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**THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF COLLEGIATE ATHLETES QUITTING THEIR  
SPORT: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess the lived experience of collegiate athletes quitting their sport and transitioning from active engagement in an organized, collegiate-level sport to non-participation in the sport at that competitive level. To do so, five to seven participants, pretested for athletic identity to gather a diverse sample, will participate in a semi-structured interview to gain an understanding of their feelings regarding the loss of athletic identity and how it impacted their well-being. Through these interviews, the data should signify trends among participants such that 1) The participants' loss of athletic identity is perceived to negatively influence their well-being, 2) This effect will be more apparent for those who formerly had a stronger athletic identity, and 3) This relation may be expressed differently according to gender identity, such that female-identifying participants will experience heightened or diminished negative impact on their well-being as compared to male-identifying participants. This study hopes to determine which possibility is more accurate for the experiences of female-identifying athletes. The information that could be gained from this study would add to the existing literature on athletic identity and mental health, introduce the concern for the well-being of former athletes, and provide valuable information for former athletes to use to better understand their experiences.

**The Psychological Impact of Collegiate Athletes Quitting Their Sport: A Multiple Case Study**

When evaluating the mental health of athletes aged 12-18 years old, it was found that 17% were experiencing at least one mental disorder, with 25% reporting a lifetime prevalence of their disorder(s) (Purcell et al., 2023). Starting from a very young age, athletes are experiencing mental health concerns. Fortunately, this trend has garnered attention and steps are being taken to help athletes. However, although concern is rising for the mental health of athletes, the well-being of those who have quit is not being considered to the same extent. Thus, this research proposal will focus on the well-being of collegiate athletes who have quit their sport, looking into how the loss of athletic identity has affected their well-being.

One may think that because the former athlete has quit their sport, the role of *athlete* would no longer affect the individual and their well-being would then be unaffected. However, the now-former athlete may experience negative consequences for their well-being through the loss of a major portion of their identity. Social identity has been defined as the knowledge that we belong to certain social groups, and this carries some emotional significance to us (Tajfel, 2010). When we think about the members of our social groups, like sports teams, we do not necessarily see them as “other,” but we instead group ourselves with them to create “us” (Haslam et al., 2009). There are two theories that can explain the formation of an identity and the impact that it can have on the individual.

According to identity theory, an identity is formed through the process of identification, in which one classifies or names oneself in accordance with their social categories, or groups that an individual belongs to (Stets & Burke, 2000). Using this theory, the self can be considered as an occupant of a role (Stets & Burke, 2000). The subsequent incorporation of the role, including

what it means and what is expected from the individuals in the role, into the self forms the core of an individual's identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). With regards to an athlete, when an individual identifies as an athlete they categorize themselves in accordance to the role of an athlete and internalize the meanings and expectations associated with being an athlete. Their performance in athletics affects their identity as an athlete because of their self-categorization into the role of an athlete. However, the salience, or likelihood of the identity being activated in any given situation, has two components to it (Stets & Burke, 2000). The stronger the commitment to the identity through ties to other people and the strength of these ties leads to greater salience of the identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). For an athlete, who spends the majority of their time with their team building strong bonds with each other, it can be assumed that they would have a more salient identity as an athlete. After reviewing various studies, Rathbone et al. (2023) found that to the extent that people strongly identify as a member of a given social group, they are more likely to conform to the perceived norms of the group. An athlete with a salient athletic identity will then adhere more to the social norms of their group, causing them to be more likely to behave in accordance with their role as an athlete.

The process of identification in identity theory is referred to as self-categorization in social identity theory (Turner et al., 1987). The identity formed through self-categorization is associated with group membership, or one's social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). These groups that individuals become members of are part of a structured society that exists in relation to opposing categories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), in this case, the category of an athlete exists only in comparison to a non-athlete. The group an individual belongs to becomes an aspect of their identity that they can turn to in order to bolster their self-esteem, using the knowledge that they maintain group membership in respected groups (Nelson, 2002). Thus, an athlete

identifying as such may rely on that aspect of self to bolster self-esteem through engagement with similarly identified people.

A main distinction between the group-based identity from social identity theory and the role-based identity from identity theory lies in how the individual centers their perceptions and actions (Stets & Burkes, 2000). For group-based identities, an individual centers their perceptions and actions to be uniform among their group members, while for role-based identities the perceptions and actions are centered around the differences that are associated between one's role and the counter roles (Stets & Burkes, 2000). For athletes, according to social identity theory, their thoughts and behaviors would be centered around those of their group members in order to act in accordance with them. For example, an athlete could act similarly to their team members by focusing on their commonalities and behaving in alignment with them. Whether that be through expressing the same type of humor or having the same hairstyles. While for identity theory, their thoughts and behaviors are meant to distinguish themselves from those of a non-athlete. In this case, athletes would focus on the attributes that separate them from non-athletes, like wearing athletic clothes with their team logo on them or purposefully behaving in a manner that makes it known that they are an athlete. For both theories, an individual's thoughts and behaviors are affected by and centered around their identity. The desire to either behave similarly to one's group or differently than the opposing group dictates how one thinks and behaves.

One's social identity has been linked to maintaining positive well-being, especially in times of distress (Andreadis & Marshal, 2023; Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2017; Ntontis et al, 2023; Vignoles et al., 2021). The mechanism behind this relationship has been argued to be a result of social identities providing meaning to life, encouraging individuals to receive social

support from others, and providing a sense of belongingness (Cruwys et al., 2014; Haslam et al., 2009). These benefits are the most impactful when the individual strongly identifies with their group (Steffens et al., 2021). The benefits of social identity can become increasingly apparent in times of distress. Due to the impact that isolating during COVID-19 may have had, many social psychologists were interested in seeing how individuals could have benefited from maintaining a strong social identity. It was found that during college over Zoom, students with a stronger social identity as a member of their university experienced decreased levels of loneliness and greater overall positive affect (Andreadis & Marshall, 2023). Additionally, social identity has been linked with less anxiety, increased mental well-being, increased resilience, lower perceived stress, and providing the avenue to receive more social support during the onset of COVID-19 (Ntontis et al., 2023; Vignoles et al., 2021). For many people, isolating during COVID-19 may have meant being distanced from their social groups, which are major aspects of an individual's identity. However, those who were able to remain highly connected to their social identity during these times positively benefited from it. For athletes, having this group membership opens up new pathways for social support, with social support from coaches and team members helping to reduce uncertainty and provide companionship in the student-athletes life, particularly during times of stress (Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Overall, it has been shown that maintaining a strong social identity can help buffer negative experiences an individual goes through, resulting in them experiencing more positive benefits.

Social identity has also been found to offer sources of support for an individual through life transitions in which they may experience negative affect through the loss of aspects of their identity (Haslam & Steffens et al., 2019, Haslam & Lam et al., 2023). The social identity model of identity change (SIMIC, Haslam et al., 2019) recognizes that any life change can create

uncertainty and instability, particularly through the loss of social identity due to changes in group membership. Haslam et al. (2019) propose that to successfully transition an individual needs to either maintain the social identities they deem important or gain new ones to replace those that were lost. Particularly, belonging to multiple different social groups is a major factor in maintaining positive well-being through life transitions (Haslam et al., 2019). For older adults transitioning to retirement, it has been found that addressing social group relationships is as important as addressing financial matters as the elderly individuals need to maintain important group memberships and ensure they gain another identity to replace the loss of their group membership in their job (Haslam et al., 2023). Such an understanding of group membership and retirement may provide insight into the transition athletes experience when they disconnect from or quit their respective sports, but this has yet to be studied thoroughly in the literature. When thinking of athletes who quit their sport, it may be essential that they find an alternate identity to buffer the loss of their athletic identity.

Athletic identity, much like group membership stemming from employment, reflects the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). Much like people retire and shift from group membership connected to their employment, athletes may quit or disengage from their sport, suggesting a similar shift away from existing group membership. For athletes, the ability to engage with different aspects of their identity may help buffer the loss of this group membership. However, for collegiate athletes, the majority of their time is spent on their sport, leaving them little time to form other social identities. It has been found that, beginning very early in life, athletes focus only on their athletic identity, and may ignore or fail to explore other alternatives (Brewer & Pepitas., 2005; Brewer & Van Raalte et al, 1993). The intense amount of time athletes spend on their sport is exemplified when two players



filed a lawsuit against the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and the NCAA - the organization that governs collegiate sports - for being deprived of a meaningful education due to their involvement in their sport (Jacobs, 2015). While the NCAA officially restricts the time spent on practice when in season to 20 hours a week, many collegiate athletes have reported that they spent up to 40 hours a week on practices (*McCants et al. v The National Collegiate Athletic Association*, 2016). Although this does not represent the life of all collegiate athletes, it can be assumed that many collegiate athletes have less time to form other meaningful social identities due to most of their time being spent on their sport. If athletes lack meaningful time to form alternate social identities, and if they tend to focus only on their athletic identity, then they would lack the buffering effect that maintaining alternate group memberships has when transitioning away from their athletic identity.

As a result, the main group-based identity and role-based identity that an athlete holds is the identity of an athlete. Athletic identity has been defined as the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). An athletic identity stems from a social identity, as both begin with considering the self as an occupant of a role, but a social identity related to playing sports pales in comparison to the athletic identity. An athletic identity becomes an aspect of the individual's personal identity, growing bigger than a social identity. It is known from identity theory that the greater salience of identity is formed through stronger commitment through ties to other people and the strength of those ties (Stets & Burke, 2000). Creating a strong social identity for the athletes on their team has been found to be important for team cohesion, efficacy, and team performance, such that a stronger social identity for the team results in better performance (Evans et al., 2023). Therefore, ensuring that the athletes on a team form strong social identities to the team is important for coaches. For a majority of teams, this can be

seen through team bonding exercises that strive to create solid group membership between the players. This enforces a strong social identity and group membership in the team which can translate to athletic identity. Thus, most athletes will strongly identify with their team and their sport. Therefore, this raises the concern of what the athlete will experience when they no longer play their sport and lose that aspect of their identity.

In order to prepare for the loss of an identity, the SIMIC model proposes that individuals need to either fall back on other social identities or gain new ones. However, athletes with strong athletic identity have been found to depict decreased consideration of career possibilities unrelated to sports due to the amount of time they spend on their sport (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy et al., 1996), which could exacerbate the identity crisis an athlete could experience when they no longer play their sport. Additionally, individuals with a stronger athletic identity have been found to experience more negative consequences when faced with circumstances that cause them to stop playing their sport (Alfermann et al., 2004; Libutti, 2022; Menke & Germany 2019; Park et al., 2013). Regarding athletes who retire from their sport, research has shown that stronger athletic identity contributed to increased negative reactions to retirement along with more trouble adapting to it (Alfermann et al., 2004). Specifically, Alfermann et al. (2004) researched the different reactions of Lithuanian, German, and Russian athletes to terminating their careers. They found that the Lithuanian athletes reported higher levels of athletic identity, which significantly correlated with longer periods of adaptation to post-career, more negative emotions after the termination of their career, and less satisfaction with the time of their career termination (Alfermann et al., 2004). Thus, the athletes who reported strong athletic identity had the hardest time transitioning out of athletics, experiencing a longer transition period and more negative emotions during it. When faced with their athletic career ending, participants have also

reported feelings of loss, sadness, and anxiety, as well as difficulty coping with the transition (Menke & Germany 2019). Park et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of 34 studies that indicated that a strong athletic identity was negatively associated with the quality of the athlete's career transitions. The retired athletes experience a loss of identity when they had a strong athletic identity when they transition away from their athletic career (Park et al., 2013). Even having to stop playing their sport for at least 3 months due to an injury resulted in more severe grief and a larger number of early maladaptive schemas for athletes with high athletic identities (Libutti, 2022). Thus, athletes are encouraged to form strong athletic identities which may lead them to experience more negative consequences when they leave their sport. They can no longer identify with the role of an athlete, use this role to inform their thoughts and behaviors, or use their social identity as an athlete to boost their self-esteem. All the while, they may not have had the time to form other meaningful social identities. All of this could exacerbate the negative consequences an athlete could face when they quit their sport. Such a conclusion, however, is yet substantiated in the existing literature; thus, the need to examine the experience of transitioning away from an athletic identity, through quitting one's sport, and its implications is empirically necessary.

An avenue that has not been thoroughly researched is how this relationship could differ between men and women. Social identity theory explains that individuals tend to evaluate their in-groups positively to achieve, maintain, or enhance a positive social identity to experience high self-esteem (Nelson, 2002). Additionally, if an individual's in-group has traditionally been of lower status, one tends to highlight the unique and distinctive nature of their in-group (Nelson, 2002). Historically, female athletes have been derogated as not real athletes and have been treated as lesser than male athletes, exemplified by the players of the U.S. women's soccer team

filing a federal gender discrimination lawsuit against the United States Soccer Federation for equal pay (O’Kane, 2019). However, according to social identity theory, female athletes could then focus on how they are unique and different from other women by being female athletes, which could lead to boosts in self-esteem. This could lead to women facing even more negative consequences when leaving their sport, as they have lost what makes them unique and distinct. On the other hand, it has been recorded that women feel that they have to balance what is deemed feminine and what is required of them by their sport (Landrum & Davis, 2023). Female athletes struggle with the need to be thin and the need to be strong, which requires a more muscular build, to fit both the requirements of a woman and an athlete (Landrum & Davis, 2023). Female athletes have also expressed that they feel that being feminine contrasts with being athletic, resulting in them feeling marginalized and being seen as different from other women (Krane et al., 2004). Krane et al. (2004) also found that female athletes are proud of their strong athletic bodies which enabled them to feel empowerment that generalized beyond the context of sports. The conflicting feelings regarding the pressure to be feminine and the desire to be athletic depict the internal struggles of being a female athlete which could result in feelings of relief when faced with leaving their sport. They are no longer required to balance both femininity and athleticism but they are no longer in a category that separates them from other women. Thus, female athletes may experience different effects of transitioning away from the role of an athlete, but this has not been explored in the literature. As such, the current literature lacks research on the impact that collegiate athletes face when they quit and whether this experience is different according to gender identity.

In order to fill this gap in the literature, the proposed study will be used to examine the lived experience of male and female-identifying people transitioning away from the athletic

aspect of identity and its perceived influence on well-being. To do so, collegiate athletes who have quit their sport in the past two years will engage in a priori survey to first identify their former level of athletic identity. Thereafter, the participants will be purposefully selected to participate in a semi-structured interview based on varying levels of athletic identity. The aims of this study will be to witness trends of responses, such that 1) The loss of athletic identity is perceived to negatively influence individuals' well-being, 2) This negative impact is more apparent for those who previously held strong athletic identity, and 3) This relationship may be perceived different by gender such that female-identifying participants will depict a different relationship. In accordance with the literature, this study hopes to determine the direction of this relationship. Thus, the following central question will be examined: "*What are the perceived implications with respect to psychological well-being when an athlete transitions away from active engagement in their sport?*" Answering this question will rely upon the use of Stake's (2006) multiple case study method.

### **Proposed Method**

#### **Participants**

According to Stake (2006), multiple case studies typically include 4-10 participants, as fewer than 4 participants do not provide adequate information while more than 10 often provide more information than the researcher can combine and understand. The sample for the present study will include 8-10 participants, 18 years or older, who were D3 collegiate athletes of any sport but have since quit within the past 2 years. An equivalent number of male-identifying and female-identifying participants will be recruited.

The participants will be recruited via convenience sampling, through fliers posted in areas around the Claremont Colleges, which are a consortium of liberal arts colleges, along with

snowball sampling in which the participants will be asked to spread the word to other individuals who fit the requirements. The potential participants who express interest in the study will complete a pretest measure of athletic identity, and then a sample of participants will be selected to cover low and high levels of athletic identity. The participants will be compensated with \$5 for the pretest and then \$15 after the interview for their time.

## **Materials**

### ***Athletic Identity Measure***

To pretest for the participants' former levels of athletic identity, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS, Brewer et al., 1993) will be used, but the participants will be asked to consider and answer the questions as they might have before they quit their sport. This scale is used to determine the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of an athlete (Brewer et al., 1993). This measure has 10 fixed-formatted items with a continuous scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Centered around facets of athletic identity, the items of this scale consist of questions such as "I consider myself an athlete," "Sport is the most important thing in my life," and "I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport." The sum of the participants' total scores will be taken, with only the bottom and top quartile of participants qualifying for the study. The AIMS measure has been found to have an alpha coefficient of .93 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .89 (Brewer et al., 1993), which is considered to be a high score for reliability (Downing, 2004). This measure, and the questions used, will assess the extent to which the individual identified with the role of an athlete.

### ***Interview***

**Sense of Athletic Identity.** To gain a better sense of the participant's athletic identity, they will be asked open-ended questions relating to their identification with the role (see

Appendix A). These questions will be loosely based on the AIMS measure (Brewer et al., 1993), but not all of the questions in the measure will be used. The fixed questions to be completed by all participants will be split into two categories, those asking about their time as an athlete and now since they have quit. To ask about their time as an athlete, the questions will ask about how they perceived their connection to their role as an athlete. The same questions will be asked again, but centered around their thoughts now after they have quit and how their connection to their athletic identity has shifted. For example, the participants will be asked about the extent of their athletic identity, their connection to different identities, the connection between self-confidence and participation in their sport, and their time spent on their sport. The specific topics in the questions will provide insight into their connection to their athletic identity, looking into whether they had other important identities at the time, and how their athletic identity impacted their well-being. For the questions relating to after they have quit, the topics asked will center around how their connection to their athletic identity has changed and how it has affected their self-confidence and ability to form other identities. Unstructured questions will be interspersed throughout in order to gain a fuller understanding of the participant's beliefs and lived experiences. These will be asked to gain more clarity if the participant does not respond with adequate detail, or to dive further into the individual's experience by asking more questions about something they say. This section of the interview will provide the participants with the opportunity to talk about their lived experiences, allowing for the collection of rich and descriptive responses that cannot be obtained through fixed-formatted questionnaires. Their responses will be coded for common themes across the participants to get a holistic sense of the participants' level of athletic identity as well as how strongly/weakly they identify with the role of an athlete.

**Sense of Well-Being.** The participant's well-being will also be measured through an open-ended semi-structured interview process (See Appendix B). The fixed questions that will be asked to every participant will be about their feelings before, directly after, and since quitting their sport. Afterward, they will be asked to consider how the transition has affected them, along with if they experienced any shifts in social support. Lastly, to gain information regarding how gender identity can affect this process, they will be asked if their gender identity affected their relationship to their sport and the transition away from athletics. Their feelings before, after, and since quitting their sport will be asked in order to determine their well-being throughout their transition away from athletics. Whether or not they experienced guilt, loss, or relief from quitting their sport will be valuable information for the results of this study. Determining whether their avenues of social support and friendships have changed since quitting will also be very insightful as they may have lost social support after quitting their sport, and this could lead to negative consequences for their well-being. To better assess each individual's well-being and lived experiences, unstructured questions will be asked to dive deeper into the participants' thoughts and feelings. For example, if a participant merely states that they felt bad, additional questions will be asked, such as "How do you know you felt bad?" to gain a deeper understanding. Their responses will be coded in terms of recurring themes that come together to explain their individual experiences with quitting their sport and how it has affected their well-being afterward.

**Impact of Gender Identity.** To assess how the participants' gender identity impacted their transition away from athletics, the participants will be asked fixed open-ended questions relating to their relationship with their gender identity and its possible impact on their well-being. The participants will be asked "To what extent did your gender identity affect your



relationship to your sport?” and “Are there any ways that your gender identity has affected this transition away from athletics?” As this question is broad, clarifying questions will be prepared to reduce any confusion from the participant. These clarifying questions will be “To what extent do you feel like you lost this unique and differentiating aspect of yourself?” and “To what extent did you experience relief or freedom after quitting, and why?” The broad questions will be asked first to allow the participants to mention anything they deem relevant without biasing their responses. If they feel confused by the questions, the clarifying questions will be asked to understand if the loss of a unique social identity or the relief gained by becoming free of the paradoxical gender norms has affected the participants' experience. Additionally, unstructured questions will be asked throughout if the interviewee deems it necessary to gain a fuller response or to dive deeper into what was said. If the participant mentioned feeling relief after quitting due to their gender, but not specifying why or what aspect of their gender, the interviewee will ask the participant to clarify their response. Their responses will be coded in terms of recurring themes that may answer the question of the participants' gender identity affecting this transition away from athletics.

**Procedure**

Prior to being selected as a participant, all possible participants will be given an Informed Consent page and then asked to complete the AIMS measure as if they were still an athlete. This measure will take approximately 15 minutes. Only the participants who score in the bottom and top quartile of the measure will be selected to continue the study. After being selected to continue, the participants will select a time within 2 weeks to complete the interview. Before beginning the interview, the participants will be given an Informed Consent page again, after which the interview will proceed only if they consent to the study and to having their answers

recorded. The three subsections of the interview will be randomized for each participant, with the structured questions fixed in order while the unstructured questions will be asked throughout when the interviewee feels it is necessary. Each interview segment will vary in length according to the responses given by the participant as they will speak uninterrupted and without regard for time constraints. After the participants have finished recounting their experiences, they will be asked to state their age, gender identity, and ethnicity in an open-ended format. After completion, the participants will be debriefed and compensated for their time.

**Ethical Considerations**

The information this study may find will add to the existing research regarding athletes' mental health and identity. Additionally, the information could be utilized by others to better understand how to assist athletes who are going through this transition. Aside from being given the space to express their feelings and experiences, there will be no direct benefits to the participants.

In regards to the possible risk of this study, the study would be considered minimal risk as the information gathered will not exceed the level of risk one would encounter in their day-to-day life. The questions asked about the participant's well-being will not exceed what would be asked during a routine psychiatric evaluation. Additionally, the participants of this study will not be considered a part of vulnerable populations. For the interview, the participants will be made aware that participation at every step is voluntary and will not affect their compensation. They will be assured that they do not need to answer any interview questions that they are not comfortable with. Moreover, the data collected will be confidential, as the interviewer will know their identities due to the in-person interviews but the participants will be labeled with a number instead of a name. The interviews will be audio recorded on the

interviewer's phone but transferred onto a secure computer that is password protected. After transcribing the recordings, the original interviews will be deleted. Additionally, deception will not be used in any form. As such, due to the minimal risks of this study design, the benefits do outweigh the potential risks to participants.

### **Anticipated Results**

After completing all the interviews, the recordings will be transcribed. Each transcription will be analyzed and coded, looking for themes that may be cohesive across participants. The themes for coding can only be decided upon when looking at the transcripts, but they will center around the research question regarding the lived experience of transition from one's athletic aspect of identity and its perceived influence on mental health and well-being. I will do the coding to ensure inter-coder reliability. Quotations from the transcripts that pertain to the central question of the study will be identified and given a succinct code to reflect their interpreted meaning. Afterward, alike codes will be combined to form themes. Themes will be written narratively to integrate all participants' experiences as each theme is meant to convey a shared, necessary aspect of the construct under study (i.e., perceived implications for psychological well-being when athletes transition from their sport).

While the trends cannot be decided upon until the transcriptions are obtained, certain trends are expected to be seen based on previous research. Between the athletic identity measure and the sense of athletic identity, it is expected that there will be a change in the perceived athletic identity of the participants from when they were an athlete to now. The participants will most likely portray a weaker perceived sense of athletic identity after quitting their sport, which will signify the loss of their athletic identity.

In terms of their well-being, it will be expected for their well-being to suffer after quitting their sport. Experiences such as a loss of social support and a drop in self-confidence and self-esteem will be likely. However, depending on the amount of time that has passed since quitting, the individuals could have had enough time to replace their athletic identity with a different identity and thus gain the benefits from it such as new avenues for social support and boosts in self-esteem.

The relationship between the loss of athletic identity and the subsequent impact on well-being will likely arouse themes of loss, grief, or confusion (Menke & Germany 2019; Libutti, 2022), as these feelings are expected to be present as a result of this loss of identity. Thus, it is expected that the participants will express feelings such as confusion, grief, uncertainty, and loss as a result of losing their athletic identity. It has been shown that having multiple social identities helps support an individual through life transitions by buffering the loss of one (Haslam & Steffens et al., 2019; Haslam & Lam et al., 2023; Jacobs, 2015), yet it has been shown that athletes tend to focus only on their athletic identity and fail to consider creating other identities (Brewer & Pepitas, 2005; Brewer & Van Raalte et al, 1993). Thus, when they lose their athletic identity, there may be nothing to buffer the impact of it, leading to a negative impact on their well-being as a result. This negative impact could be lessened if the participants are able to form other meaningful connections and create new identities after they quit.

Additionally, it is expected that the participants who strongly identified with the role of an athlete will express heightened negative affect after quitting their sport, as previous research has shown this effect for athletes who retire or get injured (Alfermann et al., 2004; Menke & Germany 2019; Libutti, 2022; Park et al., 2013). Strongly identifying with the role of an athlete may increase the chances of not having other identities to buffer the loss of the athletic identity.

Additionally, individuals have been shown to increasingly behave in alignment with their social group when their social identity is more salient (Rathbone et al., 2023). If an athlete's social identity is stronger, or more salient, they may also lose this behavioral guide. Thus, it is expected to see a trend such that those who had stronger athletic identities would experience a heightened impact on their well-being. As their athletic identity levels change and decrease over time, this impact is expected to fade.

Between the female and male participants, there is expected to be a slight difference in their responses. Female participants may experience fewer negative effects on their well-being as a result of being free from paradoxical gender stereotypes (Landrum & Davis, 2023; Krane et al., 2004) or they may experience more negative effects on their well-being as a byproduct of losing an aspect of their identity that made them feel unique and different (Nelson, 2002). According to social identity theory, individuals tend to gain self-esteem from their in-groups as well as highlight the unique or distinct nature of their group, especially when they have traditionally been of lower status (Nelson, 2002). Women are often not considered real athletes or as competent as men, so the status of a female athlete has always been beneath male athletes. Thus, women may highlight the uniqueness of their group, as a way to bolster their self-esteem. This could result in an increased negative effect on well-being after quitting, as they have lost the aspect of their identity that gave them uniqueness. However, women often struggle to deal with the contradictory demands of what it is to be female and what it is to be an athlete (Landrum & Davis, 2023). This internal struggle could lead to relief after quitting their sport, as they no longer will need to delicately balance these two opposing identities. These are conflicting predictions, but the research seems to indicate that female-identifying athletes will have more to

lose than they have to gain by quitting their sport. Thus, it is expected to see trends signifying that female-identifying athletes experienced a heightened negative impact on their well-being.

In addition to the trends that are expected to be seen, further research is necessary to better determine the factors that differentiate this transition between male and female-identifying people. Overall, trends in responses are expected to signify that collegiate athletes who quit their sport, and specifically female-identifying athletes, will experience perceived negative consequences to their well-being. The lived experiences of these athletes will add important knowledge to the current literature on the mental health of athletes, as well as provide more information that athletes can use to better transition out of their sport.

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**Appendix A**

**Sense of Athletic Identity**

Fixed questions asking about the participants' athletic identity before they quit:

“To what extent was being an athlete a part of your identity?”

“To what extent did other people mainly see you as an athlete?”

“To what extent do you rely on a different identity other than athletic identity?”

“How did your self-confidence and self-esteem rely on your participation in your sport?”

“How much time did you spend on your sport, and how much time did it leave for you to form other meaningful connections?”

Fixed questions asking about the participants' athletic identity since quitting:

“To what extent is being an athlete a part of your identity now?”

“To what extent do other people mainly view you as an athlete?”

“Can you tell me about the identities you hold now?”

“Since quitting, what does your self-confidence and self-esteem rely on?”

“How much time do you spend on athletics now, and how much time do you have to form other meaningful connections?”

**Appendix B**

**Sense of Well-Being**

Fixed questions asking the participants about their perceived well-being:

“How did you feel about your sport and your role as an athlete before you quit?”

“How did you feel the day that you quit?”

“How have you felt since quitting?”

“How has the transition out of athletics affected you?”

“To what extent have you experienced shifts in who you go to for social support?”

“If applicable, tell me about any losses/gains in friendships as a result of quitting your sport”

“Have you noticed any changes in your self-confidence/self-esteem, and if so, in what direction and why?”