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Athletic Identity: Complexity of the “Iceberg”

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Abstract

Athletic identity is a common topic in research on athlete experiences and development. Many researchers rely on the understanding of athletic identity as conceptualized by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993). This seminal work provided a foundational understanding for conducting survey research on athletic identity. However, the emphasis on survey approaches has resulted in an incomplete understanding of athletic identity as deeper meanings of the construct are taken for granted (Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016a). To develop a more nuanced conceptualization of athletic identity, the current study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the meaning of athletic identity from the view of current collegiate student-athletes. Participants included nine Division I student-athletes (M age = 19.8; 6 women and 3 men) across several sports. Participants completed individual semi-structured interviews (M time = 47 minutes). Three themes were generated using reflexive thematic analysis: Athletic Identity as “Part of Me”; Commitment to Identity through Athletic Journey; and Self-Recognition of Social Reinforcement. The construct of athletic identity is likened to an iceberg; the reflexive thematic analysis helps describe the complexity of the construct by going beyond the surface view to explore deeper understandings. Such findings are relevant for professionals aiming to more effectively connect with and support this population.

Keywords: *identity, qualitative, reflexive thematic analysis, self-perceptions, student-athletes*

The study of athletic identity is a common topic in research on athlete experiences and development. In recent years, there has been increased recognition of the importance of mental wellness in both the general college population and athletic settings (Francis & Horn, 2017; Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2018). In the collegiate athlete population specifically, the topic of mental wellness has been described as essential yet was previously overlooked (NCAA, 2016). As discussions around collegiate athlete well-being continue to expand, the role of self-perceptions in sport must not be discounted, particularly given that identity is an important factor underlying many issues related to athlete well-being (e.g., Brewer & Petitpas, 2017; Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2012; Horton & Mack, 2000). While athletic identity is considered a common topic of interest, more research is needed to examine personal meanings of athletic identity from participant perspectives (Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016b). The current investigation adds to the literature by examining and presenting meanings of athletic identity from the per-

spective of collegiate athletes, which can inform professionals supporting this population.

Background Literature

Athletic identity is conceptualized as a self-schema, or guide for processing information, and as a social role, which emphasizes group membership and social relatedness (Brewer et al., 1993). Most researchers who have examined athletic identity have relied on Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder’s (1993) conceptualization of the construct (Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016a). Brewer and colleagues (1993) defined athletic identity as the extent to which an individual identifies with the role of athlete. That seminal work provided the initial Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) while subsequent work led to the current seven-item AIMS that assesses social identity, negative affectivity, and exclusivity (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). Social identity describes the extent to which individuals view themselves as athletes. Nega-

tive affectivity describes adverse emotional reactions to performance decrements. Exclusivity is defined as solely identifying with the athlete role.

Brewer and colleagues' studies are foundational to most athletic identity research. Survey approaches using the AIMS typically have focused on examining relationships between athletic identity and other variables (e.g., physical activity after athletics, mental health concerns following sport transitions; Reifsteck, Gill, & Labban, 2016; Giannone, Haney, Kealy, & Ogrodniczuk, 2017). Fewer studies have focused on the depth, meaning, and complexity of the construct from participant perspectives, resulting in a limited understanding of athletic identity. The current study aims to gain a more nuanced view of the construct by using a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the meanings of athletic identity.

While the majority of studies on athletic identity have taken survey approaches, in more recent years researchers have assessed athletic identity using more diverse methodologies. For example, there has been a shift toward social constructivism in qualitative athletic identity research (Ronkainen et al., 2016a), which emphasizes the impact of culture and constructed meanings on individual identities. With a qualitative approach, Stephan and Brewer (2007) studied factors that contribute to the maintenance of athletic identity. Through interviews with retired Olympic athletes, Stephan and Brewer (2007) presented two interconnected categories described as factors underlying the maintenance of athletic identity: personal factors (e.g., elite sport lifestyle, athletic appearance) and social factors (e.g., flexibility in work roles to allow for training; recognition from others). Additionally, different approaches have been implemented to examine athletic identity in the transition from sport (e.g., Brown & Potrac, 2009; Lally, 2007). Brown and Potrac (2009) used an interpretative approach to understand the stories of elite soccer players who had been deselected from their teams. The findings suggested that the transition from sport can be a difficult time when athletes may face maladaptive concerns (i.e., humiliation, shock, anxiety, and despair) as their identities are challenged. Similarly, on the topic of transitioning, Lally (2007) concluded that the collegiate athletes who were proactive in using coping strategies fared more favorably than the one collegiate athlete who held firmly to his athletic iden-

tity after retiring from sport.

Further, Carless and Douglas' line of research on cultural scripts in athletics provide information on common narratives that influence athletic identity (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2013a; Carless & Douglas, 2013b). Douglas and Carless (2006) explain that the dominant narrative in athletic culture reflects an emphasis on winning, performance, and accomplishments (i.e., performance narrative). Through interviews with professional women golfers, the researchers presented two alternative narratives that since have been explored in other populations: discovery narratives focus on what athletics can provide (e.g., travel; financial incentives for winning), and in relational narratives, interpersonal relationships are the most salient reasons for sport involvement (Douglas & Carless; 2006).

While different methodologies have been used in athletic identity literature in recent years, additional work must be conducted to gain a clearer understanding of the construct. Studies have focused on in-depth investigations related to topics connected to athletic identity (e.g., transitions; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Lally, 2007). Further, researchers have started to assess external influences that can impact athletic identity (e.g., cultural scripts, performance narrative; Douglas & Carless, 2006). However, more research is needed to examine personal meanings that athletes attribute to their experiences (Ronkainen et al., 2016b). Such understandings add to the literature by emphasizing participant perspectives on self-perceptions and have practical implications for professionals striving to work competently with athletes. In an investigation aiming to identify essential counseling competencies when working with athletes, 19 of 20 expert panelists ranked recognizing the importance of athletic identity as essential for practitioners (Ward, Sandstedt, Cox, & Beck, 2005). By gaining insight into participant views and meanings of athletic identity, practitioners (e.g., counselors, sport psychologists, collegiate athlete development staff) can more effectively support and engage with this population. To better understand how athletes perceive and make sense of their identities, the current study takes an inductive, bottom-up approach to explore the meanings of athletic identity from the perspective of current athletes.

Paradigmatic Assumptions and Theoretical Frameworks

Consistent with explanations detailed by Wiltshire (2018), the current study is positioned in critical realism, pairing ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Maxwell, 2012). In critical realism, researchers aspire to find truth while accepting that individuals understand the world through constructing meaning based on perceptions (Maxwell, 2012; Wiltshire, 2018). From this perspective, production of knowledge and theories can lead to satisfactory conclusions that are tentative in nature (Wiltshire, 2018). In this investigation, the aspects of athletic identity based on participant perspectives may describe satisfactory conclusions that point to the elusive truth of the construct.

Further, the current study is informed by identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to identity theory, individuals are multidimensional beings who develop different roles and related identities that are organized into the holistic self (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Identity theory posits that individuals engage in behaviors that reinforce and verify their identities (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Such identities are organized in a hierarchical manner where salient identities influence role performance and become more stable over time and in different situations (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

The current study is also contextualized within collegiate athletes. Collegiate athletes likely have salient athletic identities due to consistent sport involvement and environmental reinforcement (Burke & Stets, 2009). Collegiate athletes face unique challenges in collegiate athletics in striving to maintain and excel in two roles. In this time period, students develop personally and professionally as they seek to find purpose and consider plans for their futures (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Purpose

While several studies have been conducted on the topic of athletic identity (Ronkainen et al., 2016a), the approaches often are geared toward understanding relationships with other variables without focusing directly on the construct itself. For researchers and

professionals to more effectively connect with and support this population, it is vital to deepen the understanding of athletic identity. To develop a more nuanced conceptualization of athletic identity, the current study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the meaning of athletic identity from the view of current athletes. The guiding research question follows: What is the meaning of athletic identity taken from the view of current collegiate athletes?

Method

Participants

Participants included nine National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I collegiate athletes ($n = 6$ women, $n = 3$ men; age range 18-21 $M_{age} = 19.8$) from a southeastern university in the United States. See Table 1 for a summary of participant characteristics. The inclusion of diverse collegiate athletes was a purposeful decision in order to explore the meanings of athletic identity that emerge across sport, race or ethnicity, and gender (Patton, 2002). The participants identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 5$), Black/African American ($n = 3$), and Hispanic American ($n = 1$); participants competed in soccer ($n = 4$), cross country/track ($n = 2$), basketball ($n = 1$), golf ($n = 1$), and volleyball ($n = 1$).

Table 1

Pseudonym and Summary Description of Each Participant

Pseudonym	Athlete Description
Nathan	Senior, Men’s Soccer
Evan	Senior, Men’s Cross country/track
Sarah	Junior, Women’s Soccer
Shawn	Sophomore, Men’s Soccer
Faith	Senior, Women’s Volleyball
Farah	Freshman, Women’s Golf
Tiara	Junior, Women’s Basketball
Terri	Sophomore, Women’s Cross country/track
Olivia	Junior, Women’s Soccer

Procedure

Following institutional review board approval, recruitment emails and informed consent forms were sent to an athletic department administrator who forwarded the materials to collegiate athletes across several sports. Interviews were scheduled with collegiate athletes who volunteered to participate. The resulting sample had representation across different groups (i.e., sport, race/ethnicity, and gender), which aligned with our aim to include a diverse group of collegiate athletes. Participant meetings consisted of review and signing of informed consents, a semi-structured interview (Appendix A), and the completion of a demographic form. Open-ended questions, follow-up probing questions, and reflections were used throughout the interview to promote clarity of initial interpretations. The semi-structured interview questions were created by the research team and practiced with two collegiate athletes who were not included in the study to refine the guide. The interview began with broader questions about identity and experiences in sport (e.g., *Tell me about yourself; When did you start playing sports?*). Further, questions were informed by identity theory (e.g., *How does your identity as an athlete inform your behavior?*); follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to expand on responses (e.g., *What more would you like to say about that?*). Individual interviews lasted an average of 47 minutes and ranged from 34 to 59 minutes. At the end of each interview, the researcher reflected on initial interpretations from the meeting and received participant feedback before the meetings ended. The researcher also wrote field notes after each interview (Patton, 2002). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts and an initial summary of the study findings were sent to participants so they were able to reflect and add feedback (i.e., member reflections; Tracy, 2010). Individuals were sent their original transcripts as a reference so that participants had contextual information if needed to aid in member reflections. The three participants who provided additional feedback on the information supported the findings.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the researcher used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Data analysis was an ongoing process occurring during and after the data collection period. The initial phases included transcribing the audio recorded interviews and rereading transcripts, which helped increase familiarization with the material as rich data rather than as information (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Next, the primary researcher read through the data and wrote initial codes in the margins of the transcripts. Codes were identified primarily on semantic, explicit levels during the coding process (Braun et al., 2016). During this iterative process, codes were organized and reorganized in a revised list. Transcriptions and codes were reviewed by another researcher in order to reflect on assumptions and work toward a more nuanced understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The codes were clustered into six potential themes, which were reviewed to create finalized themes that provided comprehensive, detailed responses to the research question. Themes were named, defined, and further expounded upon through analytic writings. Importantly, while the researcher is familiar with identity theory and athletic identity research, the coding process was completed with an inductive, data-driven approach where codes were derived from the content, rather than fitting responses into respective theories. The revised themes generated in the process were then interpreted and synthesized into existing identity literature. Further, as thematic analysis can be executed across frameworks (Braun et al., 2016), the current study is positioned within critical realism. Thus, the researcher used semantic coding in the inductive process to provide meanings on the construct of athletic identity to be presented in satisfactory conclusions of the data (Wiltshire, 2018). To remain systematic and to conduct quality reflexive thematic analysis, criteria specified in Braun et al., (2016) as well as Braun and Clarke (2019) were used both during and after data analysis.

Results and Discussion

From the reflexive thematic analysis, three overarching themes were generated to explain the

meanings of athletic identity taken from current collegiate athlete perspectives and experiences. The respective themes follow: Athletic Identity as “Part of Me”; Commitment to Identity through Athletic Journey; and Self-Recognition of Social Reinforcement.

Athletic Identity as “Part of Me”

From athlete experiences and perspectives, athletic identity is recognized as a part of the overall self-concept. The Athletic Identity as “Part of Me” theme includes elements pertaining to self-appraisal as an athlete, as well as connections between athletic identity and personality, where over time, the two seem to become interwoven.

The process toward ownership of the athlete role often began years before these athletes’ collegiate experiences. Specifically, this self-appraisal often began in childhood when participants recognized sport-specific skills (e.g., golf swing) and athletic abilities (e.g., speed) that fostered an athletic self-image. The personal enjoyment paired with early accomplishments reinforced the belief in “being good at something.” The beliefs of sport competence seemed to help foster athletic identities that became part of the self-image:

And all I’ve really known my whole life is soccer and school. So, every kid, everyone got like a number, so if you wanted to be known growing up you had to be good at something. My thing was soccer, so I stuck with that. – Olivia

Like I know I’m good at a sport, and like, I know I’m not bad at it, like so I’m gonna be happy about who I am. – Farah

The self-appraisal as an athlete, competence, and enjoyment of sport often were reflected in continued participation and elite-level involvement. In the process, the athletic self-perceptions formed in childhood and adolescence gained continual reinforcement. Some of the athletes viewed their athletic identities as a more central part of who they are, but all athlete accounts reflected an ownership of the athlete role (e.g., athletic aspirations). Their desire to progress in sport both fulfilled and created additional aspirations that reinforced athletic identities:

Definitely sport. That’s kind of like how I

perceive myself, as an athlete on campus and stuff like that, and in general when I speak to people it’s mostly about my sport. (Later in interview) Once I fell in love with it, it’s kind of become my life, and everything I do kind of revolves around it, besides like the academic side. But, yeah, it’s kind of like the biggest thing in my life and it’s what I, it’s what I love to do. And so, I guess not everyone loves the sport on the same level as certain people, but I can definitely say it’s like my favorite thing to do, and if I’m not playing, I’m watching. If I’m not watching... I’m usually like watching smaller videos of replays of games or reading information about higher level professional teams and all that stuff. – Sarah

I mean like, I love it now, but I don’t know if it’s I love it because I’ve done it so much so I’m like so used to it like it feels like it’s like a part of me now... – Terri

Further, some participants seemed to understand and describe their self-perceptions through comparison to others. More specifically, they recognized being an athlete was one part of who they are, but worried that other athletes may over-identify with the role:

I think being an athlete to them is that, being an athlete *is them*. I think that’s their only identity they can attach themselves to, and I don’t really have that for me. I think I’ve kind of just, I’ve kind of made myself more versatile on the court and off the court. But some people in a sense, I think are really just attached to that one thing... – Tiara

Further, the participant descriptions describe connections between athletic identity and personality. The interplay between the two is reflected in the participants’ self-descriptions of characteristics such as competitiveness, aggression, confidence, drive, and mental toughness. Athletics seems to provide a unique atmosphere where certain traits are repurposed and used for common goals. In these descriptions, personalities and athletic identities mutually reinforce one another resulting in the accentuation of the respective characteristic. While the traits become more pronounced through the interaction between personality and athletic identity, it is difficult to ascertain

which would hold primary and secondary influence, supporting the understanding that the two become interlocked:

Yeah, I think I'm an extremely intrinsically motivated person... I'm always getting extra reps or something like that. Like a lot of times like I'd be the only one doing it. So I think that's another big thing about how I play. – Faith

When I was younger then I was like a dare-devil... that was outside of sports... then I would come in to sports and then I would still play with like that same aggression and stuff. – Shawn

Commitment to Identity through Athletic Journey

According to participant perspectives, athletic journeys are marked by experiences through high and low periods alternating between struggles and triumphs. The Commitment to Identity through Athletic Journey theme has elements supporting athletic identity as a seasoned, stable identity held throughout the range of experiences that make up the athletic journey. Further, as journeys are not simply characterized by high and low periods, but also include daily demands (e.g., athletic regimens, obligations, and balancing roles), this theme incorporates the commitment to athletic routines. Specifically, participant perspectives and experiences support that athletic identities are reflected in the devotion to the daily sport-specific routines.

From the participant descriptions, performance seems to be the most common factor underlying the volatile shifts from high to low periods:

So, if I don't perform well, and I'm really hard on myself too, so I know when I don't perform well, it kind of makes me upset, and then it also takes a lot of out of me to get out of that and to focus on what I need to do correctly... [When playing well] I feel like I've done my job... like scoring a goal, or my team winning a really big game, it like just releases all these adrenelines and emotions that kind of like keep me pumped up and they keep my energy high, and all that good stuff (laughs) is just flowing when I score goals or my team wins.

– Sarah

Mostly excitement though. Like breaking 16 [minute mark] for the first time was honestly real exciting. I was running up the hill and like I saw like 15:48, 15:49 and I'm like, 'Oh my God, I can do this. I can do this. Oh my God. I've been trying to do this all season, and I'm finally doing it (laughs)!' – Evan

In addition to performance, the recognition of benefits and sacrifices of sport involvement contribute to the highs and lows of athletic journeys. Some of the key benefits of sport commitment outside performance-related outcomes mentioned were earning an athletic scholarship and forming long-lasting relationships. Additionally, for some, the experiences of high periods that were not performance-related seemed to be more meaningful than winning games or playing well:

One of my favorite parts about being an athlete is the way the little kids look up at you... I don't know why it's such a big deal to me, to like go up to them and like high-five, and be like, 'Thank you for being here,' and like sign stuff for them if they want it because I think it's just like every kid looks up to someone and like for them to look up to me and be like, 'I want to play with you one day' or 'I want to be in your spot' you know? It's like crazy to think that like one day I was looking up at like Mia Hamm or something like that for that... that's like the biggest, biggest thing.' – Olivia

The participants recognized key benefits to their athletic involvement, but also acknowledged weighty sacrifices. These sacrifices are reflected clearly in decisions to leave other opportunities for their sports and in injury experiences:

I started playing basketball like as soon as I could walk. I didn't stop until my freshman year of high school. Man I don't even know where to start with basketball. Shoot, I always thought that I would be playing in the league (laughs). Ain't that like the kids dream? ... But I stopped playing because I had a talk with my mom and she... was like, 'Your coach said that you... can really go somewhere, like if you take this soccer thing, like if you take it to another level,' and I was like, 'So what's

that mean? I'm playing soccer and basketball everyday.' And then she's like, 'Well, you will probably have to cancel one or the other out.' And that was the hardest day of my life when I had to tell my basketball coach that I couldn't play for him because I had to focus on soccer. It was like I was losing a loved one. – Shawn
So, when I was injured... I was really scared... I mean, I was worried about it, and I was like, 'Am I going to be able to like run again?' – Terri

Additionally, athlete descriptions present a devotion to daily athletic routines. Although the athletic routines often were considered to be demanding, participants seemed to have a commitment and perspective that the benefits outweighed the sacrifices. While some days are more difficult than others, the participants remained committed to their routines:

You know, one day I might wake up and I might be excited to go to practice, I might be in a good mood. Another day I might wake up and I'm just, I don't want to practice at all. – Nathan

(Reflecting on high school experiences) But, we would like, take care of our bodies, make sure to like eat right, umm, like hydrate, and take care of ourself. And then we would also like put in extra hours... the coaches tell you to run when they're not around. We would actually run... like lifting each other up, like trying to be a leader even if you're not a leader. Just like helping people out and stuff, and encouraging people. – Terri

The daily athletic routine involves commitment to the physical toll of practices, training sessions, and games, where physical limits are pushed in order to reach and exceed individual and collective goals. This physical toll is evident across sports, and sometimes is embraced as a sign that ultimately reinforces athletic identity:

The physical, the beat down throughout the season. No matter what sport... your body will take a beating. – Shawn

When I feel sore after a workout, it makes me feel good, because I know I was putting effort into something, and like feeling the results makes me like feel like I've accomplished something... even though most people complain about how it hurts, I like the feeling. –

Farah

The athletic routines reflect a devotion to sport and show tradeoffs between sacrifices and benefits. Participants discussed sacrificing time, energy, and social aspects for the benefits of gaining sleep, focus, and the ability to perform well. While sacrificing these aspects can be difficult, the participants consistently show commitment to the athletic routine over an alternative routine:

I think what it means to be an athlete is someone who's dedicating a lot of their time (to sport)... they're hoping to achieve certain things in, whether it's trying to go professionally, whether it's trying to reach a certain score or goal, or trying to win a medal or trophy at the end of the year... like preparation for our bodies and minds coming into games or practices, like you're not staying up late, you're not going out and drinking the night before a game or practice or anything, like you have to be fully focused, like your mind and your body... So, it's vital to be able to get your mind and body ready, and with your body also comes to eating the right foods before, the day before a match and even the morning before. Everything kind of leads up to whatever big game we have or something. So, it's important to make good decisions and good choices on what you're going to do. – Sarah

Self-Recognition of Social Reinforcement

Based on participant experiences, the athlete role seems to be reinforced through primary social relationships. The Self-Recognition of Social Reinforcement theme describes family influences on the instillation of athletic identities. Sport community influences such as experiences with coaches and teammates also are central to this theme. In addition to the awareness of social appraisal, this theme describes the spotlight of representing a program as well as how feelings of being monitored can support an identity of athletes as representatives of sport.

Athletic identity seems to be a complex construct influenced by self-appraisal and the appraisal of others shown through messages of continued support:

We took a group picture when I was like maybe 6 years old and everyone is in their soccer jersey... And then all the trophies were

behind us, so I was like, at that point I think I realized, ‘Oh, we are a soccer family. Like we don’t play any other sports. Like this is what we do.’ And if you don’t play it, then you ref it. It becomes your job, or you coach it. So, like, currently I’m a coach for a soccer club, so I’m like, ‘Oh, it influenced my job too.’ But, yeah, when I saw that when I was like 10, I think is when I was like, ‘Oh, this is what we’re supposed to do.’ – Olivia

Participant descriptions support a heavy family influence where parents often introduced the athletes to their current sport. Coaches also played integral roles in the development and fostering of athletic identities. Some key roles played by the coaches were affirming the athletic ability and instilling confidence in the athletic role:

My coach, I asked her... ‘Why did you pick me to be on the team?’ And she said, ‘Because I think you have a lot of potential,’ and she said that like before I had peaked... after she said that... I was playing like amazing... I knew like I was going to be able to represent [University Name] in like a positive way. – Farah

In the 8th grade year... I was just faster than everybody... [My coach was] telling me like I need to go play somewhere else (a higher level)... I mean that was a good feeling because people, you know, having faith in you, you know, before you even realize... before even realize it. – Nathan

Further, this theme describes how through gaining social attention as an athlete, many participants described feeling that being a representative of their team was part of their self-view:

I think being an athlete is representing something more than yourself... Well, many athletes, I feel like, represent like a team or organization... that team or organization wants you to represent them because they feel like you have something that’s noticeable, or like original about you... – Farah

Additionally, the participants discussed social status as being connected to the sport played. Participants recognized that higher profile sports garnered more attention and social status when compared to other sports. Athletes across each sport felt they were representatives of themselves and their program, but

athletes in higher profile sports felt they received additional status of being known:

People know who I am. People know that I’m not just a regular normal person. I kind of just, even though I play a sport and I kind of have my name out there in that kind of way in a sense I still kind of like keep myself up to a higher standard than everybody else. – Tiara
Like I go out to eat sometimes, and whenever I’m wearing like a [University Name] men’s soccer shirt, and there’s some people would notice it and be like, ‘Oh, you play soccer there?’ And then I’m just like, ‘Yeah,’ and then I just try to brush it off. – Shawn

Connections Between Themes and Literature

The purpose of the study was to explore deeper understandings of athletic identity and gain a more nuanced view of the construct by using a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the meaning(s) of athletic identity. In the interview with Nathan, he discussed the image of an iceberg metaphorically to explain that there are surface-level aspects of being an athlete that others see, but that there is more below the surface that others do not understand.

What it means to be an athlete is, you know... I don’t know if you’ve ever seen the picture of the iceberg. The iceberg where half, like a little bit of it is out of the water and the rest is under water... I think it’s, it’s a lot more work than you think it is to be an athlete... I think it takes a lot of mental toughness and character to be an athlete, especially at this level. – Nathan

The iceberg metaphor can be used to describe individual athletic identities, but it also can be applied to athletic identity literature. The construct commonly is defined as the extent to which an individual identifies with the athletic role (Brewer et al., 1993). Components such as social identity, exclusivity, and negative affectivity are measured and discussed in relation to other variables (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). These understandings can be described as visible aspects of the iceberg. This qualitative investigation ventures into the depths to gain a clearer view of the construct, the complexity of the athletic identity iceberg. From the reflexive thematic analysis, three themes were generated to describe the construct of athletic identity

from collegiate athlete perspectives and experiences.

The participant descriptions support athletic identity as a part of the larger self-concept. The description of the athletic identity as “part of me” reflects the ownership and intimacy of the role. Through early recognition of ability and enjoyment, participants often considered themselves as athletes at a young age. Participants continued sport involvement throughout childhood and adolescence, which seems to have maintained or elevated their connection with the athlete role (Houle, Brewer, & Kluck, 2010). Consistent involvement, success, and reinforcement likely drive centrality of the athletic identity, reflected in this statement:

Once I fell in love with it, it's kind of become my life, and everything I do kind of revolves around it, besides like the academic side. But, yeah, it's kind of like the biggest thing in my life and it's what I, it's what I love to do. – Sarah

This description reflects a love for sport cultivated over years, where it seems athletic involvement constitutes a large part of the self-concept. Contrarily, perhaps, an early commitment to the athlete role helps explain instances of an ambiguous attachment to the athlete role:

Why am I still doing this? Like, ‘Why don't you just sit out if you have this opportunity?’ and I kind of question it and I look back at it. And I don't really have an answer for myself either. – Olivia

It is possible that it is difficult to separate from an athletic identity if it has been a central aspect of the self before it was consciously named or realized by the individual.

The findings suggest that personality and athletic identities become interwoven over time. Due to this process, it is difficult to differentiate between the two. It is possible that athletic identity and personality complement one another. In this way, athletic identity can serve as both a catalyst and inhibitor for sport-related activity. For instance, an athlete with driven personality traits may increase driven behaviors that become accentuated in sports (e.g., making positive pre-game decisions). Contrarily, an athlete with lazy personality traits may have decreases in the lazy behaviors that are minimized in sports (e.g., choosing

not to skip extra workouts). Additionally, it is likely that those who are more performance-oriented (e.g., performance narratives; perfectionism in sport; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Jones, Glintmeyer, & McKenzie, 2005), would go to greater lengths to maximize sport-related behaviors as personality and athletic identity interact within the sport culture.

The Athletic Identity as “Part of Me” theme incorporates findings that both align with identity theory and provide greater detail on conceptualizations described in the seminal athletic identity work (i.e., Brewer et al., 1993). In identity theory, identities are described as situated within a hierarchy where salient identities drive role performance and have more stability across time and situations (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Participant responses support that the athletes perceived athletic identity as a central part of their self-view. Further, consistent with identity theory, some participants seemed to understand and describe their self-perceptions through comparison to others, which can influence their set of meanings associated with athletic identity (i.e., identity standard; Burke & Stets, 2009). Additionally, the existence of central athletic identities among these participants seemed evident in their decisions regarding sport (e.g., performing additional repetitions in a workout). Such an understanding provides more detail pertaining to the description of athletic identity as a self-schema, or lens through which athletes process information (Brewer et al., 1993). When athletic identity is an intimate part of the self-concept, athletes can make daily decisions with athletic commitments in mind, which can be evident in the devotion to sport-specific routines.

The participant responses suggest that athletic identities are not only described as an intimate part of the self, but that an important aspect of these identities is they can be tested, hardened, and reinforced through athletic journeys. Athletic identity is a part of the self-concept that undergoes constant tests in the devotion to daily routines and in the extreme highs and lows of the athletic journey. Throughout continual athletic seasons, athletes make the choice to continue to commit to their schedules. This process of continuing to practice skills, lift weights, build endurance, eat well, etc. maintains the athletic identity. The schedules can feel both exciting and mundane at various

times and constitute a common aspect of the athlete lifestyle (Cherrington & Watson, 2010). According to identity theory, individuals choose behaviors that reinforce identity, and identities reinforce behaviors in a reciprocal process (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Thus, the daily commitment to athletic role-related behaviors maintains athletic identities while athletic identities continue to strengthen the performance of athletic role-related behaviors.

Athletic identities are tested in sport routines and in the extreme highs and lows in athletic experiences. Athletes experience high moments such as winning titles, performing well, and positively impacting others. These moments often are filled with joy and satisfaction. Seeing that hard work has been rewarded can continue to fuel the reciprocal relationship between identities and behaviors (Stryker & Burke, 2000). However, negative experiences also can be integral parts of the athletic journey. In moments such as losing, playing poorly, and injury, feelings of loss and hopelessness can become salient. Through these struggles and through the triumphs, athletic identities can be tested. As supported by research on cultural scripts in sport, regardless of reasons for competing in sport (e.g., performance, discovery, and relational narratives; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2013a), athletic narratives can have periods encompassing highs and lows in the years of sport involvement. Thus, the Commitment to Identity through Athletic Journey theme provides rich information consistent with identity theory, supporting athletic identity as a seasoned identity that individuals reinforce through continued involvement and competition.

Further, findings suggest that social influences can play a large role in the formation and maintenance of the identities. The participant accounts point to strong family influences on the development of athletic identities. Some of the participants explained how their parents were former athletes and helped in their exposure to sports at early ages. Subsequently, the identities seem to be fostered by the individual, family, coaches, and peers. From early involvement to the current age, the appraisal of others informed and strengthened athletic identities. Consistent with Stephan and Brewer's (2007) findings that personal (e.g., physical components) and social factors (e.g.,

recognition) contributed to the maintenance of athletic identity, the collective appraisal of athletic identities appeared to strengthen such self-views in the current study. It seems that appraisal from others, paired with self-appraisal, makes athletic identity a personally and socially reinforced part of the self-concept.

Additionally, the participant descriptions support that viewing oneself as a representative can be a part of athletic identity; such understandings are consistent with social identity theory. Similar to identity theory, social identity theory posits that identities are comprised within the self-concept and influence behavior. However, social identity theory focuses more on intergroup relations and categories (Stets & Burke, 2000). The participants discussed recognizing that they receive public attention and further explained they not only bring attention upon themselves, but also on their team, university and other athletes. These understandings speak to shared experiences and camaraderie. Thus, the collective sense of representing athletes described by participants suggests a cross-sport connectedness and ownership of the athlete role (i.e., it is the athlete's responsibility to represent the collective). Further, upholding the athlete image could increase self-identification with the athlete role.

Thus, the Self-Recognition of Social Reinforcement theme provides findings consistent with identity theory as well as greater understandings of the original conceptualization of athletic identity as a social role (Brewer et al., 1993). The concept of commitment in identity theory describes the degree to which an individual's interpersonal relationships depend on the possession of a particular role. Stryker and Burke (2000) explain that commitment impacts salience and that salience influences role performance. The participant responses indicate that many social relationships formed and are maintained through athletics (e.g., "My best friends are from golf... Like my best friend... we've been playing golf together since we were like 12 years old." – Farah). As family, friends, coaches, and community members reinforce involvement in sport, it is evident that an athlete's network of relationships may seem dependent on their status as an athlete, which can strengthen athletic identities. Further, participant accounts support that athletes may have in-group understandings

of shared experiences as well as a desire to represent the collective in a positive light. Thus, athletic identity can be influenced by social appraisal and understood as a social role (Brewer et al., 1993). Participant responses provide evidence that being a representative of a team and/or program may be a component of the social role.

Practical Implications

In this investigation, athletic identity is likened to an iceberg, a participant-inspired conceptualization explaining that there are aspects related to athletic identity that are both visible and beneath the surface view. The current study adds to existing literature through assessing and describing meanings of athletic identity from the perspective of collegiate athletes. The investigation provides greater understanding of the depth of athletic identity as presented by the themes developed through the reflexive thematic analysis. Such findings are relevant for professionals aiming to more effectively connect with and support this population, as recognizing the importance of athletic identity is considered an essential competency for practitioners working with athletes (Ward et al., 2005). The findings add to the understandings of athletic identity, providing helpful information in efforts to work toward competent practice.

While there are several descriptions emerging from this study that may be transferable to other athletes (i.e., readers may see links between the findings and experiences of others; Tracy, 2010), it is important that practitioners work toward understanding the importance of athletic identity for each individual. Professionals working with collegiate athletes can encourage self-reflection to assess the meanings and importance of athletic identity for individual athletes within the context of their own lived experiences. Further, when professionals notice potentially unhealthy perceptions and behaviors related to athletic identity, they should refer collegiate athletes to appropriate licensed practitioners (e.g., licensed professional counselors, licensed clinical social workers, clinical or counseling psychologists) who can address such concerns (NCAA, 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

The study is limited in that it is based on the perspectives of nine U.S. collegiate athletes. Future research should consider additional populations of athletes to better understand athletic identity across different groups (e.g., professionals; youth sport). Also, while participants were from several different states, all participants attended the same Division I university. Future research focused on the collegiate level should include participants from multiple colleges and universities. Further, future research can examine potential commonalities and differences across groups by collecting data from large samples of collegiate athletes across different sports. With such investigations, researchers can examine and better understand potential nuances related to athletic identity across subgroups in collegiate athletics (e.g., comparison of athletic identity across divisional levels and in revenue and non-revenue sports).

Conclusion

This study explored the construct of athletic identity from the perspective of current collegiate athletes. Athletic identity commonly is defined as the extent to which individuals identify with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993; Ronkainen et al., 2016a). Through using reflexive thematic analysis, themes were generated to provide a more nuanced understanding of the construct. From participant accounts, athletic identity is described as a personal part of the athlete self-concept that has been tested, reinforced, and hardened through commitment to the role and consistency throughout the athletic journey. Additionally, athletic identity is described as a complement to personality where sport-related traits are magnified and detracting traits are minimized. Further, participants describe being a representative of their programs and teams as part of their athletic identity, and seemed to carry themselves with this knowledge. Lastly, athletic identity is described as a role influenced by both self-appraisal and social appraisal. The construct of athletic identity is likened to an iceberg; the reflexive thematic analysis helps describe the complexity of the construct by going beyond the surface view to explore deeper understandings.

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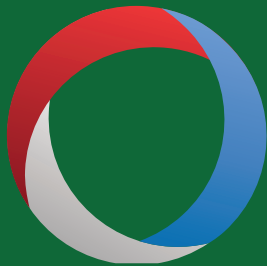
APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me about your experiences in athletics.
 - o When did you start playing sports?
 - o What sports have you played?
 - o When did you start to focus on (particular sport)?
 - o Why did you choose (particular sport)?
- What have been the most important or meaningful experiences that you have had as an athlete?
- What experiences have influenced your view of yourself as an athlete?
- In your opinion, what does it mean to be an athlete?
- How does your identity as an athlete change in different situations? (e.g., with team, in class, with friends/family)
- How does your identity as an athlete influence your behavior?

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