

Looking the Part: Female Sports Psychologists' Body Mass Index and Dress Influences Athletes' Perceptions of their Potential Effectiveness

Geoff P. Lovell

University of the Sunshine Coast

John K. Parker, Abbe Brady, and Stewart T. Cotterill

University of Gloucestershire

Glyn Howatson

Northumbria University

Research has reported that initial evaluations of consultants' competency are affected by dress and build. This investigation examined how athletes' perceptions of sport psychology consultants (SPCs) are affected by SPCs' physical characteristics of BMI and dress, and whether these perceptions are moderated by the athletes' sex or standard of competition. Two hundred and thirty three competitive sports volunteers classified by sex and competitive standard viewed computer generated images of the same female SPC in sports and formal attire manipulated to represent a range of body mass indexes. Participants were asked to rank the SPCs in order of their preference to work with them, and to rate their perceived effectiveness of each of the SPCs. Results demonstrated that SPCs' physical characteristics do influence athletes' preference to work with them and perceptions of their effectiveness. Furthermore, athlete's competitive standard does significantly moderate initial evaluation of SPCs based on physical characteristics.

There are many factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a sport psychology consultant (SPC; cf Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May 1991). Although each applied context presents different challenges to the SPC, frequently the first barrier is gaining entry (Gould & Damarjian, 1998). As Lubker and his colleagues point out, the world of performance sport is a fraternal culture where entry is not

Lovell is with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore DC, Queensland, Australia. Parker, Brady, and Cotterill are with the University of Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire, UK. Howatson is with Northumbria University, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

automatically open to all (Lubker, Watson, Visek, & Geer, 2005). Indeed, with increasing numbers of SPCs plying for trade, not only being rewarded in financial terms for involvement with the highest level of performers but also kudos and publicity, athletes may well be becoming more discerning as to who they choose to work with, or the way in which they interact with the appointed team SPC. For many team or squad based situations, individual athletes often have little choice over which SPC they interact with; their only choice is to interact, or not, with the provided team SPC. In such context, the first impression an athlete forms of the SPC is likely to be very important.

It is suggested that there is good reason why we form first impressions. Such impressions help guide our actions to achieve our goals, be they in terms of tangible rewards or the development of social relationships. The way in which we form first impressions is a complex multifaceted process, frequently leading to rapid accurate assessments of others (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). Initial impressions are considered to be based on five sources of information: Visible cues (including physical appearance; Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997), nonverbal communication (Friedman, Riggo, & Casella, 1988), perception of familiarity (Moreland & Beach, 1992), the environment (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002), and the overt behavior of the individual being observed (Gilbert, 1998). These cues are then interpreted either at a superficial or systematic level of processing, with greater emphasis given to those cues considered to be more salient by the individual for that specific context. The construction of these inferences is based on two sources of information: Acquired or learned associations between the observed cues and individuals' traits, values, and abilities; and current cognitions (Smith & Mackie, 2007). The nature of one's current cognitions is a function of how accessible different thoughts are and can be affected by factors such as mood (Williamson & Clark, 1989), expectation (Harris, 1991), contextual information (Carroll & Russell, 1996), and recentness of activation of that cognition (Wyer & Srull, 1989). The result of this interpretation is the construction of inferences about the observed individual in question. For the athlete and the SPC, these first impression inferences made by the athlete built upon the SPC's physical appearance cues, for instance, are likely to include efficacy expectations regarding the perceived potential usefulness of that practitioner, i.e., the belief that the SPC and ensuing therapeutic relationship can produce useful and desired outcomes.

The first impression a SPC makes upon athletes, specifically how it affects their attitude toward the consultant in terms of desire to form a functional therapeutic relationship and their expectation of how effective they predict the relationship will be, have been suggested to be key for gaining entry and affecting positive outcomes (Lubker, et al., 2005). If the athlete forms negative efficacy expectations regarding the effectiveness of the support provided by the SPC, even if based on immediate and superficial information, the potential for the intervention to be successful is reduced as the performer is less likely to engage, or even meet, with the SPC.

Sexton and Whiston's (1994) review of literature unequivocally found that the single most important factor in consistently facilitating productive therapeutic outcomes was the strength of relationship between the counselor and the client. In such circumstances where the athlete forms a negative initial judgment of the SPC, the SPC will be severely limited in being able to form a strong and thus therapeutic relationship with the athlete. In short, as with so many other social

interactional contexts, immediate impressions of the SPC made by the potential client are very likely to be pivotal in determining subsequent outcomes. Therefore, understanding how, and upon what factors, athletes form efficacy expectations about SPCs is an important question for the provision of effective applied sport psychology.

Although early applied sport psychology research had a strong focus upon understanding and implementing intervention techniques, such as imagery for example, recent research has redressed this imbalance directing more attention toward issues such as service delivery (e.g., Dunn & Holt, 2003) and consultant effectiveness (Gentner, Fisher, & Wrisberg, 2004). However, with regard to gaining entry, the majority of research attention has been focused on SPC styles and context; little research has considered what SPC's personal factors are considered important by athletes when selecting SPCs or choosing to engaging with a SPC.

Research from our 'cousin' professions, such as counseling, provides us with a valuable insight into what factors affect client's preference for a therapist and expectations about how effective subsequent treatments will be. According to Esters (2001), clients perceiving similarity between their own attitudes, values, and backgrounds with those of the counselor is a key factor in affecting choice of counselor and the formation of positive efficacy expectations about the therapist and the therapy. It is clear that people rarely interact without forming expectations about others' behaviors and competence, and that these expectations shape subsequent attitudes and resultant actions (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998).

According to social psychology research, the process by which athletes form initial expectancies is likely to be based on numerous sources of information, for example advocacy by a respected coach. Consistent with mainstream research (cf Smith & Mackie, 2007), it has been shown that athletes use nonverbal information such as body language and attire to form expectations about competitors (Greenless, Bradley, Thelwell, & Holder, 2005). It is therefore sensible to expect that athletes also use nonverbal cues to form expectations about SPCs and, furthermore, that specific nonverbal cues include physical characteristics of the SPC. While previous research has reliably shown that gender, race, attractiveness, and perceived resemblance to people familiar to the client are important variables in influencing perceptions of service providers (Basow & Silberg, 1987; Dare, 1992; Goebel & Cashen, 1979; Hamner, Kim, Baird, & Bigoness, 1974; Lewis & Walsh, 1978; Surman, 1997), these characteristics are generally stable and unchangeable. As SPCs have little control over these characteristics, with reference to enhancing SPC acceptance by sporting clients, individual SPCs are limited in how they can make use of such findings.

Characteristics that SPCs do have greater control over, however, include build and dress; two physical characteristics shown to be important in shaping clients' attitudes toward practitioners and efficacy expectations of ensuing therapeutic relationship and professional advice. Hash, Munna, Vogel, and Bason (2003), for example, clearly demonstrated that patients' confidence in physician's advice and medical recommendations was related to the obesity of the practitioner; the more obese the practitioner, the less the clients' confidence in the advice. With regard to dress, Lennon and Miller (1984) demonstrated that judgments of an individual's competence were positively influenced by adornment with professional attire.

With specific reference to sport, although some research has commented upon the potential influence SPCs' physical characteristics may have upon the efficacy of subsequent consultation, little research has actually focused on this issue as key research questions (Lubker, et al., 2005). This paucity of research examining the effect of SPCs' physical characteristics have upon potential clients' efficacy expectations is surprising considering the research findings from parallel professions. The suggestion that observations such as those by Hash et al. (2003) and Lennon and Miller (1984) can be generalized to sporting contexts is supported by the findings of Lubker and his coauthors (Lubker, Visek, Geer, & Watson, 2008; Lubker, et al., 2005).

Lubker and colleagues (2005; 2008) have done well in extending our understanding of how physical characterizes of SPCs affect sports performers' formation of efficacy expectations about them. Lubker et al. (2005) specifically addressed this by presenting 86 undergraduate varsity student-athletes with 11 pictures of different "performance enhancement consultants (PECs)" representing different combinations of race, gender, build, and dress. Results revealed that athletes' first impressions are impacted by SPCs' physical characteristics, with build and dress being more influential than the physical characteristics of gender and ethnicity. Those consultants with lean build in athletic clothing were rated higher on sport specific knowledge and were more likely to be sought for services than consultants with large build and academic dress. Lubker et al. (2008) examined athletes' and SPCs' perspectives of characteristics important to be an effective SPC. One hundred and twenty-four college athletes and 80 SPC's were surveyed using the Characteristics of Effective Sport Psychology Consultants Inventory (CESPCI); a measure developed as part of their study. Of the many interesting results, the key finding relevant to this investigation was that the college athletes reported 'physical characteristics' of SPCs as "moderately or highly important" (p. 162).

Although the work by Lubker et al. (2005; 2008) has progressed our understanding of how physical appearance affects athletes' perceptions of SPCs' effectiveness, there are some methodological challenges within these works as well as further unanswered questions. Lubker et al. (2008) did not actually assess how efficacy expectations were affected by physical characteristics; rather only assessed athletes' and coaches' perceptions of important characteristics for SPCs to be effective. Although Lubker et al. (2005) did directly assess how athletes' efficacy expectation of SPCs were affected by SPCs' physical appearances, the variance in participants' judgments of the different SPC representations may have been affected by factors other than the key points of interest for the investigation. Despite the great efforts made to control for factors such as attractiveness, the different representations of SPC build and clothing were of different SPCs. Thus there was still the potential that the athletes' ratings were influenced by differences in spurious factors between the SPCs. Furthermore, as Lubker et al. (2005; 2008) highlight, the findings from their studies are limited by the narrow competitive range of the participating athletes. It may be that athletes of different competitive levels place differing importance to physical attributes of build and attire. To remedy this limitation, Lubker calls for further cross-sectional research that compares first impression formations of SPCs by athletes from different competitive levels.

The aim of this investigation was therefore to extend the research of Lubker et al. (2005; 2008) examining how athletes' efficacy expectations of SPCs are

influenced by physical characteristics: Firstly by adopting a more robust method where computer generated images of the same SPC were manipulated to represent different body mass indexes (BMI) and type of dress; Secondly by inclusion of athletes' sex and competitive standard as independent variables. The specific research objects were: Firstly, do the physical characteristics of BMI and dress influence athletes' efficacy expectations of SPCs? And secondly, whether efficacy expectations of SPCs based on BMI and dress are moderated by athletes' sex or competitive standard. The application of such research will be of direct use to currently practicing SPCs as well as for the training of SPCs. Such research findings will providing a greater understanding of how athletes make initial judgments which may govern the likelihood that a practitioner is granted entry and thus presented with the opportunity to provide effective service.

Method

Participants

Following ethical approval by the University of Gloucestershire, 233 volunteers (age mean = 20.16, $SD = 2.94$ years) were recruited from undergraduate students enrolled in sport and exercise degree programs at two UK universities, each with a strong competitive sport ethos. Information recruiting participants for the study was provided during classes. Data were collected by the researchers during breaks in classes. To reduce the risk of generating demand characteristics biasing participants' responses, the classes used for participant recruitment were not ones where the data collecting researcher had any student assessment duties. Furthermore, responses were completely anonymous. Participant informed consent was signified by their completion of demographics information sheet; no information was recorded that could in any way link responses to individual students.

The majority of the participants were Anglo-Caucasian, all engaged in regular competitive sport, and participated in 25 different sports in total (alpine skiing, American football, athletics, badminton, basketball, canoeing, cricket, cycling, dance, golf, gymnastics, hockey, ice dance, kick boxing, lacrosse, martial arts, netball, rowing, rugby, soccer, squash, swimming, tennis, triathlon, and volleyball). Participants were grouped according to their competitive standard; international ($n = 34$), national ($n = 124$), or regional ($n = 75$), and sex; male ($n = 133$) or female ($n = 100$; see Table 1). International competitive standard was operationalized as having competed at an international sporting competition representing ones nation in the last 12 months. National competitive standard was considered to be having competed at a national championships level in the last 12 months, and regional competitive standard was regarded as having taken part in local or district level competition in the last 12 months.

Materials and Procedure

Following informed consent by completion of demographics information sheet, participants viewed two slides representing four concurrently presented computer generated images of the same Anglo-Caucasian in appearance female said to be a SPC. These slides represented the SPC dressed in either sports attire (tracksuit)

Table 1 Participant Group Details

Group	<i>n</i>	Age (years)	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
International			
Male	20	20.0	2.7
Female	14	21.4	4.94
National			
Male	75	20.4	2.7
Female	49	20.9	5.1
Regional			
Male	38	19.6	3.5
Female	37	20.9	3.3

or in formal attire (trouser suite). Each of these two slides contained four concurrently presented images of the SPC manipulated to represent a range of BMI's (23, 28, 33, and 38 kg/m²) typifying four World Health Organization classifications of obesity (normal, preobese, obese class I, and obese class II). For each of these separate slides participants were asked to rank the images of the SPC manipulated to represent the four different BMIs in order of their preference to work with them. Secondly, participants were then asked to rate their perceived effectiveness of each of the four SPCs representations on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = totally ineffective; 3 = somewhat ineffective; 5 = somewhat effective; 7 = totally effective). The order of presentation was balanced for both the sequence across the slides of the four SPC representations of the different BMI's, as well as the order of the two slides representing the different types of attire.

Participants were then showed another slide containing two concurrently presented images of the SPC; both images representing the preobese BMI, but with one SPC dressed in sports attire, the other in formal attire. Again participants were asked to rank the SPCs in order of their preference to work with them and secondly, to rate their perceived effectiveness of the two SPCs upon the same 7-point Likert scale as in the previous slides. The order across the side of the two SPC attire representations was balanced.

Data Analysis

Two analyses were conducted on the data collected. The first analysis examined the athletes' responses to the first two presented slides. A sex (male and female), by competitive standard (international, national, and regional), by SPC BMI (normal, preobese, obese class I, and obese class II), by SPC dress (sports attire and formal attire) mixed design Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with repeated measures on the last two factors was conducted, with the athletes' rating of perceived SPC effectiveness and rank of preferences constituting the multiple dependent

measures. Univariate tests of the same design were then conducted where justified by significant ($p < .05$) MANOVA main effects and interactions and followed by post hoc tests. The second analysis examined the athletes' responses to the third slide; the simultaneous parallel presentation of two images of a preobese SPC, one in sports attire and one in formal attire. A sex (male and female), by competitive level (international, national, and regional), by SPC dress (sports attire and formal attire) mixed design MANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor was conducted, again with the athletes' rating of perceived SPC effectiveness and rank of preferences constituting the multiple dependent measures. Univariate tests of the same design were also then conducted where justified by significant ($p < .05$) MANOVA main effects and interactions and followed by post hoc tests.

Results

Of the results to the first analysis, the most significant finding was a main effect for SPCs' BMI, $F(2, 226) = 187.85, p < .001$. Subsequent univariate tests demonstrated significant BMI main effects for both the dependent measures of athletes' rating of perceived SPC effectiveness and rank of preference, $F(3, 681) = 109.84, p < .001$ and $F(3, 681) = 326.23, p < .001$ respectively. Post hoc paired samples t tests ($p < .05$) showed that the normal and preobese SPCs were rated and ranked significantly more positively than the class I and II obese SPCs by the athletes (see Figure 1).

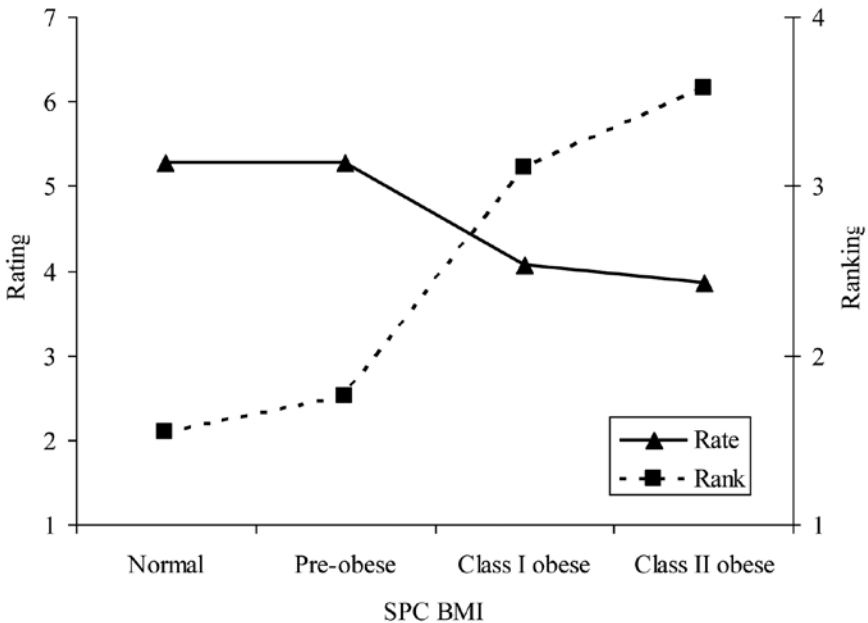


Figure 1 — Athletes' mean ratings of perceived SPC effectiveness and ranking of preference to work with SPCs of differing BMI.

MANOVA also demonstrated a significant sex main effect, $F(2, 226) = 4.00$, $p < .05$, with the females rating and ranking the SPCs more positively than the males; univariate analysis only showed a significant effect for ratings of expected effectiveness, $F(1, 227) = 31.67$, $p < .01$. The two-way interaction of dress by BMI and the three-way interaction between BMI by sex by competitive level were both significant, $F(6, 226) = 2.72$, $p < .05$ and $F(12, 446) = 1.93$, $p < .05$ respectively. Although the results to these interactions were similar to the BMI main effect in that the normal and preobese SPCs were more positively evaluated than the class I and II obese SPC, no consistent trends in terms of interaction were seen across the independent variables of sex or competitive standard.

Results to the second analysis, the simultaneous parallel presentation of two images of a preobese SPC; one in sports attire and one in formal attire, demonstrated a significant MANOVA dress main effect, $F(2, 226) = 5.56$, $p < .01$, and a significant dress by competitive standard interaction, $F(4, 446) = 4.09$, $p < .01$. Univariate analysis demonstrated that the SPC dressed in sports attire was rated and ranked more positively than the formally attired SPC, $F(1, 227) = 7.58$, $p < .01$ and $F(1, 227) = 8.96$, $p < .01$ respectively. Univariate analysis of the dress by competitive standard interaction revealed a significant result for the dependent variable rank, $F(1, 227) = 3.56$, $p < .001$. As with the results to the dress main effect, both the international and national standard participant groups ranked the SPC in sports attire more positively than the SPC in formal attire. Additional to the dress main effect, both the international and national standard groups showed a greater differentiation in their rankings of the SPC in varying attire than the regional standard athletes. Post hoc paired samples *t* tests demonstrated that both international and national standard participant groups ranked the SPC dressed in sports attire more positively than the SPC dressed more formally; however no significant difference in the regional standard athletes' rankings of the differently dressed SPC were observed (see Figure 2). Similar trends were observed for the rating data but post hoc statistical analysis was not justified as the univariate *F*-test for rating was not significant.

Discussion

In relation to the first research object, the results from this investigation suggest that SPCs' physical characteristics do influence athletes' efficacy expectations regarding the potential effectiveness of consultants and their preference to work with them. Athletes ranked and rated the nonobese SPCs more positively in terms of their preference to work with them and their perceived effectiveness than the obese SPCs. Evident in the concurrent parallel comparison of the SPC in formal and sports attire, results showed that dress does also affect athletes' efficacy expectations of SPCs; those SPCs in sports attire were perceived more positively with higher ratings of perceived effectiveness and ranked higher in terms of preference to work with.

In terms of dress, Lubker et al. (2005) also observed that SPCs in athletic dress were evaluated more positively than those in formal attire, and were more likely to be approached for services. However, Lennon and Miller (1984) found that perceptions of competence were positively influenced by professional attire, which on initial inspection appear contradictory to the here presented results. Conciliation of

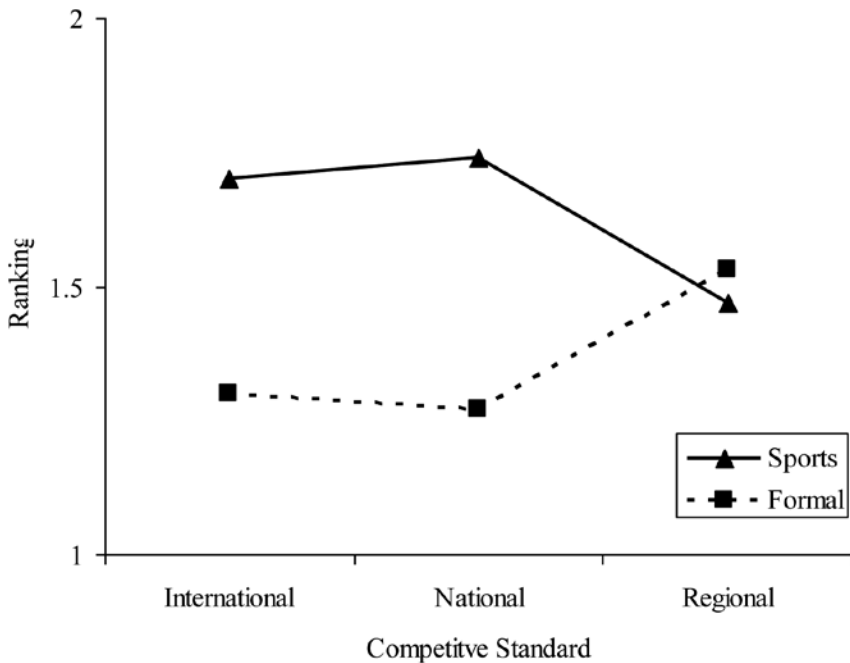


Figure 2 — Athletes' grouped by competitive standard mean rankings of perceived effectiveness of a SPC in differing dress.

the apparent contraction may lay in the consideration of what is considered 'professional attire'; with the professionalism of sport, tracksuits may now be considered professional attire by the participants, which must be remembered, were drawn from an athletic population. Another explanation of the departure of the current findings from those reported by Lennon and Miller, who did not specifically focus on athletic participants, is derived from the conclusions of Esters (2001). Esters suggested that key factors in affecting choice of counselor and the formation of positive efficacy expectations regarding a therapist is the perception of similarity with the counselor by the client. Thus, with reference to the findings from the current investigation, if the athlete's perception of similarity in terms of attitude, values, and background with the practitioner is enhanced by the SPC wearing sports attire, the athlete is likely to develop a more positive evaluation of the SPC. It may well be that a balance exists whereby the SPC must strike a compromise between dressing in such a fashion that conveys a sense of sporting background and similarity with the athlete, yet at the same time still appearing professional and thus being judged as competent.

With regard to BMI, Lubker et al. (2005) also demonstrated that lean SPCs are evaluated more positively than large build SPCs. Explanation of these results may be related to finding from Hash et al. (2003) that obesity is negatively associated

with clients' confidence in health practitioners' advice. In addition, however, it has been documented that athletes' perceptions of consultants' sporting knowledge is important in the shaping of their evaluation of the practitioner (Lubker et al., 2008). If the athlete associates the SPC being overweight with limited sports knowledge, then it would be expected that the athlete would form negative evaluations. Of course the same argument regarding the importance of perceived similarity in terms of attitude, values, and background between SPC and athlete made previously is also relevant here. Most sports require strict attention to physical condition including body weight and body composition, to this end many athletes place great value in physical condition and have strong attitudes regarding the importance of keeping in good physical shape. It is of little surprise that athletes, so sensitive about body shape, form negative initial impressions of obese SPCs. This suggestion has particularly important implications for SPCs working with weight dependent sports, such as lightweight rowing for example, where athletes may be particularly sensitized to body weight. On the converse, it may be that athletes from sports less concerned with lean body builds may not be so influenced by the BMI of the SPC. However, other physical characteristics such as muscularity of the SPC may be seen as more important by athletes from power sports. Obviously such statements are beyond that data collected in this investigation, although seem sensible based on the argument that athletes use nonverbal cues to form efficacy expectations regarding SPCs based on the level of perceived similarity between the client and the consultant in terms of attitude, values, and background (cf Esters, 2001). Clearly future research examining this contention is required.

In reference to the second research objective, whether efficacy expectations of SPCs based on BMI and dress are moderated by athletes' sex or competitive standard, it appears that competitive standard may be more important than sex. It should be stressed that in investigating sex we refer to the sex of the participants, not the sex of SPC as we only considered female practitioners. Although a significant sex effect was observed, more importantly, there were no sex interactions that demonstrated any clear trends. An explanation of the sex main effect, where females ranked and rated the SPCs more positively than the males, is that in education settings males have been shown to consistently rate female instructors less positively than males (Basow & Silberg, 1987). Results of the dress by BMI interaction are more meaningful.

The dress by BMI interaction for the concurrent parallel comparison of the SPC in formal and sports attire, not only showed that those SPCs in sports attire were generally perceived more positively, but that there was a differential between the competitive standard groups in terms of their evaluation of the sports and formally attired SPC. The regional athletes actually ranked the formally dressed SPC more positively but far from significantly, while both the national and international athletes ranked the SPC in sports attire more positively. This finding goes beyond the findings of Lubker et al. (2005). We suggest that the explanation of this interaction is that the international and national standard athletes placed greater importance upon the SPC appearing to be of a sporting background with similar attitudes and values to themselves. Furthermore, that attitudes and values of the higher standard athletes were more defined in terms of sport than the regional athletes due to their greater investment and immersion in sport, thus further sensitizing the higher standard athletes' perception of importance that a SPC appears to have a sporting background and associated values.

Implications and Future Research

These results have clear implications for SPCs attempting to gain entry; athletes do use nonverbal cues to form initial efficacy expectation regarding SPCs and these cues include physical characteristics of dress and BMI. If the client's initial judgments of a SPC based on dress and BMI are negative, the development of effective therapeutic relationships between the client and the practitioner are likely to be compromised, at least initially, no matter the practitioner's expertise and knowledge.

It is evident that the relationship between physical characteristics and athletes' efficacy expectation formations is complex and includes factors such as athlete's standard of competition. Further research is required to identify how other factors may moderate efficacy expectations such as nature of the athlete's sport. Do athletes from sports with different expectations in terms of body shape base initial judgments of SPC abilities and preference to work with them on different physical attributes? Furthermore, do these results transfer to other applied sport science disciplines? Is the effect of a consultant's BMI upon an athlete's initial evaluations moderated by the nature of the discipline; are obese sports nutritionists evaluated more negatively than obese applied biomechanists? Finally, qualitative investigations are required which assess how and why athletes base their initial evaluations of SPCs in terms of preference to work with and perceived effectiveness, upon physical characteristics such as BMI and dress.

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