

Body Image Dissatisfaction and Discrepancy

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Abstract

It is often heard and discussed that athletes, professional and semi-professional, face situations and experiences that negatively affect their body-image. This study investigates the relationship between sport and body image among Division 1 (D1) student athletes. Its purpose is to determine the difference in body image between different sports, genders. It also focuses on how sport uniforms and sexualization might affect how athletes perceive their body. Participants for this study included Division 1 student athletes at a small Southeastern Liberal Arts university. The annual survey, that included Body Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ) and demographic questionnaire was sent out via email to all student athletes. In addition to these questionnaires, additional questions were asked related to their comfort with their uniform and experiences with sexualization.

1. Introduction

Body image is a subjective picture of how an individual sees themselves and their body (Hosseini & Padhy, 2022). This image of body perception is not necessarily a reflection of the individual's real appearance. Body image includes emotions, thinking, behavior and evaluation related to one's body. The experiences individuals go through could have a significant impact on how they perceive themselves. One's body-image can determine the quality of their life by affecting them both physically and mentally and it can influence self-esteem and mood (Hosseini & Padhy, 2022). In a century in which the development of technology is in full swing, it is difficult not to be a part of that process and fall under the influence of everything that is available to us on the Internet. What we see and hear on a daily basis can have a big impact on our perception of ourselves. As sexualization, setting ideals, and judgment based on physical appearance are present in society, negative influences on Body Image have become more frequent and visible (Davis, 2018).

Negative feelings and thoughts about our physical appearance could lead to body image discrepancy and dissatisfaction, which can be explained by perceiving one's body size to be larger or different than desired. The feeling of discrepancy can be an indicator of depression, anxiety, low self esteem and changes in mood (Hosseini & Padhy, 2022). Individuals with negative body image may often avoid places and situations where their body would be exposed.

Most research on body image is conducted among college students. The age of emerging adulthood can be very challenging and stressful, and many factors can influence one's body perception. It is not surprising that in most of these studies female college students show higher levels of body dissatisfactions. More specifically, female students are usually more oriented toward physical appearance but less satisfied with it than male students (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2012). That can be explained through sociocultural factors. Women are often pressured to stay thin and are expected to follow the social media representation of ideal body shape and size (Polivy & Herman, 2004). These expectations can often be unrealistic and unattainable, which leads to dissatisfaction. Interestingly, African Americans consistently have higher scores on satisfaction with their appearance than European American (Polivy & Herman, 2004). That could be due to underrepresentation of African Americans in the media, while European Americans are constantly represented as desired only when they are thin. Furthermore, it is important to mention that although women suffer more often from negative body image, this does not mean that men do not experience any dissatisfaction with their appearance. Pope and colleagues (2000) presented results in which men indicated they would like to be more muscular, because they believed women prefer that.

In addition to traditional cultural influences on body image, athletes, professional and semi-professional, often face additional situations and experiences that negatively affect their body-image. Those are mostly comments and expectations about their body shape and size from their coaches, teammates, peers, families, spectators and others. While discussing body Image among athletes, it is important to consider the impact of different appearance expectations between different sports. It is assumed that body dissatisfaction is more prevalent among sports that emphasize aesthetic aspects of athletes, thinness, and appearance (Swami et al., 2009). For example, long distance runners reported less body satisfaction than throwers in a study done on college athletes, even though they match the body size ideals (Swami et al., 2009). The lack of satisfaction can be due to the pressure to stay slim in order to perform better (Kosteli, 2014). Further, while talking about the sports that focus on aesthetics, it is important to consider the impact different uniforms have on body image. That can be seen in a study on female D1 volleyball players done by Steinfeldt and colleagues (2013). The uniforms they wear not only have an affect on their body image, but it showed that form fitting spandex uniforms affect their performance on the court as well (Steinfeldt et al., 2013). As mentioned, student-athletes, especially females, are facing sexualization in their everyday life. Whether coming from coaches, teammates, peers, or families, it not only affects the person being sexualized, but it can also encourage others to see the sexualized person as less capable. Sexualized athletes are considered less competent and lower in self-esteem (Daniels et al., 2021).

My hypothesis is that female college athletes would report more body Image dissatisfaction and discrepancy than male athletes. Even though negative body image is often linked with low physical activity and sport performance (Sabiston et al., 2019), it is important to do more research on body image among professional and semi-professional athletes.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

In order to assess the relationship between body Image dissatisfaction and discrepancy and gender questions were embedded in an annual athletic mental health survey. The survey was issued to 239 Division 1 athletes. 92 athletes responded, representing a 38.5% response rate. Out of 92 respondents, 58 identified as female and 34 identified as male.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Body Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ)

For the purposes of this study, Body Image Ideals Questionnaire was used to determine how student athletes perceive their body. In other words, the questionnaire assesses body-image satisfaction-dissatisfaction by measuring the degree of discrepancy of self-perceived and idealized physical attributes. It measures discrepancy with 11 physical attributes (e.g., weight, facial features, muscle tone/definition, physical strength). The questionnaire used two subscales: (1) the Discrepancy subscale to assess appraisals of overall appearance, and (2) the Importance subscale to measure the degree importance of 11 bodily areas/aspects using a likert scale ranging from 0 (Exactly as I Am/Not Important) to 3(Very Unlike Me/Very Important). The BIQ score is found by multiplying the results of the two subscales. All "0" responses are recoded as "-1", resulting in a range of BIQ scores from -3 (More positive Body Image with no discrepancy) to 9 (More negative body image with higher discrepancy). The BIQ has been found to have satisfactory internal consistency reliability for both females ($M=.81$) and males ($M=.76$).

2.2.2 Questions About Athletes Experiences

I asked additional questions to learn about student-athletes experiences that could potentially cause body image dissatisfaction. Most questions were set on a Likert Scale followed by one open-ended question. First I asked the participants to rate how comfortable they feel in their uniform on the scale from 1-4: 1=Extremely Comfortable, 2=Somewhat Comfortable, 3=Not Very Comfortable and 4=Not At All Comfortable. Next, the participants reported how much they care about their physical appearance while performing on a scale from 1-4: 1=I do not at all care, 2=I somewhat care, 3=I care a good bit, 4=I care a great deal. The question about how often participants hear sexualizing comments about their body was set on a scale from 1-7: 1=Daily, 2=Weekly, 3=Monthly, 4=Every couple weeks but not every week, 5=Once every few months,

6=Rarely, 7=Never. This was followed by the open-ended question asking who was making those comments. Finally, the question about how often coaches make comments about their body shape/size was also used on a scale from 1-7.

2.3 Procedures

We obtained approval from the institutional review board of the university along with the Athletics department to conduct this survey. The survey was administered to all student athletes via Qualtrics, an invitation for which was sent via email by a university athletics administrator. They had a three-week period to complete the survey, with a reminder to complete the survey being emailed once. The survey could be completed on the athlete's own time, and it took approximately 10-20 minutes. Athletes were reassured that all responses would remain anonymous to everyone except the Athletics Mental Health Coordinator and that the way they responded would in no way impact their playing time or standing with their coaches, scholarships, or the administration. The Athletics Mental Health Coordinator reviewed the data initially and redacted any personally identifying information of coaches, athletes, or administration prior to sharing the data with the primary author. We then used SPSS to examine descriptive statistics and conduct the t-test in order to determine the difference in body image between females and males.

3. Results

3.1. Participants

A total of 78 participants completed the BIQ. 32 of respondents were males and 47 were females. A total of 86 athletes completed the four questions about the student-athletes experiences. Out of 86 respondents, 52 identified as female and 34 identified as male. Out of the overall 92 participants, most were freshman (N=32), followed by juniors (N=24), sophomores (N=14) and seniors (N=14). 83.33% of participants identified as White or European, followed by 7.84% of Black or African American, 3.92% Hispanic or Latino/a/x, 1.96% Asian or Asian American, and 0.98% American Indian or Alaska Native.

3.2. Body Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ)

The results from the overall BIQ test are showing that sampled athletes as a whole seem to be experiencing less discrepancy between their ideal and how they see themselves in the areas that are most important to them (M=1.93, SD=1.95).

3.2.1. Discrepancy Subscale

Analysis of the first subscale of BIQ to assess appraisals of overall appearance, or the discrepancy between how one sees themselves currently and their ideal. Results (see Figure 1) show that participants experience more discrepancy, therefore less satisfaction, with their physical strength (M=1.94, SD=0.78), followed by their muscle tone and definition (M=1.93, SD=0.75), body proportions (M=1.86, SD=0.85) and overall physical appearance (M=1.83, SD=0.77). Participants showed more satisfaction with

their skin complexion (M=1.46, SD=0.65), height (M=1.52, SD=0.68), hair texture and thickness (M=1.56, SD=0.76), and facial features (M=1.57, SD=0.69).

3.2.2. Importance Subscale

Further, the second subscale measured the degree of importance that they place on 11 bodily areas/aspects. Results (see Figure 2) showed that participants care most about their physical appearance (M=2.63, SD=1.03), Physical strength (M=2.57, SD=0.94), muscle tone and definition (M=2.48, SD=1.06), physical coordination (M=2.36, SD=1.16), body weight (M=2.35, SD=1.07), and body proportions (M=2.31, SD=1.11). Participants reported to care less about their ideal height (M=1.65, SD=0.94), chest size (M=1.75, SD=0.91), skin complexion (M=1.83, SD=1.08), hair texture and thickness (M=1.90, SD=1.05), and facial features (M=1.96, SD=0.97).

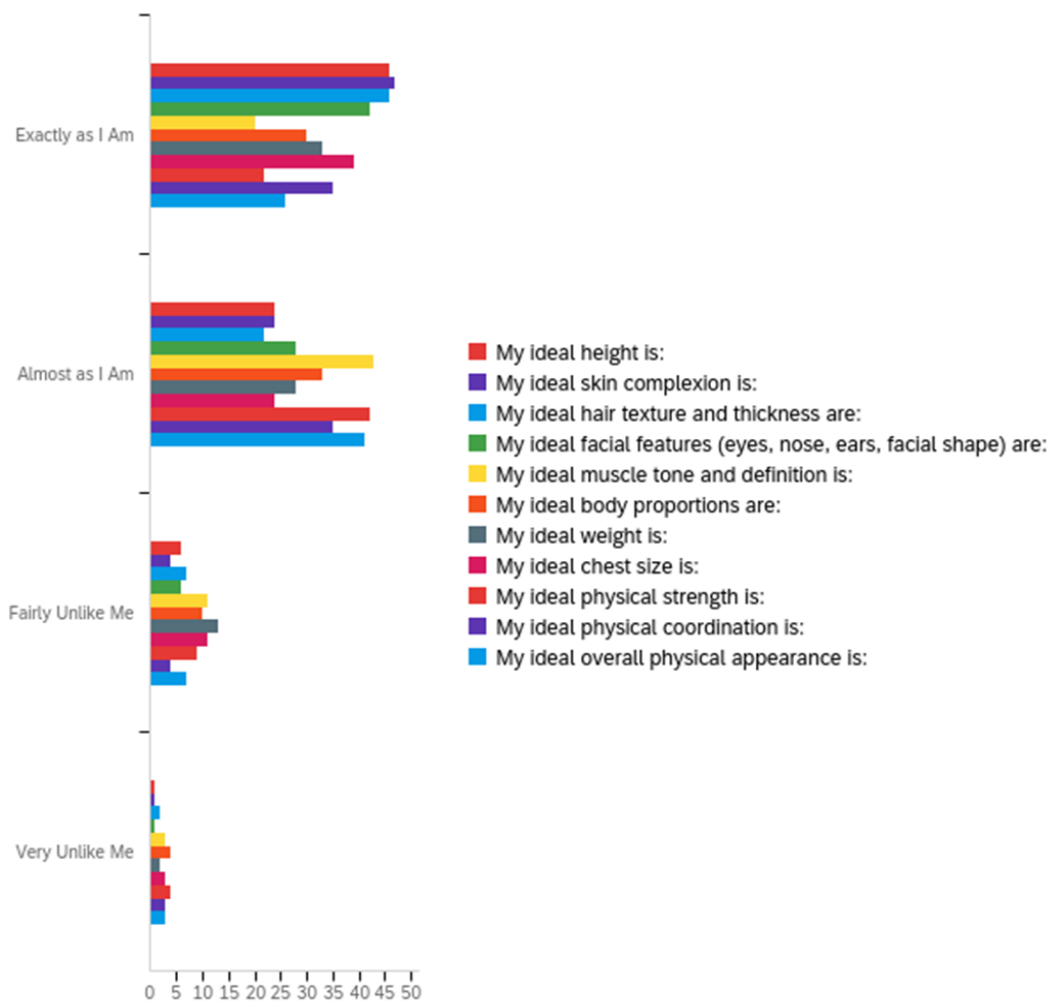


Figure 1: Discrepancy subscale for each of 11 body areas.

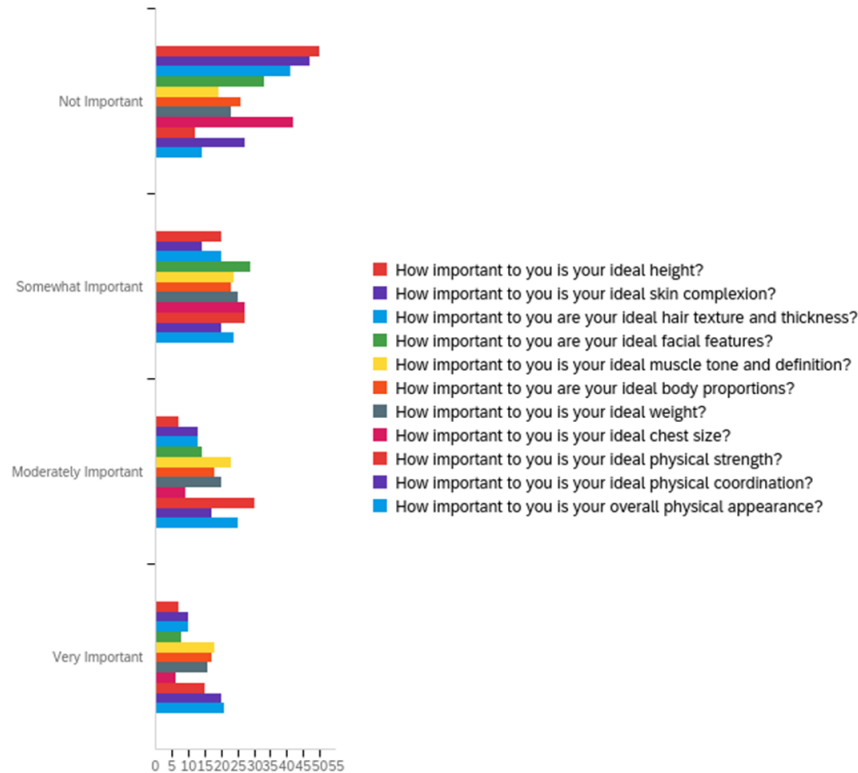


Figure 2: Importance subscale for each of 11 body areas.

3.2.3. Comparing Females and Males BIQ Scores

When comparing overall BIQ composite scores, there was no significant difference between females ($M=1.93$, $SD=1.95$) and males ($M=2.57$, $SD=1.76$); $t(77)=1.499$, $p=0.069$. However, after conducting t-tests examining the difference between males and females on the BIQ scores for each of the 11 body areas (see Table 1), I found significant differences in the answers between females and males for some of the physical characteristics. Male respondents reported more dissatisfaction and discrepancy with their body proportion: $t(77)=1.774$, $p=0.040$; weight: $t(76)=2.596$, $p=0.006$; chest size: $t(77)=1.687$, $p=0.048$; and coordination: $t(77)=2.017$, $p=0.024$. Female participants did not report significantly higher dissatisfaction and discrepancy in any of the 11 physical characteristics.

Group Statistics

	Gender_Sport	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Height	Male	32	2.1563	2.24484	.39684
	Female	47	2.4255	2.42939	.35436
Skin	Male	32	2.5625	2.01506	.35622
	Female	46	2.2391	2.43297	.35872
Hair	Male	32	2.0000	2.57782	.45570
	Female	47	2.3191	2.57164	.37511
Face	Male	32	2.6563	1.94454	.34375
	Female	47	2.1064	2.63945	.38500
Muscle	Male	32	2.3438	2.80103	.49516
	Female	47	1.6809	2.69546	.39317
BodyProp	Male	32	2.4375	2.46181	.43519
	Female	47	1.2553	3.17235	.46274
Weight	Male	32	2.9688	1.97540	.34921
	Female	46	1.2174	3.43778	.50687
Chest	Male	32	2.0625	1.93337	.34177
	Female	47	1.2128	2.35848	.34402
Strength	Male	32	2.4688	3.18246	.56258
	Female	47	2.1489	2.75822	.40233
Coord	Male	32	3.6875	2.90092	.51281
	Female	47	2.4468	2.52646	.36852
Overall	Male	32	2.9375	2.87298	.50788
	Female	47	2.1702	2.89917	.42289

Table 1: Means for males and females on BIQ scores for each of the 11 body areas.

3.3 Questions About Athletes Experiences

3.3.1. Uniforms

To understand how uniforms affect their performance and body image, we asked participants how comfortable they feel wearing it. Only 59.49 % of the participants reported they are extremely comfortable while wearing their uniform, 31.65% were somewhat comfortable, and 8.86% reported to not be very comfortable. Overall, student-athletes reported being more comfortable than uncomfortable wearing the uniform (M=1.48, SD=0.64). Male participants reported being more comfortable in their uniform (M=1.26, SD=0.51) than females (M=1.63, SD=0.68) and the difference was significant; $t(84)=-2.689$, $p=0.004$. Importantly, there was less variation in responses from males compared to females participants.

3.3.2. Appearance

After asking participants how much they care about their looks while performing their sport, only 12.66% reported to not care at all. Further, 50.63% of participants stated they somewhat care, 24.05% stated they care a good bit, and 12.66% reported they care a great deal. There was a significant difference between male participants ($M=2.12$, $SD=0.88$) than female participants ($M=2.50$, $SD=0.80$); $t(84)=-2.077$, $p=0.020$. Female responses showed greater variation in their responses.

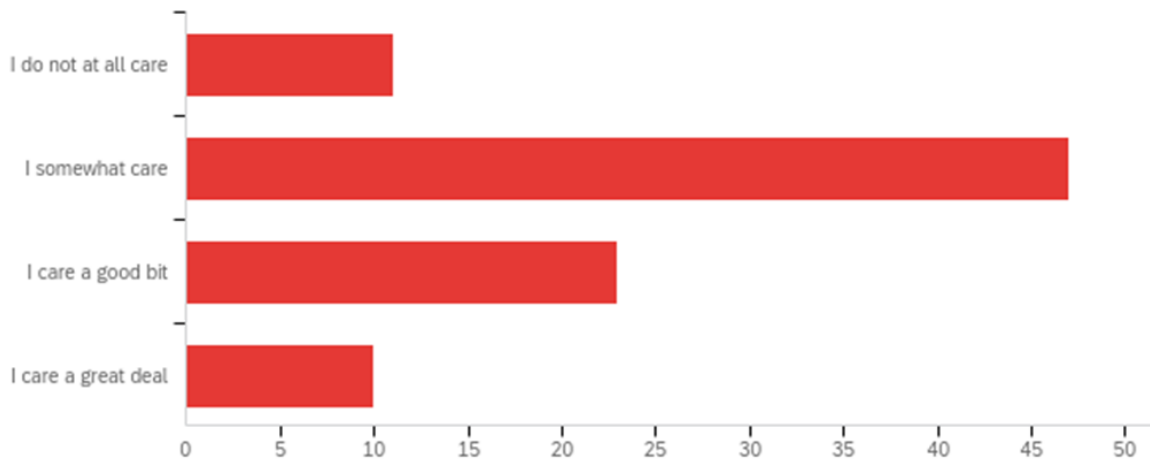


Figure 3. The degree to which participants care about their appearance while performing.

3.3.3 Sexualizing comments

To understand the impact of sexualization we asked how often participants hear sexualizing comments about their bodies. They responded as follows: daily 2.53%, weekly 1.27%, monthly 8.86%, every couple weeks but not every week 12.66%, once every few months 7.59%, rarely 35.44%, and never 31.65%. There was a significant difference between females ($M=6.77$, $SD=2.22$) and males ($M=7.85$, $SD=1.88$); $t(84)=2.349$, $p=0.011$. Further, when asked who makes those comments, most response included man, other athletes, and teammates, such as:

“Males”

“Random men”

“male athletes”

“Other male athletes”

“Not about me personally, but other athletes, specifically on men's teams have made comments about female athletes.”

“Teammates”

“normally people within my own sport”

“Friends but not in a derogatory way and sometimes women”

3.3.4. Coaches comments

Participants were asked how often they hear comments about their bodies from coaches. Most of the participants responded they never (67.05%) or rarely (21.52%)

hear those comments from their coaches. 2.53% reported to hear it every few months, 3.80% monthly, 3.80% every couple weeks, and 1.27% said they get those comments weekly. There was no significant difference in responses from female participants ($M=6.37$, $SD=1.14$) and male participants ($M=6.53$, $SD=1.02$); $t(84)=0.680$, $p=0.249$.

4. Discussion

4.2. Body Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ)

The results from Body Image Ideals Questionnaire (BIQ) suggested that student-athletes overall have generally positive body image and are experiencing less discrepancy between their ideal and how they perceive themselves in the areas that are most important to them. Participants reported less satisfaction with their physical strength, followed by their muscle tone and definition, body proportions and overall physical appearance. They also reported more satisfaction with their skin complexion, ideal height, hair texture and thickness, and facial features. The second part of the questionnaire suggested student athletes care more about their physical appearance, physical strength, muscle tone and definition, physical coordination, body weight, and body proportions, while they reported to care less about their ideal height, chest size, skin complexion, hair texture and thickness, and facial features. That leads us to a conclusion that athletes care more about their bodies than about facial features, which could be explained by the expectations from coaches, teammates and other people on how they should look in order to perform well.

Unexpectedly, the results from BIQ contradicted the hypothesis by suggesting that female athletes do not necessarily have more negative body image than male athletes. This is also contrary to the previous research that stated that females are usually more oriented toward physical appearance (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2012). Even though they reported to have a slightly more negative body image overall, the difference was not significant. Interestingly, the results from male participants are showing they are experiencing significantly higher discrepancy between their ideal and how they see themselves in 4 areas: body proportion, weight, chest, and coordination. It would be interesting to research it further to understand the cause of those discrepancies. Female athletes did not show significantly higher discrepancy at any of the 11 areas.

4.3. Questions About Athletes Experiences

The responses from the additional questions provided a clearer picture of the experiences athletes go through and how such experiences could have an impact on body image. Results showed that only 59.49 % of participants are completely comfortable with wearing the uniform. Also, more females than males reported either not being as comfortable or being uncomfortable in their uniform.

Further, the results from our second question are showing that most of the athletes care at least a bit about their looks while performing. That could be due to the body ideals related to athletes seen in media and the expectations from coaches, teammates, families and others. Again, females reported to care more about their appearance while performing than males do.

Next, females reported to hear more sexualizing comments than male athletes as well. Most of the participants reported to hear those comments by male individuals. What was interesting is that a few believed that those comments are not necessarily harmful or negative. For example, when asked to report who is making those comments, one of the respondents stated: “Teammates, coaches. It’s all positive- never negative and never in any harm”. Further, there was no significant difference between females and males when it comes to the comments coaching might make about their body shape/size. Overall, participants did not report to hear those often. This would suggest that coaches are not influencing the body image of their athletes.

5. Conclusion

It is important to conclude and state that sexualized comments, comments about body shape/size, and tight and revealing uniform are not necessarily an indicator of negative body image among the athletes who participated in this study. As reported, females are more likely to face the situations that could harm their perception of themselves but the results from BIQ does not follow that. The research about body image, especially body negativity and dissatisfaction, is more focused on females, but the results emphasize the importance of studying body image in males and comparing experiences between male and female athletes. Also, the dissatisfaction in body proportions, weight and chest size among males could be due to the increase of sexualization of male bodies in media and among young generations. It can also be argued that the sexualizing comments and comments about their bodies became a part of female athletes life and does not affect their body image as much. Further research should be conducted in this area.

6. Limitations

This research was conducted in a small mid-major Division 1 University and the sample size was limited. The university also has a more limited number of different sports teams, only containing 14 teams across 8 sports. Expanding research to a broader range of sports could benefit the study. Further, the participants were mostly White or European and there was not enough representation from different racial groups. There is a lack of representation from different demographic groups.

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