to the healthism ideology, Brown (2015) found that athletes can be normalised into surveillance culture, where they feel guilt and shame in consuming ‘junk’ foods, thus self-regulating their behaviour to fit with coach-imposed diet restrictions. This is exacerbated on social media, where influencers actively promote ‘clean’ diets, that tend to be unsustainable due to their restrictive nature. Wu et al. (2023) found that interaction with food and beverage content on social media influenced adolescent girls’ eating behaviours, leading to an increased consumption of protein, and less intake of carbohydrates and fats, which may reflect contemporary diet trends circulating on SM. The demonisation of ‘bad’ foods can result in the stigmatisation of certain foods, which may perpetuate unhealthy relationships with food and disordered eating. Such moralisation extends beyond individuals’ food choices to broader societal measures of health, such as BMI, which lacks reliability, particularly in athletes (Brown, 2015).

Families in low-income households often face financial, environmental, and time barriers to healthy food options (Mulder et al., 2014). For these families, the pressure of time scarcity means that convenience often dictates food decisions (Katre & Raddatz, 2023), which commonly leads to readily available and affordable meals that are often limited in key micronutrients. When society imposes the responsibility of health solely on the individual,

parents and their children are morally demonised through discourses beyond their control (Mulder et al., 2014). The moralisation of food and responsibility of health may be experienced differently by athletes depending on their socio-economic or cultural contexts. Female athletes from low-income backgrounds may face additional challenges in making healthy food choices while simultaneously navigating sport-related health expectations. Together, these intersecting pressures reinforce how healthism, moralisation of food, and socio-economic status can shape the lived experiences of female athletes.

## **2.5 Aotearoa New Zealand Context**

At present, there is limited academic research addressing the impact of social media on experiences of body image in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This gap reflects the relatively recent emergence of social media platforms as a driver of BID over the last decade. Research suggests that the prevalence of clinically significant mental health concerns among adolescents in NZ grew from 10.6% in 2007 to 12.8% in 2012 (Babbott et al., 2023). More recently, the 2024 New Zealand health survey found that 14.3% of young adults between 15-24 now experience high or very high levels of psychological distress (Ministry of Health, 2024). Babbott et al. (2023) undertook surveys with 893 adolescents between the ages of 11 to 13 in NZ and found that 40.2% reported eating less food at mealtimes than desired, and 26.5% reported frequently skipping meals for weight loss. Additionally, 38.7% expressed BID, and one-in-two female participants experienced BID. Building on these concerns, Brown (2015) highlights how dominant discourses further marginalise Māori girls in sport, whose bodies are often characterized by coaches as ‘atypical’ or abnormal.

Drawing on indigenous feminist methodologies, *mana wāhine* (referring to the unique strength and leadership of Māori women within cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions) and *masi* methodology, Nemani and Thorpe (2023) used wānanga (focus groups) and digital

diaries to explore young Māori and Pasifika wāhine's (women's) experiences. Their findings revealed that these young women are met with pressures to adhere to body ideals, that are shaped by heteronormative images of young, small-framed, white women. Beyond this, as there is limited literature documenting the impact of social media on body image in Aotearoa New Zealand, this study will aim to contribute to the literature by providing insights specific to young female athletes in NZ; a group that is at particular risk of BID and its normalisation. The following section will provide an overview of the major theoretical frameworks that ground the lens and analysis of this study.

## **2.6 Theoretical Frameworks**

### ***Social Cognitive Theory - Tripartite Influence Model***

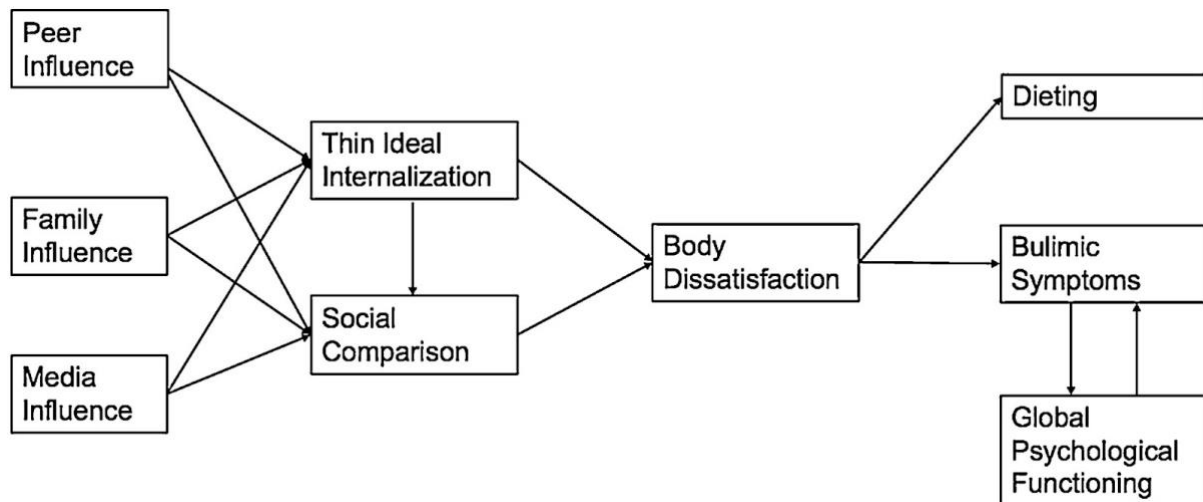
Sociocultural theories provide a broad framework for understanding how social, cultural, and environmental factors shape individual beliefs and behaviours. Therefore, theories such as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991) can be used to explain how individual risk factors for negative body image and eating disorders emerge through reciprocal interactions, through exposure to, and reinforcement of, sociocultural norms. Processes such as observational learning and reinforcement are key for understanding how sociocultural norms become internalised, providing a basis for appropriate prevention and intervention strategies.

The tripartite influence model was first introduced in the late 1990s by Thompson et al. (1999) and is the most widely recognised and implemented tool in areas of health psychology (Kakar et al., 2023). The model proposes three primary variables that form the foundation for the development of body image and disordered eating: parents, peers, and the media (Van den Berg et al., 2002). These variables, often experienced as pressures, encourage women to compare themselves to others (social comparison) and typically

associate beauty with thinness (Donovan et al., 2020). Pressure to conform to the appearance standards expressed by family, peers, and media has been linked to higher internalisation of the thin-ideal (Kakar et al., 2023). A study with adolescents identified social media as a source of appearance-related pressure that contributed to BID (Roberts et al., 2022). In turn, these appearance-related concerns are believed to have a direct influence on eating pathology (see Figure 1). In a recent longitudinal study, greater social media use in adolescents was linked to higher likelihood of engaging in social comparison, leading to lower body satisfaction (Jarman et al., 2021). Expanding beyond the traditional tripartite influence model, Roberts et al. (2022) identified social media as a fourth distinct source of appearance pressure. Their study highlighted links between social media and body image outcomes, through mechanisms including body comparison, thin ideal internalisation, and muscular ideal internalisation (Roberts et al., 2022). Conversely, the model also explains protective factors; for example, engagement with body-positive content on social media was found to reduce body image dissatisfaction (BID) and maladaptive eating behaviours (Harriger et al., 2023).

**Figure 1**

*Original Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999).*



### ***Social Comparison Theory***

Social comparison theory (SCT) was first introduced by Festinger (1954) and suggests that individuals contextualise and evaluate their beliefs, attitudes, and emotions through comparison to others, which is an essential process for self-reflection and personal growth. Social comparison can function as a facilitator of confidence by offering validation of behaviours and actions, allowing individuals to evaluate themselves in relation to others through upward or downward trajectories. Upward comparison describes the process of comparing oneself to another regarded as having a higher position, which may elicit subjectively positive responses (inspiration), or negative, (envy or resentment). In contrast, downward trajectories involves comparing oneself to others perceived as less capable and can provide reassurance and increase self-confidence (Caliskan et al., 2024). Recent research suggests that downward social comparison can have detrimental effects for individuals with pre-existing disordered eating behaviours (Laker & Waller, 2021), as comparisons with bodies perceived as ‘not thin enough’ can act as a trigger, reinforcing fears of weight gain

and increasing anxiety around control and self-regulation. Individuals may also engage in lateral comparisons, where they evaluate themselves in relation to others that they perceive like themselves (Fardouly et al., 2017). While lateral comparisons can reinforce connectedness and belonging, it can also create competitive tension; for example, Portingale et al. (2024) found that lateral comparisons were associated with increased exercise urges among women with body image concerns, highlighting how lateral comparisons may perpetuate appearance-driven behaviours. However overall, research highlights that individuals are more likely to engage in upward appearance comparisons rather than lateral or downward (Coelho et al., 2023).

Emerging evidence suggests that TikTok use is associated with body dissatisfaction, through upward appearance comparisons and increased body surveillance (Mink & Szymanski, 2022). According to social comparison theory, an individual's reference group is a key factor in shaping how they evaluate their personal attributes and their self-identity (Zvosec et al., 2021). In particular, appearance comparison is common among women, including mothers, who regularly compare themselves to unrealistic media representations of other women's bodies. Consequently, these women often internalise high expectations for themselves and, in turn, communicate these expectations to their daughters through their attitudes and beliefs (Spivak-Lavi et al., 2023). Appearance comparison will often lead to emotional responses such as anxiety, envy, or relief when an individual notices a difference between their self and the observed other (Coelho et al., 2023).

### ***Social Identity Theory***

Initially developed by Henri Tajfel in 1970's, social identity theory (SIT) describes individuals' identities as being influenced by their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). That is, people derive positive self-esteem from positive evaluations of the *groups* that

they derive membership and a sense of belonging from. The processes of identification results in three levels of self-abstraction: personal identity (“I” level), where the individual views themselves as a unique individual, social identity (“we” level), identifying themselves as part of a group and connects with common identities, and superordinate identity (“all” level), viewing themselves as part of a wider community. An athlete may situationally identify with either of these levels depending on the circumstances, or they may experience more than one level simultaneously. Campo et al. (2019) explored the social identities of athletes by examining how they identify with their team and sport and how this affected pre-competition emotions. Social identity appeared most salient in competitive environments where identification with their team or sport guided emotional responses toward team members and out-group members (competitors). Beyond competitive sport, SIT has been widely used across health, organisational, and educational research to conceptualise how group identification influences emotional responses, behaviours, and conformity (Lê & Hoang, 2025; McNeill et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2017).

Social identity theory is built on seven psychological principles. First, individuals may classify themselves into social groups based on shared attributes, such as age, interests, or profession. Second, the relevance of the social group for the individual depends on the situation or environment they are in. Third, individuals engage in intergroup comparisons, by evaluating their in-group in relation to relevant out-groups. Fourth, positive distinctiveness is experienced when the in-group is viewed more positively than the out-group, provided the individual feels a sense of membership. Fifth, an individual's identity is shaped by their self-categorisation and intergroup comparison, thus affecting stage six, their self-esteem. Lastly, the seventh principle outlines the outcomes of these processes, suggesting that individuals adapt to group dynamics through strategies such as shifting between groups, modifying their

values, or engaging in intergroup competition and rivalry (Lee et al., 2024). While social identity dynamics can lead to intergroup conflict and prejudice, social identities may also provide individuals with an important psychological resource for their self-esteem, which can strengthen and safeguard their mental health (Stevens et al., 2024). The processes through which a social identity is enacted and expressed depends on the norms, values, beliefs, and priorities that are collectively shared by members of the group.

Social influence emerges when individuals internalise the norms of these groups, which impacts their self-perception, beliefs, and future behaviours (Lee et al., 2024). Athletes often internalise the behaviours prevalent in their sport, which may include training regimes, diet, and physique. In sporting environments, athletes often engage in social comparison, evaluating not only their performance, but also their appearance relative to others with whom they share in-group identity with, such as teammates or athletes in the same sport. Internalising these standards can result in maladaptive behaviours, such as under-fuelling and over-training, which could potentially lead to further health consequences. In many cases, expectations placed on athletes may be less apparent within their team, due to desensitisation and it being the perceived norm, whereas in out-groups, their training and dedication may appear more noticeable.

Athletes engage in sport as members of a social group, thereby their identity can be defined in the group in which they belong to (e.g., swimmer; gymnast). In academic literature, this category has been identified as a relevant and meaningful social identity (Evans et al., 2023). As noted by Slater et al. (2020), athletes with a stronger sense of social identification with their sport are more likely to, for better or worse, behave in ways that align with their team and group goals, comparatively to those that are individually focused, who are more likely to act less conformist and prioritise personal achievements.

## **2.7 Literature Summary**

Currently, few qualitative studies have explored the impact of social media on body image and eating behaviours, specifically among athletes in the Aotearoa New Zealand population. Research on high-performance female athletes remains limited, and most existing literature is quantitative in nature, which may not fully capture the complex and dynamic lived experiences, subjective interpretations, and contextual factors in which they navigate.

Research has demonstrated a link between active social media use, body image dissatisfaction (BID), appearance comparison, and internalisation of the athletic-thin ideal (Bonfanti et al., 2025; Fardouly et al., 2017). These relationships may be exacerbated for female athletes, who often face additional pressures such as sport-specific body expectations, coach and peer influences, and performance pressures alongside gendered appearance expectations. These factors also place athletes at a greater risk of developing conditions such as relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S), and hypothalamic amenorrhea (HA).

Studies published on the impact of social media on athletes' body image and eating behaviours are primarily based on overseas populations, making it difficult to translate these findings within the New Zealand context. Furthermore, there is a strong need for research that centers the lived experiences that athletes manage both online and, in their sport, to gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationship between digital influences and competitive pressures.

### **2.7.1 Research Aims and Questions**

Despite growing recognition of the impact of social media on self-perception and eating behaviours, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding female athletes, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand. Previous studies have predominantly prioritised a quantitative approach by using standardised tools to measure body image and eating

behaviours. This study, however, focused on gaining a deeper understanding of athletes lived experiences, by examining the unique pressures that female athletes face, providing nuanced insights into the intersections of gender, sport, social media, peer influence, and mental health. Given the growing presence of social media in individuals' everyday lives, this research is both timely and essential, providing an exploration of its impacts on mental health, self-perception, identity, and behaviour in a group that is at particular risk of developing BID - female athletes. To these ends, this study explored the following three questions:

1. How do perceptions of beauty standards influence the experiences of body image for female athletes?
2. What are the implications of engaging with social media for female athletes' experiences of body image?
3. What are the social and psychological factors that influence positive and negative body image experiences for female athletes on social media?

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

The following chapter presents the methodological framework guiding this research. It introduces the epistemological and ontological stance, research design, and theoretical underpinning. Next, it will outline my positionality and subjectivity as a qualitative researcher, based on my prior lived experiences and perspectives as a woman who is embedded and enculturated within the context of competitive sports. Thereafter, it will discuss the chosen methodology and how this was applied in the data collection and analysis to address my research questions. Lastly, this chapter will consider the ethical considerations of this research and the active measures taken to address the relevant methodological principles throughout the study.

### **3.2 Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity**

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) emphasises the active role of the researcher in shaping the research process, requiring careful consideration of how personal perspectives, experiences, and positionality shape theme identification, data coding, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022a). A key component of reflexivity is reflecting on and acknowledging researcher subjectivity, which involves expressing how the researcher's personal perspectives and experiences have guided the research project and objectives (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

My passion for this area of research has stemmed from my personal experiences with disordered eating and negative body image as an international athlete. These challenges intensified during COVID-19 by increased social media use and prolonged periods at home, with few distractions, creating the ideal conditions for overthinking and self-rumination. As a skater my body was constantly judged by other parents and skaters, and I was told in my early teens that my skating would look better if I were thinner. I competed as a high-level

athlete in a minority sport, where nutritional and psychological support was absent.

Unfortunately, these difficulties were exacerbated by coaches who provided misinformation about nutrition and energy needs, which intensified the pressure I felt to shrink my body to fit the coach's perception of an 'elegant' skater, while health-related risks of overexercise and under-fuelling were neglected.

Despite disclosing my fixation with exercise, multiple health professionals did not express concern as my BMI remained within the 'normal' range. I was advised that it was normal for athletes to experience a missing menstrual cycle. The detrimental effects on my body only became clear to both my doctor and I after retiring from competing. Eight months later, I was diagnosed with hypothalamic amenorrhea (HA) (missing menstrual cycle) and relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S). RED-S occurs when there is inadequate energy intake to sustain the exercise energy expenditure, and can lead to menstrual irregularities, cardiovascular dysfunction, gastrointestinal problems, weakened bone health, hypogonadotropic hypogonadism, and negative psychological consequences (Cabre et al., 2022).

At the time, I was unaware of the long-term consequences of engaging in restrictive eating behaviours. Had I been educated about the risks associated with such behaviours; I may not have been in the position that I am today. Ultimately, my personal experience of recovering from an ED, whilst navigating the challenges of RED-S has been my 'why' for conducting this research. My own struggles and challenges with body image were driven by my socially constructed ideals of what a skater should look like, as endorsed, reinforced and appropriated through social media, coaches, and peer influences. These experiences have deepened my passion and commitment to contribute both now and in the future to academic

literature and to the archive of lived experiences and stories of women athletes, in the hopes that this will increase support and education for future athletes.

### **3.3 Research Design**

#### **3.3.1 Epistemological and Ontological Positioning**

Braun and Clarke (2022a) emphasise the importance of qualitative researchers acknowledging their epistemological and ontological positioning, as these perspectives provide a grounding framework for how they understand, interpret and apply their data. The term epistemology challenges how we come to know things, and under which conditions knowledge is considered valid (Khondker, 2022). Ontology defines key concepts and their interrelationships, helping researchers identify behavioural patterns, understand how they relate to each other, and categorise them meaningfully (Beatty & Kaplan, 2022).

This research was guided by a critical realist framework (Bhaskar, 2009), combining ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality. Ontological realism maintains that reality exists independently of our perceptions, while epistemological relativism recognises that humans are meaning-makers that continually interpret and redefine experiences and the world through language. The third, judgmental rationality refers to the application of logic, reasoning, and collective understandings to assess situations (Pilgrim, 2020). From a relativist perspective, such reasoning is context-dependent, shaped by cultural, social, and historical perspectives, rather than objective truth.

Ontologically, this research assumes that athletes experience reality differently depending on their identities, roles and environments. Epistemologically, it assumes that knowledge and experience are socially constructed through group norms, social comparison, and shared meaning-making. By taking an *emic* perspective and centering the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants (Scarduzio, 2017), I approached this research

as someone embedded within the high-performance athlete culture, which shaped how I interpreted participants' *stories* and how I made sense of the experiences that they shared. This allowed me to critique dominant assumptions within Western psychology that frame disordered eating and negative self-perception as an individual or pathological pattern and shift to consider how these are both socially and culturally constructed (Helfrich, 1999). Furthermore, a critical realist framework allowed me to explore the social and structural influences that shape human interpretation and experiences within the environmental contexts of high-performance female athletes.

### **3.3.2 Methodological Approach**

Qualitative research plays an integral role in understanding human experiences, enabling a thorough exploration of the multifaceted and interconnected relationship between environmental, social and cultural contexts, psychological dynamics and health behaviours. Through exploring personal narratives and lived experiences, qualitative methods allow the researcher to analyse the contextual factors that have shaped an individual (Gore-Gorszewska, 2024). This study implemented an interpretivist epistemological stance, viewing knowledge as socially constructed. Drawing from this perspective, a qualitative methodological approach was applied to develop a nuanced, exploratory and multifaceted understanding of the relationship between social media, self-perception, social influence, and eating behaviours in high-performance female athletes. Qualitative research encourages diversity of knowledge that can address systemic and social concerns, which are tailored to address the specific needs of communities and can lead to impactful change (Gough & Lyons, 2015). Positioning myself within an idiographic and emic approach provided the opportunity to listen attentively to participants' stories, and practice reflexivity throughout the research process (Morrow, 2005).

### 3.3.3 Theoretical Underpinning

Social comparison theory (SCT), developed by Festinger (1954) was used to interpret how female athletes engage in upward and downward comparisons of body image and athletic ability in relation to peers, teammates, and social media influencers. SCT suggests that individuals measure their worth based on how they compare to others, thereby influencing self-perception, identity, motivation, and behaviour. Recent research applying SCT principles highlights the role that peers and other social influences have in shaping behaviour through cognitive processes including self-efficacy and expected outcomes (Woreta et al., 2025).

Within competitive sporting environments, these social comparison processes are often particularly salient and can be increased through pressure to meet aesthetic and performance-based expectations, which can lead to increased internal and external pressure. While this analysis was primarily inductive, SCT provided a theoretical lens to interpret the dynamics of social comparisons with peers both in-person and online. This framework helped me to understand, interpret and unpack how social comparison interacts with female athletes' self-perception in sporting environments.

Likewise, social identity theory (SIT) was also drawn upon to interpret how individuals derive membership and affiliation with social groups, and how this contributes to their self-perception, behaviours and beliefs. Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that an individual's sense of identity is based on their group membership(s). For athletes, their social groups are frequently complex, as they navigate multiple roles within groups, such as a student, athlete, teammate, partner, or public figure. These intersecting roles can create tension, particularly when the norms in different groups contradict each other. Drawing on SIT, this research examined the ways in which participants respond to the norms, values and

aspirations of relevant self-identified groups as women and as athletes, and how these dynamics are related to their self-perceptions of body image and sense of belonging.

### **3.4 Method**

This section outlines the research procedures including the sampling and recruitment process, the interview environment, reasons for selecting a one-on-one semi-structured interview, data collection, tools, and data analysis.

#### **3.4.1 Sampling**

This study explored the experiences of eight female athletes who were members of the Massey Academy of Sport (AOS) and between the ages of 18 to 25. Athletes were chosen from the AOS as eligibility for this organisation requires athletes to be competing regionally, nationally, or internationally, while demonstrating sporting excellence. Competitive athletes were chosen as the participant group, as previous research suggested that they exhibit higher levels of BID than non-competitive active individuals (Kantanista et al., 2018). Drawing on the researcher's previous experience as a former athlete, this study was interested in exploring body image within the context of high-performance athletes, with ongoing reflexivity guiding the data collection and analysis process. This study followed convenience sampling to recruit participants and participation was voluntary. Convenience sampling was employed as it has been identified as a simple, affordable, and time-efficient strategy to select participants that align with the research objectives (Jager et al., 2017).

As mentioned, participants were selected from the Massey University Academy of Sport. As a previous member of the Academy of Sport and a retired skater; I am aware of the sacrifices that athletes make in balancing their studies with national and international sporting commitments and training. This sample group represents a unique set of participants who navigate multiple identities, balancing their roles as both students and athletes. My past

experiences of negative body image and eating behaviours, alongside conversations with other female athletes in everyday settings have shaped my awareness of the complicated, but widely shared nature of these issues and experiences amongst members of this community.

My connection to both the issue and my previous experience of being an athlete in the AOS community positions me as an insider to the community of interest in this research. Insider researchers can carry out research that is more sensitive, nuanced, and responsive, as their shared background and exposure to similar influences provide them with a greater understanding of the community's perspective and specific needs (Liu & Burnett, 2022). This shared background also facilitates stronger rapport, as insider researchers are better positioned to recognise contextual factors and subtle underlying influences that guide and shape participant experiences (Fleming, 2018). Furthermore, insider research can reduce power imbalances and position the researcher as a collaborator rather than an authoritative figure, which can encourage more open and honest communication (Aguilar et al., 2025). By drawing on shared experience, this research aims to capture participants' experiences in a way that genuinely reflects and resonates with their perspectives.

Qualitative research seeks to develop a complex, nuanced and dynamic understanding of specific phenomena, rather than empirical generalisations (Ting et al., 2023). Qualitative methods are particularly valuable for capturing the complexity of human interactions and experiences, including specific social and cultural dynamics that may in other types of research, be overlooked (Oranga & Matere, 2023). Qualitative research academics argue that there is no fixed or optimal sample size, as it depends on a range of epistemological, methodological, and practical factors (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Thus, there are no rigid, universally applicable guidelines for determining sample size in qualitative research. Wutich et al. (2024) suggest that theme saturation can be achieved after facilitating 6 to 12

interviews, while qualitative researchers find that minimal further information is generated after interviewing 20 participants from the same group (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Clarke and Braun (2013) recommend that a medium-sized thematic analysis study, such as those undertaken in a master's program, should include between 6 and 15 participants. To gain a more nuanced understanding, this research initially aimed for minimum of six and maximum of ten participants, resulting in a sample size of eight. This sample size allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences, while considering the time constraints of this research.

### **3.4.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

To ensure that the participants met the criteria for participation in this research, given its specific interests in the experiences of women in competitive sports, and in accordance with formal ethical requirements, an inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed. This provided clear guidelines to determine participants' eligibility in this study and maintained a transparent selection process.

#### ***Inclusion Criteria***

- Female athletes between the ages of 18 and 25 years
- Actively competing at the regional, national, or international level
- Current member of the Massey University Academy of Sport
- Athlete actively engages with social media (once a week or more)
- Proficient in English language
- Willing to participate in the study and provide written informed consent

#### ***Exclusion Criteria***

- Athletes who do not identify as female

- Athletes who are not actively competing at the regional, national, or international level
- Athletes that fall outside the age bracket of 18 to 25 years
- Athletes who engage with social media infrequently
- Athletes who are not proficient in English
- Athletes who do not provide informed consent or who withdraw from the study

### **3.4.3 Recruitment**

The sports' coordinator in the AOS was contacted several months prior to the start of the research to discuss and obtain approval for the study's advertisement within the community. After this project was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, Application (400030198), an email containing recruitment information was sent to the coordinator, including the participant information sheet and contact details of the researcher and supervisors. The coordinator disseminated this information through an email to all current members in the Massey Academy of Sport. After receiving the formal invitation email, students who were interested in participating in this study were instructed to email me with basic demographic information such as their age, gender, ethnicity, and sport.

After receiving an email from participants expressing interest in further information about the research, I answered any questions that they had and sent them the information sheets and consent forms. Potential participants were also encouraged to ask any additional questions to either the researcher or supervisors and were given the email of the ethics committee if they had any concerns prior to signing the consent forms. They were then given one week to review the information sheet and consent form, ensuring that they were informed about the study. If still interested in participating, students emailed the signed consent forms before proceeding with the interview. I proceeded with interviews with each participant only

after they provided signed, informed consent. No participants raised additional questions, and all returned their signed consent forms and subsequently arranged interview times.

Participants were offered a range of interview times to select from, and every effort was made to accommodate their availability. Understanding the difficulty of balancing both academic and sporting commitments, I intended to minimise any additional strain to their busy schedules and worked around existing commitments to provide flexibility.

#### **3.4.4 Interview Settings**

To open recruitment up to Massey AOS members from all areas of Aotearoa New Zealand, and to allow for athletes to participate while competing overseas, all interviews were held on Zoom. Interviews are widely used as a qualitative data collection method, allowing for researchers to ask open-ended questions that may be more challenging to explore deeply through other data collection frameworks. Online interviews can create a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere, as participants can join from their natural environment. Furthermore, Zoom can offer an affordable way for interviewing, by reducing expenses related to travel, easier accessibility, and increasing diversity of participants (Olliffe et al., 2021).

Initially, I felt slightly uneasy as I was unfamiliar with hosting a one-on-one Zoom meeting. My previous experiences had been in group tutorials, or in meetings with my supervisors. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to facilitate practice interviews with a friend who was a retired competitive athlete, as well as family members, which helped me to feel more confident in leading sensitive discussions. During the first couple of interviews with the participants, I was still adjusting, however, through each conversation, I became more comfortable and confident in leading conversations. The participants appeared relatively

comfortable and experienced with using Zoom, which may be attributed to many Massey University AOS members undertaking distance study alongside their sporting commitments.

### **3.4.5 Interviews**

This study used semi-structured Zoom interviews, as this allowed for a deeper understanding of participants lived experiences rather than a generalised understanding of the phenomenon. A semi-structured interview can facilitate a more focused discussion, giving the researcher freedom to explore topics that may spontaneously arise during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). I was able to draw upon my pre-planned interview guideline and prompts without needing to follow a fixed order, which allowed the conversation to flow naturally. Jamshed (2014) suggests that interview guidelines can be advantageous as it can help to make the most of interview time, while also keeping the conversation aligned with the intended direction.

### **3.4.6 Data collection procedures**

#### ***Interviews with Athletes***

At the start of each interview, I introduced myself to the participant, described the purpose of the interview, and began building rapport. Prior to recording the interview, participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could stop and withdraw at any stage of the interview. I invited them to ask any questions before commencing with the interview and sought their permission for recording the discussion via Zoom.

After receiving the participant's verbal consent, the interview began with a few icebreaker questions about the participant's study, sport, and favourite sporting memories. This introduction helped build rapport and informed my understanding of the participants' context and background in their sporting area. From there, the interview guideline was

arranged into three sections. The first section explored body image experiences and pressures, the role of aesthetics in sporting performance, and how these relate to their self-perception. Section two focused on social media usage; including how often they used it, the type of content they typically viewed, the emotions they experienced while engaging in social media, their responses to social media representations of exercise, and their responses to social media representations of certain diets. Section three discussed whether and how they encountered challenges with their eating or exercise habits. For those who did express encountering such challenges, further questions explored how the behaviours started, whether they viewed social media as a contributing factor or dynamic, how they managed body image pressures, and what forms of support they perceived to be accessible to them. If they did not identify any challenges with eating or exercise, the interview concluded.

At the end of the interview, athletes were provided the opportunity for any final comments or questions about the topics discussed during the interview. Participants were reminded of the mental health support services available to them, including the university counselling services, and 24/7 online helplines, and were thanked for their time.

### **3.4.7 Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Reflexivity is the process of reflecting on the researcher's positionality, decisions, and methodologies that can shape the research outcomes. Through reflexivity, qualitative researchers can develop a deeper understanding of their role and influence, increasing the trustworthiness of the data and maintaining integrity throughout the research process (Nadin & Cassell, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was initially developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and is a widely used qualitative method in health, sport, and exercise research (e.g., Budhraj et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2019; Ogle et al., 2023; Waring & Kelly, 2023).

It works within a non-positivist framework and values the researchers' subjectivity as a strength, rather than a limitation.

RTA posits that meaning and knowledge are socially constructed and constantly evolving, influenced by contextual factors (Braun & Clarke, 2022b). This aligns with my epistemological stance, which assumes that athletes' experiences are shaped by environmental factors, with their knowledge dynamically acquired and open to change through the conditions of their social and structural contexts. RTA encourages researcher reflexivity and participant subjectivity, which is essential when investigating complex and sensitive issues such as body image, self-perceptions, identity, and eating behaviours. Reflexivity is grounded in the researcher's responsibility to make mindful and ethical decisions, articulate them clearly, and navigate the complex dynamics of collecting real-world data that accurately reflects participants lived experiences (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

A combination of inductive and deductive strategies is frequently used in RTA (Clarke & Braun, 2013) and this study incorporated elements of both. The analysis began with a deductive approach, as I interpreted the data through the theoretical lens of SCT and SIT, which guided my identification of themes. Deductive analysis is a top-down approach, comprising pre-existing theories or frameworks that guide coding development. Although deductive analysis is a useful method, it tends to be hypothesis driven and fits within a post-positivist paradigm, which assumes there is one objective reality (Naeem et al., 2023). While this aligns with the ontological position of this research, it does not reflect the epistemological position of this research, which views knowledge as constructed through social interaction and shared meaning-making.

This study primarily used inductive analysis, where patterns and themes were identified from the researcher's interpretive and reflexive meaning-making of the data

(Clarke & Braun, 2013). Inductive analysis is a bottom-up approach and consists of observing before identifying patterns and then developing conclusions. This approach can generate stronger themes that more closely reflect participant views and unique experiences, as it allows patterns to emerge from the raw data (Naeem et al., 2023). Using an inductive approach allowed me to remain guided by the data and engage reflexively throughout the analysis process.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process I kept both a written reflexive diary and audio recordings, allowing me to reflect on and refine my understanding of participants' responses at any time or place (Turner, 2020). I often reached for audio recordings after interviews, as articulating my thoughts aloud helped me to process and make sense of the interview. There are no specific rules on how to use a reflexive diary, however, I found that taking a walk after each interview to give myself time and space to record some initial thoughts and responses helped to immerse myself in understanding each participant's lived experiences and perspective immediately after the interview. The transcription itself was also reflexive. I listened to the interviews while going over the automatic-generated transcript from Zoom to make corrections. These moments of listening and re-visiting each interview gave me the opportunity to refine my understanding and interpretation of the data, by noticing new insights and writing extra notes and reflections.

### ***Six-phase Analytical Framework***

The analysis of this research broadly followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase analytical process guide for TA. This includes familiarising oneself with the data, establishing initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and developing a report. As Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight, it is important to recognise that qualitative data analysis is not linear, but rather a recursive process that unfolds over time.

This framework provided a flexible structure and guideline for my research analysis, rather than a set of mandatory rules. To provide greater transparency of the research process and analysis, an explanation of the six phases that I applied in my research is detailed below.

### **Phase One: Familiarisation With the Data.**

The first phase comprised of reading and re-reading interview transcripts to familiarise myself with the participants and their responses. This phase required interacting with the text to develop familiarity with the data. I began by listening to each recorded interview to gain a general understanding before transcribing. Following this, I watched and listened to each interview alongside the automatic transcription through Zoom, which I manually checked and corrected the words, twice, with each participant. While listening and reading the transcripts, I made some changes by removing unnecessary words to improve sentence flow and allow for greater clarity. I found this to be an essential part of the analysis, particularly when participants repeated words or said words that distracted from their meaning such as ‘um’ or ‘like’.

On the third review, I focused solely on the audio itself, which allowed me to recognise subtle vocal cues such as pauses, tone differences, and shifts in emotional cues, deepening my understanding of their stories and experiences. I used a reflexive audio journal to keep track of my thoughts as well as concepts and theories that were being applied. I found this phase to be a challenging and emotionally taxing process as it required a lot of time and concentration.

### **Phase Two: Establishing Initial Codes.**

Phase two focused on identifying specific content relevant to the research by categorising relevant data pieces. This phase was the most exciting part of analysis, although there was uncertainty to be navigated during the initial development of themes. I started with

a table in Microsoft Word which included some potential themes, and then I went back and forth through the transcripts, looking over my interview notes to ensure that I had not missed any key observations.

### **Phase Three: Identifying Themes.**

After all data was initially coded, phase three involved generating the final organisation of themes in the data based on similarities, connections, and patterns within the dataset. This entailed exploring the deeper meanings, connections and insights within the data, whilst maintaining awareness of my own assumptions, preconceptions and why I interpreted information in specific ways. I began by creating a large brainstorm of the barriers and protective factors for athletes' body image experiences through colour-coding. After dialogue with my supervisors, I then generated a rough draft of the key theme ideas, which became version one. Initially, I identified seven main themes: 'Normalisation of overtraining', 'Comparison on social media and in person', 'Misinformation of training and nutrition needs', 'Misinformation on social media', 'Disordered eating and exercise behaviours', 'Internalising appearance expectations', and 'Coaching and family influences on nutrition and training'. I named these themes according to what stood out as being the most prevalent and notable observations from the interviews, which was also informed by my insider perspective as a former athlete. Once I identified these seven broad themes, they were discussed with my supervisors. It was suggested to group some sub-themes under broader overarching themes, such as 'Risk Factors' and 'Protective Factors'. By version three, the themes were refined and consolidated to three main themes, with specific sub-themes nested within each.

#### **Phase Four: Reviewing Themes.**

Phase four involved reviewing and refining the identified themes and sub-themes. This process allowed identification of themes that had insufficient data (which became sub-themes or specific observations within sub-themes) and enabled the merging of themes to represent an overarching, distinct, and holistic concept in each main theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I returned to the transcripts, audio journal notes, and brainstorm notes to review the themes and had a discussion with my supervisors, who suggested refining and merging some of the sub-themes into broader overarching themes. ‘Risk factors’ included the three sub-themes of ‘normalisation of unhealthy ideals’, ‘misinformation and inadequate education’, and ‘coaches and family influence on nutrition and training’. ‘Protective factors’ included ‘social support’, ‘access to guidance and resources’, and ‘self-regulatory strategies.’ The last main theme ‘Navigating Social Media Pressures on Body Image and Eating Habits’ included the sub-themes: ‘comparison on social media and in person’, ‘internalisation of appearance norms and expectations’, and ‘disordered eating and over-exercise behaviours.’ Reframing the themes into these three broad and distinct thematic categories encompassed the specific codes more coherently.

#### **Phase Five: Defining Themes.**

In phase five, my attention remained on reviewing and refining sub-theme titles and quotes that fitted within each sub-theme. A separate Microsoft Word Document was created so that I could analyse each theme, distinguish them clearly, and identify the connections between them. Through dialogue, discussions, negotiations and co-constructions of the themes and sub-themes with supervisors, the articulation of the themes became more comprehensive and nuanced. I went through each transcript individually and selected extracts most relevant to each sub-theme to fit within the three main themes. During this phase, I

considered how each sub-theme addressed each research question and refined them to highlight the connections between the data and the focus of the study.

### **Phase Six: Developing a Report.**

During phase six I carefully re-read each participant's transcript and selected excerpts that best captured the essence of each theme. These were then collated, which became the foundation of my written analysis. From there, I arranged the excerpts under each of the main themes and sub-themes. As the analysis developed, I began weaving in my own interpretations of the excerpts, which incorporated insider reflections and connections to relevant theories and concepts that helped support the ideas that were developed from the data. The written analysis was thereafter reviewed and refined in collaboration with all supervisors.

All excerpts included in the analysis are verbatim. However, when manually reviewing the transcripts, I made minor edits for readability, such as removing extra words such as 'like' or 'um'. In certain instances, I combined quotes from the same participant to enhance the flow of their narrative, which is indicated using '...'.

## **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

This study was identified as high risk and subsequently assessed and approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee, Application (400030198). In research involving sensitive topics, researchers must acknowledge the risks associated with their studies and implement measures to minimise them.

Qualitative research can be facilitated through online interviews, which incorporate video, audio, and text discussions. In this research, it was considered that the online nature of Zoom interviews can enable the participant and researcher to take part from a safe environment, minimising the potential of distress or harm. Conducting active research on

sensitive topics online also gave the participants the option to easily withdraw from the study, by simply logging out; however, no participants chose to do so. Furthermore, online data collection can be less intrusive, reducing the likelihood of re-traumatising participants while offering rich insights from a safe distance (Sipes et al., 2020). Some individuals could experience social interaction anxiety (SIA), defined as discomfort with meeting and talking with others, with fear of not knowing what to do, say, or respond in social interactions (Lim et al., 2025). Khojasteh and Won (2021) found that individuals experience reduced anxiety when they can hide behind their avatars or turn off their cameras. To lessen discomfort, I made this an option available to participants during the interview.

To ensure that participants did not feel pressured to take part in this study, the researcher arranged for the head coordinator of the Academy to send an invitation out to members, instead of personally approaching participants. The information sheet also clarified that participants were under no expectation to take part in the study based on any pre-existing relationship with the researcher. The researcher did not have any personal connections to any of the current athletes within the sports academy.

Confidentiality is imperative to maintaining ethical practice in research. The relatively small and specific participant sample, which may increase the potential for identification was considered while conducting this study. Participant identities were all anonymised through pseudonyms to safeguard participant identities in any dissemination of the data and analysis, and I was the only individual with access to identifiable information.

Rigor is often viewed as a necessary quality component in qualitative research, including clarity, robustness, appropriateness, and internal consistency of the concepts, methodologies, epistemological and ontological positions, and the methodologies used during the research process and conclusions. To ensure that the findings of the research accurately

reflected participants lived experiences, I returned transcripts to each participant for review and offered the option to email back with any corrections or clarifications, a process called member checking (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Member checking helps minimise researcher bias and interpretations and is a widely recognised strategy for enhancing credibility (Culver et al., 2012) and prevent misrepresentation during the data analysis process (McKim, 2023). I felt that offering participants a chance to revise and amend their transcripts strengthened the depth and nuance of the exploration. No participants chose to revise their transcript or exclude any segments of their interviews from the analysis.

As mentioned earlier, this study underwent a full ethics review due to the potential for psychological discomfort. While this research did not involve a population that is specifically diagnosed with an ED, I was researching in an area where it can be more prevalent. Athletes tend to be at risk of developing an ED compared to non-athletes and often avoid seeking treatment due to stigma and sport-specific constraints (Flatt et al., 2020). Therefore, participants were reminded throughout the interview that they could choose to not answer specific questions if they felt uncomfortable with the topic. If a participant experienced discomfort, the interview would have been paused, though this situation did not arise.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction and Overview**

The current chapter reports on the key patterns and themes that I identified in the data.

This study reports three main themes that address the initial research questions:

- 1) Risk factors for body image perceptions and experiences
- 2) Protective factors for body image perceptions and experiences
- 3) Navigating social media pressures on body image, exercise and eating habits

Throughout this chapter, I will articulate my interpretation of the barriers and risk factors that complicate body image experiences and eating behaviours for the female athlete participants (theme 1) followed by an exploration of the conditions that help them nurture a positive and balanced relationship with their bodies (theme 2). Analysis of theme three will focus on participants lived experiences of competitive comparison, disordered eating, overtraining, and internalisation of appearance norms, with a particular focus on how social media informs and reinforces these patterns and self-perceptions.

**Table 1**

*Overview of Identified Themes/Sub-Themes and Their Interconnections*

| <b>THEMES</b>                                                                     | <b>FOCUS OF THEME AND HOW IT CONNECTS</b>                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>SUB-THEMES</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Theme 1: Risk Factors</b>                                                      | Social, environmental, and performance-related pressures that perpetuate cycles of maladaptive behaviours (e.g., overtraining and under-fuelling), especially when protective factors are limited.               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural Normalisation of unhealthy ideals</li> <li>• Coaches and Family Influence on training and nutrition</li> <li>• Misinformation and inadequate Education</li> </ul>    |
| <b>Theme 2: Protective Factors</b>                                                | Protective factors influence how athletes respond to both risk and social media pressures, which can buffer against comparison, internalisation of harmful norms, disordered eating behaviours, or overtraining. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Support</li> <li>• Access to Guidance and Resources</li> <li>• Self-Regulatory Strategies</li> </ul>                                                                   |
| <b>Theme 3: Navigating social media pressures on body image and eating habits</b> | The ways social media pressures influence athletes' body image and eating behaviours, within the context of existing risk and protective factors.                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison on Social Media and in Person</li> <li>• Internalisation of Appearance Norms and Expectations</li> <li>• Disordered Eating and Over-Exercise Behaviours</li> </ul> |

#### **4.2 Theme One: Risk Factors for Body Image Perceptions and Experiences**

The analysis identified common risk factors associated with negative body image experiences as particularly significant and recurring in the accounts shared by the participants. Such risk factors may compromise self-perception and mental well-being, as well as physical health, performance, and sustained participation in sport. These dynamics include three sub-themes; namely, cultural normalisation of unhealthy ideals, coaches' and

familial influence, and misinformation about training and nutrition. Collectively, these dynamics contribute to social environments where harmful exercise and behaviours are normalised, and the risk of body dissatisfaction is elevated.

#### **4.2.1 Sub-theme One: Cultural Normalisation of Unhealthy Ideals**

A particularly interesting insight from this study was the ways in which unhealthy behaviours, such as overtraining and under-fuelling are actively encouraged and normalised within sporting environments. This culture shapes athletes' self-perception, and creates expectations around what it means to be a 'dedicated' athlete, as Sophie highlights:

I kind of grew up thinking it was just me, but I also coach the sport, and I get so many questions from young girls about it, and I'm like, oh no, no, this is not normal, and I think it almost romanticises overtraining. Like the amount of things on our feed - like someone's third training session of the day where they run their half marathon and then eat a banana. It's what we are all brought up seeing, and I think a lot of us have tried it from time to time.

Sophie's account can be understood through the dynamic of internalising content that associates athleticism with overtraining and under-fuelling, while simultaneously recognising that these same maladaptive patterns are absorbed by the younger girls she coaches. I have experienced this firsthand, as I often saw competitors training online and felt obliged to meet their visible efforts, even without knowing how much they were *actually* training. Everything felt like a competition, and I associated being the best with restricting food and increasing training intensity and duration, as this was something that my coaches reinforced. I recall vividly when one of my skaters, at nine years old, said she didn't like how she looked in her leotard. It broke my heart, and, in that moment, I knew I never wanted to pass unhealthy habits onto my own skaters. Nowadays, I like to remind my skaters to make sure they are

eating enough to fuel their training, and if that means having some chocolate before competing, they should have it. In a way, it felt like healing my younger self.

Sophie's experience drew my attention to how the cycle of overtraining is often overlooked, as athletes are praised for their dedication to training, and overtraining (excessive training with inadequate recovery) is often viewed as what is required to reach the top level within their sport. Although achieving balance between training load and recovery is essential for optimal and sustainable performance (Kellmann et al., 2017), athletes often prioritise training over rest and recovery, placing female athletes at an increased risk of negative physiological consequences such as HA or RED-S. Such training behaviours and perceptions may become chronic and routine, increasingly contributing to *their* version of training becoming normalised as their baseline, which risks leading to physical and mental burnout. Sophie described running every night, in addition to her own training, as she felt her existing training load was insufficient, demonstrating the dynamic of higher training loads becoming increasingly normalised in her experience: "Throughout 2022 and 2023, I would run a 10K every night, most nights at 10 o'clock after all of the [other] training, because it felt like I wasn't exercising enough."

This normalisation of over-training and over-exercise (and insufficient recovery) risks hiding its compulsive nature, particularly in relation to body image. Isla reflected on her underlying motivations for over-exercise as being driven by her body image concerns, saying:

Over-exercise looked like going for runs, training for a half marathon, but doing it because I want to lose weight and burn the energy that I've eaten - things like that. And every time I swim, for example, it's not to train, it's to try and burn energy to lose weight...I didn't look like an athlete, so I thought... I need to train more.

Similarly, Ruby reflected on how she took her overtraining and undereating to an extreme level, where she *knew* it was more than her body could handle but would push through, due to the fear of gaining weight and the desire to become ‘skinnier’ explaining:

I was still training when I was only having a slice of mango [the entire day] for 3 months. I was having nothing and still training on it. At that point I was aware of the fact that it was more than my body could handle but that was the reason I was doing it for so long, because I would be in so much pain from hunger, and say, “no, I’m still gonna train, it’s gonna be better for me, because it’s gonna be better in the long run.” So, I knew that it was in that sense, over-exercising, because I couldn’t handle it, essentially.

Ruby’s awareness that her behavior was harmful, yet continuing despite this awareness, reflects a tension between her own physical well-being and the societal ideology of self-control and thinness. Furthermore, the drive to be thin was exacerbated by Ruby competing in a sport where appearance is tied to achievement, a dynamic that often went unnoticed, as leanness was normalised and celebrated as a visible marker of discipline and success:

It definitely came about as internal pressure from their [coaches] outwards acknowledgement, which then made everything a whole lot bigger than it would have been in the first place. It kind of fueled that fire a little bit to build in that internal pressure that clearly I need to look a certain way to do the sport to the best of my abilities.

The accounts of Sophie, Isla, and Ruby illustrate how overtraining and under-fuelling are normalised and encouraged within sporting environments for female athletes. Through upward social comparisons and internalised ideals of how they perceived a ‘dedicated’ athlete should behave, participants described pressures to increase training, including during periods

of rest and recovery. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can offer a framework for understanding how participants' athletic identity influences their self-perception, when discipline, dedication, and constant pursuit of excellence are positioned as core values of this identity. Through the lens of social identity, athletes were likely to compare their training to aspirational peers from their in-group and interpret the perceived gap between their own routines and what they considered and perceived to be the norm for this group.

Resting appeared to elicit a guilt response, particularly when participants viewed their peers and other athletes training on social media. This may stem from discipline and dedication being regarded as key values for this group, so resting, planned or not, may feel like contradicting their athletic identity. Viewing participants' accounts through the social identity and comparison framework highlights how social norms of discipline and hard work, typically performed as over-training, become internalised and prioritised for those who identify with the category of athletes. Furthermore, these dynamics highlight how the proliferation of, and constant exposure to visible markers and exaggerations of these ideals on social media may contribute to heightened risk factors for overtraining, under-fuelling and burnout for athletes.

#### **4.2.2 Sub-theme Two: Coaches and Family Influence on Training and Nutrition**

Adults and parents are the first role models that children have and are highly influential in shaping their early behaviours, beliefs, and self-perception. Athletes regularly observe coaches, peers, competitors, and role models and incorporate certain observed behaviours and habits into their own routines (Connolly, 2017). Several athletes in this study reflected on conversations that they had with coaches and parents over the years about their eating habits, appearance, and comments about others' appearance, all which athletes internalised, which informed their own self-perception and eating behaviours.

Isla recalled that from a young age, comments regarding her body from her coach left a lasting impression on her body image:

Like, I remember for me, I honestly don't even know how old I was, I think I was maybe 12 or 13, and a coach said that she can tell that I've stopped growing because my hips have gotten wide. Just comments like that have always been quite body-focused.

Here, Isla is recognising that the subconscious comments that authority figures say can inadvertently reinforce appearance-based ideals within sporting environments. The way that coaches talk about food, their own bodies, or those of others can implicitly communicate to young athletes about what type of appearance is expected in their sport, which reinforces a narrow standard of an *ideal athlete*. Similarly, Grace's experience highlights how parental comments, regardless of intention, can shape confidence and self-perception: "Even, like, those little side comments your Mum makes that she doesn't understand is actually really putting you down. But she just thinks she's being helpful."

Grace highlights how well-intentioned parental comments may be interpreted as criticism, which in her case, contributed to maladaptive behaviours.

Even, those little side comments your mom makes that she doesn't understand is actually really putting you down – she just thinks she's being helpful...And even my mom sometimes, even now, she says, "you eat so much" or "do you really need that?" Just little things.

These comments were interpreted by Grace as judgements about portion size, or whether she *needed* the food, which made her perceive food as undeserved or unwarranted. She described internalising these comments as criticism, which intensified self-surveillance. This led to

behaviours of restriction, including excessive fasting, calorie tracking, and skipping meals to avoid scrutiny from her mother.

Sophie extended this idea by highlighting a wider lack of understanding among male coaches about female physiology:

I grew up with a lot of male coaches who weren't quite aware of the female body and female hormones. Low energy availability is very different for females than it is for males, and they weren't quite aware... I think men can keep a slightly lower body fat percentage than females are actually capable of doing.

Her reflection draws attention to the gaps in female-specific understandings among male coaches, that affects how nutrition, training, and body composition information is delivered to female athletes.

As highlighted within this sub-theme, coaches, teachers, older teammates, and family members serve as early role models during the formation of athletic identity, particularly in environments where performance, discipline, and appearance are closely intertwined.

Drawing on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), which posits that children and adolescents observe and internalise verbal comments, cues, and social norms (Miller et al., 2022), participants' reflections underscore how repeated exposure to evaluative comments about food intake and appearance, alongside modelling of adults' eating practices was gradually internalised and normalised.

Collectively, these influences became risk factors for body image dissatisfaction (BID) when sporting and social norms equate athletic success with thinness, reinforced by coaches, adults, and peers. As such, food was positioned as something to be restricted, earned, or justified. Many athletes adopted these behaviours, driven by the competitive drive to succeed. As SCT highlights, individuals are more likely to internalise the attitudes or

beliefs of those around them. This internalisation contributed to negative self-perception, restrictive eating, and disordered eating behaviours, increasing vulnerability among female athletes.

#### **4.2.3 Sub-theme Three: Misinformation and Inadequate Education**

With the rapid growth of social media in recent years, TikTok and Instagram have become prominent spaces for health and fitness content, with young people increasingly turning to online influencers for guidance on diet and exercise. However, a large proportion of this material is developed without the necessary credentials; for example, a content analysis by Pryde et al. (2024) found that 94.6% of fitness and health related videos posted by influencers did not disclose any form of qualifications or credentials for expertise in nutrition or exercise. Misinformation on these platforms can create opportunities for financial gain, with influencers able to monetise endorsements by promoting products and services as a way of life (Moran et al., 2024). This makes it overwhelmingly challenging to navigate between *correct* and *incorrect* information online. Amelia reflected on the difficulty of distinguishing between both reliable information and misinformation on social media: “It feels overwhelming with different creators and people posting ‘What I eat in a Day’ videos or giving nutrition advice with no credentials whatsoever.”

Isla highlights the real-life consequences of following health and fitness advice online from content creators, and how misinformation led to chronic under-fuelling, among other health consequences:

Back then, like, I was following all these accounts, and they were telling me what I should eat, and... I did it, and I actually got quite sick...I think it's because I was under-fuelling majorly for the level of exercise I was doing. And yeah, I

lost heaps of weight, but I was not healthy, and I couldn't swim, like, I had no energy.

This highlights how Isla engaged in upward comparison based on aspirational content posted by full-time fitness influencers, as she continued to restrict her food intake to align with what social media fitness influencers were eating, which led to negative health outcomes:

I think especially when I was younger, like a teenager, I would take everything literally. To the point where I went vegan. Yeah, so this is when it all started going downhill for me. I went vegan because I thought it was gonna help me lose weight, and this was the stuff I was seeing online, on Instagram.

Isla highlights how content on social media can be blindly followed as absolute guidance, especially when consuming it from a young and impressionable age, when it can be more challenging to differentiate between online content and reality. The internalisation of messages promoting calorie restriction or dieting that are posted by fitness influencers seem to constitute a major risk factor for BID in athletes, which is seen in Amelia's perspective:

Social media has completely warped my view of what normal female bodies should look like. On social media, young women are often faced with a constant bombardment of the perfect, flawless physique. No flaws, no loose skin, blemishes, rolls, cellulite: typical female traits that are deemed imperfections are edited out and not shown. This constant highlight reel is damaging for young women and can also negatively impact female athletes, as the bodies praised online don't always conform to what the bodies of athletes look like.

Amelia's reflection illustrates how constant exposure to curated images can influence how young women critique their own bodies. She sheds light on the psychological burden of comparing oneself to highly edited content on social media. For athletes who primarily focus

on ability, these disparities may reinforce internal conflict between performance and appearance-related expectations on social media, which relates to the social identity challenges discussed in theme 3, where athletes' identities can conflict with broader societal expectations of femininity and appearance.

At the pre-teen and early teenage years, a stage where children begin using social media, changes in the brain can heighten sensitivity to peer approval, making them more vulnerable and impressionable to internalising social media content in efforts to align with those around them. At this stage, young users have limited experience in thinking critically about social media content or evaluating it realistically, which can increase the risk of developing unhealthy dietary behaviours. As Isla explains, as a young adult she now feels more comfortable to critically evaluate videos on social media, saying:

I feel like maybe now I'm just a bit more educated, so when I do see those videos, like 'what I eat in a day' or calorie deficits, I'm a bit more open-minded about it, and a bit more critical with the way I look at it.

While Isla demonstrates the development of a more critical awareness of evaluating social media content over time, Ruby's experience illustrates how exposure to similar content can create significant psychological strain. Her experience reflects the persistent struggle of managing conflicting health advice online, that intensified 'food noise' (persistent food-related thoughts and behaviours) can make balanced food choices challenging:

At the moment, I get a lot of disordered eating stuff, in the sense of, there's all these weight loss coaches promoting what food swaps to make, how to decrease the amount of calories in food. It's a lot of comparisons, and dietitians/weight loss coaches telling you how to lose weight. Every three reels or videos that I get is going to be some sort of person telling you how to eat well, how to work

out to burn as many calories as you want...It definitely makes it a lot harder to be more calm around foods, to choose what I would want to eat, rather than what I deem better for me based on what social media has told me is better for me if that makes sense.

Conflicting information about carbohydrates and fats creates more confusion than non-dietary recommendations (Clark et al., 2019). A recent mixed-methods study by Cotter and Melanson (2025) involving young adults found that 45% of participants reported changing their dietary habits by adding specific foods such as protein powder to their diet through viewing content on social media. Furthermore, 37% of those participants reported comparing their food to influencers and adopting diets such as intermittent fasting and the carnivore diet, highlighting how social media can shape both dietary behaviours and attitudes towards food (Cotter & Melanson, 2025). Sophie talks about her experience with navigating diets on social media, describing: “Every year. It's, like, everywhere, and, like, the... it's just the same as the processed sugar-free, and, like, it was essentially what I was doing. I was eating meat, vegetables, fruit.”

This highlights how dietary approaches often remain the same, however they are renamed and promoted as ‘new’ viral diets. Similarly, Amelia highlights the recent trend of demonising carbohydrates and the increased focus on protein intake, explaining that:

Everyone's obsessed with getting 13 million grams of protein and no carbohydrates when carbohydrates are actually a really big source of fuel, especially if you're doing long amounts of training. You need carbs, and people are really obsessed with protein.

Importantly, misinformation or lack of information can also emerge in medical settings, where healthcare professionals dismiss and normalise warning signs of low energy availability (LEA) or relative energy deficiency in sport (RED-S), conditions that are often perceived as acceptable or an expected aspect of being an active individual (Verhoef et al., 2021). In Sophie's experience, hypothalamic amenorrhea (HA) was dismissed as a natural consequence of high intensity exercise, rather than being treated as a health concern. She reflected on how these experiences led her to question the validity of her own experiences:

I went to the doctors about it, and I was like “hey, like I used to get my period. I don’t anymore” and he’s like, “oh, you exercise a lot, it’s normal for a female”, and I was like oh yeah must be normal, and then I went to the physio one day, and she just happened to specialise in RED-S and she was like “this is actually not normal at all.” Like it’s normalised, but it’s not okay or normal?

Here, we can see how normalising a missing menstrual cycle in female athletes can downplay the long-term consequences of RED-S. Being told by authoritative figures that her symptoms were ‘normal’ for an athlete, created self-doubt and confusion about bodily function.

As established earlier, social media is saturated with health and fitness content, often from unqualified creators, which increases the risk of perpetuating misinformation. Athletes are particularly prone to internalising and implementing dietary content from social media when they lack knowledge in this area. Furthermore, limited critical thinking skills in developing brains make it challenging for emerging, younger athletes to evaluate the credibility of online content. By comparing themselves to these curated images, athletes internalise the norms and expectations associated with both femininity and athleticism. At an early age, this process can implicitly reinforce unhealthy body ideals and engagement with restrictive and trending diets. Female athletes also experience a unique pressure to meet the

social norms of both their athletic and female identities, which can be complementary at times (e.g., looking fit) or conflicting (e.g., under-fuelling).

#### **4.2.4 Theme One Summary**

In summary, findings from theme one suggests that there are multiple risk factors that feed into self-perception, training, and eating habits in female athletes. Participants frequently compared their training to others on social media, which contributed to guilt around taking rest days and normalised a culture of overtraining. Coaches, adults, family, and healthcare professionals are influential role-models for younger athletes, with appearance-based comments and misleading information affecting body image, understandings of bodily function, and implicitly reinforcing maladaptive behaviours if outcomes are praised as being ‘disciplined’.

Social media may amplify these risks, by providing widespread content on restrictive diets that are targeted to young women, with conflicting nutritional advice, creating opportunities for constant, chronic comparison. Findings from theme one can be interpreted through the lens of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), as participants engaged in upwards comparison against peers and social media influencers, which increased feelings of guilt around both resting (in comparison to other athletes) and caloric intake (in comparison to social media influencers). Specifically, through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the core values of discipline and dedication tend to be perceived as integral to participants’ athletic identity (as further reinforced by coaches and other authorities), which makes rest feel contradictory to their understanding of what it means to be a ‘committed’ athlete.

### **4.3 Theme Two: Protective Factors for Body Image Perceptions and Experiences**

The second theme that I identified from the data was the shared presence of protective and supportive factors in female athletes' experiences of body image and broader well-being. Initially, and as informed by my previous experiences of negative body image and eating behaviours, I assumed that female athletes would report few social factors and conditions that support positive body image experiences. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that participants described a variety of social and psychological factors that contributed positively to their experiences and self-esteem as a female athlete. This theme explores three main protective factors for promoting positive relationships to body image, including social support, access to resources for nutrition and training, and self-regulatory strategies.

#### **4.3.1 Social Support**

Within sport, Rees and Freeman (2010) described support as encompassing four dimensions: emotional (ensuring the athlete feels valued and seen), esteem (providing reassurance), informational (providing guidance), and tangible (supplying the resources necessary for athletic success). Social support has been associated with a lower risk of burnout in sport (Cresswell, 2009) and in broader contexts, there is evidence to suggest that social identification with a group reduces likelihood of burnout (Steffens et al., 2014). Similarly, in this study, female participants who reported stronger relational ties to teammates, coaches, and parents described more positive experiences of body image, which helped them navigate pressures and create personal boundaries with social media. Amelia highlights the positive ways in which coaches and teammates have helped her navigate challenges with food:

My coach has been helpful with giving me advice and good information about what I should be eating, and what I shouldn't be eating, and what kind of effect

it's gonna have on me. It changed my perception a little bit about how fueling can be beneficial...I think talking to people within your sport is really helpful, because there's probably other people who have gone through this stuff, struggled with this, and they can offer you advice about how you can look at it.

I would encourage them to seek mentorship from other people within their sport.

Amelia's reflection highlights how supportive guidance from coaches can shift how athletes perceive nutrition by reframing food as a source of fuel, rather than something to restrict. Moreover, she identifies mentorship and information sharing with other teammates as a protective factor for promoting healthier training, eating, and recovery habits.

Similarly, coaches can provide protective conditions for training by setting boundaries for training intensity and duration to decrease the likelihood of overtraining and burnout. Findings from Gerber et al. (2024) highlight that the coach-athlete relationship is closely linked to athletes' well-being. Coaches are influential in a range of top-down decisions related to diet, training, competition and broader lifestyle factors. Lily highlights how her coaches have set boundaries on training to limit overtraining: "It's just expected that we do the set trainings and they don't like us training outside of them. I feel like they've gotten stricter and say, "just train the trainings that we've set you."

The approach Lily has highlighted requires coaches (and parents) to develop a critical and nuanced awareness of how diet, training, recovery, and well-being are interconnected (Doherty et al., 2024; Temm et al., 2022). For athletes to thrive, each component should be supported, and coaches play a significant role in this.

Equally, having a family environment that emphasises a balanced relationship with food can cultivate protective and safe conditions for body image, as Lily reiterates:

I've always been told to eat, and I've grown up in a family that eats a lot. We have very large portions. And everyone that comes over, we always have to be like “remember, we need to give them less food than what you would give us.” I feel like my family's always been a cool environment to grow up eating lots and not feeling too bad about that. And at netball, we're encouraged to eat lots as well so yeah. That's been good, I'd say.

This highlights the positive relationship that families can offer athletes, by normalising adequate fueling and therefore encouraging a healthy relationship with food, which may act as a protective factor against maladaptive eating behaviours and over-reliance on social media for nutritional advice.

Ruby, who is navigating anorexia nervosa, described her family to be both supportive and helpful in recovery by allowing her to experience and work through food-related emotions:

My family has been really good at being really involved in my recovery process, and I think it was my mum, actually, who first got me into seeing a dietitian, because she was like, this is not... okay, you're not okay, so here you go. What I find helpful is them not discussing anything about food and letting me work it out on myself if they say, like hand me something that's part of my meal plan. If they just leave. Well, not leave, but, like, if they don't force me to eat it, they just... allow myself to work through the emotions, then I find that much more helpful, and they've been really good at taking a step back away, and trusting that I can... do things myself.

These accounts suggest that being surrounded by supportive coaches, teammates, and families can foster a protective environment for navigating pressures around body image and

maladaptive eating habits, thereby promoting a healthy relationship with food and self-perception. Positive eating behaviours appeared to be influenced by modelling (Cruwys et al., 2015; Stice, 1998) and by following social norms regarding food choices in their social environment (Higgs, 2015). Athletes who grew up in families that actively reinforced a balanced approach to food, and encouraged adequate fueling in a supportive, non-judgmental environment also served as a protective factor. These findings align with Arthur-Cameselle and Quatromoni (2011), who found that peers influenced eating habits. In the present study, participants described peer influence in both positive and negative ways. Support from coaches and family through encouragement and role-modelling, both acted as protective factors for athletes. Team-based sports appeared to cultivate a more supportive and collaborative dynamic, whereas individual sports often intensified social comparison and appearance pressures. These findings emphasise how peer influence can be multi-dimensional and context dependent.

#### **4.3.2 Access to Guidance and Resources**

Although participation and visibility for female athletes in sport has increased, knowledge and attitudes regarding health in sport continue to be shaped by male-based evidence, overlooking the gender-specific differences and inequality that women experience (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023). These gaps in education can shape and mislead how athletes internalise messages about training, nutrition, and body image (see theme 1, sub-theme 3).

Isla highlighted the potential for coaches' comments about appearance or diet to be internalised and interpreted by impressionable young athletes. She suggested that providing education and guidance for both coaches and parents could serve as a protective factor:

I think just better education. Like, for coaches and for parents because there's such a huge emphasis on looking a certain way, and the coaches almost feed

into that. Like, my coach commenting on how other people look, commenting on how he looks himself, on what he eats.

Building on Isla's point, Amelia reflects on the emotional isolation experienced by girls, navigating puberty and questioning why their bodies didn't match the *look* of other girls:

I definitely wish that there were more people to talk to about it because it is such a lonely thing for a girl - like, you're young, you're going through puberty, your body's changing in all these different ways, and there's so many things you can't control. Some people are gonna be built like, tiny or curvy, or with abs. People are gonna be naturally built like that and so I think when you try to force yourself into something that probably isn't gonna happen, it's making you miserable.

Lily highlights how, in her team-based sport, she had access to formal nutrition education at the beginning of the season:

At the start of the season, we always have a full-on workshop. We get told the ideal amount of food for a training day, or for a game day, and for rest days and then we're given a book that we write in throughout the season when we reflect on games. In that book, it has some of the stuff from the workshop about nutrition for certain days of the week, and what that can look like.

This underscores the importance of having access to education for young female athletes, especially in early adolescence where they are navigating physical, emotional, and social changes. Isla expresses how better education begins by educating those around us, such as coaches or families, as they often have a pervasive influence on outcomes. Amelia's experience adds to this perspective by explaining how professional support from counsellors or psychologists can provide a safe space for young girls navigating body image and

disordered eating pressures to develop coping strategies before it becomes unmanageable. Collectively, these insights highlight the need for guidance and resources that provide wraparound support for athletes, as well as for the adults who shape their environments.

### **4.3.3 Self-Regulatory Strategies**

Heavy social media use has been linked to increased psychological distress among adolescents (Mougharbel et al., 2023); including, decreased self-esteem (Woods & Scott, 2016), body dissatisfaction (Charmaraman et al., 2021), disordered eating (Malloy et al., 2024), and increased comparison in appearance and body surveillance (Mink & Szymanski, 2022) (further discussed in theme 3). Simultaneously, social media has shifted from a tool for primarily connecting with friends, to algorithm-driven commercial content that is designed to be continuous (Metzler & Garcia, 2023). Therefore, self-regulation by establishing boundaries around social media use is particularly important for adolescents and young adults. Lily reflected on her strategies for managing social media use by limiting phone access in the morning and late evening:

I feel like I try to not go on at first thing in the morning, and I've never been a huge person that sits in my bed and scrolls on my phone ages before going to bed at night. A lot of my childhood I didn't have my phone in my room because my parents would just wake me up, and I didn't see the point of it. So, I feel like that probably helps me with not... being on it too much.

This suggests that early habits and parental boundaries can add a protective barrier in regulating screen time. Lily also highlighted the other side of the issue: subconscious and repetitive patterns of phone use when bored, suggesting that there may be an element of awareness of these automatic behaviours:

There's nothing interesting on social media half the time when I go on, I'm just kind of bored, like, scrolling, but nothing that interesting, and I'm like, why do I do this? It's just, like, an ingrained habit to pick up my phone when I'm bored, and then I'm still bored when I'm on it and I'm just like, what am I doing?

This aligns with findings from Li et al. (2023) who observed that Chinese college students were more likely to reach for their phones when they were visible and not given guidance to regulate their usage. When participants did engage with social media, intentionally following and interacting with like-minded, performance-driven athletes served as a protective factor. In contrast, gym influencers that focused on aesthetics were less helpful, as participants found this content less relatable and found it deviated from their performance goals. The following quote demonstrates that being intentional with who one follows can be helpful, as Sophie highlights:

When you are constantly flooded with the people who are just working out for aesthetics, it's very different than someone who's actually training for performance, which I think is really important to remember, because as an athlete, you're not training to look a certain way, you're training for your sport.

Similarly, Olivia emphasised how deliberately following performance athletes was more helpful as well: "I definitely found what helped more too was comparing more to the actual athletes I follow, compared to like the gym rats, which are purely there for aesthetic reasons."

Engaging with positive content created by other athletes online can reinforce participants' athletic identity and focus attention on what their body and performance can achieve in terms of their sport, aligning with the principles of social identity theory. In contrast, following aesthetic gym influencers that prioritise appearance may encourage social comparison and

increase the risk of body dissatisfaction, especially if the focus is on weight loss and caloric restriction. In line with the previous sub-theme of social support, engaging with athlete content may provide a sense of belonging and validation through shared norms, perspectives, and experiences within their community.

In terms of nutrition, a few participants found that focusing on a balanced food approach was a protective factor for minimising food noise. The 80/20 diet was mentioned by participants a few times, through its non-restrictive approach that focuses on eating nutritious foods most of the time (80%) while still incorporating occasional treats (20%):

“My coach also pushed the 80/20 rule for eating. There definitely is very much of that sense of fueling your body but still allowing yourself something to treat yourself with.” (Olivia)

This highlights how a flexible approach to eating may support physical and psychological well-being, by shifting the narrative to nourishment over restrictive practices. Isla’s experience reinforces this but also underscores the ongoing journey many athletes face. Having spent most of her adolescent years restricting food and trying weight loss diets such as vegan and keto, Isla described her shift toward intuitive eating and understanding her body’s hunger cues: “I’m trying to be more intuitive with how I eat and actually listening to my body and learning my hunger cues. That’s what I’m working on at the moment.”

Together, both participants describe intentional approaches to eating that prioritise balance and flexibility as key protective factors. Reflecting on my own experience, I found that following an 80/20 approach helped me move away from labelling foods as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and allowed focus on prioritising foods that supported my performance, without restriction.

Another self-regulatory strategy highlighted by the participants, was discovering and participating in hobbies and activities outside of their competitive sport to broaden their

identity and interests. Athletes can often measure their worth based on whether or not they are succeeding as an athlete, therefore other interests become overlooked. It is important that athletes can discover other interests outside of their sport to support their psychological well-being and reduce the risk of burnout or defining oneself solely through sport (Gustafsson et al., 2018). Ruby described turning to crafts in her spare time to redirect focus and occupy her mind and body:

The thing that works best for me is distraction. I've been taking up a lot of creative crafts to do stuff to do with my hands, so that I will feel that my body is still busy, I won't have to just sit and think about those thoughts. I'll plug-in and watch some sort of documentary and do, like, some embroidery or crochet or something with my hands, and that'll take me out of my head and into the work that I'm doing.

Overall, participants described a range of self-regulatory strategies that allowed them to maintain autonomy and balance over their engagement with social media content, including establishing boundaries with phone use, finding hobbies outside of their sport, and incorporating a balanced nutrition approach, such as the 80/20 rule, allowing athletes to view food as fuel, and not a tool for restriction. This aligns with findings from Faulhaber et al. (2023) who found that reducing and establishing boundaries with social media use can significantly enhance mental health in young adults. Furthermore, Brockett et al. (2024) reported that building an identity outside of sport increased well-being of Olympic and Paralympic athletes, particularly when transitioning into retirement. This positive use of hobbies and exploration of alternative identities can be understood through social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as if an athlete's self-concept is entirely tied to their sport,

poor performance, mistakes and even retirement can be internalised as personal failure and experienced as a loss of meaning.

Finding interests beyond sport can reduce the impact of these effects and increase athlete well-being. This resonates with my own experience as a competitive skater. I look back and wish I had explored other hobbies outside of skating. When competitions did not go as planned or I didn't achieve the results that I had hoped for, it was difficult to not take it personally or blame myself for how I looked, as so much of my identity was wrapped up within the sport. These strategies demonstrate how some athletes actively work to manage the pressures of their sport to maintain their mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

#### **4.3.4 Theme Two Summary**

In summary, the guidance of coaches, teammates, and family can provide social support that encourages healthy relationships with food, training, and recovery, helping female athletes maintain a positive body image and overall well-being in and outside of their professional lives. Educating key support figures such as coaches and parents themselves is important, as athletes observe and internalise their comments and behaviours, which can inform their training, eating habits, and self-perception (see theme 1). Additionally, limiting social media use and engaging with more relevant and like-minded content creators who are also athletes themselves provides a further protective effect. Lastly, establishing hobbies outside of sport may help athletes to broaden and build an identity outside of sport and may reduce the risk of tying their self-worth to performance outcomes.

#### **4.4 Theme Three: Navigating Social Media Pressures on Body Image and Eating Habits**

The third main theme noted across participant interviews was the actual *experience* of body image, self-perception and how this is influenced by social media. Three sub-themes were identified within this theme. The first involved participants' self-comparison with others

on social media and within their peer groups, the second was the experience and internalisation of appearance norms, which, in some cases, contributed to the third sub-theme; the development of disordered eating and over-exercising behaviours.

#### **4.4.1 Comparison on Social Media and In Person**

Research literature has consistently shown that increased SM use is associated with body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours. One factor contributing to these harmful effects is social comparison, as social media provides a space for constant evaluation of the self in relation to peers, celebrities, and influencers (Bonfanti et al., 2025). Findings from this research highlighted just how frequently athletes were comparing their bodies, training, and food intake to peers and online content in their everyday life. This mostly manifested as upward comparison, by viewing others as more accomplished, leading to guilt, over-training, disordered eating behaviours, but also lateral comparison, where comparing their bodies to athlete and non-athlete peers simultaneously reinforced negative, conflicting experiences of body image and harmful eating habits.

Participants often reported feeling guilty about taking rest days, which may be connected to the widespread ‘hustle’ culture that Burgess et al. (2022) highlights and reflects the wider social pressures that associate continuous effort with success and dedication.

“Sophie” described experiencing training “FOMO” (fear of missing out), expressing that seeing peers train made rest days feel unbearable, leading her to give in and train, explaining, “I get the worst exercise FOMO ever, especially on a Sunday. I’m like, oh, but my friends are at open gym, like I have to go!”

Sophie’s reflections highlight how she constantly compares herself to other peers that are actively training and posting on social media, even on a rest day. Her experience reveals how athletes come to associate rest with failure, rather than an essential component of training,

reflecting how effort is glorified through ‘hustle’ culture. Likewise, Isla spoke about the guilt she would experience when taking a rest day, admitting, "I'd feel quite guilty and sometimes now can feel quite guilty for, like, taking a day off." These comments reflect a deep internalisation of societal expectations regarding discipline and productivity and demonstrate how these narratives are enacted within sporting contexts. Sophie highlighted, again, the guilt that she experiences in relation to training:

I definitely get a bit of training guilt as well, when I'm like, oh, I actually I can't, or I'll put a little bit of extra training in, because every once in a while, I'll slip and I'll be, like "I want to, I really want to", and then I'll put it in my training diary for our entire squad, and then I'll get a bit told off, and I'm like, oh, okay, can't do that.

Her account highlights the psychological tension between navigating what she *wants to do* and what she *feels she should do*, both at an individual and team level. Sophie's experience illustrates how guilt drove her to continue training, even when going against team training boundaries set by her coaches.

Several participants in this research expressed tension between both accepting their muscular build and navigating aesthetic pressures to be smaller than their non-athlete peers, as Hannah expresses: "I think I've always sort of accepted that I'll always be more muscular or athletic than just the average person. And, like, compared to my normal friends who don't play sport or anything."

For other athletes, social comparison influenced their dietary habits, where comparing their food intake to peers led to discomfort when eating more than those around them. Amelia highlighted that over time she became mindful that performing as an athlete required more energy intake than the average person; however, she remained conscious of and judged her

intake to others. This reflects the wider gendered societal expectations for women's bodies to both look and eat a certain way (Dai et al., 2025; Marshall et al., 2018), even when athletes are aware that their body requires more energy intake for optimal and sustainable performance:

I feel like a lot of my friends were really slim, and looked a certain way, and cared about that a lot, whereas I, more muscular and stuff, and so it's definitely... been interesting navigating that as, like, not wanting to be smaller, whatever, because that's just how they look...You're gonna eat more than a normal person, because your body's been doing a lot more. So it's definitely been...not uncomfortable, but sometimes it's like, ooh, I'm eating a lot compared to these other people....

Amelia's reflection highlights how different social environments, such as her non-athlete school friends, can shape how she perceives her eating habits and body in relation to others. While she understands that her energy needs are higher, being surrounded by and identifying with peers who eat less with the goal of becoming leaner leads her to compare and second guess her eating habits as an athlete. This continuous pattern of social comparison often begins in childhood and continues into adolescence and adulthood. For example, Grace highlighted how body image comparison to peers emerged early in her childhood, in the waiting room before her ballet classes, as she and her friends frequently compared their lunchboxes and discussed food:

We had all come after school, our parents or grandparents would drop us off, and there's a little waiting area outside of the studio. And you'd have your little snack box after school and just talk about it. You would talk about like, what is in the snack box, what you ate at school, or what your parents are gonna cook

for dinner, and just all those things just contributed to the outcome of... not eating, or eating... cucumbers, and that's what they eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

These ongoing interactions maintain a culture where food choices were openly observed and critiqued by her peers. These early experiences have continued to influence Grace's thoughts and relationships around food into early adulthood. This aligns with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), as Grace's eating behaviours were shaped through observational learning. Specifically, she observed and internalised peers' food habits, and the associated *approval* or *disapproval* responses contributed to her adjusting and restricting her food behaviours. As Grace has transitioned to a new life-stage, her food intake is more closely influenced by personal responsibilities and time constraints; however, she continues to perceive food as something that should be restricted or avoided, with eating often accompanied by feelings of guilt:

Now, it's more that I forget to eat, because I'm worried about my son, or trying to fit in studies. But before, it'd just be either trying to limit what I'm eating, or intermittent fasting for 24 hours. Feeling so guilty about having a snack, or... not even enjoying what you're eating.

With the combination of 'hustle culture' and healthism becoming increasingly prevalent on social media (Molina, 2023), it can intensify feelings of inadequacy and heighten internal pressure to exercise. Sophie describes feelings of guilt when resting (see sub-theme 1, theme 1), and how this interacts with viewing posts of other athletes and gym influencers training content, which in turn compels them to exercise more than prescribed in their training schedule, leading to a cycle of overtraining and burnout:

When the HYROX or CrossFit person is doing, like, their fourth session of the day, I'm like "okay, I need to get out of bed and go to the gym." It's 12 o'clock, I haven't exercised today. Let's move on, but, like, obviously at times, I'm like, oh, I really don't want to see what this bodybuilder on a 12-week cut is eating, because no matter how much I want to do that kind of diet, I can't.

Sophie's experience underscores how viewing others' training online can exacerbate feelings of guilt and self-criticism. These comparisons add to her internal pressure to train, as she compares her own training against others:

I'll be on my second session of the day, and sometimes I'm like, oh, but so-and-so would be on their third session by now... like, doing the amount of training I'm doing and still feeling like it's not an adequate amount.

Sophie's experience uniquely highlights that even when participants are not directly engaging with social media, their repeated exposure to it leads to '*imagined*' content of other peers. This *imagined* content triggers athletes to experience guilt on low-volume or rest days, stemming from what they believe others are doing. This unique finding appears to have not been explored within the sporting literature and offers a new avenue for future research.

These reflections illustrate how social comparison, especially on social media, can distort how athletes view themselves and approach training, contributing to guilt around rest and pressure to match others' perceived exercise and eating routines. Ruby highlighted how she viewed food-related social media posts such as WIEIAD (What I eat in a Day) as a competition to eat less:

It's definitely more of a competition of, I see people's what I eat in the day, and I go, oh, okay, well, I need to eat less than that, no matter or whatever they look like, I make it a goal to eat less than whatever they did, or if they're... telling

me about what foods to swap out with like, oh, you've got this brand A of food, try brand B because it saves you X amount of calories, or whatever.

This illustrates how social media comparison can be taken to an extreme, with athletes internalising the content of others as a benchmark for their own training and eating habits.

Experiences of social comparison amongst female athletes was identified as a central and recurring theme in this study that was tied to negative and chronic experiences of female athletes' self-perception, restrictive dietary behaviours, and over-training. Participants reflected on comparing themselves to those perceived as training 'more', which reinforced feelings of inadequacy and guilt. These patterns reflect principles of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), with upward and lateral comparisons pervasive with peers, both in person and through social media. In many cases, guilt elicited patterns of restrictive eating, and training to an extent where it became detrimental to athletes' physical and mental well-being.

Perhaps most striking was the concept of *imagined* content comparison, whereby athletes visualised their competitors as training more than them, prompting doubts on whether their training was sufficient. This specific dynamic reflected a performance-driven comparison with other athletes, while appearance-based comparisons were prevalent and pervasive with both non-athlete and athlete peers and influencers. These findings can be understood through SCT as participants reported evaluating themselves in relation to others' abilities, behaviours, and results (Festinger, 1954). Social media (SM) provides a platform for constant comparison, with access to others' training diaries, eating habits, and physiques. Imagined content underscores how social comparison extends beyond SM, influencing participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours without actively engaging in SM in a psychologically pervasive way.

#### 4.4.2 Internalisation of Appearance Norms and Expectations

Weight loss has been pushed in society, as a means of reducing body fat and in some cases, perceived by athletes as a tool for enhancing performance. For female athletes, this co-exists with societal expectations that equate beauty with thinness, an ideal that is socially reinforced and moralised as a sign of discipline for women, creating a unique tension between athletic and gendered societal standards. Stoyel et al. (2021) found that people often hold a subconscious assumption that equates appearance with sporting success and athleticism, which increases the risk of disordered eating for those who have internalised these widespread assumptions. For Ruby, the pressure from societal and sporting expectations was exacerbated by competing in figure skating, a subjectively judged sport that prioritises aesthetics and often links a lean physique with high performance and success:

Obviously, you're skating in a leotard, and there's like nothing covering, and the emphasis on skating is about how you, as a vessel, are executing the moves. So it's how well your arms look while they were outstretched, how well your legs look as they're doing all of the footwork, and how well your body looks as it moves through. In my experience, it's all strictly based on aesthetics. There hasn't really been pressure to look a certain way. No one has told me I have to look a certain way, but there has definitely been comments of, oh, well, this person's skinnier than you, so therefore they're better or, oh, well, you're too fat to do this, blah blah blah.

These experiences resonate with my own experience as a former international skater, where I likewise perceived that success was dependent on whether I could meet the standards of the lean physique perpetuated within the sport. Given the subjective nature of judging, those at the top of the podium both nationally and internationally, were predominantly thin and

athletic. Consequently, in the earlier stages of my career, by internalising both the beauty standards portrayed on social media and the aesthetic expectations implicitly shared within the sport, I came to believe that reaching the top meant meeting the thin ideal alongside performance-related technicality. These personal experiences are further corroborated by Ruby, saying, “It kind of fueled that fire a little bit to build in that internal pressure that, oh, well, clearly I need to look a certain way to do the sport to the best of my abilities.”

Both Ruby’s reflections and my own experiences highlight the pervasive, but often hidden influence of these aesthetic pressures on training, eating behaviours, and self-perception. This pattern aligns with findings in the literature, which suggest that athletes in aesthetic sports are more likely to experience disordered eating and BID than those in non-lean sports (Mancine et al., 2020; Zaccagni & Gualdi-Russo, 2023). While many athletes internalise these pressures, it can manifest differently across people. In Isla’s experience, she reflects on her struggles with feeling worthy enough for a brand ambassador partnership and the self-imposed pressure she placed on herself to meet her own expectations of looking like an athlete. She shared how she prioritised her mental health by stepping away when the pressure became overwhelming:

I was a social media ambassador for \*\*\*\*\* and had been for the past three years.

That also increased the pressure because I was having to post photos of myself in their gear. And obviously I felt I had to meet a certain expectation of what I should look like as an athlete representing their brand. I actually stopped that this year because I have been seeing a psychologist for body image and eating, and I just thought I don’t want to have to worry about having to post. So, I stopped it, and I feel like it’s actually helped. It’s kind of sad that I did have to do that because I didn’t feel worthy enough, you know, but it’s fine.

This illustrates how pervasively young women may internalise social media ideals of the ‘perfect’ body, to the extent that a professional brand deal can become source of stress and self-criticism, by feeling self-conscious about not matching the perceived aesthetic standard of an athlete. This highlights the troubling reality that images on social media, and of the many women representing brands, reflect a narrow, and sometimes unattainable ideal: young, white, and thin (Kennedy, 2020). Likewise, Sophie described associating sporting success with having a “shredded” body - a term commonly used in fitness culture denoting an extremely lean, muscular physique, expressing:

I think growing up watching all of these swimmers, surf lifesavers, or underwater hockey players, who all go to these competitions and stand up and look shredded, like.... They do, because they kind of have to. And being like, “I want to do that one day. I have to look the part first.

Collectively, these accounts highlight how athletes internalise appearance norms through social and online contexts that align with the perceived athletic ideal in their sport, experiencing both real and ‘imagined’ social judgement when expectations are unmet. One athlete expressed how perfectionism and her Type A personality amplified pressures of restriction and overtraining, consistent with findings of Rusnáková et al. (2025), finding that neuroticism and perfectionism are associated with higher levels of training-related stress. This can be where education, support, and self-regulatory strategies can work as protective factors and promote a healthy relationship with training and nutrition among athletes.

Participants' reflections suggest that many athletes equate leanness and muscularity with sporting success, reflecting wider societal and social media influences that reinforce and perpetuate these norms. Some participants shared their struggles with self-worth when they did not meet socially constructed ideals of an ‘athletic’ body, reflecting social comparison

theory, where individuals evaluate themselves against others (Festinger, 1954). Social media appeared to amplify this by providing constant, personalised targets for upward comparison.

#### 4.4.3 Disordered Eating and Over-Exercise Behaviours

One of the strongest themes that was identified from this study was participants shared experiences of *food noise* through social media engagement. Food noise is a psychological construct that causes cognitive strain, described as a persistent mental preoccupation with food and often characterised by experiencing repetitive thoughts about food and maladaptive eating behaviours (Dhurandhar et al., 2025). While only a couple of participants explicitly used the term *food noise*, many athletes described engaging in constant self-monitoring of food intake or thoughts consuming food, which can be termed as *food noise*. As Amelia described, “I think, yeah, there'll always be, like, a little kind of noise in the back of your head, like, a little bit of food noise.” Amelia’s explanation of the “*noise in the back of your head*” highlights how thoughts about food become internalised and suggests that this often occurs subconsciously. For Amelia, food noise embodied a heightened cognitive awareness and sensitivity to food that influenced her everyday decisions around eating and her psychological state. Participants experiencing food noise or restricted food intake also appeared to struggle with overtraining, highlighting how these two experiences are intertwined. This is consistent with existing literature (Lichtenstein et al., 2017; Strahler et al., 2021) that connects restrictive dieting with excessive exercise practices.

Restrictive food intake became clear in Sophie’s experience, where orthorexic tendencies and excessive exercise functioned simultaneously, aligning with previous research that suggests a correlation between orthorexia nervosa and greater levels of exercise compulsion (Lichtenstein et al., 2017; Oberle et al., 2018). Orthorexia nervosa is often characterised by self-imposed, strict rules around diet, such as avoidance of entire food

groups, and a fixation on the nutritional content of the food that they consume (Horovitz & Argyrides, 2023). For Sophie, these characteristics were reflected in her everyday routine, where she described running 10 kilometres every night at 10pm in addition to her athletic training, and adopted restrictive eating behaviours that she termed orthorexic:

Yeah, it was very, very orthorexic habits. Just because I was quite Type A. And as a Type A, I needed everything to be perfect, and I wanted to be the perfect athlete and look exactly the way I was supposed to look... "Like, you're supposed to look perfect, but you can't say. I didn't eat for a few days because we had a comp coming up, and I had to kind of... Cut down kind of vibes.

Individuals with a Type A personality tend to be highly competitive, hardworking, and goal oriented, however, they can often be critical of things that could have been done better, causing internal stress (Sharma, 2024). Sophie's perfectionist tendency to strive to achieve both the internal and external perception of the 'perfect athlete' appeared to fuel her restrictive eating and exercise behaviours. This highlights how personality traits often celebrated in sport can become maladaptive when self-worth becomes tied to physicality.

Appearance norms were also reinforced through in-person experiences, as Grace described earlier, through internalising peers' food-related comments before ballet class, which influenced her decisions and behaviours around eating. Over time, these habits began to shape her thoughts and decisions around food: "Then you go home and you think about it, and it's like, ugh maybe I don't want to eat that anymore, or... I don't want toasted cheese sandwiches, or... Yeah."

This highlights how eating behaviours can gradually shift through conversations and comparisons through food and visible eating habits, to align with the norms of their social group. Over time, these regular interactions shaped Grace's perceptions of food into 'good'

and ‘bad’, leading her to question her own food intake. Grace also described early patterns of control around food, reflecting on how restrictive eating first emerged in her childhood. She shared:

Yeah, it would start with not eating a meal or two, or... just... having small portions and stuff. I even would not eat my lunch, but then I'd be so worried about my mum finding my uneaten lunch, and, like, being like, why aren't you eating my food? You're wasting it. Then I just throw it away or hide it under my bed until I could just chuck it in the bin when the bin would go out for the garbage truck.

Grace shared a sad, but honest account of how she internalised the behaviours and remarks of her ballet peers, and how this impacted her in her home life. Furthermore, she highlighted how restricted food intake was normalised by ballet teachers, implying that they required little energy or food: “You’re not exerting that much energy, you can do fine with a little bit of nothing here, nothing there.” Ballet’s emphasis on thinness, combined with family pressures around food created tension and fear of disappointing others, and turned food into a source of guilt and anxiety for Grace. While her disordered eating behaviours emerged in childhood, Ruby’s experiences suggest how similar patterns can develop or intensify in response to life changes, or social disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, consistent with existing research (Luginaah et al., 2025; McLean et al., 2022; Mentzelou et al., 2024):

It actually started back in 2020, like, a week or two into the lockdown period. There was all this stuff on social media about, oh, well if we exercise as much as we can during this period, then by the time that lockdown lifts, we're going to be unrecognisable and fabulous. Now then I went, “okay well, one way I can do that is just make myself sick after every meal” and that worked out really

well! So that was pretty consistent, about one or two purges for 4ish years, I had a brief stint of where for maybe, like, a couple months where I was in a better place where I would maybe go a couple of days without purging, and then it all came back in like, very early 2024 and then November was... unmanageable.

Ruby explicitly demonstrates how social media depictions and trends of productivity and transformation ideals, rooted in hustle culture (Molina, 2023), can influence the development of disordered behaviours, where food and exercise become maladaptive coping mechanisms. She also described her experience with bulimia nervosa, and how it later transitioned into anorexia nervosa:

I started off bulimic. For years and years and years, and then I got to a stage where I was making myself sick 5 or 6 times a day. And I went, “this is awfully uncomfortable. The way to fix this is just to not eat anything, so I don't have to make myself sick.

Ruby’s experience during the pandemic illustrates how increased social media exposure, particularly during lockdown, when isolation and rumination were heightened, can lead to guilt and body dissatisfaction. This aligns with other research (Rodrigue et al., 2024; Vall-Roqué et al., 2021; Gobin et al., 2021), where social network sites were associated with BID, lower self-esteem, and internalised eating behaviours from increased social media exposure. Furthermore, algorithms on social media platforms can exacerbate the internalisation of such ideals, discourses, and behaviours. Social media algorithms draw from a multitude of data points to personalise the content presented to users. Some of which may include the format of the post (video, photo, or text), patterns of engagement (liking, commenting, sharing, and reposting), an individual's browsing habits, and previous online activity. Other factors that influence algorithmic recommendations include interactions between users, amount of time

spent viewing content, whether it was replayed, scroll speed, time of access, and engagement patterns such as exiting and re-entering different social media platforms.

In a recent study, Griffiths et al. (2024) found a positive correlation between exposure to appearance-focused, dieting, exercise, and disordered eating content on TikTok and increased ED symptoms. They also created the term *eating disorder echo chamber* to encapsulate the environment where users are repeatedly exposed to ED content as it has been recognised as material they interact with, both actively and passively (Griffiths et al., 2024). This can be challenging for those navigating through negative body image and eating behaviours as the content that they are algorithmically exposed to could continually contribute to a distressing psychological state, functioning as a trigger. This was particularly prevalent in Ruby's case:

It's difficult because I also get the side of TikTok that's eating disorder recovery so, it's a lot of mixed signals, which actually gets me quite confused. And I know that in my space, I'd prefer to look and pay attention to the recovery accounts, because that's what would align better with my values. But the amount of videos that come up to me that are both is not helping the unwell side of my brain. It's definitely not aiding any sort of recovery, even though I am getting some recovery content... But it is my Facebook that is the worst, where it's every single video. I cannot find one that's not telling you how to eat better or how to make this 800-calorie meal down to 300 calories.

This highlights how harmful social media content continues to be cycled to users based on their engagement. Whether through liking, commenting, or passively watching, social media platforms will continue to perpetuate similar content, reinforcing exposure to potentially triggering material: "I try to do a lot of the 'I'm not interested' kind of stuff, but it's difficult,

because even though I will push not interested my watch time says otherwise, so they will keep feeding me the same stuff.” (Ruby)

Ruby also reveals the psychological impact of social media engagement, whereby exposure to both recovery and ED content can exacerbate harmful behaviours:

I have been dealing with this a lot, where I will come out of social media, and I will feel a whole lot more depleted and in a state of despair, and it will encourage that kind of disordered part of me to get worse. I'll almost see recovery accounts and completely go the opposite way and go, oh, okay, well if they're recovering, then they got into a place where they had to deserve recovery, so I want to get to the place that they were, therefore I'm just gonna not eat for the rest of the day after I've seen something in the sense. So it has been something I have noticed in the past maybe 2 or 3 months an increase of just feeling so much worse after I'm on any type of social media.

This aligns with compensatory satisfaction theory, which suggests that individuals will use social media as a maladaptive coping mechanism to meet unfulfilled emotional requirements. There is also a competitive aspect, as Ruby describes viewing other social media content as a challenge to surpass them, highlighting perfectionistic tendencies. As she notes, habitual social media use can reinforce maladaptive behaviours, such as those associated with her eating disorder, because curated content intensifies the compulsion to act on these thoughts (Yang et al., 2022). This is also supported by Li et al. (2023) who found that social media content overload triggers and increased social media fatigue among college students, which in turn contributed to negative outcomes, such as anxiety, low mood, and depressive symptoms.

The broader implications of engaging in social media exposure is particularly concerning for younger users who may be more impressionable and susceptible to harmful content. Isla raised concerns regarding the younger generation of girls engaging with social media, who may be more vulnerable to content that is misleading or promotes negative eating behaviours:

“In swimming, all the top athletes are posting on Instagram and even in, like, a vlog of a New Zealand swimmer, I heard this chick say, “do I look skinny?”

Like, one of our top New Zealand swimmers said that, and it was posted on social media. It made me so sad for the younger girls watching that.”

This demonstrates how younger athletes often look up to older peers within their sport (see theme 2, sub-theme 1), and how Isla is self-aware of the harmful effects of social media whilst still engaging with it. Her reflection underscores the opportunities and role athletes hold in sharing content that encourages healthy relationships with food and body image for the younger generation.

Altogether, this theme illustrates how food and exercise habits can drastically change in pursuit of a specific appearance and what may begin or appear as *dedication* and *commitment* may escalate into unhealthy or disordered behaviours. This is a dynamic that is particularly relevant among female athletes who are subjected to (and often internalise) rigid appearance norms in relation to their performance (see sub-theme 2, theme 3), and who are immersed within a social climate that normalises overtraining as an aspirational goal (see theme 1). The combination of social media algorithms, social comparison, and idealisation of online representations as role models can contribute to the development of BID and disordered eating behaviours. Younger athletes are particularly vulnerable as they may struggle to interpret or cope with harmful social media content. Social identity theory (Tajfel

& Turner, 1979) is helpful for theoretical understanding here, particularly when athletes adopt the eating and exercise behaviours of their in-group, such as Grace's experience of making changes to her eating habits through observations of her peers in ballet class. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) underlies these patterns, as athletes are motivated to engage in certain habits and practices by observing and evaluating the perceived outcomes of such eating and exercise behaviours in their peers or role models. Such motivations are rooted in persistent experiences of guilt, pressure, and body image dissatisfaction (BID).

#### **4.4.4 Theme Three Summary**

In summary, findings from theme three suggest that social media can negatively impact athletes' self-perception, body image, and eating and exercise behaviours. Social media provides the space and visible markers for users to constantly compare themselves to others, which in some cases, informed a sense of guilt and self-criticism, which was compensated by over-training. A particularly significant finding of this research was the concept of 'imagined' comparison, whereby athletes construct images of how other competitors train, based on what they frequently observe on social media, experiencing guilt, even without directly viewing any content. Athletes internalised societal and athletic pressures regarding their appearance, and the reinforcement of narrow standards for feminine aesthetic on social media intensified this tension.

Multiple participants described experiencing food noise, restrictive eating, and compulsive exercise, with previous research suggesting algorithmic content curation can exacerbate these behaviours. These patterns can be understood through SCT (Festinger, 1954), as athletes occupy a position where they are likely to compare themselves to others para-socially online, as well as in real life competitive sporting environments. This may be further extended through the lens of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as individuals' model, for

better or worse, the behaviours of the group that they identify with, which in this case comprises an intersection between women, athlete, fitness/gym influencers and peers. At times, the body ideals and social norms of these groups are complementary and reinforce each other to become even more exaggerated and extreme, while at other times they are in conflict and create tensions. Collectively, these themes demonstrate how negative self-perception, over-training and eating behaviours in female athletes extend beyond performance-related factors, continuously shaped by cultural, social, and digital environments.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 General Discussion**

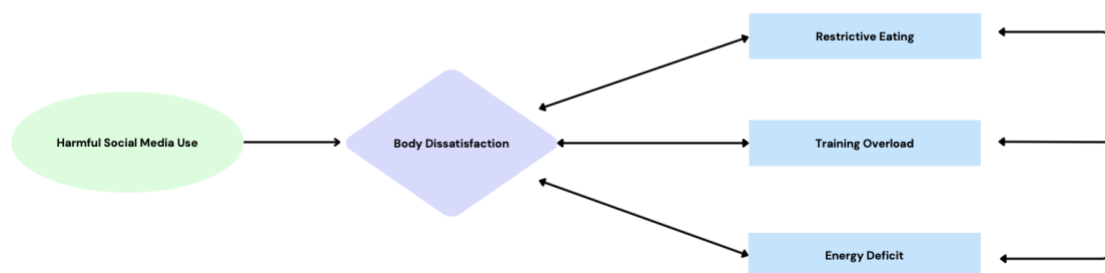
The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of social media on athletes' self-perception and eating behaviours by listening to, and interpreting participants' perspectives and lived experiences in relation to these topics. The themes identified in this research highlighted how social media often functions as a source of chronic pressure for athletes, influencing their body image, exercise patterns, and dietary behaviours through constant opportunities for comparison.

Participants described how comparison of appearance, as well as eating and exercise/training behaviours, not only occurred in real-life settings, but also (and more frequently) online with peers and fitness influencers. These findings can be understood through the lens of social comparison theory (Corcoran et al., 2011; Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000; Vogel et al., 2014), as athletes expressed engaging in three distinct types of comparison: intra-sport comparison (within the same sport), inter-sport comparison (with athletes from other sports), and external comparison (with peers and social media content). These comparison processes continually and dynamically shaped how participants perceived their bodies, training, and eating behaviours. This dynamic is summarised below in Figure 2, where harmful social media use interacts with BID, which in turn, feeds into behaviours such as restrictive eating, training overload, and energy deficiency, creating a cycle that is reinforced by ongoing exposure to social media.

**Figure 2**

*Link Between Social Media (SM) Use and Behavioural Outcomes in Female Athletes*

### Link Between Social Media (SM) Use and Behavioural Outcomes in Female Athletes



Through reflexive analysis of themes, it became evident that participants' experiences of body image dissatisfaction often occurred alongside the reliance of training and nutrition advice from social media (theme 1). This dynamic was intensified by the cultural normalisation of overtraining for athletes, which reinforced a constant pressure to train more and perform better (theme 1). A common belief among participants was that training multiple times a day was an essential part of being (and being perceived as) a dedicated athlete. Alongside comparison, some participants felt that they had to *prove* themselves as an athlete, which they associated with a higher training load through viewing and modelling other athletes' training content on social media. Although most participants were aware that overtraining could cause burnout, and in some cases, were able to self-regulate, feelings of guilt or inadequacy, often arising through comparison to others on social media made it challenging to maintain these boundaries. This shared perception contributes to conditions of

risk as some athletes may push beyond their limits, leading to a cycle of overtraining and an increased risk of injury, LEA, and RED-S.

In contrast, participants with positive experiences of body image and eating behaviours, particularly those competing in mainstream sports, typically had access to nutritional and psychological support and related education through coaches and workshops (theme 2). This consistent access to support and formal educational resources helped athletes actively establish boundaries and limit their exposure to misleading and harmful content. Furthermore, theme 2 (protective factors) suggested that athletes in well-funded sports tend to be better supported to develop a more secure and balanced athletic identity, through the structured education that they received around training and nutrition.

Participants without access to such professional support used social media as a tool for nutritional guidance, which contributed to chronic under-fuelling and disordered eating behaviours. A few athletes perceived '*what I eat in a day*' videos as a benchmark for nutrition, overlooking the selective nature of the content presented on social media that may not reflect the users' true dietary intake, or healthy nutrition for that matter. Participants predominantly engaged in upwards comparison; for example, feeling pressure to train more and restrict their diet to reduce the gap between perceptions of themselves and what they perceived as the 'aesthetic' body ideal within their professional sport as well as amongst their social peers (which were sometimes in conflict). The body ideals that participants encountered on social media gradually became perceived as the 'norm' through consistent social media engagement and the prioritisation of certain body and appearance types on participants' algorithms (theme 3). This *appearance comparison* often elicited emotional responses, such as feelings of guilt and anxiety which is consistent with current literature

(Bonfanti et al., 2025; Coelho et al., 2023; Cohen & Blaszczyński, 2015; Fardouly et al., 2015), particularly when athletes interpreted others as achieving more than them.

One participant described the pressure of subconsciously comparing her non-athlete friends' eating behaviours to her own and noticing that she both looked and ate differently. She expressed how it was challenging to resist following similar behaviours of restriction, highlighting the tension between her athletic identity and the expectations within her non-athlete friend group. Such experiences can be interpreted through social identity theory, whereby the participant's identity was influenced by the norms and expectations of a non-athlete *social* group to which she also belonged. In this participant's experience, although she experienced pressure to restrict her diet to fit in with her non-athlete friends, her social identity was more strongly tied to being an athlete, therefore, her eating behaviours remained aligned with her training and performance goals. These risk factors described in theme 1, including cultural normalisation of unhealthy ideals, coaches' and familial influence, and misinformation about nutrition and training can create negative conditions for athletes lived experiences of body image. However, protective factors (theme 2) such as social support, access to resources, and self-regulatory strategies can provide athletes with greater knowledge and a stronger sense of agency when interpreting and responding to the situations and information they encounter. These conditions appeared to help athletes navigate social media with greater awareness and reduce its influence on their experiences of body image, understanding of nutrition and tendencies to follow exercise norms.

Another athlete highlighted her experience of changing her dietary habits in ballet to align with her non-athlete peers to fit in and maintain her social identity as part of this group. The ways in which she ate around others changed overtime, as she internalised peers' comments around food, and in response, changed her eating habits in her home environment.

These patterns align with and add support to the adapted tripartite influence model (Roberts et al., 2022), which highlights peer influence, thin ideal internalisation, and social comparison as key drivers shaping body image dissatisfaction and eating behaviours. Foods that were once acceptable became threatening, leading her to hide or discard food at home, to align with the perceived expectations and peer pressures within ballet. This reinforces how children can experience interpersonal rejection and exclusion through individual differences such as attractiveness (Leets & Sunwolf, 2005) or personality characteristics if they are perceived as not following (or trying to follow) the behaviours of those around them (Mulvey et al., 2017). At this stage, much of their life is embedded within peer groups, therefore acceptance by peers is highly valued. This reflects social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as children align themselves with specific peer groups by modelling their behaviour on aspirational peers (Bandura, 1977), and internalising group norms. Collectively, this participant's experience reflects a process that was initiated through social comparison and the internalisation of appearance and behavioural expectations. Over time, these gendered ideals, reinforced within peer groups and sporting environments, contributed to the development of disordered eating behaviours to align with the perceived norms for acceptance and femininity.

Overall, theme 1 (risk factors), theme 2 (protective factors), and theme 3 (navigating social media pressures on body image and eating habits) highlight how appearance standards are formed, maintained and exacerbated through chronic online comparison, which can influence how athletes perceive themselves; including their body image and associated expectations for behaviours and lifestyle habits. Together, these themes provide rich insights as to why some athletes are more vulnerable to harmful outcomes, such as body image dissatisfaction (BID) and disordered eating, while others remain more protected from these experiences, informing the implications detailed below.

## 5.2 Practical Implications and Recommendations

Based on these themes, the following recommendations are proposed for young women in sport, in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Findings from this research identified a lack of active and structured support for female athletes from a young age for nutrition (especially outside of mainstream sports). It became apparent that some of the participants in this study spent many years under-fuelling and restricting, relying primarily on informal information and content from social media.

A top-down and structured provision of education for female athletes, beginning in early adolescence may provide a protective factor against such outcomes, by encouraging critical thinking when engaging with social media content and preventing experiences of isolation while using social media and/or experiencing body image issues. When asked whether there were any specific suggestions for enhancing support for themselves and other female athletes, some participants expressed the need for more transparency and open discourse about food, eating and nutrition within athlete communities. Several participants expressed how formal education was introduced late into their sporting careers, highlighting a gap in early, preventative support. In addition, another participant highlighted the importance of a cultural shift within women's sport, especially regarding how appearance and bodies are discussed. They suggested that minimising the focus on appearance and being more mindful of language used by those in positions of power (e.g. coaches and parents) could help limit potential harm and create a more supportive environment for female athletes.

Given this, there is a clear need for structured workshops for influential adult figures, such as coaches, parents, and other adults in athletes' wider support and professional networks. Existing research has indicated that coaches have limited access to professional development opportunities to support athletes' body image and eating behaviours, and have

expressed the need for larger-scale policies, such as training interventions that educate coaches on how to handle body image concerns (Sabiston et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2023). These workshops could include evidence-based knowledge on nutrition and healthy body image, and guidance on how to communicate with young athletes in a way that builds confidence and sustains a supportive environment. Such engagement allows adult figures to guide strategies for navigating the behaviours and beliefs that female athletes are exposed to and may also enhance coaches' capacities to be positive role models (Sabiston et al., 2020). Expanding these workshops to include coaches and parents may also strengthen top-down protective factors, given the strong influence these adults have in socializing young athletes' self-perceptions, behaviours and judgements.

There is clearly limited availability and accessibility of resources for coaches and adults on nutrition and training for female athletes. Two resources that do stand out are the *Balanced Female Health Handbook* (Sport New Zealand, 2023), and *Healthy Women in Performance Sport*, an initiative by High Performance Sport New Zealand (HPSNZ, n.d.) that offers evidence-based information to guide coaches and management to support the specific needs of girls and women in sport. Developed by health professionals, this resource includes information about puberty and development, the menstrual cycle, and optimal fuelling (Sport New Zealand, 2023); however, its impact could be strengthened by including workshops or online meetings that actively engage coaches and athletes. Findings of this research suggest that athletes in individual sports receive less guidance and support from wider organisations. For some participants, competing in well-resourced sports such as netball or rowing in New Zealand acted as a key protective factor.

Adolescent girls in sport are unlikely to search for these online resources highlighted earlier themselves, and instead, are more likely to gain this knowledge in workshops that are

actively facilitated and coordinated by coaches, nutritionists, or sporting institutions.

Although access to nutritionists and psychologists would be beneficial for athletes, this support is not equally accessible for families due to cost and availability. Therefore, a more inclusive alternative could be the development of mandatory training modules for athletes and coaches, similar to the E-Learning modules that Drug Free Sport NZ requires athletes to complete when competing nationally (Sport Integrity Commission, n.d.). Similar modules could be developed to focus on nutrition, body image, and social media literacy, while providing equal accessibility for all girls and women in competitive sports. Such an approach could serve as an early intervention for girls in the pre-puberty and early adolescent stages and could further be implemented into secondary school health education for wider access.

The absence of education and awareness around the nutritional and fueling needs of female athletes is rooted in long-standing gendered, systemic and societal barriers. Research on athletes' energy demands has primarily focused on males, creating a significant knowledge gap on the unique physiological training, nutrition, and recovery requirements of female athletes (Madigan, 2024). Therefore, there is a need for further research that specifically focuses on women's health and needs in sport.

### **5.3 Limitations and Future Directions**

One methodological limitation of this research was the use of convenience sampling. The participant group was selected from a sports academy within a university and may not reflect the experiences of female athletes outside of this group. One main disadvantage of convenience sampling is that the sample may lack generalisability, suggesting that the findings of this study may not be applicable to the wider population of women in sports (Jager et al., 2017). Grounded in an epistemological approach that centers on lived experience, this study focused on university athletes who identified themselves as having

experiences relevant to the research. While the sample size of eight meant it was relatively concise; this allowed for a manageable dataset and a more in-depth exploration of participants lived experiences.

Due to time constraints, this study was unable to explore the temporal relationship between risk factors and outcomes (Wang & Cheng, 2020). One-off interviews were conducted at a single point in time, so this study was unable to capture how participants experiences with social media, body image, and eating behaviours may shift across time or across different life stages. Future research would benefit from utilising a longitudinal design in quantitative research or conducting multiple interviews or diary studies in qualitative research, as this would allow for a nuanced understanding of how, for instance, lifestyle and situational factors dynamically interact with social media use, body image, and eating behaviours.

Given the methodology and employed RTA, my positionality as a former athlete and academy member informed the research and interpretation of data. This insider perspective allowed me to engage meaningfully with participants to elicit rich insights and interpret them in a contextually appropriate and sensitive manner. Reflexivity was maintained through fortnightly meetings with supervisors where themes and interpretations were considered and discussed. While the interpretive nature of this study means that the findings are not intended to be inherently generalisable to wider populations, they provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of female athletes in Aotearoa New Zealand and may serve as helpful considerations for those working in sport and educational settings.

## **5.4 General Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to examine how social media influences self-perception and eating behaviours in female athletes. Specifically, findings from this research highlighted

both risk and protective factors involved in sustaining a positive sense of body image, and the ways in which social media interacts with these experiences.

Below are summaries of the key findings from the themes that addresses each of the key research questions:

*Question One: How do perceptions of beauty standards influence the experiences of body image for female athletes?*

In recent years, social media has become a monetised platform for fitness influencers to generate income. However, as highlighted by previous research, many of these influencers do not disclose any credentials, creating a space for both reliable information and misinformation to co-exist. Participants highlighted how social media has distorted their perception of what a *normal* female body should look like, as much of the content posted are highlight reels that selectively depict, reflect and perform societal and gendered standards of aesthetic perfection rather than the lived reality of most women. In a few participants' experiences, misinformation on social media presented a major risk factor for chronic under-fuelling and disordered eating, especially in the absence of formal nutritional education.

Engaging with social media content opens pathways for constant comparison to peers, celebrities, and influencers. Comparison was identified as an early and pervasive experience for all participants and became an experience that was habitual and normalised in their sporting environment and self-perceptions. The findings of theme three, found in section 4.4.1 (comparison on social media and in person), highlighted how athletes compared their bodies, training, and food intake to others in person and on social media. A few participants expressed feeling dual, and often conflicting, pressures to maintain the muscular and athletic physique expected of an athlete, while meeting the gendered beauty standards prevalent in

social media that often emphasise leanness, femininity, and socially reinforced appearance ideals.

The sub-themes identified (comparison on social media and in person, internalisation of appearance norms and expectations) in this research highlighted that participants navigate appearance-related pressures, often experiencing judgement when or if they did not meet the athletic ideal within their sport. These pressures were further exacerbated by social media, as athletes were expected to embody the physical and performance expectations set within their sport, while also conforming to the idealised feminine body perpetuated online. One athlete expressed how she and fellow athletes saw themselves as ‘Type A’ individuals, (characterised by competitiveness, perfectionism, and a persistent drive for success), which put them at even greater risk, as they would take their actions to extreme levels to be the best and associated success with being a ‘shredded’ athlete.

Moreover, algorithms play a significant role in perpetuating these gendered beauty standards. Even without actively engaging with content, viewing time is monitored and tracked, increasing the repeated exposure of similar material to users. For athletes in a vulnerable psychological state or those experiencing challenges with disordered eating, repeated exposure to such harmful content created by influencers was particularly dangerous as it reinforced cycles of unhealthy behaviours and negative self-perception.

*Question Two: What are the implications of engaging with social media for female athletes’ experiences of body image?*

Exposure to others’ routines, perceived as training ‘more’ by participants on social media, created chronic guilt around resting and motivated participants to push themselves, often to the point of overtraining and neglecting rest days. Likewise, exposure to diet content prompted a few participants to question their food intake, and one participant perceived this

content as a *competition* to eat less. As ‘hustle’ culture continues to be a trend on social media (Burgess et al., 2022; Molina, 2023), as well as in wider athlete culture, the expectations and cycles of overtraining are often overlooked as dedication and hard work, which in a few participants experiences, led to long-term health consequences.

Several participants highlighted how exposure to SM trends promoted by influencers influenced their own dietary behaviours, explaining that they changed their diets to reflect popular weight-loss trends that they observed online, such as vegan, keto, or the carnivore diet. One participant expressed concern of the risks for younger girls on social media, as they are more vulnerable to internalising similar content that promotes negative eating behaviours and under fuelling, and a physique that is unrealistic, edited or even artificial intelligence (AI) generated.

Previous studies (e.g., Harrison, 2003; Malloy et al., 2024; Stevens et al., 2024) have identified that social media can exacerbate eating and other psychological disorders, particularly as algorithms continue to feed users more of the same content that they engage with, which can enable their unhealthy fixations. One participant described how, over the past three months, she found herself in a state of despair after using social media and how it contributed to a worsening of her eating disorder. These implications highlight how social media functions as a facilitator for BID and how it can intensify the pressures felt by female athletes. It does so by influencing eating behaviours, increasing opportunities for comparison, perpetuating a normalised culture of overtraining, and creating tension between dual body and fitness ideals for girls and women.

*Question Three: What are the social and psychological factors that influence positive and negative body image experiences for female athletes on social media?*

Findings of this research identified both risk and protective factors for how athletes manage body image pressures. Coaches, families, peers, and teammates have a strong influence on athletes' experiences of body image in both domains. Theme 4.3.1 (social support) highlighted the positive role families have had on eating behaviours for some participants, which in some cases contributed to more positive experiences of body image. Greater social support can reduce the likelihood of burnout among athletes by promoting healthier training habits and reducing disordered habits of eating like under-fuelling, especially when the support is provided by those whom which they share a meaningful sense of social belonging and identification with (Murray et al., 2023). A family environment that encourages a balanced relationship with food without restrictive comments was identified as a protective factor by the participants.

Similarly, coaches play a significant role in eating habits and establishing training boundaries with their athletes, which can help prevent the development of maladaptive eating and training behaviours that stem from negative self-perceptions and body image experiences. In some cases, athletes reported developing disordered eating habits through internalising comments from coaches. These experiences reflected a lack of coaches' awareness sensitivity to gendered health and body image experiences, reinforcing a culture of silence in which athletes felt unable to voice their struggles.

Athletes with greater access to nutritional knowledge explained that this allowed them to evaluate and resist misinformation on social media. Several highlighted that without this knowledge, they would have been more vulnerable to following restrictive diets. Other participants followed diets on social media with the objective of getting 'thinner', which

ultimately led to BID and in one case, anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Access to formal, structured and consistent nutritional and fuelling guidance and resources were both identified as supporting the development of a more positive body image in female athletes. Importantly, participants who competed in niche sports had less access to such nutritional and psychological support than those in sports receiving more funding and publicity from Sport New Zealand, such as netball and tennis. As such, this research highlighted how those competing in more niche and individual sports tend to be at higher risk of BID than those in mainstream sports (tennis, netball). One athlete in a mainstream sport highlighted how their team has continual access to a nutritionist and psychologist, and in addition, are provided with regular workshops to ensure that they have knowledge around fuelling and recovery. In turn, she found it easier to disregard unhelpful dietary content on social media as she was equipped with the resources and guidance to independently figure out how to eat to support and sustain her own performance as an athlete.

Lastly, self-regulatory strategies were identified as influential in maintaining a positive body image. These included self-directed boundaries of social media use, choosing to follow accounts that focused on training and performance rather than aesthetics, maintaining a balanced diet, and actively finding hobbies outside of competitive sport. It is not uncommon for athletes to find it challenging to establish hobbies outside of their sport, but doing so can help cultivate a broader and more stable sense of self throughout their career, which may reduce the pressure to engage in unhealthy behaviours and make the transition to retirement or injury easier in the future. When I recently retired from skating, it was incredibly challenging to find a sense of identity outside of sport. For so long, I had tied my worth and success as an individual to how well I was performing as an athlete. When I stopped, I felt like I was just an average person. Only athletes could understand this specific

transitional experience; however, I think that my acceptance of this transition would have been handled better if I had developed interests outside of my sport beforehand. While such self-regulatory strategies are indeed valuable, athletes need external support and education as a foundation to supplement their training, nutrition, and social media use. At present, many lack this support, raising questions about the hidden costs of sport involvement. This is particularly significant for female athletes, who often navigate conflicting beauty ideals and restrictive diets, masked by a wider culture of overtraining. How much restriction around food and dietary misinformation on social media must female athletes navigate before support is made accessible across all sport?

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Invitation Email to Participants

Dear Massey Academy of Sport Members,

My name is Aspen Fell, and I am a fifth-year Psychology student at Massey University. As a former athlete in the Massey Academy of Sport, I am passionate about exploring the impact of social media on body image and eating behaviours in female athletes through this study.

I am looking for **female athletes aged 18-25** currently involved in the Massey Academy of Sport to participate in a **one-on-one Zoom interview (40-50 minutes)** about their experiences with social media, body image, and eating behaviours.

Participation is voluntary, and all responses will remain confidential and anonymized. By sharing your experiences, you will be contributing to important research in an area that is currently under-researched. The insights gained may help shape future support systems, and provide a more informed and supportive environment for female athletes.

If you are interested or would like more information, please contact me at [Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz](mailto:Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz) with your age, sport, and ethnicity.

Looking forward to hearing from you!

Best wishes,  
**Aspen Fell**

Master's Student, School of Psychology  
Massey University

## Appendix B: Participant information sheet



School of Psychology  
Massey University  
Block 7  
Wallace Street  
Mt Cook, Wellington 6021

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Body Image and Eating Behaviours in High-Performance Female Athletes

**Lead Researcher:** Aspen Fell, BA (Psychology & Education)

**Email:** [Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz](mailto:Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz)

I am a fifth year Psychology student at Massey University based in the Wellington Region, currently completing my Master's thesis. I have previously been involved in the Massey Academy of Sport as an athlete over the past four years, which sparked an interest to look at improving knowledge and support for female athletes.

You are invited to participate in research study exploring how social media, can influence body image and eating behaviours in among high-performance female athletes (ages 18-25). This study will examine the unique pressures female athletes face, focusing on how social media content - especially fitness and food-related videos, influences self-perception and eating behaviours.

#### What this Study Involves

This study will involve semi-structured interviews with 5-10 female athletes between the ages of 18-25 that are currently involved in the Massey Academy of Sport. If you choose to participate, you will be invited to take part in an one-on-one interview about your personal experience with social media content related to body image, fitness, and food, and how it has influenced your self-perception and eating behaviours. Each interview will be conducted via Zoom, lasting between 40-50 minutes and will be recorded for the purposes of transcription and data analysis. You may ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview. Any information you have shared up to that point may also be withdrawn from the research if you choose to do so.

#### Confidentiality

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. You are not obligated to take part in this study due to any pre-existing relationship with the researcher. Choosing not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher in any capacity. All personal information will remain confidential and will be solely used for the purposes of this study, and then deleted after. All data collected will remain anonymized and only the research team will have access to this data.

You will have two weeks from the date you receive your transcript to review it, make any edits, or choose to withdraw your data. After this two-week period, your data will be considered final and included in the analysis. In line with university policies, identifiable data will be deleted within one year of data collection (e.g., name, contact details) and deidentified data (anonymized transcripts of your interviews) will be permanently deleted five years after the studies completion.

**Below are your rights as a participant:**

- Right to receive clear information before consenting
- Right to voluntary participation and to refuse answers
- Right to withdraw at any time leading up or during the interview (see above)
- Right to confidentiality and anonymity
- Right to access the study results upon request

**Potential Risks and Benefits**

Topics such as body image and eating behaviours can be sensitive to discuss. If at any stage you feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to decline answering questions you do not wish to discuss or withdraw from the study at any time. The findings of this research may provide valuable insights into the intersection of social media, body image, and disordered eating behaviours in female athletes. This knowledge may enhance understandings that could inform the development of support systems for athletes, specifically in mental health resources and education on digital media literacy.

**Support Services**

Should you experience any distress during or after the interview, you are encouraged to reach out for support. The following services are available, and are free and confidential.

**Massey University Counselling:**

- Auckland campus Student Health and Counselling Centre:  
Hours: 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays. [studenthealth.auckland@massey.ac.nz](mailto:studenthealth.auckland@massey.ac.nz) Phone [+64 9 213 6700](tel:+6492136700)
- Manawatū campus Student Health and Counselling Centre (Palmerston North):  
Hours: 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays. [studenthealth.manawatu@massey.ac.nz](mailto:studenthealth.manawatu@massey.ac.nz) Phone [+64 6 350 5533](tel:+6463505533)
- Wellington campus Student Health and Counselling Centre. Hours: 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays. Email [studenthealth.wellington@massey.ac.nz](mailto:studenthealth.wellington@massey.ac.nz) Phone [+64 4 979 3030](tel:+6449793030)
- Healthcare for distance learners: Contact the campus health and counselling centre nearest you.

**Eating Disorders Aotearoa Helpline:** 0800 2 EDANZ/ 0800 2 33269 or (09) 5222 679. Email: [info@ed.org.nz](mailto:info@ed.org.nz)

**Youthline:** 24/7 Helpline 0800 376 633. Free text 234. Chat via Webchat 10am-10pm, visit <https://youthline.co.nz/get-help/helpline/>

**Interested in participating?**

Please email back with your age, gender, ethnicity, and sport, along with your signed consent form (attached). Should you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher Aspen Fell, at [Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz](mailto:Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz) or the supervision team at:

**Sarah Choi**

Senior Tutor – School of Psychology

[Y.S.Choi@massey.ac.nz](mailto:Y.S.Choi@massey.ac.nz)

**Co-Supervisors****Warrick Wood**

Lecturer – School of Sport, Exercise, and Nutrition

[W.Wood@massey.ac.nz](mailto:W.Wood@massey.ac.nz)

**Pita King**

Kaupapa Māori Senior Lecturer – School of Psychology

[P.R.W.King@massey.ac.nz](mailto:P.R.W.King@massey.ac.nz)

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 1, Application OMI 25/20. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 1, email [humanethics1@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics1@massey.ac.nz).*

***Thank you in advance for considering your participation in this important research***

## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



School of Psychology  
Massey University  
Block 7  
Wallace Street  
Mt Cook, Wellington 6021

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### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Female Athletes' Body Image and Eating Habits

**Lead Researcher:** Aspen Fell, BA (Psychology & Education)

The purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of social media on both body image and eating behaviours in female athletes. As a participant in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences with social media and how it has shaped your view of body image and eating habits.

The interview will be conducted one-one-one, via a Zoom call, and will last approximately 40 to 50 minutes. This discussion invites personal experiences and perspectives of social media content, self-perception, and how this has influenced your identity as an athlete. Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any point without any consequence.

Your responses in the interview will remain confidential. While the interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes, your personal information will not be included in any publications. You will have two weeks from the date you receive your transcript to review it, make any edits, or choose to withdraw your data. After this two-week period, your data will be considered final and included in the analysis.

The information gathered will be solely used for research purposes to increase understandings of the relationship between social media, body image, and eating behaviours in female athletes. By participating, you will contribute to valuable insights that may in future develop further support systems for female athletes.

**In order to take part in this research, please sign the consent form below.**

To take part in this research, I ask that you please sign this consent form.

- I have been informed about this research and understand my participation in it.
- I understand that my participation in the interviews will remain confidential, anonymous and no identification information will be linked to my responses.
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and I can choose to opt out at any stage of the interview process.

- I am aware the information I provide will be used in research publication.
- I understand that I can choose not to answer specific questions.
- I understand that I can request the audio recorder to be turned off at any time during an interview and any information I have provided to that point can be withdrawn from the research.

**I confirm that:**

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that anonymized data will be used in published research outputs.
- I understand that information will be stored securely for the duration of this research project, and then anonymized for future reference.

I highly encourage you to consider your participation in this study and raise any potential concerns about the study with myself, or the supervisory team. Please get in touch with the researchers listed below if you have any further questions.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 1, Application OMI 25/20. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 1, email [humanethics1@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics1@massey.ac.nz).*

**Aspen Fell**

School of Psychology, Massey University  
[Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz](mailto:Aspen.Fell.1@uni.massey.ac.nz)

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**Pita King**

Kaupapa Māori Senior Lecturer – School of Psychology  
[P.R.W.King@massey.ac.nz](mailto:P.R.W.King@massey.ac.nz)

## Appendix D: Interview Guideline

### Interview Protocol

This research will comprise of 40-50-minute qualitative interviews with female athletes between the ages of 18-25 that are active members in the Massey Academy of Sport.

Detailed below is a draft interview guideline as a reference. As this interview is qualitative in nature, some questions may not be covered in each interview to maintain a relaxed and open environment for participants. Participants involved in this study may provide additional insights or share further information than what is detailed below. These guidelines ensure that the interview remains participant centered and enables the interviewer to remain flexible, adapting to the flow of conversation as it unfolds.

### Qualitative Interview Guideline

This qualitative interview covers four key topics: Body image pressures, social media usage, and disordered eating.

### Icebreaker Questions

*Can you tell me a little about yourself and your sport?*

- *How did you get into [sport]?*
- *How long have you been involved in [sport]?*

*What do you enjoy most about being an athlete?*

- *Do you have a favorite memory from your training or a competition?*

### Topic Two: Understanding Body Image Pressures

*Q1. In [sport], how much emphasis does aesthetics play in terms of performance or public perception?*

*Q2. Can you tell me about any pressures you face in relation to your body image as a female athlete?*

*Probe: Do you feel pressure to present yourself a certain way?*

*Probe: How does this affect your confidence or self-perception?*

### Topic Three: Social Media Usage

*Q3. Can you describe your relationship with social media?*

*Probe: How often do you use TikTok/Instagram, and what kind of content do you typically view on the platform?*

*Probe: Have you wanted to establish boundaries or limit screen time? Why/Why not?*

*Q4. What emotions do you typically experience when scrolling through social media?*

*Probe: Do you feel differently during versus after using it?*

*Q5. Do you feel more, or less confident in your body as a result of social media usage?*

*Q6. Do you feel that social media platforms, such as TikTok or Instagram, influence the pressures experienced by female athletes?*

*Probe: Can you tell me more about how it does?*

*Probe: What kinds of body image messages do you see on social media related to female athletes?*

*Q7. Has social media influenced the way you approach training or exercise?*

*Q8. Have you ever been influenced by TikTok/Instagram to try certain diets or exercise regimes?*

*Probe: If so, what specific diets/topics of videos?*

#### **Topic Four: Disordered Eating Behaviors**

*Q9. Have you experienced any challenges with eating or exercise habits, such as restrictive eating, binge eating, or over-exercising?*

**[If individual mentions that they have struggled with any of Q7, continue with questions below]**

*Probe: If yes, how did these behaviors start?*

*Probe: Do you see TikTok or Instagram (social media) as playing a part in shaping your attitude towards food?*

*Probe: In what ways?*

*Probe: Do you feel pressure to train more than necessary due to social media influences?*

*Q10. How do you handle body image pressures or disordered eating tendencies? Do you seek support?*

*Probe: Are there any specific things that you think would help or add further support to yourself and other female athletes?*

**Is there anything else that you would like to mention related to any of the themes that we've talked about today?**

## Appendix E: Massey University Human Ethics Committee Research Approval Letter



29/05/2025

Dear: Aspen Fell

**Re: Ethics Application - OM1 25/20 - The Influence of social media on Female Athletes' Body Image:  
Exploring the Role of Social Media in Shaping Perceptions and Impacting Eating Behaviours**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

**Ohu Matatika 1** at their meeting held on **Tuesday, 8 April 2025**

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Professor Tracy Riley,  
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Chair's Committee