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What am I?": Navigating Running Identity During COVID-19

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"WHAT AM I?": NAVIGATING RUNNING IDENTITY DURING COVID-19

BY

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE PAGE

Joshua Yeager

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for

the master's degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree.

Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are

necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis attempted to answer how collegiate student-athlete runners navigated their running identity through the COVID-19 pandemic. This international health crisis served as an identity threat to the participants in this study as it cancelled outdoor track and field season in the spring of 2020. The main goal was to investigate how student-athlete runners navigated their athletic identity during COVID-19 and the social and psychological costs associated with said navigation. Utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews, I collected data from five male and five female collegiate distance runners, from the same university. With grounded theory approach and identity theory as a theoretical framework, I discovered six themes concerning navigation of identity. These themes are Immediate Reactions, Negotiation of Identities, Emotional and Mental Health Responses, Formation of Running Identity, Social Support, and Return to Running. These six themes created the basis for the proposed model I titled this model "Navigation of Athletic Running Identity through COVID-19". In general, the participants found COVID-19 to be a temporary identity threat that created a need for identity work during the pandemic. This negotiation of identity led to some emotional and mental health responses. Eventually, the athletes' restore their running identities with slightly different meanings with the return to practice. Throughout the process, the commitment to running identity and social support influenced the process of navigation. This study showed how a

group of homogenous student-athletes' running identities were navigated and altered through the temporary identity threat of COVID-19.

Keywords: Athletic-identity, Identity navigation, Identity hierarchy, Identity threats, COVID-19

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background on Impacts of COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19, which can cause severe respiratory illness, was first reported in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO 2021a). As of the April 17, 2021, there have been 139,501,934 confirmed positive cases and 2,992,193 deaths from COVID-19 worldwide (WHO 2021b). The recommended practices of quarantine and social distancing have created a new normal around the world to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Studies have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on health care providers and the general public (Daly et al. 2021; Goularte et al. 2021; Stanton et al. 2020). Studies also examined the effects of this pandemic on students' mental health (Elmer et al. 2020; Ma et al. 2020; Wathelet et al. 2020), physical activities (Gallo et al. 2020; Romero-Blanco et al. 2020), school performance (Radu et al. 2020) and food insecurity (Owens et al. 2020). Two large studies focused on the mental health of college students during COVID-19. Ma et al. (2020) examined the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of 746,217 students in Guangdong Province, China. The authors found high rates of stress (34.9%), depression (21.1%) and anxiety (11.0%) among the population. Wathelet and colleagues (2020) found that French students reported high rates of suicidal thoughts (11.4%) and symptoms of distress (22.4%), severe depression (16.1%), and severe anxiety (27.5%).

A review of the literature showed little work has been conducted to examine the impact of COVID-19 on student-athletes' identities. There is, however, some work

regarding the impact of COVID-19 on sport in general and how it negatively impacts athletes. Goularte and colleagues (2020) noted how "social distancing and other interventions that disrupt day-to-day normal activities are associated with the development of acute stress disorder symptoms" (32). This disruption, felt through quarantine, leads to a shift in daily activities which disturbs the performance of identities. This leads to a higher prevalence of psychiatric disorders, stress, and other emotional disturbances. The authors further noted more than 75% of their Brazilian participants had anxiety and 66% had depression (2020:34). For these reasons, researching mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic is of utmost importance. What the research does not cover is how athletes navigated their identity through COVID-19. Hence, the overall goal of this research is to qualitatively investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student-athletes' running identity.

Statement of the Problem

Research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has largely ignored the potential effects of this pandemic on student-athletes' identity. This unique group of students spends numerous hours practicing, traveling, and dealing with injuries. Some student-athletes spend years developing and nurturing their athletic identities. However, student-athletes lost the ability to practice and compete as universities shut down. Although student-athletes have other identities based on personal attributes, groups to which they belong, and other roles they occupy, their identity as an athlete resides at the top of their hierarchy of identities. My research focused on collegiate runners and the threat that COVID-19 posed to their athletic identity and well-being.

In terms of social impacts, one of the biggest disturbances caused by COVID-19 was the postponement of sport events. For example, high-performance athletes sat in shock as Olympic qualifying events were abandoned as COVID-19 spread rapidly throughout the world (Schinke et al. 2020a:270). Once the Olympics were formally postponed, the "years of hard work, diligence, and commitment were placed in question" (2020a:271). Due to this postponement and the threat to their identity, mental health consultants tried to find ways to aid and improve the mental well-being of athletes in this trying time (2020a:269). This is due to an athlete's intense, often disproportionate, weight placed on their identity as an athlete (Schinke et al. 2020b:410). This heavy weight leads to an increased possibility of depression, anxiety, addiction, and many other mental health disorders (Schinke et al. 2020b:410). This is reflected in studies on COVID-19 thus far. For example, a study of young Spanish athletes found that almost half of the participants (45%) had moderate to severe mental health issues due to COVID-19 (Pons et al. 2020). However, athletes who were able to practice during COVID-19 reported fewer mental health issues. Similarly, Ruffault and colleagues (2020) found that French athletes who continue training during COVID-19 experienced little anxiety. These studies assessed mental health impacts felt from COVID-19. What is lacking in literature is attention to athletes navigating their identities amidst the threat of COVID-19.

This research focused exclusively on runners from a mid-major Midwest, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 (D1) university. All participants had their outdoor track seasons terminated due to COVID-19 which created a threat to their identity.

Research Objectives

The intent of the study was to understand how COVID-19 affected student-athletes' athletic identities and propose a theory on this understanding. This included how identities are managed and fluctuate when put under stress. Therefore, the overall goal of this research was to investigate how student-athlete runners navigated their athletic identity during COVID-19 and the social and psychological costs associated with said navigation.

Moving Forward

The following four chapters concern various steps taken to address the objective described above. In Chapter 2, I covered a review of previous studies on the impact of COVID-19 on students, athletes, and student-athletes. Further, the literature review also covered identity threats for athletes with injury. The inclusion of physical injury served as a well-studied identity threat to athletes. In Chapter 3, I presented the theoretical framework for the study. Identity theory proved to be the ideal framework for addressing the research objective. Chapter 4 contains the methods utilized to collect and analyze data. This chapter covered constructivist grounded theory as the main method of collecting and presenting data. Next, I dove into data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations with collection of data. In Chapter 5, I presented my findings with a focus on the themes that I discovered in the data and how they constructed the proposed theory for athlete navigation of running identity through COVID-19. Additionally, this chapter provided a discussion on comparison to previous research, study limitations, and

implications for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 offers a conclusion to the study with

parting remarks from myself.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to investigate how student-athlete runners navigated their athletic identity through COVID-19. As mentioned in the introduction, previous research on student-athletes navigating athletic identity during COVID-19 was lacking. Studies on the impact of COVID-19 on students and athletes, however, were reviewed in this chapter to contextualize the research problem and to gain an insight on the impact of COVID-19 on these two populations. Initially, this chapter began with a brief section on the use of literature reviews in grounded theory research. I also provided a section on definitions of important concepts. Moving forward, I first focused on the impact COVID-19 on students before turning my attention to its impact on athletes and athletic identity. I then focused on specific studies noting COVID-19's effect on student-athletes and threats to identity. Because the literature on COVID-19 as a threat to identity was rather small at the writing of this research, I included a brief review of studies on the identity threat of injury. Within sociological studies on athletes, injury is cited as a common threat to identity. Injury in athletics served to bolster the literature review on how athletes' respond to a different, yet similar, identity threat. Finally, it reviewed studies on some strategies athletes adopt to navigate their identities during times of threat.

Literature Review in Grounded Theory Research

Put simply, a literature review is a synthesis of studies and literature on a given topic (Pan 2008:1). It involves an in-depth review of studies, theory, and data based on topics relevant to concepts researched. Grounded theory approach has a different perspective on literature review compared to other qualitative methods. The ultimate goal

of grounded theory is to generate theory or models based on data grounded in participants' perspectives (Charmaz 2006; Creswell and Poth 2017). While literature reviews are often reviewed and relied on in the initial phases of the project, grounded theorists postpone the literature review until after data is collected and analyzed (Charmaz 2006). This is in an effort to create a theory or model grounded in the data and not influenced by previous studies. This was a suggestion I followed in my thesis. The literature review I provided below demonstrated my grasp of relevant works and allowed me to make claims in my findings (Charmaz 2006:168). The following section discusses important definitions relevant to this literature review.

Definitions of Concepts

Before covering the sections noted at the beginning of this chapter, definitions for some important concepts are presented to minimize confusion.

Identity is a concept central to this study. Identities are sets of meanings for roles that conform to expectations of others and expectations of an individual (Brenner et al. 2014). Identities are pieces of the "self". The self is a combination of all identities that make up a person (Mead 1934). Identity encompasses many different roles in the self, and athletic identity is central to this research.

Identity threats constituted occurrences that challenged the performance and perception of an individual's or groups' identity (Brown and Coupland 2015:1318). Examples of identity threats for athletes include injury, poor performance, and retirement. In this study, COVID-19 is an external identity threat that constrained and challenged the

participants' ability and desire to perform their identities. Identity threats are a constant

for all identities and are combated through various mechanisms.

Athletic identity is part of the self and its strength is determined based on

individual degree of relation to the identity, other identities, and the roles they present

(Lautenbach et al. 2020:4). Athletic identity, therefore, constitutes the role identity of

being an athlete and was the focus of this study.

Identity loss is another term requiring clarification and definition. Throughout

life, identities change and can lead to reorganization of identity importance in hierarchies.

There is always a possibility of identity loss (Grapuensperger et al. 2020), which can be

caused by both internal (e.g., chronic illness) and external threats or challenges (e.g.,

COVID-19). Dissociation from important identities (e.g., athletic identity), can, in some

cases, lead to some emotional and mental health issues.

Identity navigation is another important concept. Within this work it refers to the

overall process of identity negotiation. In other words, it constitutes the entire journey a

social actor embarks upon when navigating a given identity. Within this navigation there

are two aspects of negotiations when an identity is threatened. These are maintenance,

and rearrangement.

Identity maintenance/management is a strategy used when an identity is under

threat or disruption in identity performance. In this study I define maintenance of

identity as the desire and efforts to achieve consistency within an identity hierarchy, and

meaning of an identity, when faced with identity threats (DeLamater and Ward 2013).

Identity rearrangement/restructuring is the second strategy which involves

changes in identity following a threat. While maintenance refers to attempts to achieve

identity stability and verification, restructuring involves rearranging identity hierarchies and increasing/decreasing importance of some identities. Some individuals may eventually claim back their valued identity with little change while others have to reconstruct their identities with new meanings attached to them (Charmaz 2002; DeLamater and Ward 2013).

Each of these definitions provides a pertinent concept to my study. They aided in tracing the navigation and negotiation of identities through the identity threat of COVID-19. The next section focuses on previous literature concerning COVID-19's impact on social groups represented by the participants in this study.

COVID-19 Impact on Students

The impacts of COVID-19 included social and psychological issues which spread rapidly throughout the world at the beginning of 2020. COVID-19 impacts people from all walks of life including college students (Charles et al. 2020; Copeland et al. 2020; Du et al. 2021; Son et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020). As indicated above, Ma et al. (2020) found that multiple factors including family infection, media exposure, and lack of social support led to high rates of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. In France, a study found that students reported high rates of suicidal thoughts and symptoms of distress, depression, and anxiety due to the pandemic (Wathelet et al. 2020). These symptoms were a result of quarantine and isolation and not related to the physical contraction of the disease (2020). In the U.S., Wang and colleagues (2020) found moderate-to-severe levels of depression in students at Texas A&M directly related to the pandemic. Stress was influenced largely by a shift in academics, which disrupted regular

habits and led to uncertainty (2020:6). This change in academics included a shift to online classes, increased concern of academic performance, and delayed graduation dates (2020:6). Son and colleagues (2020) found stress and anxiety to come from areas other than academics during the quarantine among a different college student population in Texas. They wrote, "Interestingly, almost half of the participants reported lower stress levels related to academic pressure and class workload since the pandemic began" due to professors easing student's transitions in learning (2020:10). Rather, the stress on students largely stemmed from fear and worries about personal health and health of loved ones (2020:1). While authors found different sources of stress leading to various mental health issues, the presence of stress, anxiety, and depression remained consistent across many studies. Copeland and colleagues (2021) found that COVID-19 impacted students' mood and wellness behavior. Charles and colleagues (2021) found increases in mood disorders, perceived stress, and alcohol use during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 compared to results from the previous year (1). However, unlike depression, stress, and alcohol use, anxiety did not increase during the pandemic. Overall, the studies presented showed a general trend of an increase in mental health issues among college students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Impact on Professional and Elite Athletes

Just as COVID-19 impacted student identities and mental health, so too did it impact athletes. The impacts of COVID-19 on athletes ranged from postponement of the Olympics to the halt on the NCAA's March Madness. Robert Schinke and colleagues wrote multiple articles concerning COVID-19's impact on athletes. He and his colleagues

(Schinke et al. 2020a), noted that, to an athlete, "suddenly, years of hard work, diligence, and commitment were placed in question" with the cancellation of Olympic qualifying events (2020a:270-271). This, of course, impacted athletes' mental health as well as their identity. Schinke et al. (2020b), brought identity into light in the second study. An intense, and often disproportionate, weight placed on the athletic identity of an athlete can increase depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders in a time of disruption (2020b:410). The COVID-19 pandemic served as a disruption that impedes athletes' ability to perform a cherished identity. This disruption potentially leads to weight gain, depression, and various other mental health issues which creates ill effects for the athlete. Mental health issues were among the most prevalent impacts felt following COVID-19 (Pons et al. 2020). Ruffault et al. (2020) showed that those possessing the ability to continue training and maintaining their athletic identity had less mental health issues. These studies presented background on the impacts and potential impacts of COVID-19 on athletes and mental health.

COVID-19 impacted the well-being of athletes as demonstrated by higher number of athletes reporting issues with drinking, smoking and mental health problems (Lautenbach et al. 2020). This presented a further problem as previous research has noted that high level athletes often resent seeking psychological aid for impacts from identity threats (Weatherhead 2015). With strong athletic identity serving as a barrier to seeking help, athletes were found to sink further into emotional despair. Costa et al. (2020:8) noted that athletes with high levels of perceived athletic identity often catastrophized and ruminated on their situation during COVID-19. Catastrophizing and rumination referred to a constant focus on the negative impact of the pandemic on athletic identity. This led

to increased emotional issues and strain on athletic identity. In general, elite athletes were found to cope with the COVID-19 situation better than athletes at different levels (2020:7). Elite athletes, compared to amateur and recreational athletes, had more practice and strategies with addressing identity threats within athletics. This is often because the social role as an athlete is often the foremost identity for elite athletes. Therefore, athletic identity and level of professionalism within athletics produced different results in response to COVID-19. In contrast to Costa et al. (2020), Lautenbach et al. (2020:13) found those with the highest athletic identity had little shift in motivation to train. Differences in the results were possibly created through differing methods utilized such as measures of athletic identity. Overall, studies have shown that COVID-19 has negatively impacted athletes' mental health and threatened maintenance of athletic identity. Differing findings were noted concerning level of athletic identity and relation to emotional distress and identity loss. Notably, studies concerning COVID-19's impact on athletes remain limited as the pandemic remains novel. There were a few studies, however, that viewed those possessing both student and athlete as identities.

COVID-19 Impact on Student-Athletes

Studies on COVID-19's impact on student-athletes remained even more limited than that of athletes alone while conducting this study. Student-athletes present a unique group as they embody both the responsibilities of students and athletes in their daily lives. The previous two sections exemplified the impacts of COVID-19 on both groups, and student-athletes experience a culmination of these impacts. To begin, student-athletes have a level of athletic identity similar to professionals and elites. Weatherhead (2015)

noted how there is "inherently a level of attrition between high school athletics and college athletics…if one makes it to a higher level of athletics, it stands to reason that their athletic identity would be higher" (88). Thus, a student-athlete not only embodies high levels of academic responsibility, but also carries the high demands of a committed athlete. This section summarizes the studies I reviewed relating to student-athletes.

Lucia Abenza-Cano and colleagues (2020) noted the impact of COVID-19 on continuation of athletic identities for student-athletes. The authors found identity shifts as student-athletes put increased weight on studying and schoolwork during COVID-19 (2020:1). Further it was found that COVID-19 caused fewer athletes to desire continuing athletics upon the conclusion of their studies (2020:1). The student-athletes in this study found a shift in identity allowing for less maintenance of their athletic identity. In other words, this study showed the impacts of a threat on identity and how navigation of identity restructures both an athletic identity and a hierarchy of other identities within the self. This may be a result of the lack of ability or opportunity to perform an athletic identity, but also because of reorganization of identity priorities.

In terms of maintenance of identities, Graupensperger and others (2020) looked at student-athletes and their changing athletic identities during COVID-19. They paid close attention to the supportive role of teammates for the maintenance of identities. An increase in identity loss was found in those with strong perceived athletic identity (2020:668). However, identity loss was often combated through close social relations. Those having strong social interactions with teammates found less shift in athletic identity (2020:663). Team environments and social relations were important to identity maintenance and thus mental health. This further supported the findings that athletic

identity maintenance is based on social relations as well (Lautenbach et al. 2020). Therefore, the social position of the student-athlete was unique in the sense that their presence at a university allowed for social performance of both student identities and athletic identities. These studies presented the most in-depth research into student-athletes specifically in response to COVID-19.

However, due to the limited number of studies on COVID-19 as an identity threat, I found it useful to review some studies on injury as a threat and how athletes navigate identity. Injury provided a provocative concept to explore in further understanding and contextualizing COVID-19's threat on athlete identity.

Injury Impact on Athletic Identity

Identities, when heavily relied upon in a professional setting, are constantly at threat (Brown and Coupland 2015:1318). Many findings presented in the literature (Brown and Coupland et al. 2015; Costa et al. 2020; Graupensperger et al. 2020) noted that injury is a serious threat to athletic identity. In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on athletic identity, a look at injury allows a view into athlete navigation of identity in a different, yet comparable, sense. Graupensperger et al. (2020:663) stated that "When athletes who possess strong athletic identities are faced with an abrupt career end (e.g., injury), they tend to dissociate from their athletic identity." Further, Costa et al. (2020:8) called upon previous literature saying that "athletes reduced their investment in the athletic role to protect their self-image following anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction." The inclusion of injury as background in other literature surrounding the

same concepts, and the similar effects noted by scholars in athlete reaction to injury and COVID-19, justify athletic injury as an important area of literature to discuss.

The effect of injury on athletes' identity and mental health is widely reported (Putukian 2016). Some scholars considered injury as one of the main risk factors for mental health issues among athletes (Souter et al. 2018). Marsac et al. (2013) stated that physical injury can lead to detrimental psychological outcomes such as post-traumatic stress symptoms. Athletes in alpine skiing noted stress symptoms at the mere possibility of risk of injury (Kiemle-Gabbay and Lavallee 2017). Constant stress of injury is found to create physical and psychological distress and disturbance. Snyder (1990) found that female gymnasts felt immense emotional responses due to the nature of risk in sport as well. Frustration, disappointment, fear, and nervousness were all responses felt by women gymnasts at the mere possibility of injury.

Beyond fear of injury, actual physical injury in athletics is found to create further stress, mental health disorders, and crisis in identity. Dean (2019) found that following his concussion as a collegiate athlete, he fell into emotional trauma. Beer cans scattered his room, he missed exams and assignments, and his life appeared to be falling apart (2019:26-27). This led to the author attempting to act "normal". Acting normal and focusing on the present is found to be a form of identity work and maintenance athletes use to combat injury (Brown and Coupland 2015). However, acting normal when injured creates great psychological strain and makes it hard to reach out to others for help. Athletes further feel pressure when injured as "their fears are connected with the notion that they are letting down team-mates *(sic),* managers, coaches, supporters, as well as their family" (Roderick 2006:83). Graupensperger et al. (2020) noted how teammates and

social environments created higher well-being and maintenance of identity during COVID-19. The pressure felt in relation to teammates, coaches, and others surrounding these athletes directly relates to the social upholding of athletic identity.

While injury presents a different threat to identity than COVID-19, both are similar in the sense that they can be temporary setbacks, or career ending threats. Rehabilitation from injury aids in physical improvement and restoration of athletic identity. Ford and Gordon (1999:251-252) found that close interactions with those involved in sport aided in athletes coping and returning to athletics, restoring athletic identity. Interactions with coaches and others may also be negative as athletes are coerced to return to athletics before physically able (Young, White, and McTeer 1994:190). Therefore, while identity is personal, it is also largely social. This return to identity and performance in sport is troubled through many different angles. Through navigation and restructuring identity I exemplify this return to identity and performance.

Navigating and Restructuring Athletic Identity

Return to identity and performance is represented in this study through navigating and restructuring athletic identity. In studying chronic illness, Charmaz (2002:31S) noted that the self is habitual and often does not accept change to identities and the self easily. She further noted that a reconstructed self does not necessarily mean a better self; it does mean a modified, revised, and perhaps re-envisioned self (2002:38S). This section takes Charmaz's ideas and looks at athlete strategies to utilize identity work, how social relations impact identity reconstruction, and cases that exemplify reconstruction of identity.

In terms of navigating identity, Miller and colleagues (2019) noted that emotional suppression is a common theme of coping and negotiation for individuals facing identity threats. Suppression refers to diminishing emotional responses and the severity of an identity threat. It is utilized when identity nonverification occurs due to identity threats (2019:99). In other words, emotional suppression occurs when consistency of identities is thrown out the window when unexpected situations put strain on an identity. Further, Miller et al. (2019) argued that negative emotions automatically occur when one's identity is threatened. Charmaz (2002) supported this argument when she wrote that chronically ill people "avoid viewing themselves as chronically ill and resist reconstructing an altered self around illness until they exhaust all other plausible explanations" (31S) Moreover, Charmaz (2002:38S) stated that reconstruction of a self creates a new self that is modified, re-envisioned, and slightly different than before. These two studies exemplified the beginning of identity navigation through identity maintenance. This involved coping mechanisms and prolonging reality. Further, suppression and denial of threats to identity are a common first step in beginning the navigation of identity in response to a threat.

Brown and Coupland (2015) noted these same ideas in regard to studying a rugby team on identity work in response to identity threats. Suppression, as has been covered, is often an initial response to identity threats. Rugby players focused on the present (instead of worrying about the future), sought individual toughness and self-reliance, and aspired for success via chasing goals (2015:1324-1327). These identity work strategies were utilized to navigate identity threats of injury, short careers, and performance issues (2015:1324-1327). Returning to Graupensperger et al. (2020:667), another form of

restructuring and navigating identity, this time in the case of COVID-19, is maintenance

of social relations. Student-athletes faced identity threats with campus closures, online

classes, and the cancellation of collegiate athletics. Yet, maintenance of social relations

was found to have a direct impact on maintenance of athletic identity during COVID-19.

These examples of initial reactions to threats of identity, identity work, and social

relations as methods of maintenance embodied the literature concerning the population I

studied. Studies on other athletes have also shown and modeled navigation and

restructuring of identity. Hockey (2015:38) outlined his own experience as an

autoethnography of the maintenance of athletic identity during injury. He utilized various

forms of "identity work" to map out the return to a running identity. Identity work refers

to strategies to work on maintenance and restructuring of identity. Eventually, these

efforts led to a modified running self which signifies the return to running identity, yet

still with some differences learned along the way (2015:52). Hockey's research showed a

glance at the navigation of running identity through personal experience. Further, this

study proved invaluable as background to my study as one of the few research projects

specifically concerning runners and identity navigation.

Navigating and restructuring identity are complex processes outlined by multiple

researchers in multiple disciplines. Initial responses to trauma as a threat to identity

included suppression and denial (Charmaz 2002; Miller et al. 2019). Athletes find was to

maintain their athletic identities following the threat (Brown and Coupland 2015).

Further, Hockey (2015) presented a valuable ethnography relating to running and identity

navigation and restructuring. Overall, identity navigation through maintenance and

restructuring have similarities across academic works. My work attempted to model and compare athletes navigating identity during COVID-19 to these studies.

Summary of Literature Review

  This literature review provided background on research concerning the topics covered in this research project. It covered the effect of COVID-19 on students, athletes, and student-athletes. As this field of literature is young and continuing to grow, I turned to other identity threats that impact athletic identity. Injury as a threat to athletic identity is somewhat similar to COVID-19. In fact, it was constantly cited by other authors when writing about identity threats and COVID-19. Finally, I moved to studies that focused on identity navigation through maintenance and restructuring to provide some foundations for my own research. This background proved useful as I applied it to grounded theory and athletic identity navigation in relation to COVID-19.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework utilized in this study is identity theory. This chapter provides a brief history of identity theory. I started with a look at definitions of the self and identity then, I then traced the two schools of thought within identity theory and noted the three common types of identity. Further, I noted how identity theory has been utilized in athletic studies. From here, the chapter focused on types of identity theories. Next, I discussed emotion and mental health associated with identity validation.

History of Identity Theory

To begin tracing the history of identity theory, a look at various definitions is required. The first is the idea of the "self". The self, according to Mead (1934), encompasses the person created through interactions with others. Different interactions create distinct aspects of the self as well. For example, on the weekend a person's self may encompass a soccer coach, whereas during the week the self represents an insurance salesperson. These types of self are created through interaction. A person contains multiple selves throughout aspects of their social lives (DeLamater and Ward 2013). These multiple selves are defined as identities which constitute meanings, characteristics, actions, and social performances one performs to identify with a group or separate them as a unique identity (Burke and Stets 2009). The self, therefore, is a culmination of identities that can be called on to address any situation. Identities are commonly referred to, and assigned to, individuals regarding culture, identification with groups, and in reference to a particular part of the self in relation to a specific role in society (Stryker

and Burke 2000). These definitions outline the general background of identity theory's main concepts. However, there is a long history relating to this theoretical framework.

Identity theory stemmed from symbolic interactionism creating the Chicago School and Iowa School of symbolic interactionism (DeLamater and Ward 2013). The Chicago School focused on the situational approach to identity which sees society as constantly created through social actors (Stets and Burke 2011:1). The Iowa School focused on structural impact on the self (Delamater and Ward 2013). Hence, it emphasized the structural approach to the self. In essence, the structural approach states that people are embedded into a system which influences them, their self, and their identities. These structures are noted on various levels from large social institutions, down to families and smaller groups (2013). From these initial Schools, many scholars brought forth new and plentiful ideas within identity theory. Notably these became a focus on external and internal forces on shaping identity.

Stryker's structural approach of identity theory became the dominant perspective in analyzing the self and identity (Owens et al. 2010). Stryker's ideas constituted the initial conception of identity theory. Stryker focused on role identities and the influence of social structure on one's identity utilizing the concept of a salience hierarchy, which concerns the ability for an identity to be activated in a given situation (Stets and Burke 2011).

Within this school, Burke focused on the internal dynamics that create and constitute one's identity. Burke's work focused on internal dynamics and the notion of feedback loops between the individual and others around them (Stets and Burke 2011). Rather than structure being the main influencer of identity, interactions between people

create various meaning and personal definitions towards identities. His work was situational and more concerned with models conceptualizing internal dynamics of identity activation and change. These two perspectives led to other scholars and their unique variants on identity theory as well.

Among these scholars were McCall and Simmons (1966) who continued theorizing the self and focused on role identities, based on occupying a given position in a society. McCall and Simmons's focus on role identities concerned a hierarchy of prominence rather than of salience (Stets and Burke 2011). Prominence is tied to centrality and prevalence in one's life, rather than the likelihood that an identity will be utilized in a given situation. This term will further be defined later as well. While still focusing on the structural approach to identity, McCall and Simmons presented another important distinction from Stryker through noting other ways identity is prioritized in people.

These scholars constitute only a few of the many influential scholars involved in the creation and evolution of identity theory. From Stryker's initial conception of identity theory, many authors continued the tradition with their own additions to the theory. Collective identity theory, social identity theory, affect control theory, and many more focus on different aspects of identity and add to the ever-increasing framework (Owens et al. 2010). This brief origin and history of identity theory sets a ground for the types of identity studied within identity theory. With this brief history in mind, I move on to note various types of identities within the theory.

Types of Identities

Within identity theory there are three main types of identities outlined by scholars. The most common among these are person identity, role identity and, group identity (Burke 2004a; Burke and Stets 2009; DeLamater and Ward 2013; Stets and Burke 2011). Person identity concerns expectations and definitions towards characteristics of the individual (e.g., funny). Role identity is found through ties to others in a role set. Role identities are also often in a hierarchy of importance within the self, based on verification by others. Finally, social identity is shared with, and dependent on, group membership. Each of these identity types constitute various internal and external associations with regard to how identity is created and maintained. Stets and Burke (2011) noted the importance of each of these identities. They stated, "We suggest that future research examine all three bases of identities: person, role, and social identities. This would lead to a more integrated and a stronger theory of identity. Within groups there are roles and persons playing out those roles. All are operating in a situation and we need to identify how they are related in the setting" (2011:34). This is reflected by Stets and Burke (2000). They noted that social identity theory focuses on group identity, while identity theory focuses on role identity. Further, depersonalization occurs within embodying social identities, while self-verification occurs when embodying role identities (2000:224). These two identity theories present different results when looking at various aspects of identities. However, Stets and Burke (2000) noted, "Yet, although the group, role, and person identities provide different sources of meaning, it is also likely that these different identities overlap. Sometimes they may reinforce who one is; at other times they may constrain the self" (234). I found this quote to show that, while

theories of identity focus on identity differently, each theory and identity type influences

the other creating a larger and more in-depth understanding of the self. Therefore, while

each identity type presents a different focus on studying identity, each type of identity

interrelates to influence the self. Identities in relation to the self, the group, and societal

actions all lead to a more coherent picture of identity.

Important Concepts

Moving on, this section points to important concepts of identity theory for

maintenance and restructuring. Within social actors, the self is created through

incorporation of various identities, or parts of the self, in structured role relationships

(Brenner et al. 2014:1-2). These identities are negotiated through various important

concepts. The concepts covered here include verification, salience, centrality and

prominence, and commitment. As DeLamater and Ward (2013) noted, "One of the

primary goals of identity theory is to specify how the meanings attached to various

identities are negotiated in interaction" (31). Each of these concepts provide insight into

the meanings and their negotiation within identities of the self. These concepts, in

particular, are of importance as they show strategies for maintenance of identities and

restructuring of identities, which were present in the literature review.

Verification

Verification concerns the perception of others in relation to how an individual

sees themselves in a given situation (DeLamater and Ward 2013). Previously, this section

mentioned Burke and his emphasis on a feedback, or verification, loop within identity

theory. Within this loop, emotion is a direct reaction to the similarity between perception

of others and how an individual sees oneself (2013:35). Verification of an identity, or a similar identity perception among others and oneself, leads to positive emotion and reinforcement of identity performance. However, non-verification is possible as well, which leads to negative emotional responses and may lead to a change of identity. Verification serves as a concept that shows the interrelation between external sources and internal sources on an identity. This constant comparison leads to negotiation of identities for better or worse.

Salience

Salience refers to the likelihood that a given identity will be activated, or utilized, by an individual in a situation (DeLamater and Ward 2013; Stets and Burke 2011). An identity with a higher salience is often at the ready to be enacted across different situations. For example, a teacher may be a high salience identity to an individual. Therefore, when helping a friend fix a bike, the identity of a teacher may come to the forefront even though it is not necessarily an identity grounded in that specific situation. On the other hand, less salience leads to a lower probability that an identity will be utilized. Identities with less salience, however, diminish in importance as other identities take over in certain situations.

Centrality and Prominence

These two terms, which I refer to as centrality from here on, denote a similar yet different definition to salience. While salience focuses on the likelihood that a given identity will be employed, centrality refers to an identity that is important to a person and has greater focus (Rosenberg 1979). Centrality constitutes the most important identities in relation to the person's perception of oneself. Therefore, threats that detract the ability to

perform an identity of centrality can lead to negative emotions and impacts as well. It's also important to note that an identity can be both central and salient, such as someone who enjoys their job. Or, an identity can be not central, but still salient. This would constitute someone who does not enjoy their job but puts more effort into that identity than other identities.

Commitment

Commitment to an identity has two dimensions: the interactional dimension and the affective one (DeLamater and Ward 2013). The interactional dimension or the size of social network, is based on the number of people one involves themselves with in a given identity. Whereas the affective dimension (or the intensiveness of social ties) is focused on the quality of the relations to people within an identity. Therefore, the interactional dimension claims that the greater number of people connected through a common identity equates to higher commitment to the identity. The affective dimension claims that the deeper and stronger social connections lead to a higher commitment (Burke and Stets 2009:47). Social relations and interactions are important to an identity and the identity may suffer without them.

These concepts show how the negotiation of identities occurs through personal, social, and structural interactions. With these important concepts in mind, I now turn to identity theory as utilized in sports and athletic studies.

Identity Theory in Sport and Athletic Studies

Identity theory has been extensively used in research on athletes. Athletic identity is defined as a role identity, thought to be stable contingent on the level of identification

with being an athlete (Brewer et al. 1993). Menke and Germany (2019:18) noted that

athletic identity is influenced by family, teammates, and coaches, as well used for

achieving success in life. Therefore, beyond athletic identity as a role identity alone,

athletic identity is represented by both social and person identities as well.

Graupensperger et al. (2020:667) found teammates and social interactions as a

reaffirmation of athletic identity and increased sense of role identification. Further, in

terms of person identity, strength of personal relation to an athletic identity was found to

create a difference in attitudes towards psychological help (Weatherhead 2015:90).

Studies on athletic identity use identity theory to understand organization of the

self and identities and how this organization shifts and occurs as time progresses (Burke

and Stets 2009:9).Identity theory was employed in the study of sports retirement (Menke

and Germany 2019), injury (Brown and Coupland 2015; Dean 2019; Ford and Gordon

1999; Hockey 2015), identity threats (Brown and Copeland 2015; Miller et al. 2018), and

most recently COVID-19 (Costa et al. 2020; Graupensperger et al. 2020; Lautenbach et

al. 2020; Ruffault et al. 2020). This section served as a short example of how identity is

studied contemporarily in athletics. The following section concerns emotion and mental

health in identity theory.

Emotion and Mental Health in Identity Theory

Although I mentioned emotions in association with identity throughout this

overview, a section dedicated to emotion and mental health was necessary. Emotion is

closely analyzed and recently received a revival in study within identity theory (Owens et

al. 2010). This section covers the roles of emotion and mental health as presented in identity theory.

Burke and Stets (2009) noted the importance of emotion with his emphasis on mood, which last longer than emotions, "lower in intensity, and they are more diffuse and unfocused" (168). Research on stress and mental health show connections with identity-relevant stressors and level of relations to identities (Thoits 1991). Negative emotions are found to decrease levels of identity commitment and salience as well. Whereas positive emotions increase commitment, and ties to others, as well as salience of identities (DeLamater and Ward 2013). Positive and negative emotions also stem from identity verification and non-verification. Those with non-verification in regard to an identity often attempt to cope with the situation through various strategies to gain verification of identity. Further, emotional response to negotiating behaviors through verifications and threats show the general importance of the identity to the individual (DeLamater and Ward 2013). In other words, identities with more centrality or prominence are more likely to cause emotional distress if identity non-verification occurs.

Mental health and emotional responses are also found to be dependent on different types of identities. There are obligatory and voluntary role identities that influence mental health (Stets and Burke 2011). Obligatory roles surround roles that are required for an individual to perform. On the other hand, voluntary roles are identities that are enjoyed due to less pressure and distress while undertaking them. Having more obligatory identities increases mental health only when stress is low. Therefore, an increase in voluntary roles tends to increase mental health as well due to less pressure and stress (Thoits 1991).

In all, emotion and mental health are outcomes based on the negotiation of identities. Those that experience non-verification and threats to identities often find themselves with negative moods and mental health. This leads social actors to attempt to cope with the situations or change and shift identities all together. This leads to the final section of this chapter based on changing identities.

Changing Identities

The final section of this theoretical overview concerned how identities change following negotiation with the important concepts covered and emotions and mental health. Burke and Stets (2009) noted that identity change is thought to occur gradually over time. This is because identities are constantly negotiated personally, socially, and structurally throughout life. However, sudden and dramatic changes tend to shift identities at a more rapid rate in environments where identity performance is limited (DeLamater and Ward 2013:48). Of course, this then depends on the importance of identities in regard to salience, commitment, and centrality. Burke (2006) presented three ways in which identities shift. First is that changes in situations create changes in identity meanings. Second is that many identities may conflict in a given situation. And third, that conflicting meanings within an identity change and modify a given identity. Therefore, the strongest, most prevalent, and central identities are the hardest to change. Whereas less salient and less important identities tend to change at an easier and increased rate. Further, social involvement tends to create identity change as well as salience and prominence hierarchies (Stets and Burke 2011). This is also in relation to hierarchical systems. Hierarchical systems of identities look for constant verification and look at

various perceptions which leads to constantly changing identities at high- and low-level identities (Burke and Cast 1997; Stets and Burke 2011).

Changes in identities are unavoidable due to the constant negotiation between the self, other people, and social structures. This section was chosen as the final section as it showed how identity theory comes full circle. The goal of an identity theorist is to view the negotiation of identities. Identities are negotiated through the important concepts listed. This creates emotional and mental health responses in regard to shifting identities from these negotiations.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

This chapter covered a brief history of identity theory. This was followed by identity theory exemplified in sociology through looking at athletics, a focus on types of identity, important concepts in identity theory, emotional and mental health, and concluded with a focus on changing identity. Identity theory is a complex and robust theoretical framework with many scholars influencing it today, just like a constantly changing identity. Notably, research going forward attempts to look at all aspects of identity. This includes personal, social, and structural identities and how they intertwine with one another (Stets and Burke 2000). The culmination of all types of identity and their relation creates a stronger theory more representative of social actors (Stets and Burke 2011). Therefore, while many different concepts were presented, they all intertwine to create identity theory as a framework.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative research methods approach that was inductive and used grounded theory as a tool. Grounded theory, in relation to the objective of this study, proved the best method to obtain and present data. In this section I provided an overview of the methods I performed in this research. Before noting the particulars of grounded theory, I provided a brief overview of qualitative research. Next, I briefly summarized the history of grounded theory including Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory, which I utilized in my research. The chapter then covered research design with information on participants and the sample of the study. Data collection and data analysis were covered, with a brief discussion of validity and reliability. Finally, I discussed my role as the researcher, reflexivity, and ethical considerations considered.

Brief Overview of Qualitative Research

The purpose of all research is to examine data and create findings arguing facts, new conclusions, or expanding knowledge (Tie et al. 2019:1). Research allows people to better understand the world and, ideally, utilize knowledge found to improve it. Research is largely performed within two overarching categories. These are quantitative research and qualitative research. Quantitative research concerns statistics and mathematics. Qualitative research, on the other hand, focuses on information gathered from social actors and artifacts. In sociology, interest in qualitative research is traced back to the early 1900s with roots in Max Weber, symbolic interactionism, and structural approaches (Flick 2005:2). Qualitative research involves observing the world through interpretation of phenomena and the meaning people assign to them. It often involves field notes,

interviews, photographs, recordings, and memos as means of collecting data on said phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln 2011:3). The outcome of the qualitative research reports and presents the voices of participants, the researcher's role within the research, and in-depth descriptions and interpretations of problems studied (Creswell and Poth 2017). Therefore, qualitative methods constitute interpretations and meanings of phenomena through different methods and approaches.

There are many different approaches and methods to qualitative research. Among these are narrative research, which focuses on a singular person, or small group, and traces stories and meaning and phenomena discovered within interviews. Phenomenology focuses on in-depth descriptions and meanings prescribed to a given phenomenon among a limited number of people. For example, participants assign meaning to becoming a parent or the experience of a life-threatening injury or illness. Ethnography is an in-depth method utilizing field work and extensive amounts of time with a social group. Often these projects take months or years and attempt to study and encompass ways of life in a social group. Case studies look at particular events and focus on social artifacts, such as writing and photography, beyond human voices alone. Finally, grounded theory, the method utilized in this study, focuses on creating a theory of social reality based on responses and data collected by participants (Creswell and Poth 2017; Flick 2005). Below I focused on grounded theory, the method I used in my research.

Grounded Theory

This research project utilized grounded theory as a method of data collection and analysis. Grounded theory is a method which creates theories about phenomena that are important in people's lives. It follows an inductive process where the emerging theory is

grounded within the data collected (Mills et al. 2006). This section traces three types of

grounded theory proposed by different scholars. The first perspective is offered by Glaser

and Strauss, second approach is promoted by Strauss and Corbin, and the third

perspective is championed by Kathy Charmaz. I ended the section noting my choice to

utilize Charmaz's constructivist approach to grounded theory.

Glaser and Strauss are credited with founding grounded theory. The two scholars

found qualitative research methods to lack analysis that was comparative and concrete in

generating theory (Tie et al. 2019:2). This led to the creation of an approach to qualitative

research that allowed for complex description which created theory through the eyes of

participants (Apramian et al. 2016). This initial creation of grounded theory focused on

the creation of theory inductively by taking away all preconceived notions of the

researcher and basing results in data collected alone (Mills et al. 2006). The second

perspective of grounded theory was headed by Strauss and Corbin and shifted focus

towards symbolic interactionism and the idea that there is no single reality out there

(Mills et al. 2006). This idea, of course, rejected positivistic notions present in previous

iterations of grounded theory. Rather, a focus on symbolic interactionism is present as it

shows meaning and theory is created by people providing data through their social and

symbolic interactions.

However, the third perspective is the constructivist grounded theory. Kathy

Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory involves multiple steps in gathering rich data,

interviewing, coding, memo-writing, and constant revision to create theories grounded in

data. Charmaz takes a constructivist approach believing that the interaction between

researcher and participants produces data, which puts the researcher in the thick of

creation (Mills et al. 2006). Rather than the researcher completely removing oneself, the role of the researcher is to work with the participant to analyze and construct theory. This involves a style of writing that reflects experiences of participants in a more literary fashion (Apramian et al. 2016; Mills et al. 2006). Therefore, the constructivist approach to grounded theory is focused on creation of useful analytic frameworks for describing people. (Apramian et al. 2016; Charmaz 2014:xv). Further, Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory places priority on what is studied rather than techniques to gather data, focuses on reflexivity and the role of the researcher, notes that data and analysis are social constructions, views how meaning and actions are created by participants, seeks the views of insiders in regard to a given phenomenon, and acknowledges that results are contextual and relative to the population, place, and other settings (Charmaz 2007:2025).

Constructivist grounded theory presented the best methodological tool for my study. As I studied student-athlete runners' navigation of athletic identity through COVID-19, voices of the individuals needed to be reflected. Charmaz's literary style of analysis helped with my expression of the experiences of each participant. Further, the researcher's role, being more prominent in constructivist grounded theory, aided as well as I had a social position as a student-athlete too. Constructivist grounded theory allowed for the presentation of an analytic framework which showed the process of identity navigation through COVID-19. Of course, the presented theory cannot be accurate with other samples and populations studied. However, it can serve as a reference for comparison and further understanding on the subject. Just as the roots of grounded theory argued for.

Research Design

The following sections covered the sample, data collection, and data analysis of the study. Each section elaborates on the methods chosen with reference to Charmaz (2006). To conduct this study, I adhered to collecting and analyzing data at the same time, utilization of comparative methods, engaged in analytic writing at each stage, and sampled for the purposes of this study and the ideas I wished to unearth (Charmaz 2007:2024). The objective of this study, as indicated above, was to investigate how student-athlete runners navigated their athletic identity during COVID-19 and the social and psychological costs associated with said navigation. Student-athletes on cross country and track teams at a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I university in the Midwest United States were interviewed for this study. Interviews took place in the fall of 2020 upon the return of some students to campus. The rest of this section further elaborates on the population, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Participants

The number of the participants in this research was 10. Theoretical saturation in grounded theory refers to a point at which collecting further data produces no new or further insight. (Charmaz 2006:113). In this study, theoretical saturation was researched with 10 participants. This section covers the sampling criteria, participant recruitment, initial sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

Sampling criteria

Charmaz (2006) noted that theoretical sampling involves "seeking pertinent data to *develop* your emerging *theory*" (96). Theoretical sampling involves seeking data, and participants, that have relevant information and data to provide regarding the research

questions. In conjunction with sampling for the emerging theory, sampling criteria were put in place to ensure rich data. The following are the criteria I utilized in selecting the participants:

1. The student-athlete must be on the cross country and track teams at the same Midwest NCAA DI university.
2. The student-athlete must have run one season of outdoor track prior to the cancelled season due to COVID-19.
3. The student-athlete must return to school for practice and competition in fall 2020.

These criteria were chosen to create the best possible sample for an emerging theory for navigating COVID-19. The student-athletes all belonged to the same university at the time of COVID-19 outbreak. This allowed for a more homogenous population in terms of practice and social experience and showed the many views and realities stemming from identity navigation. Student-athletes needed to have run at least one outdoor track season in the past. This allowed for a participant with more experience within the track program and an understanding of outdoor track prior to the cancellation of the season due to COVID-19. Finally, in order to view identity navigation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the student-athletes needed to return to school to resume practice. This final criterion brought some difficulty. The women's team at the university was considerably smaller, and the first two criteria limited the pool further. Therefore, one participant, a former student at the same university, was recruited as she ran at a different university as a graduate student at the time of the interview. While not returning to the same university, her input still added depth that was needed in the study.

Participant Recruitment and Initial Sampling

Recruiting participants began with purposeful sampling. This sampling method, when building a theory, often requires studying a homogenous sample and reaching out to those that will add to data (Creswell and Poth 2017:198-199). As a researcher and student-athlete on a track and cross country team, I had previous relations with many individuals who met my sampling criteria. I reached out to individuals through three methods with the goal of recruiting an equal number of men and women. Those I was close with, and had already built rapport with in the past, allowed me to personally speak to them and ask them to participate in the study. For those where rapport wasn't fully built, I reached out via text and email to recruit for participation. I found nine participants for the initial sample based on purposeful sampling. From here, snowball sampling, where participants offer suggestions for participants that they are aware of, was utilized (Wright et al. 1992). Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached. At 10 participants, I found no new theoretical categories added through interviews and declared that the sample had reached saturation. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. The following is a list of participants and a brief general description:

- Sophie (Female, 24): Sophie was a 4th year undergraduate student primarily focused on track when outdoor track was cancelled. She was preparing for an outdoor season with the goal of making nationals when COVID-19 hit. She returned to school for a 5th year to pursue a graduate degree and continue running.

- Teddie (Male, 22): Teddie was a 4th year undergraduate student coming off of injury to run outdoor track when the pandemic hit. He returned to school for a final semester to finish his undergrad degree and potentially run cross country.

- Daryl (Male, 24): Daryl was a 5th year undergraduate student finishing up his degree when the pandemic hit. He was preparing for outdoor season after not running outdoor track for two years due to injuries. He returned to school for a 6th year to pursue a graduate degree and continue running.

- Phil (Male, 20): Phil was a sophomore undergraduate student when the pandemic hit. He was coming off an impressive indoor season and ready for huge improvements in outdoor track. He returned in the fall after COVID-19 to continue running and pursue his undergraduate degree.

- Iris (Female, 22): Iris was a senior heading into her final outdoor season when COVID-19 hit. She had aspirations of making nationals. In the fall she pursued a graduate degree at a different university along with finishing up athletic eligibility at said university.

- Irvine (Male, 21): Irvine was a junior when COVID-19 cancelled his outdoor track season. He was facing injury throughout the year and was ready to return to the track for the outdoor season. He returned in the fall to continue his academic and athletic careers.

- Leilah (Female, 21): Leilah was a junior at the time COVID-19 cancelled her outdoor season. She battled injury all of the year leading up to the cancelled outdoor season. She returned to the university for her senior year of school and to finish running eligibility.

- Alicia (Female, 20): Alicia was a sophomore when COVID-19 hit. She had just concluded her fastest indoor track season yet and was ready for big improvements during outdoor track. She returned in the fall to continue her degree and running.

- Alice (Female, 21): Alice was a junior when COVID-19 cancelled the outdoor season. She was coming off a fantastic cross country and indoor track season and was ready to run fast in outdoor track. She returned to university in the fall to continue running and school.

- Trenton (Male, 23): Trenton was a 5th year undergraduate student when COVID-19 hit. He had run his fastest times ever during the indoor track season but suffered an injury right before outdoor track. He returned in the fall to pursue a graduate degree and continue running.

Each individual fit the theoretical sampling criteria and supplied rich data for the study. These individuals' stories and experiences of navigating identity through COVID-19 are elaborated further in the findings section.

Data Collection

Data collection involved in-depth interviews. Within qualitative research, interviews are a common tool to view and understand the world from the subjects (Creswell and Poth 2017:206). It uncovers the world and, within grounded theory, allows for construction of theory grounded in the data itself. Semi-structured interviews were utilized for a variety of reasons. These interviews created a better atmosphere and relaxation for the sensitive topics covered during this research (Bailey 2017:100). Similar to structured interviews, these interviews were formal and scheduled, but allowed for engagement in dialogue and presentation of ideas not available in structured interviews (Bailey 2017:100). The method also allowed me to close vertical space (discrepancies in status and wealth) through emphasizing horizontal space (interaction with subject) among the participants (Hermanowicz 2002:493). Therefore, relational distance was closed and

allowed for clear and in-depth descriptions on the subjects' athletic identities during

COVID-19.

Time

Within interviews, timing and setting are incredibly important to gathering rich

and thick descriptions. The interviews were strategically conducted in fall through winter

of 2020 upon return to campus for practice. Not only did this allow relational space close

to me for interviewing, but it allowed for participants to have months of reflection on

athletic identity in relation to COVID-19. Further, this time proved crucial in the lives of

participants as cross country was cancelled in the fall as well. This created further threats

to identity and allowed for responses critical to building theory.

Interview Conduction

Conduction of interviews occurred both in person and via Zoom video

conferencing. COVID-19 presented risk of infection and prompted safety protocols for

in-person meetings. Due to my close relation with the participants, we were often

temperature and symptom checked on the same days. Nine of the participants were

willing and comfortable to engage in in-person interviews due to safety measures taken

by all parties involved. Iris was the lone participant interviewed via Zoom due to her

enrollment at a different university. Interviews were either conducted in my apartment or

the homes/apartments of participants. The location was decided based on participants'

comfortability. This was also done in an effort to avoid public spaces and follow COVID-

19 protocols. In relation to the opening of this section, semi-structured interviews were

utilized and allowed for touching on theoretical questions pertinent to the study as well as

opening paths of dialogue previously not considered. Each interview took from 30 to 50

minutes with an average time of 36 minutes and 31 seconds. Listed below are the
interview questions approved by the South Dakota State University IRB that served as a
template for each interview to begin with:

1. What constitutes your identity as a runner? For example, what are daily activities,
   interactions, people you see, structures of your day, etc., that you perform as a
   runner?

2. How are your social circles organized around your identities? Do you hang out
   with certain people in certain places more than others due to their relation to your
   identity?

3. This research looks at identity. As a theoretical concept, a person can have
   multiple different identities that overall constitute the "self". What are some of
   your other identities? How do you introduce yourself to others according to these
   identities?

4. In general, pre-COVID-19, what would you say your mental health status was?
   Any major or diagnosed mental health statuses?

5. When COVID-19 hit, there were obvious physical ailments spread throughout the
   world. However, its impacts went beyond that with periods of quarantine that are
   continuing to this day. How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact your ability to
   perform your identity as a runner?

6. Other identities can take precedence in times of crisis. For example, a job takes a
   backseat when a spouse is suffering from cancer, etc. Therefore, when the Covid-
   19 pandemic hit, did other identities take precedence over your running identity?

7. Identity, and the inability to fulfill its socially and self-defined roles, has the potential to negatively impact mental health. If you are so willing, could you elaborate if the Covid-19 pandemic, and its impact on your running identity, caused any negative impacts towards your mental well-being?

8. While we are not clear from the pandemic yet, there are restrictions steadily being lifted all over the U.S. allowing running to be performed again. How has this navigation back to your running identity occurred? Has it been smooth? Troubled? Do you have the same motivation to fulfill your running identity once again?

9. How has the return to "normal" impacted your other identities and daily life? Has motivation to return been an issue? Are your social circles helping you to restore your identity?

During the interviews, adjustments were made to questions and new questions were asked based on the responses and data provided by the participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006). All interviews were hand transcribed after listening to the audio recordings from Temi and Zoom. This section covered coding methods as delineated by grounded theory. Charmaz (2006) noted that "Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (43). Coding aids in simplifying and streamlining data to be analyzed by the

researcher. Here I walk through my coding beginning with initial coding, followed by focused coding, and concluding with theoretical coding.

The first step of my data analysis, after transcription, concerned initial coding. Initial coding refers to remaining open and exploring what possible categories and information is available in the data provided by each interview (Charmaz 2006:47). I utilized a line-by-line method of initial coding to describe the major idea in each line and statement provided by the interviewees (2006:50). Each statement was coded and simplified into a short statement based on the data at hand.

For the second step of coding, I took my initial codes and performed focused codes. Focused coding "means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data" (Charmaz 2006:57). To perform focused coding, I labelled each passage of participants' responses to create further focused codes to lump the initial codes into. For example, a focused code I discovered was "Positive influence of coach". For each instance of this code, I recorded the passage into an Excel document for each participant, recording the frequency and location of the code. 35 focused codes were discovered and listed in Microsoft Excel with frequency and location for each participant (codebook is shown in APPENDIX A). Further, *In Vivo* codes were recorded. *In Vivo* codes constitute specialized terms verbatim from the interviewee themselves which preserve meanings and views of the participant (Charmaz 2006:55). For example, an *In Vivo* code from Leilah stated *"Nothing mattered anymore"* with regard to COVID-19 cancelling the outdoor track season.

Finally, theoretical coding was utilized. Theoretical coding involves taking focused codes and creating a coherent story based on common themes throughout all

interviews (Charmaz 2006:63). Theoretical coding aided in the creation of the model and theory presented in the findings section. To exemplify this, one of my theoretical codes found the theme of "Social Support". Within this theme there were codes such as "Positive influence of coach", "Importance of significant other", and "Importance of shared experience". These themes allowed for creation of a theory on identity navigation.

Validity and Reliability

I was careful to address validity and reliability issues in my research. Validity pertains to creating trustworthy research that accurately reports the phenomena it analyzes (Creswell and Poth 2017). I used reflexivity and viewed my own social position in regard to the research (Whittemore et al. 2001). Another aspect of validity I focused on is that of finding both positive and negative evidence in relation to my findings (Creswell and Poth 2017:314). I viewed this through other research and contradicting data within the responses. Further, I was certain to establish rapport and trust with the participants through empathic moments which created more valid responses (Prior 2018).

Reliability is concerned with how research fits in with other findings surrounding the topic that currently exists. I related my findings to previous research through relation to the literature already reviewed. Further, my codes are publicly available for future comparison in studies concerning the same concepts.

Role of the Researcher

Reflexivity

Validity was addressed through constant interaction with reflexivity on my behalf. Within qualitative work it is important for the researcher to reflect and note their social position in regard to the research. In this study I classify myself as a "halfie". This term was introduced by Abu-Lughod (2008) and refers to a researcher who has background and interest in multiple areas within their research. I am a sociologist who researched student-athletes as they navigate their athletic identity through COVID-19. Moreover, I am also a student-athlete who had to navigate his own identity through COVID-19. In a sense, this validates my extreme interest in this topic. On the other hand, I bring my own experience and interactions to the research and interviews. I am personally acquainted with each person I interviewed which further put me in a tricky situation. During interviews this was beneficial as it allowed me to utilize rapport and call on specific examples in these peoples' lives. While coding and creating the theory, I was sure to concentrate only on the data and forget my own ideas of what certain statements mean. I believe this practice of reflexivity allowed me to obtain valuable information that a stranger, and one who isn't a student-athlete, may not have been able to obtain.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns are plentiful and always present in social science research. Working closely with people creates "the possibility of myriad ethical questions, none of which are accompanied by easy solutions" (Bailey 2017:15). Major ethical concerns, presented by Bailey (2017), include providing informed consent to allow the participant

to consent and understand the research, avoiding deception and trickery to protect the participant, maintaining confidentiality to protect the identity and impacts of information from harming the participant, and approval through Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). This section covers informed consent, maintenance of confidentiality, establishment of rapport, and approval of IRB within this research.

Informed consent provided information about research notifying the participant the purpose of said research, procedures of research, risks and benefits, that participation is voluntary, research may cease if participant desires, steps to ensure confidentiality, right to answer their questions, what is required of them in research, guarantee that ceasing research will not produce negative consequences, and any other information (Bailey 2017:17). In APPENDIX C the informed consent form filled out by the participants prior to their interviews is listed. Interviews were not conducted until participants understood, signed, and returned the form to me.

Within informed consent I included notes on confidentiality. Confidentiality means that the researcher will not disclose the identity of a participant to anyone outside of themselves and other researchers involved in the research (Bailey 2017:24). Notably, the majority of participants told me they didn't care about the confidentiality of their identity. However, I respected confidentiality and assigned pseudonyms to each participant. Further, I opted to not include the name of the university attended by participants as identities of participants may be assumed through school association.

Along with confidentiality, I established rapport, or a relationship with the interviewees to enhance the data collected (Bailey 2017:106). Rapport was previously established in many cases due to my association with participants prior to research.

Further, semi-structured interviews within the method allowed for connection and

meaningful interaction and conversation to unfold during research. This created rapport,

trust, and disclosure of information relevant to the theoretical underpinnings of this

research.

Finally, to conclude this section on ethical considerations, I sought IRB approval

through South Dakota State University. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) serve to

review and maintain ethical integrity in proposed studies in schools and research

institutions. IRB approval was provided in the fall of 2020 prior to collection of data from

participants.

These considerations were all employed to create ethically sound research.

Further, throughout the collection of data and writing this thesis I abided by research

ethical standards outlined by the SDSU Research Integrity and Compliance and The

American Sociological Association Code of Ethics.

Summary of Methodology

Constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz presented the best possible method of

research due to my social role as the researcher and the increased focus on voices of

participants as compared to previous schools of grounded theory. The sample of 10

participants provided much information on navigation of identity through COVID-19

based on the research questions and interviews employed. The codes and data analysis

are presented in the next chapter concerning the overall findings of the study.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presented the findings and the proposed model outlining the navigation of athletic running identity during COVID-19. The information presented traced the athletes' experience with the pandemic in conjunction with the research objectives outlined in the introduction. To reiterate, the main research objective was to investigate how student-athlete runners navigated their athletic identity during COVID-19 and the social and psychological costs associated with said navigation. As this study looked at how COVID-19 impacted the participants, a quick note on COVID-19 as an identity threat is presented.

Following the description of COVID-19 as an identity threat, I provided an explanation of the six themes I discovered in the data. The themes I discovered were as follows: Immediate Reactions, Negotiation of Identities, Emotional and Mental Health Responses, Formation of Running Identity, Social Support, and Return to Running. Each of these themes are expanded upon further throughout the findings section as well. With the themes presented, I conclude the results section with a proposed model of identity navigation through COVID-19. Before diving in, I noted the participants once again.

COVID-19 as a Threat to Student-Athlete Identity

Each participant described in Chapter 4 navigated their identity in response to COVID-19. Identity threats, as covered in the literature review, denote occurrences that challenge the performance and perception of identity for a person or group (Brown and Coupland 2015). COVID-19, as the responses from participants suggested, was a threat

to their identity which caused some psychological issues. The timeline for this study

focused on the immediate response of the COVID-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020.

Back in March 2020, the campus was closed, classes were moved online, and athletic

activities were cancelled. Further, the impact of COVID-19 continued through the fall

semester. The cancellation of the cross country season was another setback in addition to

social distancing and other protocols to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The following

section describes the six major themes found throughout data analysis.

Themes

I derived six themes through theoretical coding concerning the journey of running

identity through COVID-19. This section states each of the six theoretical themes, or

codes, and lists the focused codes which constitute the building of these themes. Notably,

certain codes are listed in multiple theme categories due to their relation to multiple

different ideas and processes within athletic identity navigation.

<u>**Immediate Reactions**</u>

The Immediate Reactions theme constituted the first responses to COVID-19

including cancellation of the outdoor track season and halt on athletics. Information

gathered to create this theme was focused on common phrases and shock values

experienced and expressed by the participants.

Focused Codes for this theme included: "I don't know what else I wanted outside

of running", "Nothing mattered anymore", "I don't know what I am", "What am I".

Negotiation of Identities

The Negotiation of Identities theme focused on the activities undertaken by the participants to encounter the threat posed by COVID-19 to their athletes' running identities. In the study it was noted that some were able to maintain their running identity, while others were able to put their running identity to the side and rearrange their identity hierarchies. This theme captured all the strategies of identity negotiation that were employed by all the participants. Notably, negotiation referred to maintenance and rearrangement of identities. Navigation, on the other hand, referred to the entire process embodied by the participants throughout the study's timeline.

Focused Codes for this theme included: Hierarchy of identity, Change in identity hierarchy, A change in running identity, A change in lifestyle, Importance of holistic person, "There's more to life than sport", Prolonging reality, Focusing on the positive.

Emotional and Mental Health Responses

This theme captured the emotional and mental health experience associated with identity navigation when dealing with the threat of COVID-19 to running identity. Emotional and mental health responses related to the salience, centrality, and commitment to identities and how negotiated identities, in regard to running and personal hierarchies, played out.

Focused Codes for this theme included: Negative mental health, Strain on mental health, Positive mental health, Feeling of loneliness, Sense of relief, Less pressure, Constant pressure, "Crutches were coming underneath me".

Formation of Running Identity

The Formation of Running Identity theme concerned the reasons why the participants have running as a role identity. The background of this theme is based on commitment and investment from personal histories and social support in regard to running identity. This theme concerned the personal reasons as to how the participants were exposed to running and why commitment and investment is present for the identity within the population studied.

Focused Codes for this theme included: Running as major identity, Major identity beyond running, Physical aspect of running, Individual aspect of running, Reason for running as identity, Importance of holistic person, Importance of friends/teammates, Positive influence of coach.

Social Support

This theme referred to the levels and types of social support received by participants while navigating their running identities. Presence of social support was often found to alleviate negative impacts on mental health for the athletes interviewed.

Focused Codes for this theme included: Negative influence of teammates/coaches, Identity hierarchy, Importance of shared experience (understanding), Friends/teammates aid in mental health, Trainers aid in mental health, Importance of family, Importance of significant other, "We've been forced to lean on each other".

<u>Return to Running</u>

This final theme concerned the return to campus and continuation of running in a collegiate team setting. This theme was about the participants reclaiming their running identity after the impact of COVID-19 lessens. However, the return to the role of being a runner was associated with some change for many participants. Therefore, while the identity returned, the personal definition and roles associated with the identity may have changed over the course of COVID-19.

Focused Codes for this theme included: Resurgence of running identity, A change in running identity, A change in lifestyle.

Notably, many codes and provocative ideas were left out of the analysis. I focused on the most pertinent and prevalent codes and ideas that led to a theory able to encompass each participant interviewed. The following sections provide in-depth and concrete examples of these themes' presence in the data.

Immediate Reactions to COVID-19

COVID-19 served as a threat to an identity and prompted Immediate Reactions. Often, immediate reactions to an event constitute shock and awe if it disrupts an identity. The pandemic proved to provoke immediate reactions of disbelief, uncertainty, and confusion among participants. Once COVID-19 became a global pandemic student-athletes were unable to practice, banned from campus, and required to attend classes online. Therefore, the social interactions of going to practice, class, and hanging out with friends were no longer possible. This led to various forms of reactions. These reactions ranged from miniscule to severe.

Sophie, Iris, Irvine, Trenton, Teddie, and Daryl all experienced injuries and/or some psychological issues stemming from running in the past. This experience created an already threatened athletic identity which created less of a severe immediate reaction to COVID-19. This is consistent with studies on athletic injury (Hockey 2015). Sophie, due to her athletic identity history, was used to threats to her runner identity. Her reaction was one of mixed feelings. In the end she knew it was the reality of the situation and all she could do was move forward. This was also reflected by other participants such as Phil, Alice, and Iris. Similarly, this lack of reaction and acceptance of the fact were due to these athletes' commitment and investment to their running identity as well.

On the other hand, severe reactions were present in participants as well. Those who weren't used to identity threats found themselves saying, *"I don't know what else I wanted outside of running", "nothing mattered anymore", "I don't know what I am",* and *"what am I?"* These statements were of direct influence from Formation of Running Identity creating importance for the identity in their lives. Their reactions were further amplified in severity as the shock of an identity threat of this magnitude was unexpected and caused immediate confusion.

This immediate reaction phase constituted the beginning of COVID-19's impact on the participants. The cancellation of the outdoor track season was a constant experienced by each athlete interviewed. It also served as the beginning of identity negotiation for the participants.

Negotiation of Identities

Identities change slowly and gradually over time (Burke and Stets 2009).
However, COVID-19 created dramatic changes at a rapid rate for the individuals in this
study (DeLamater and Ward 2013). To deal with identity threats, maintenance of running
identity and rearrangement of identity hierarchies were utilized. Maintenance of running
identity concerns achieving consistency within an identity hierarchy, and meanings of an
identity when faced with identity threats (DeLamater and Ward 2013). Literature has
shown that athletes attempt to navigate threats through suppression of emotions, focusing
on the present, seeking individual improvement, and chasing goals (Brown and Coupland
2015, Miller et al. 2019). Within this study, two major attempts to negotiate identity were
discovered. The first of these is a focus on maintenance of running identity. The second
of these is rearrangement of identity hierarchy in terms of salience. And yet, others had a
mixture of both rearrangement and maintenance that played out due to changing
situations during COVID-19.

In terms of maintenance of running identity, two main actions were utilized.
These were prolonging reality and focusing on the positive. Teddie's version of
maintenance was to prolong reality when COVID-19 threatened his identity. Teddie,
having a high perceived athletic identity as well as a high perceived farming identity, was
working over spring break at a farm when the outdoor track season was cancelled. Seeing
as Teddie was hundreds of miles away from his teammates and friends at the time, his
social circle wasn't there to relate to him. Therefore, he opted to continue training and
working as if nothing happened. For a week he was able to successfully prolong the
reality of the situation until returning to school from his spring break job. Alicia furthered

the idea of prolonging reality by attempting to act as if the summer training was as normal as possible and no different from any other summer training for the cross country season in the fall. Trenton, facing conclusion of college, maintained his running identity by committing to graduate school and continuing running for another year.

The majority of participants found COVID-19 as identity maintenance tool. Participants such as Teddie, Leilah, Alice, and Trenton saw COVID-19 as a positive in maintenance of athletic running identity. This may sound insane to the casual reader, however each of these participants were dealing with injury or burnout prior to COVID-19 cancelling athletic events. Cancellation allowed them to view the time away from runner identity to improve mental health, rehabilitate injuries, and rebuild their running identities. Therefore, COVID-19 was an opportunity to heal and return to practice on their own terms. The pandemic allowed them to fulfill their running identities at their own pace. COVID-19 also was positive for some who were offered the opportunity to continue running for one more year.

In contrast to maintenance, some athletes found themselves rearranging their identity in their respective identity hierarchy when the threat of COVID-19 occurred. For example, Sophie reported rearrangement of other identities when dealing with COVID-19. Sophie, while frustrated, understood the cancellation of track was to promote safety and actions required to mitigate disease spread in a global pandemic. Due to her personal commitment to running identity and social support, she was easily able to focus her efforts on other identities. For Sophie this included pouring efforts into her identity as a teacher and future graduate student. This was because Sophie's running identity was highly salient, but not necessarily central. A salient identity refers to identities that have a

high probability of being invoked across situations (DeLamater and Ward 2013).

Therefore, her saliency hierarchy of identities had to be rearranged as started to invoke

her teaching identity. Phil was another participant that noted the easy replacement of his

running identity. He emphasized his role identity as a worker and focused on familial

roles during COVID-19. Alice reflected this easy replacement of athletic identity as well.

Alice's change in running identity definition showed a decrease in salience and centrality

hierarchies within her identities. She easily replaced the centrality of her running identity

with her role identity as a farmer due to her changing definition of running identity. She

noted that, "*I realized, like, you can run anytime in your life you know…I can run after*

college too you know". She realized her enjoyment of running was important to her

beyond the competitive aspect alone. She enjoyed the physical benefits of the activity and

noted that the identity can remain in her life, just with a different personal definition.

Each of these participant's Formation of Running Identity influenced the changing of

running identity both in definition and hierarchy as a result of COVID-19.

Daryl felt many different changes in running identity along the way in regard to

constant identity rearrangement. His relationship with running identity was initially one

foot out the door. As his eligibility for college athletics was coming to a close, his

running identity diminished in importance and was slowly put on the backburner. He had

changed his focus to his future career as a teacher. This decrease in personal relation to

running identity was quickly followed with an increased love and motivation for the

sport. Therefore, while his identity hierarchy initially rearranged to have teaching over

running, it quickly rearranged back to running on top. When Daryl's eligibility was

reinstated for one more year, his running identity became stronger than before. Trenton

followed a similar path of increased identity importance as well going through the same obstacles of obtaining eligibility for one more year.

The employment of these various identity negotiations strategies was associated with some emotional and mental health responses.

Emotional and Mental Health Reactions

Above, I noted how some participants insisted on keeping and strengthening their running identity while others demoted their running identities in their identity prominence hierarchy throughout COVID-19. These negotiations of identity resulted in different emotional and mental health reactions (Owens et al. 2010; Thoits 1991). Mental health outcomes were related to how negotiation of identity occurred. Reactions were found to be both positive and negative and ranged from mild to extreme.

Mild negative mental health responses were prevalent in some cases due to athletic identity being less central. A central identity, like running for most of the participants, is based on greater internalized importance of a given identity (DeLamater and Ward 2013:37). Therefore, an identity with higher commitment level often produces a greater emotional response. A less central/important identity, when threatened, often results in mild or minimal emotional response. Aside from stress and negative emotions, those with less central/important identities reported little change in mental health well-being with COVID-19. Sophie noted, "I *was very angry and very frustrated…I wouldn't say I was depressed by any means…it was a weird situation where you couldn't control…COVID hit and you're just like well I can't necessarily get…success that I*

wanted." Sophie, as noted before, had a more salient running identity, but it was less central. Therefore, her emotional response was mild to her identity negotiations.

Moving up the ladder, moderate negative mental health responses were quite prevalent among participants. Trenton summed up his experience with negative mental health in one phrase. He said, my *"crutches were coming underneath me".* This was in reference to his social circle of teammates and peers slowly leaving upon the cancellation of in-person classes and outdoor track. The lack of others around him created non-verification of his valued identity by others. Trenton's example shows the importance of social support and verification in maintaining positive mental health during identity threats. Trenton's view of himself as a runner dwindled as he was both injured and dealt with COVID-19. Further, his commitment to identity, concerning the number of and people interacted with in regard to an identity, suffered. Many of his closest teammates and friends left town due to cancellation of classes and closing dorms. This limited his interactions and created negative emotions as he wasn't able to fulfill his running identity and his negotiation of identity wasn't easily maintained or replaced.

On the other hand of the spectrum was extreme negative mental health responses. Leilah served as an example for negative mental health from the impact of COVID-19. Leilah's running identity was defined by high centrality and high commitment. As an identity that is constantly called upon in situations and is of great importance to her, negative emotions and mental health became a common theme (Rosenberg 1979). Initially, Leilah was able to run with friends and cope with the cancellation of outdoor track through acting like everything was normal. However, she slowly felt like nothing mattered anymore as she left school and distanced herself from her friends and

teammates. Due to COVID-19's impact on her running identity, she ended up seeing a

counselor as she had trouble sleeping and eating as her mental health drastically

decreased. This was in relation to COVID-19's impact on her running identity, but also

on her life outside of running in relation to school, family, and friends. This was also

reflected in Irvine's experience. Irvine further reflected notions of negative mental health

at the beginning of COVID-19. Coming off of injury, Irvine's mental health was already

low. However, COVID-19's cancellation of outdoor track disheartened him even further

as he wasn't able to fulfill his own identity standards. Both of these athletes' running

identities had high centrality. This created a strong negative emotional response to

COVID-19.

However, there were instances of positive mental health sprinkled throughout the

participants' journey through the pandemic. Many experienced a change in emotions to a

sense of relief and less pressure. Participants talked about these moments fondly

indicating possible increase in mental health in this regard. Less pressure was felt by

many such as Irvine, Trenton, Alice, and Teddie. Focusing on the positive was noted in

the negotiation of identities. Trenton, Irvine, and Teddie noted that their injuries prior to

COVID-19 created stress and negative mental health already residing with them.

Therefore, these athletes' maintenance of running identity, in the negotiation section,

created positive mental health responses so they could focus on their running identity

with less stress. While COVID-19 initially may have impacted mental health and

emotion, eventually a feeling of less pressure came about. This is due to increased time

and less stress to return to performance quickly. While COVID-19 added another stress

on to their already full plates, it also took away stresses and identity threats that were

currently impacting them. Theoretically, this is seen in relation to analysis on obligatory identities. Obligatory identities are identities one is expected to assume, which is running and returning from injury for these athletes (Stets and Burke 2011). Unfortunately, too much stress in relation to an obligatory identity creates emotional distress which isn't easy to discard as the identity is also central. COVID-19 took the stress out of their situations and relaxed their obligatory identities. This created an allowance for emotional relief and relaxation in some sense. On the other hand, Alice felt relief because of her general stress about performance and running. She felt burnt out and stagnated in her running and school identities and the return home allowed her to improve her mental health and recharge. This was due to her close relationships with family members and taking running at her own pace. Therefore, while not necessarily a shift towards positive mental health, COVID-19 allowed for positive change in these runners' lives through relaxation of stress and pressure. Even though non-verification may have been felt, positive emotions were still able to surface in regard to the complexity of identity negotiation (DeLamater and Ward 2013).

Other participants found positive mental health through another avenue. This included finding enjoyment in identities aside from running. Phil presented the most concrete data regarding this phenomenon. Phil turned away from his running identity focused on working and saving up money. This turn towards other identities increased his mental health. In our conversation he noted how running isn't everything and returning home to be with family and friends distracted him from running and improved his mood. Rather, he stopped running briefly and didn't think about the identity much at all. This created an increase in mental health for him during the pandemic. Alice felt this as well.

She returned home to work on the family farm which allowed her to take her mind off of competitive running. Rather than dwell on the cancellation of outdoor track, she found herself happier with her family and pursuing another important role identity of hers. Alicia reflected Alice's positive homelife as well and felt her mental health increase during the negotiation of identity as her other identities were verified and central as well. These participants had lower salience and less centrality for their running identity in their respective hierarchies. They found that a threat to their running identity caused considerably less emotional and mental distress due to their difference in salience and prominence hierarchies. Their hierarchies were easily rearranged as they focused on different identities and their mental health improved as verification for other identities took over.

Some participants also noted waves of both negative and positive mental health following identity negotiation. Daryl had expected his time running in college to have concluded. He noted, in regard to mental health, "*yeah it was definitely lower before we got eligibility back because I just could not, I really hated the feeling of not being able to see it through especially being a fifth year at that point*". An important thing to note here is that eligibility was extended to all spring sports impacted by COVID-19 in the NCAA. Therefore, the fifth-year undergraduates were provided the opportunity to return to school to pursue master's degrees and run one more year to finish on their own terms. This created an increase in mental health allowed for a clearer path for the future. This created verification and allowed for the salient and central identities to remain and stay strong within his hierarchy.

Each participant experienced Emotional and Mental Health Responses to COVID-19 in relation to their Negotiation of Identities. These responses varied from mild to extreme and concerned both positive and negative impacts to mental well-being. Notably, mental health responses, as well as Immediate Reactions and Negotiation of Identities, were contingent on other themes as well.

Formation of Running Identity

The commitment and investment of each participant in their running identity proved important in their navigation. The participants largely noted their introduction to running and the importance of social connections that influenced their commitment and investment in their running identities. In a sense, they help in the Formation of Running Identity and how the identity became important to each person. The commitment and investment lead to placing their running identity at the top of their identity hierarchies. Further, the commitment and investment served as an influence through the navigation of identity.

Each participant had a different and unique reason for running to serve as a primary identity in their lives. For example, Teddie was first exposed to running after noticing he was "too small" to play other sports. During our interview, he recalled his friends asking him to run on the cross country team. Upon joining, he ran with friends and became hooked on running. Teddie's significant others played a role in creating a deep athletic identity within him from an early age. With Teddie, I noted the importance of his athletic identity history being grounded in social relations with others in the sport.

Iris reflected this similar identity history with regard to her family. I asked Iris how she

started running in our interview. She stated,

> *"Okay, um so my mom ran in college athletics so I loved, I mean, I loved running*
>
> *from the get go…when we were little, um if we were getting too rowdy, we would*
>
> *have to run laps around my house, and so that's how all of us kids started*
>
> *running. And we would train for, we had fun runs, I guess in a really small town."*

This passage from Iris noted a similar reason for athletic identity to Teddie. The

difference was that her parents played a role in forming her athletic identity whereas in

Teddie's case it was his friends and coaches. These examples provided the grounds for

social support and influence being important to the commitment and investment to

running identity.

On the other hand, some participants found their strength of athletic identity

rooted within their specific enjoyments of running itself. Alice and Daryl found

enjoyment in the individual nature and physical aspects of running as an activity. The

individual nature constituted the enjoyment of running solo and improving themselves

physically and mentally. Whereas Sophie embodied a running identity to prove that she

wasn't a broken orphan, and Alicia found solace in a running identity due to her

enjoyment in winning races and being the best. However, many participants noted the

importance of what I call a holistic self as well. Sophie, Alice, Daryl, and Phil all

extensively noted that a person is not their running identity alone. Rather, as Daryl noted,

"there's more to life than sport". For these particular athletes who noted the importance

of a holistic person, their identity hierarchies tended to be more robust with other

identities easily interchangeable with running identity. Therefore, their Formation of Running Identity was formed in relation to other identities as well.

The Formation of Running Identity for these athletes proved to influence the navigation of their running identity. Another influence on the navigation was the theme of Social Support.

Social Support

Positive interactions with teammates, coaches, parents, and significant others create better well-being and affirmation of athletic identities during times of strife (Graupensperger et al. 2020). Social support and social ties played a role in dealing with emotions and mental health during the process of identity negotiation. Social support, or lack of support, influenced experiences of mental health and emotion and changing identity and hierarchies. Social support from teammates, significant others, and athletic staff influenced the participants' emotional and mental health responses. The main reason social support proved important was a feeling of connection through shared understanding and experience with others in the same shoes. This section covers these instances.

Social support is a commonly cited as a variable that influences identity maintenance in athletic identity literature (Graupensperger et al. 2020; Lautenbach et al. 2020). Social support from others is important to maintenance of identity as interactions with others create belonging or ostracizing of individuals from identities (Burke and Stets 2009:118). Responses from participants echoed the importance of various individuals around the participant as they positively and negatively impact one's experience with

their running identity. Trenton, Teddie, and Phil were among those who most frequently noted the importance of teammates and friends throughout the experience of COVID-19. Trenton constantly brought up his friends and teammates that he met in running and how they shaped him to be the person he is. He noted that, *"it was weird when like a lot of people left but a lot of people were here. I think when some of the people who I had invested a lot of my heart and soul into as being a friend kind of left and went away."* However, a decent amount of Trenton's teammates stayed and his social interactions with them were found to improve his mental health. Teddie reflected these ideas stating that the only reason he ran was for the team. He didn't care about individual success, but only helping out the team, the guys, and his "brothers". Teddie further expressed frustration as his parent's didn't possess the shared understanding of COVID-19's impact on runners. Therefore, he often met up with teammates, and made frequent calls to teammates, to express his emotions. This aided in creating a more positive experience for mental health. Iris also noted the importance of continuing to run with teammates during COVID-19. She noted, in terms of continuing to run with her senior classmates even though track was cancelled, that *"There was definitely like the kind of dark humor of like well we're gonna keep doing this but like, we don't really need to."* The continuation of running with each other aided in relating to one another and limiting negative emotional responses.

Yet, other participants found different social figures, beyond teammates, to be of importance to them when navigating their identities. Alicia, Phil, and Alice found comfort and support in navigating their identities through social relations with family members. Upon returning home during COVID-19, family members served as resources to vent to, and converse with, on the state of the world. This created shared experiences

that improved mental health through social support. Daryl, Alicia, and Leilah further found reassurance and maintenance of identities through coaches. Frequent calls to coaches with reassurances that everything would be okay aided in subduing intense emotional reactions. Significant others and athletic staff were also noted as social support groups that aided athletes' emotional and mental health experiences.

The importance of social support in creating positive emotions and mental health provided importance stemming from the negotiation of identities for the participants. However, the participants eventually found themselves back running as the world slowly began its shift to normalcy.

Return to Running

Upon negotiation of identities, and the mental health responses which followed, the participants found themselves back running, both literally and metaphorically, in terms of their running identity. While the world was not normal by any means, the participants did return to their school campuses in the fall to report for academics and athletics. During the interviews, the participants looked retrospectively at their changing identities through COVID-19. The importance of their running identities returned through social means and their commitment to the identity rose once again. Phil, while setting running to the side in the summer, found an increased interest in his running identity once again. While Alice loved working on the farm in the summer, she was glad to be back and fulfilling her role as a runner. Sophie, while having a low salience identity as a runner, found herself motivated once again for one more year to run. Leilah, Trenton, and Irvine found their mental health increased as they returned to running as verification for

the identity increased. This journey back to their role identity was made possible through their commitment and investment in running. The reasons running was important to many of them had returned. In the first section I noted the personal histories and social support which made running a central identity for many of the participants. Upon return to campus for school and running, these reasons, mainly the social support, returned. This prompted improvement in mental health and a resurgence of running identity for many.

However, there were athletes, such as Teddie, that found further mental strain while getting back into running. Unlike his counterparts, he only returned for the fall semester. While everyone else had indoor and outdoor track in the coming months, Teddie only had cross country remaining. Unfortunately, cross country was cancelled and Teddie remained confused as to what his running identity meant to him once again. He had the option to quit running as he wouldn't be fulfilling his duty to run cross country for the team. However, as social support was one of the main reasons running was a central identity to him, he opted to continue practicing with the team to help out his teammates in any way possible.

Teddie's example, in conjunction with many others, showed how, even though the athletes returned to running, their identities didn't necessarily revert to their original pre-COVID-19 state. Charmaz (2002) noted, "The self is continually reconstructed-but it may become a shell of a former self as the tasks of care consume time and consciousness" (38S). This was reflected among the participants as well. Those that held running as a highly central identity beforehand may have it less central now. From this negotiation, the realization of a holistic person was noted as their lives continued beyond COVID-19's threat. Upon the return to college, the identity was reinstated and centralized for the

participants. However, COVID-19 served as a threat that changed their attitudes toward their running identities. Participants realized there was more to life than solely running. This led to a changed sense of running identity that focuses on different aspects, such as social aspects, less stress, and enjoyment.

Proposed Theory

Based on the six thematic codes listed above, I present a proposed theory called "Navigation of Athletic Running Identity through COVID-19". I noted the entire process of the theory, and the six themes, as the "navigation" of the participants running identities. This section presents a description and traces what I call the navigation of identity for the participants through the identity threat of COVID-19. There are three distinct areas that are covered in relation to this theory. First, is the identity threat of COVID-19 affecting the athletes. The second concerns the navigation of identity throughout the identity threat of COVID-19. And the third part concerns the influences on identity navigation throughout the timeline of COVID-19's threat on running identity for these participants.

The theory is based on the identity threat of COVID-19 and its timeline for affecting athletic identity. COVID-19 began with the cancellation of outdoor track and cancellation of in-person classes in the spring of 2020. The timeline, for this study, continued through the return to campus for practice and classes in the fall of 2020. The next part of the theory concerns navigation of identity as participants were impacted.

The navigation of athletic running identity occurred within the participants over the timeline of COVID-19. The navigation of identity began in reference to the theme of

immediate reactions. This theme presented the first moments of shock and confusion and how the participants responded to the threat to identity. As the COVID-19 threat timeline continued, the participants eventually had to negotiate their identities. This led to the theme of Negotiation of Identities. This involved practices of maintaining running identity and rearranging identity hierarchies. In response to negotiation, the theme of Emotional and Mental Health Responses occurred. Notably, mental health responses and identity negotiation also occurred simultaneously throughout identity navigation. Therefore, while identity negotiation led to emotional and mental health impacts, emotional and mental health impacts also influenced negotiation after the initial negotiation practices.

The navigation takes into account influencers that aided the participants in their journey of identity navigation. The first theme that influenced navigation is Social Support. This theme had a direct impact on mental health within the population. This is because social support was influential in Emotional and Mental Health Responses throughout participant responses. Finally, Formation of Running Identity is the last theme accounted for and served as an influence. Formation of Running Identity encompassed the entirety of "Navigation of Athletic Running Identity through COVID-19" timeline. This is because the Formation of Running Identity constituted commitment and investment to the identity. This was called upon at multiple different stages throughout the navigation as an influence.

Finally, the "Navigation of Athletic Running Identity through COVID-19" wraps up with the Return to Running theme. This marks the conclusion of the COVID-19 threat timelines for the purposes of this study. Further, it marks the outcome of the navigation

of running identity and its influencers. In the end, identity was restored, yet with different personal relations to the identity.

This proposed theory does not serve as an objective model for all athletes grappling with their identity during COVID-19. Rather, this is a theory grounded in the data provided by the participants in this research alone. This theory encompassed important themes of the study and answered the initial research objective in the introduction. In relation to constructivist grounded theory, this is a useful analytic framework for describing the people of this study rather than a hard and explicit theory of social life (Apramian et al. 2016; Charmaz 2014:xv).

Discussion

In this section, I included what I found differently, as well as what I found similar to previous studies on the subjects of athletic identity navigation during COVID-19. Further, I noted the shortcomings of my study. There are various areas that could have been improved in hindsight that created limitations for the study. Finally, this section covers implications for future research on these subjects.

Relation to Other Research

As covered in the literature review, there were many other studies in relation to athletic identity and COVID-19 (Abenza-Cano et al. 2020; Costa et al. 2020; Graupensperger et al. 2020; Lautenbach et al. 2020; Pons et al. 2020; Ruffault et al. 2020; Schinke et al. 2020a; Schinke et al. 2020b). Similar to these other studies, my findings found negative impacts in the sense of negative emotions and mental health. This further

led to other impacts felt among the participants. Those with stronger perceived athletic identity also felt more impact than those with less strength in relation to their athletic identities. Similar results were found in Graupensperger et al. (2020) as well as how strong social interactions aiding in easing navigation and Negotiation of Identities. Further, changes in identity occurred in relation to continuation of the athletic identity towards the future similar to Abenza-Cano et al. (2020). Along with these findings, mental health disruptions were constant and found throughout my population as was found in Pons et al. (2020). Yet, there were differences that my study addressed.

The largest difference between my studies and others is the scope of the study. My study took a grounded theory approach focused on a small group of student-athletes and how they navigated their identity. Further, the student-athletes were all collegiate distance runners, creating a homogenous population for study. Also, my findings focused on hierarchy of identities and how athletic identity moved on the hierarchy. Therefore, rather than a focus on identity loss and mental health alone, I was able to construct a more holistic identity picture through the data collected in interviews. This is due to the small population and type of research utilized. However, the general findings reflected what was found in previous research on athletic identity and COVID-19 as a threat.

Limitations

Limitations and shortcomings were present in this study as well. For one, my sample was rather small for the construction of a full-fledged grounded theory study (Charmaz 2006; Creswell 2017). This was due to the limitations on sample population who met the sampling criteria of the study. Further, tracing athletes' navigation through

all of COVID-19 was not possible. Therefore, this grounded theory work served as viewing the immediate identity impacts in relation to COVID-19. In terms of grounded theory, I could have focused more on memo-writing throughout the process (Charmaz 2006). Memo-writing serves as a useful tool for organizing thoughts while achieving theoretical saturation. However, I opted to take mental notes which impacted my efficiency in writing the findings in the end. While I'm sure there are more limitations I'm not listing, these are the most pertinent.

Future Research

Future research surrounding athletic identity and COVID-19, concerning grounded theory, should utilize a larger sample. Using a larger sample from a more varied population may aid in creating a larger and more inclusive grounded theory than my research was able to provide. Further, more attention should be paid to the various types of identity, such as person, social, and role identities. While my study attempted this, the types of identities often meshed together. Further, identity change upon the conclusion of COVID-19, that being when it is no longer a global pandemic, may be more telling of the impacts this large threat has on athletic identity.

Summary of Findings

The ten participants in this study embarked on their own personal navigations of running identity due to the threat of COVID-19. While each participant experienced the global pandemic differently, I was able to piece together a cohesive narrative based on the research objective of this study. That objective being to investigate how student-

athlete runners navigated their athletic identity during COVID-19 and the social and psychological costs associated with said navigation. In the end, I found six themes which were Immediate Reactions, Negotiation of Identities, Emotional and Mental Health Responses, Formation of Running Identity, Social Support, and Return to Running. These themes served as grounds for the proposed model and analytical framework, titled "Navigation of Athletic Running Identity through COVID-19", presented in the final pages of this chapter. Once again, each participant had their own unique path of navigation of their running identity through COVID-19. The presented model served as a theory for how these athletes embarked on and concluded this navigational journey.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The outbreak of COVID-19 put the world on hold starting in early 2020. While many different social groups were impacted in a myriad of different ways by COVID-19, my research focused on collegiate student-athletes. At the time of the study, research looking at COVID-19 as a threat to athletic identity for student-athletes was lacking in sociology. This subject proved important to study seeing as athletic activities around the world were cancelled and postponed due to the global pandemic at hand. Further, scholars including Schinke and colleagues (2020a; 2020b), called for analysis on athletic identity during this time due to the mental health risks associated with threat to a salient and central identity. Therefore, I designed this study investigate how student-athlete runners navigated their athletic identity during COVID-19 and the social and psychological costs associated with said navigation. The following sections provide a brief overview of each chapter before providing final thoughts on this research project.

After analyzing previous literature in relation to my questions and objectives, I formalized the gap in research this study attempted to cover. Previous scholars had spent ample time discussing the impact of COVID-19 on students (Charles et al. 2020; Copeland et al. 2020; Du et al. 2021; Son et al. 2020; Wang et al. 2020), the impact of COVID-19 on athletes (Costa et al. 2020; Lautenbach et al. 2020; Ruffault et al. 2020; Schinke et al. 2020a; Schinke et al. 2020b), and a few studies on COVID-19's impact on student-athletes (Lucia Abenza-Cano et al. 2020; Graupensperger et al. 2020). Among these studies was the important concept of identity which this research surrounded. Identities are sets of meanings for roles that conform to expectations of others and expectations of an individual (Brenner et al. 2014). People have multiple identities which

come together to create a "self", or the holistic person created from all their roles (Mead 1934). With this idea in mind, I covered literature on identity within athletics. Notably, athletic identity is found to be constantly at threat from possibility of injury, retirement, or poor performance (Graupensperger et al. 2020). Within this study, COVID-19 became an identity threat akin to those previously mentioned by authors, and identity navigation was studied as impacted by the external threat. Therefore, because research on COVID-19 as an identity threat was limited, I turned towards athletic injury as a template to explain athlete reactions to threatened athletic identities. Finally, I noted processes of reconstructing athletic identities in literature. The literature review revealed that little research was performed concerning student-athletes impacted by COVID-19, COVID-19 as an athletic identity threat, and threats to athletic running identity in particular. Therefore, answering calls from Schinke and colleagues (2020a; 2020b), this research focused on this unique gap in literature to better understand the concepts studied.

Identity theory presented the theoretical framework to base this analysis on. Identity theory has a rich history stretching back to the Chicago and Iowa Schools of symbolic interactionism (DeLamater and Ward 2013). Leading scholars created useful ideas in the theory, such as Stryker's focus on role identities and social influence as well as salience hierarchy (Owens et al. 2010; Stets and Burke 2011), Burke's focus on internal dynamics and feedback loops (Stets and Burke 2011), and McCall and Simmons's hierarchy of prominence and focus on role identities (Stets and Burke 2011). Regardless of the type of identity theory, one of its primary goals is "to specify how the meanings attached to various identities are negotiated in interaction" (DeLamater and Ward 2013:31). Therefore, in relation to the research questions and objectives, identity

theory served as the ideal theoretical framework to ground the analysis based on the goals of the theory. Further, identity theory has been utilized extensively in sociological studies on athletics. Within identity theory I noted important concepts including verification, salience, centrality and prominence, and commitment as influential to my study. Finally, I covered concepts of emotion and mental health, as well as changing identities within the framework as they related closely to my study.

Upon choosing identity theory as a theoretical framework, I then moved into methods. While qualitative methods provide many means for collecting data, I opted to focus on grounded theory (Creswell and Poth 2017). One of the goals of the research was to create a proposed model, or theory, that traced participant navigation of identity through COVID-19. Grounded theory fit this bill as it focuses on complex descriptions which create theory through the eyes of participants (Apramian et al. 2016). While many types of grounded theory exist, this research utilized constructivist grounded theory proposed by Kathy Charmaz. This includes the importance of the role of the researcher in creating theory that invokes a literary style of writing reflecting the participants meanings in the data (Apramian et al. 2016; Charmaz 2014; Mills et al. 2006).

With the method of grounded theory in mind, I created sampling requirements and steps to gather data. The initial sample involved recruiting 10 participants, equal numbers of male and female, for the study. They had to embody the following criteria for recruitment in the sample: (a) the student-athlete must be on the cross country and track teams at the same Midwest NCAA DI university. (b) the student-athlete must have run one season of outdoor track prior to the cancelled season due to COVID-19. (c) the student-athlete must return to school for practice and competition in fall 2020. The

sample was recruited through purposeful sampling (Creswell and Poth 2017) followed by

snowball sampling (Wright et al. 1992). Theoretical saturation was reached at 10

participants. Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These

interviews lasted an average of a little over 36 minutes and asked the listed questions in

Chapter 3 and APPENDIX B. Interviews were transcribed and followed by a form of

line-by-line initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding to find themes on

which to create a proposed theory (Charmaz 2006). I was sure to reflexively review my

position to maintain validity, list my codes in the appendix to maintain reliability, and

adhere to ethical considerations through IRB, SDSU Research Integrity and Compliance,

and The American Sociological Association Code of Ethics.

The research methods led to the findings as presented in Chapter 5. I found each

of the participants, influenced by their commitment and investment to their running

identity, to have a different journey through the threat of COVID-19. I traced their

experience from immediate reactions to either maintaining their running identity, or

briefly setting it to the side and having other identities take its place. Positive and

negative emotional and mental health impacts were felt ranging from mild to extreme as a

result of COVID-19's threat on their identities. However, the participants all eventually

returned to school to pursue running once more. Therefore, COVID-19 served as a

temporary roadblock, but still changed many of their relationships with their running

identities. From this analysis I discovered six common themes on which I based my

proposed model. These themes were: Immediate Reactions, Negotiation of Identities,

Emotional and Mental Health Responses, Formation of Running Identity, Social Support,

and Return to Running. The proposed theory was titled, "Navigation of Athletic Running

Identity through COVID-19". This navigation began with Immediate Reactions to the COVID-19 identity threat and led to Negotiation of Identities. These negotiations influenced Emotional and Mental Health Responses, and these responses impacted negotiation of identities once again for many participants. Finally, the participants found themselves in a Return to Running stage where their role identity was once again fulfilled, but with different personal definitions attributed to the, once again, central and salient identity. Throughout this process, the Formation of Running Identity including personal histories, reasons for running as an identity, and social support, influenced the navigation of running identity at various stages throughout for each participant. Further, Social Support was another influence that mediated mental health responses. This model encompassed important themes of the study and answered the initial research objective in the introduction. In relation to constructivist grounded theory, this proved to be a useful analytic framework for describing the people of this study rather than a hard and explicit theory of social life (Apramian et al. 2016; Charmaz 2014:xv). The findings section concluded with relations to other work, study limitations, and implications for future research on the topic.

      To conclude, this research has its own limitations. There were many roadblocks to overcome along the way. However, the outcome of this grounded theory project was the proposed theory, which answered the initial research objective. I thank the participants for their willingness to contribute to the study and gain further understanding on the navigation of athletic running identity throughout COVID-19. To call back to the Acknowledgments section, once again, I thank my advisor and the committee members. I further thank my teammates and coaches for prolonging my love of running and

influencing me to take on this research project. And, finally, I thank my parents for being there for me every step of the way. As a sociologist, my goal was to uncover meanings in the social world. To reference C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* (2000), my efforts were to both make the familiar strange and the strange familiar in terms of social phenomena. I believe I accomplished this, and I thank the participants for shedding light and knowledge on this world.

APPENDIX A: CODEBOOK

Theme	Focused Code	Definition	Example
Formation of Running Identity	Running as major identity	Running presented and described as an important identity.	*"So, I would say that, for me, when I'm at school, running is almost my sole identity."*
	Major Identity Beyond Running	Presence of other identities beyond running identity.	*"It's not really like running related unless I'm at practice. Or, like doing a team event. But mostly it's around people in my major as well. Like going to their house for supper or just studying for exams. Or, just in general, like my faith, I'll go over to bible study a lot."*
	Physical aspect of running	Enjoyment of physiological benefits from running.	*"I just loved the feeling of running and like I was being able to take care of my body and see what it can do."*
	Individual aspect of running	Enjoyment of the individual aspect and nature of running.	*"I would hope everyone here kind of has that same where they just have that passion of running where even if they didn't have the teammates."*
	Reason for running as identity	Reasons on why commitment and investment exist for a running identity.	*"Like, I didn't have any fun thing that I was like passionate about or was like wow this (running) is what like I'm really good at."*
	Importance of holistic person	Importance of maintaining multiple identities aside from focusing on running alone.	*"I think so because it just shows like that running really isn't that important at the end of the day like if running is gone forever like I'm still going to be able to move on. Is it gonna be fun to move on? No. but*

			I have found a way and an ability to root myself in other identities."
	Importance of friends/teammates	Importance and instances of social support from friends and teammates in running identity.	*"Yeah in high school I had my two best friends in my grade who were also on the team who were also really smart. So, we had almost all of our classes together. So, it's just a natural fit, that like hey we can go to all of our classes together, then we'll go run together, then we'll go hang out after practice. Um, and I think that's kind of followed through to college..."*
	Positive influence of coach	Instances of positive social support from coach for running identity as a whole.	*"Over the past years for me has really just my whole college career I've been very close with him (coach) and our conversations aren't always running based but also life based in the greater, greater scheme of things. And so, when I look up very highly to him as my coach, to hear him kind of kind of remind us too that running is not the sole focus is always good."*
	Identity hierarchy	Instances of other identities important and central within participants' hierarchies of identities.	*"Yeah, definitely student that's a big one, I mean I guess I take school pretty seriously and then like um, yeah, but yeah runner and student are like really big ones. Um, and I'm like really close with my siblings so I guess sister would be*

			another identity and then um… Is friend and identity if I just put friend?"
Immediate Reactions	*"I don't know what else I wanted outside of running"*	InVivo code concerning COVID-19's impact on running identity.	
	"Nothing mattered anymore"	InVivo code concerning COVID-19's impact on running identity.	
	"I don't know what I am"	InVivo code concerning confusion in self and identity following COVID-19.	
	"What am I"	InVivo code concerning confusion in self and identity following COVID-19.	
Negotiation of Identities	Identity Hierarchy	Instances of other identities important and central within participants' hierarchies of identities.	Example previously provided.
	Shift in identity Hierarchy	Instances of identities in participants' hierarchies changing places during COVID-19.	*"Hm, probably my faith grew more. And just like, trusting that, also, um, I'd say farming didn't change. It used to always be there and I don't think it did change much because I feel like that's always been…but like at school it would change to more of like a*

	A shift in running identity	Changes in personal definition and relation to running identity.	*running aspect of it...but I got to enjoy being on the farm."*
			"But kind of at the same time, it's just like I can run after college too you know. So, probably, not what I want to hear but I think it kind of relaxed my ambition to what I need to do just because I've seen other people start running during COVID."
	A shift in lifestyle	Changes in life practices in regard to identities.	*"So, I was like, not only am I trying to do all the stuff that I was doing back here (school), but like any ounce of free time I have is stuck with the farm. And so that was more so just exhaustion those last two month."*
	Importance of holistic person	Importance of maintaining multiple identities aside from focusing on running alone.	Example previously provided.
	"There's more to life than sport"	InVivo code concerning importance of other identities beyond running alone.	
	Prolonging reality	Practices utilized to ignore the initial impacts of COVID-19 on life and identity.	*"Um, but being able to go out there and work for a week when like all this shit was starting to go down was really good because I was able to just kind of turn off that running portion of me and since I have like pretty much a duality in*

			my personality, I was then just 100% just focused on the farm."
	Focusing on the positive	Focusing on positive impacts from COVID-19 rather than dwelling on the negative.	*"So, because there were no outdoor track meets I didn't have to rush back from my injury, or because my student teaching was cancelled I didn't have as much responsibilities in school and it was just gonna work out."*
Emotional and Mental Health Responses	Negative mental health	Prevalence of negative mental health as a result of COVID-19 and identity negotiation.	*"Um, yeah, so, yeah it was, immediately I was disheartened because we didn't have a season. But then...I feel like I'm pretty hard on myself at least performance-wise like in school or like with running and I was very frustrated with running."*
	Strain on mental health	Prevalence of a strained, or mild, mental health response from COVID-19 and identity negotiation.	*"So, I think like when COVID hit like it was hard to reconcile those feeling cause there was nothing I could do about it. But I was very angry and very frustrated, not that I was...I wouldn't say I was depressed by any means."*
	Positive mental health	Prevalence of positive mental health as a result of COVID-19 and identity negotiation.	*"And I just, you know when…COVID did happen, I was definitely very happy still, like, nothing like my mental state went down."*
	Feeling of loneliness	Feeling of loneliness following social migration away	*"Yeah, um, so I feel like there was the big drop off when everyone...went to like spring break...and then*

		from school due to COVID-19.	*everyone like, a lot of people just never came back. I think, that was hard, um, because I didn't know when I would see a lot of them again."*
	Sense of relief	Sense of relief due to relinquishing athletic roles during COVID-19's cancellation of outdoor track.	*"So, I think it was a sense of relief that I could just be home all spring, cause, like, if I'm not home…it's just like a sense of peace."*
	Less pressure	Feeling less pressure to relinquishing athletic roles during COVID-19's cancellation of outdoor track.	*"I almost like, I don't know if it's bad that I kind of like it more that we're not wearing jerseys now…because it, yeah, there's a lot less pressure and my motivation for a lot of it…like, I'm still really motivated to like, because I still want to PR in a lot of the things I'm doing."*
	Constant pressure	Feeling of consistent pressure from before, during, and after COVID-19's threat.	*"Because when you are an athlete at a higher caliber and you've built a reputation of being good, you're always expected to perform well, you know like whether it's COVID or not COVID, like you're always, even if you think about an injury, it's the toughest thing to come back...there's not a relief of pressure."*
	"Crutches were coming underneath me"	InVivo code concerning an emotional response to social support systems	

		leaving during COVID-19.	
Social Support	Importance of friends/teammates	Importance and instances of social support from friends and teammates in running identity.	
	Positive influence of coach	Instances of social support from coach during COVID-19.	"I mean like, one of the biggest conversations that I had right away when I was like, when everything got canceled, was like um, with…my coach...was right away we had running cancelled and then school was cancelled for that extra week."
	Negative influence of teammates/coaches	Instances of negative social support from teammates/coaches during COVID-19.	*"Um, and so and for me that's just never been something I've let myself ever be okay with. Like I've never was like oh it's okay for this team to beat me you know. Like it's okay to not win a race like, just never has been. Um, so, yeah, definitely like a very different social culture is like developing and it's time for me to leave..."*
	Importance of shared experience (understanding)	Importance of having shared experiences and understanding with others during COVID-19.	*"And I think that was, even like, the month or two when I was back home, looking to like basically the end of the semester, I don't think my parents or anybody back home really understood like what we were going through with just having the season*

			ripped away from us. And so that's where, being back here was good..."
	Friends/teammates aid in mental health	Instances of social support, being friends and teammates, creating a positive mental health atmosphere.	*"Um, that so…that would be when my mental health was not the best. Um, when I was here it was good. Like, we were all sad, but like, I was with guys who cared about me and guys that understand what I was going through…"*
	Trainers aid in mental health	Instances of social support, being athletic trainers, creating a positive mental health atmosphere.	*"Some of the emails I sent her (the trainer) were like super depressing, like super angry. Like, not at her just at life and she's just like hey like it's alright, you're going to be fine, like your foot's going to be great."*
	Importance of family	Importance of social support through family member during COVID-19	*"Like, family and my friends are always 100% first you know. But if I had to give up running for that, you know, I will."*
	Importance of significant other	Importance of social support through significant others during COVID-19.	*"I found that COVID has exposed that I am largely reliant on other people to like help me stay motivated. Which is awesome that I married my husband otherwise I probably would've gained like 20 pounds."*
	"We've been forced to lean on each other"	InVivo code concerning social support during COVID-19.	

Return to Running	Resurgence of running identity	Return of importance and centrality of running identity.	*"Uh, I saw it as an opportunity because at that point actually did get our eligibility back. And so that actually lit a fire under me to you know...well okay we have this extra year back, how can I make the best of it to put myself in the best situation to succeed and get back to that level I was at?"*
	A shift in running identity	Changes in personal definition and relation to running identity.	Example previously provided.
	A shift in lifestyle	Changes in life practices in regard to identities.	Example previously provided.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What constitutes your identity as a runner? For example, what are daily activities, interactions, people you see, structures of your day, etc., that you perform as a runner?

2. How are your social circles organized around your identities? Do you hang out with certain people in certain places more than others due to their relation to your identity?

3. This research looks at identity. As a theoretical concept, a person can have multiple different identities that overall constitute the "self". What are some of your other identities? How do you introduce yourself to others according to these identities?

4. In general, pre-COVID-19, what would you say your mental health status was? Any major or diagnosed mental health statuses?

5. When COVID-19 hit, there were obvious physical ailments spread throughout the world. However, its impacts went beyond that with periods of quarantine that are continuing to this day. How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact your ability to perform your identity as a runner?

6. Other identities can take precedence in times of crisis. For example, a job takes a backseat when a spouse is suffering from cancer, etc. Therefore, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, did other identities take precedence over your running identity?

7. Identity, and the inability to fulfill its socially and self-defined roles, has the potential to negatively impact mental health. If you are so willing, could you

elaborate if the Covid-19 pandemic, and its impact on your running identity, caused any negative impacts towards your mental well-being?

8. While we are not clear from the pandemic yet, there are restrictions steadily being lifted all over the U.S. allowing running to be performed again. How has this navigation back to your running identity occurred? Has it been smooth? Troubled? Do you have the same motivation to fulfill your running identity once again?

9. How has the return to "normal" impacted your other identities and daily life? Has motivation to return been an issue? Are your social circles helping you to restore your identity?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Participant Informed Consent Form

Participation in a Research Project

South Dakota State University

Brookings, SD 57007

Department of Sociology & Rural Studies

Project Director: Joshua Yeager   Phone No. (319) 721-7829

E-mail: Joshua.yeager@jacks.sdstate.edu   Date: 9/22/2020

Please read (listen to) the following information:

This is an invitation for you, as a collegiate distance runner at SDSU, to participate in a research project under the direction of the project director listed above.

Project Title: Investigating Identity and Mental Health in Collegiate Distance Runners During Covid-19.

Information and Purpose: The purpose of the project is to interview collegiate distance runners, ages 18 and older, in a D1 Track & Field/XC program (SDSU) to uncover the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on individual's identity (as a runner and beyond) and mental health. You were selected as a participant due to your status as a collegiate distance runner at SDSU during COVID-19.

Participation: Your participation involves a qualitative in-depth interview, lasting 30-60 minutes, on the subjects discussed above. Consent is implied through agreement to participate. Interviews will be recorded through note taking and audio recording. Audio recording is only utilized if you agree. Interviews will either take place on the SDSU campus, following COVID-19 protocols, or via Zoom/phone. Your participation in this project is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Further, any questions may be skipped if desired.

Benefits and Risks: The benefit of your participation is to help us learn about the impact of COVID-19 on collegiate distance runners. Further, compensation of a snack and/or drink may be provided during in-person interviews. Risks include possible anxiety, depression, and other responses associated to mental health due to the nature of the questions provided.

Confidentiality: Your responses are strictly confidential. The interview will be tape recorded to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words; however, your name will not be recorded on the tape. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. If you feel uncomfortable with the recorder, you may ask that it by turned off at any time. Further, all information will be password protected in folders only accessible to the Project Director on his personal computer.

As a research participant, I have read the above, have had any questions answered, and agree to participate in the research project. I will receive a copy of this form for my information.

Participants Signature (printed) _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Project Director's Signature _____ Date _____

(Electronic)

By checking this box and typing my name below, I consent to participation: ☐

Name: _____

I (the participant) agree to the use of audio recording during the interview: Yes ___ No___

If you have any questions regarding this study you may contact Joshua Yeager at (319) 721-7829 or Joshua.yeager@jacks.sdstate.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, you can contact the SDSU Research Compliance Coordinator at (605) 688-6975 or SDSU.IRB@sdstate.edu.

This project has been approved by the SDSU Institutional Review Board, Approval No.: _____

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