

8-6-2019

Retired Female Gymnasts' Reflections on Body Image and Sense of Self

Briley Casanova
brileygymnast@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses



Part of the [Life Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Casanova, Briley, "Retired Female Gymnasts' Reflections on Body Image and Sense of Self" (2019). *LSU Master's Theses*. 4993.
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/4993

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.

**RETIRED FEMALE GYMNASTS' REFLECTIONS ON BODY IMAGE
AND SENSE OF SELF**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

in

The Department of Kinesiology

by
Briley Casanova
B.A., University of Michigan, 2016
December 2019

Acknowledgements

I want to sincerely thank my advisor and committee member Dr. Alex Garn for his incredible support and guidance throughout the thesis writing process. He has been an exceptional instructor, leader and mentor throughout my time at LSU. I also thank my other committee members and professors, Dr. Melinda Solmon, Dr. Amanda Benson and Dr. Elizabeth “Kip” Webster for their endless support and feedback.

This project would not have come to fruition without the unconditional love and encouragement from my parents Bev and Zelda, my brother Cole and the entirety of my family and friends. I am also incredibly grateful for the peers and colleagues who have supported me throughout this process as well. Thank you!

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Body Image in Gymnastics.....	2
Athletic Identity and its Connections with Body Image.....	4
Present Study.....	7
Method.....	9
Qualitative Research Design.....	9
Participants.....	9
Procedures.....	10
Data Analysis and Credibility.....	11
Results and Discussion.....	12
“Fit, Lean and Strong, Not a Skinny Mini”.....	12
Diverse Sources of Body Image Ideals and Identity.....	17
Protective Factors.....	22
Conclusions.....	28
References.....	31
Appendix A. IRB Form.....	35
Appendix B. Interview Guide.....	36
Appendix C. Higher-Order Theme Chart.....	37
Vita.....	40

Abstract

Researchers identify the early stages of retirement as a key developmental period when many female athletes struggle with both body image disturbances and changes to identity. Body image disturbances and changes to identity may be especially challenging for former female athletes participating in aesthetic focused sports such as gymnastics, because physical appearance plays an important role in elite performance. This study utilized semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five former NCAA Division I artistic gymnasts to learn about their experiences and perceptions of body image and athletic identity in the early stages of retirement. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: (a) *“Fit, Lean and Strong, not a Skinny Mini;”* (b) *Diverse Sources of Body Image Ideals and Identity;* and (c) *Protective Factors.* In the first theme, athletes reported an ideal body image that was more athletic in nature than the traditional tall and thin ideal portrayed in the media. However, there was a fine line about not being “bulky and too masculine” and “getting fat” was a major body image fear reported by these athletes. In the second theme, participants reported an array of external sources contributing to thoughts about body image including social media, but underscored critical awareness about pros and cons of these different external influences. Finally, in the last theme, these retired athletes revealed protective factors such as supportive families and coaches and not immersing one’s identity completely into gymnastics that made the transition into retirement an easier process. Unlike previous research reports, these athletes did not experience extreme difficulties with their body image and identity in the early stages of retirement. In fact, these retired gymnasts showed that they could thrive beyond their time as competitive athletes due to healthy self-reflection, resilience, and several supporting factors.

Introduction

Adolescents and young adults are especially prone to negative views and unhealthy behaviors regarding their body, which often stems from low self-esteem and societal pressures to obtain a specific ideal appearance (Kostanski & Gullone, 1998). Over the past several decades, this has led researchers to investigate nuances of body image, disordered eating, and their connections to self-esteem and identity (O’Dea & Abraham, 2000). Female athletes involved in sports that emphasize appearance may be especially prone to body image disturbances (Rice et al., 2016). One related area that has not received much attention is the investigation of recently retired female athletes, in this case, recently retired female artistic gymnasts who were National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I collegiate program members.

With the growing research interest on female body image discussions and hardships associated with athletic retirement, there is a need for further research surrounding body image ideals and disturbances in retired elite female gymnast populations. Rice et al. (2016) provided evidence on the current state of the mental health of elite athletes. They pointed out that in comparison to the general population, elite athletes are at a high risk for mental disorders such as depression and anxiety. Further, they mentioned that these mental disorders have a propensity for leading one to abuse drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism, along with encountering other health outcomes associated with such habits such as injury, overtraining and burnout. Additionally, Chang et al. (2018) found that depending on the psychological flexibility and personality of an athlete, athletic identity relates to emotional exhaustion over time. This information is valuable considering that athletes graduating from high-level collegiate programs may encounter disruptions with their athletic identity and struggle with healthy adjustment to retirement.

This study investigates body image perception and its connection to athletic identity in retired female collegiate gymnasts. In the following paragraphs, body image is defined and the research literature is synthesized with a focus on female athletes. Next, athletic identity is defined and connections between body image and athletic identity are made with an emphasis on how connections may affect retired female gymnasts.

Body Image in Gymnastics

According to Cash (2004, p. 1), the definition of *body image* is "...the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment, especially but not exclusively one's physical appearance." From this perspective, there is variance in how one can perceive her or his own body. According to research, both males and females are affected by body image distortion, social physique anxiety, and maladaptive perfectionism (Haase, Prapavessis & Owens, 2002). Additionally, research on body image perception, body image satisfaction and eating disorders has been done on males and females using both athletic and non-athletic populations (DiPasquale & Petrie, 2013; Stewart et al., 2003; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). This inquiry aims to explore retired female collegiate gymnasts' body image retrospectively, focusing on their perceptions about change during the transition from competitive athlete to retired athlete. Body image disturbances can lead to a myriad of problems such as eating disorders and the use of negative coping mechanisms for weight management. It is clear that research supports the pressure to be perfect and presence of disordered eating is at high levels in elite athletes, especially young gymnasts (Nordin, Harris & Cumming, 2003). While this inquiry is not specifically focused on eating disorders, learning from the cultural norm of pressure to be thin is worth mentioning to give background and context to further support this inquiry. While the socialization of women to be thin has been witnessed on a broad scale in recent years, females in

sports have been under a different microscope in comparison to those not involved with sport (Adams, Goldufsky & Schlaff, 2016; Furnham, Badmin & Sneade, 2002; Ogle, Reddy-Best & Park, 2017). Certainly, there have been a multitude of research focused on the body image of women and girls both in athletic and non-athletic populations (Varnes et al., 2013). Learning about the origins of pressures to be thin from the athletes' points of view can help discover more understanding about body image and athletic identity within the sport of gymnastics. In addition to the notion of pressure to be thin as a part of gymnastics specifically, research supports that other sports focused on leanness for the purpose of performing successfully encounter similar phenomena, including but not limited to: swimming, diving, figure skating, cross-country, wrestling, ballet, cheerleading and running events in track and field. Since these sports have a physical aesthetic and particularly lean-focused ideal, these athletes are at risk for experiencing unreasonable pressures to be thin and "make weight" (Rudd & Carter, 2006).

Athletes may feel pressure to showcase their appearance in a sport-specific "mold" or in a manner their coaches think they "should" look like. With this, fear of failing coaches and parents is a potential risk factor in leading athletes to detrimental coping behaviors (Papathomas & Lavalley, 2010). This may cause athletes to cope with or monitor their weight in unhealthy ways, as demonstrated by Warriner and Lavalley (2008) in their interviews with rhythmic and artistic gymnasts. Sports that strongly emphasize leanness and performance such as gymnastics, ice skating wrestling and diving may facilitate unhealthy weight management behaviors (Sundgot-Borgen & Garthe, 2011). Another facet of this inquiry is to simultaneously evaluate how gymnasts' views of their personal body image may have been shaped, maintained or changed across time in their immediate environments both inside and outside of collegiate gymnastics.

Athletic Identity and its Connections with Body Image

Athletic identity is another theme of this inquiry, specifically its association with body image in retired female gymnasts. The definition of identity according to Stets and Burke (2000, p. 229) is, “the set of meanings that are tied to and sustain an individual.” Additionally, Brewer et al. (1993) provide a specific definition for *athletic* identity: “The degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (p. 237).” When athletes experience the changes of retirement, identity and self-concept issues often arise (Lavalley, Gordon & Grove, 1997). Researchers have begun to chronicle the emotional transition associated with sport retirement. For example, Stephan et al. (2003) report that the first six months after retirement is the sensitive period when many retired athletes show a decrease in perceived physical self-worth, global self-esteem and overall physical condition. However, once this initial transition stage passes, some of the athletes in the study increased each facet of their self-perception and demonstrated an adjustment to new strengths. The potential difficulties associated with athletic retirement (e.g., decreased self-worth, negative self-esteem, etc.) will guide female gymnasts’ firsthand accounts about their self-beliefs about retirement.

Specifically, in Warriner and Lavalley’s (2008) work, they identified that the most overwhelming feedback from retired gymnasts once they retired was a “lost” sense of identity. Because elite gymnasts tend to retire in their early 20s and are at their peak level of investment and performance during their adolescent years, it is presumed that the degree of lifestyle changes in retirement are particularly overwhelming. This is especially the case when potential physical and developmental changes take place (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

Due to the possibility of decreased self-esteem and mental exhaustion from these taxing demands, a plausible coping mechanism for retired gymnasts may be searching for other outlets

or sports that allow for a similar form of self-expression that gymnastics provided during their careers (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). With feelings of loss, turmoil, identity confusion and sadness, these initial stages and emotional periods potentially guide retired athletes to finding other outlets to find a sense of belonging and purpose that they once had with gymnastics. Additionally, if athletes can plan for these difficult stages of retirement from sport ahead of time, then more positive experiences of coping with sport loss may ensue (Lally, 2007).

A review by Rice et al. (2016) found that many athletes suffer from some type of mental health disorder at some point in their career, specifically anxiety and depression, and elite athletes tend to have a higher propensity to experience mental health troubles compared to the general population. Results showed this could be even more apparent in athletes who are or have been injured or are nearing retirement from their sport (Rice et al., 2016). Taking this a step further, other research has confirmed that athletic identity is associated with symptoms of anxiety and depressive feelings within months of retiring from their sport (Giannone et al., 2017). Varnes et al. (2013) also cite that in general, female collegiate athletes are likely to have more protection from body image concerns than non-athletes their age. However, it is also indicated that with more “feminine” sports, especially gymnastics, this protection may be weakened since gymnastics is perceived as quite “feminine” in nature compared to other popular sports (Plaza et al., 2017).

Warriner and Lavallee (2008) explain that the relationship between coaches and athletes interact with athletes’ need to either lose weight and maintain thinness or lack of pressure to maintain the thin ideal. They reveal that there are multifaceted aspects to gymnastics’ inner workings and relationships between coaches and athletes. This is mirrored by Stirling, Cruz &

Kerr (2012) in their work with both rhythmic and artistic gymnasts. While rhythmic gymnastics contains an even stronger aesthetic appeal compared to artistic gymnastics, it was established that both types of gymnasts in their inquiry felt strong pressures to lose weight, had continued athletic identity ambivalence and internalized the belief that success is measured by thinness. Coach interactions were the driving force behind their belief that thinness equals success.

Connecting this to Warriner and Lavalley's (2008) research, many of their athletes described fear when interacting with their coaches concerning their weight and body image. The coach-athlete relationship is vital to athlete's success, therefore, fearful and negative interactions with coaches can be harmful to an athlete's identity (Weiss & Weiss, 2006). In addition to fear as an emotional side effect of interacting with coaches, other inquiries have found that gymnasts often experience a lack of self-esteem and overall negative body image perspectives from interactions with coaches and performance pressure over time (Stirling et al., 2012). This reflects a state of *entrapment* that Weiss & Weiss (2006) mention in their work (e.g. "have to" remain involved in the sport rather than "want to"). It has also been shown that coaches can directly contribute to how an athlete manages their perception of their body image and health behaviors (Beckner & Record, 2016).

Looking back at how athletes initially handle retirement, Warriner and Lavalley (2008) highlighted that it is common for gymnasts to experience identity loss and confusion in the early stages of retirement. In other words, these athletes expressed ambivalence about who they were outside of the sport. According to these gymnasts, they emphasized a lack of perceived personal control over their life, schedule and physical appearance once they reached retirement. This was due to their time in the sport having been very structured and controlled by coaches for most of their career. Stirling et al.'s (2012) reported similar findings of retired gymnast dissatisfaction

with weight and body image leading to unhealthy coping behaviors study. Other inquiries have also mentioned various perspectives on loss of control and guilt in terms of diet and physical appearance, thus contributing to the notion that retirement has both an influence on identity and body image in retired female gymnasts (Nordin, et al., 2003; Stirling et al., 2012).

Stirling et al. (2012) explored how retirement shaped elite rhythmic gymnasts' perceptions on their body satisfaction and their behaviors encompassing weight control. The retired gymnasts they interviewed had an overall increase in body dissatisfaction once they retired and felt guilty about putting on weight and losing muscle after retiring from the sport. Their guilt and distaste towards their physical state was exhibited through food restriction, taking laxatives and exercising in excessive amounts (Stirling et al., 2012). Regarding self-identity and its connection to retired athletes, Stephan, Torregrosa and Sanchez (2007) report that the athletes who experience difficulties with their body image post retirement tend to feel a loss of their self-esteem, physical self-worth, in addition to a decreased perception of physical condition, sport competence and physical attractiveness. They specifically mention that the perception of certain physical losses related to sport is quite stressful to the athletes' self-esteem (Stephan et al., 2007).

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate female artistic gymnasts' perceptions of athletic identity and body image during the early stages of retirement. Specifically, the goal was to gather firsthand descriptive information about how retirement links to body image and identity. While overweight and obesity are at an all-time high in the United States, it is simultaneously apparent that the overwhelming pressure to be thin is an ever-present phenomenon, especially for females (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). However, it is currently

unclear if the retired athletic collegiate gymnast population is further susceptible to the social pressure to be thin brought on by broader, cultural forces.

Method

Qualitative Research Design

Phenomenological inquiry model as developed by Smith and Osborn (2003) was used in this study. This model is suited to investigate a personal, intense phenomenon such as body image; especially because the *lived experience* is a key feature supporting this inquiry (Patton, 2015). In addition to focusing on the lived experience, phenomenological inquiry aims to specifically study the *meanings* extracted from the participants' emotions, behaviors and social aspects of their lived experiences (Guest et al., 2013). Furthermore, phenomenology seeks to study one's feelings and perceptions along with their lived, conscious experiences. Additionally, the goal behind using a phenomenological approach was to investigate and understand deeper meanings of one's emotions, thoughts, and social meanings of their individual experiences within their world. Moreover, Patton (2015) provides central questions that drive a phenomenological approach. Essentially, the main questions focus on the deeper meanings behind human experiences, along with the "essence," meanings and interpretations of such lived experiences.

Participants

The participants in this study represented a purposeful sample of retired female college gymnasts ($N = 5$) within five years of retirement. The importance of the participants' background information allowed for further understanding of where the chosen participants came from, thus leading to a more in-depth picture of their lived experience with body image ideals as retired female gymnasts. Criterion sampling was used to recruit participants (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria were: (a) Each participant was retired from a Division I NCAA university gymnastics program for at least six months, but no longer than five years; (b) Athletes were not injured for

more than one calendar year while on their team (injured enough to be taken out of competition for no longer than one full year); and (c) Each participant was a roster member of the gymnastics team for at least four years. Fifth year student-athletes were considered if their redshirt status was due to injury during their collegiate career. The table below highlights the personal details of each participant.

Table. Overview of Participants

Pseudonym:	Alex	Jasmine	Mandy	Katherine	Lily
Years of gymnastics experience:	20	15	20	16	20
Time since retirement at time of interview:	1 year 9 months	2 years 10 months	10 months	4 years 11 months	11 months
Age:	24	24	23	27	23
Race/Ethnicity	White	Multi-Racial	Multi-Racial	White	Multi-Racial
Scholarship status:	Full Scholarship	Full Scholarship	Full Scholarship	Full Scholarship	Full Scholarship

Procedures

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The interview process followed a semi-structured format, as to allow for proper in-depth discussion of both body image and athletic identity (see Appendix for Interview Guide). Verbal consent was obtained from each participant.

Each participants' right to anonymity was protected throughout the data collection process. Specifically, participants were assigned pseudonyms in all cases. Each interview was

conducted in a quiet, private room in order to maintain trust and comfort in discussing personal topics without interruption or judgement from others. Post-interview follow up via e-mail correspondence took place with each participant to share their transcripts and clarify codes.

Data Analysis and Credibility

Smith and Osborn (2003) emphasize that phenomenology analysis supports discovery of rich, thick description and requires detailed data analysis. Dividing data into categories occurs in the initial analysis stages, which allows for in-depth description of participants' most salient answers. An important aspect of the analytical process is asking critical questions beyond those in the interview. In other words, thinking a step beyond the participants' response(s) and using critical thinking skills to assess what meaning the participant is trying to convey. Patton (2015) further describes that phenomenology methods should be committed to maintaining the connection between participants' thoughts, expressions and emotional state.

For the first step in the analytical process, line-by-line coding was completed for each transcribed interview. Each line of conversation was analyzed on a copy of the typed transcript. Once this line-by-line coding process was accomplished, each main finding was categorized. Next, a second round of analysis took place that consisted of grouping categories into broader themes based on communalities and connections. Once several themes were created, a final round of analysis was used to reduce themes into three higher-order themes. Full transcripts with coding and main findings were e-mailed to the participants for their confirmation of accuracy.

Results and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the participants' interviews regarding their body image, athletic identity, and gymnastics career history. The first theme, "*Fit, Lean, and Strong, Not a Skinny Mini*" pertained to the common beliefs about a body image ideal shared by these retired gymnasts. The second theme, *Diverse Sources of Body Image Ideals and Identity*, covered participants' reports that body image and identity were not as simple as being born with certain traits or ideals but was the interaction between personality and environment. The third and final theme of this inquiry was *Protective Factors*. This final theme focused on the many protective strategies and supports participants maintained in order to maximize their body image and identity ideals during the early stages of retirement.

"Fit, Lean, and Strong, Not a Skinny Mini"

The first emerging theme focused on the shared body image ideal discussed by these participants. The idea of maintaining a "fit," "lean," and "strong" physical appearance was prioritized over a very thin body. However, within the "fit, lean, strong" body ideal there was a clear demarcation about being strong but not masculine. Fear of getting "fat" was the worst possible outcome that could occur during retirement according to these participants having that "leanness" and thinner, yet athletic look was what the participants described in their perceptions of what they aimed to achieve physically. For example, Jasmine described her ideal body image in the following passage: "My ideal body image is probably the gymnast body: the fit, you know... I wouldn't say skinny mini, but I'd say like the lean fit, you know, abs or no rolls kind of... but at the same time, sometimes I'm not always gonna have that." According to Alex, an emphasis on not becoming "too bulky" or having excessive muscle mass or fat was an imperative distinction made among the interviewees. Even though retired, the participants still

wanted to maintain somewhat of an athletic appearance in balancing the amount of muscle mass and leanness in their general appearance. Specifically, when discussing the physical goal that Alex had when Olympic lifting training, she definitely recognized her desire to avoid having “man arms” while additionally striving to strengthen her body in general. She remembered the feeling of being strong when she was a gymnast, so she maintained that desire to have strength as she trained as a novice Olympic weight lifter and CrossFit enthusiast when she said, “...like when I think about in workouts, I get worried if my arms are gonna get too big... I don’t want to have man arms, but I know that the body I am most confident in is a strong one.” A sense of ambivalence about maintaining strength while also avoiding too much obvious muscle mass is evident in Alex’s perspective. Her peers mentioned a similar drive to maintain physical strength while not necessarily looking to maintain their previous muscle mass in their gymnastics career.

Jasmine specifically mentioned both the things that she desires and what she avoids in terms of appearance. She brought up that she wanted to be “lean fit” with “abs” and “no rolls.” Her perspective was interesting in the sense that she detailed both the attributes she looked for (e.g. leanness, thinness) but also mentioned specific things she wanted to avoid (e.g. fat, rolls). Other participants were not as descriptive in terms of the physical attributes that they avoided compared to the things that they looked for in their physical aspirations. However, another interesting aspect of the interviews included not only physical traits that were desired or aimed to avoid, but when discussing body image in depth, the discussion took a turn towards focusing on both the emotions and physical feelings attached to certain body image statuses.

This particularly stood out when Jasmine and Lily talked about comfort within their own skin and self being an important aspect of one’s body image: Jasmine stated that she strives for “want(ing) skin that I’m comfortable in” on a daily basis. Lily elaborated on the discomfort she

mentally and physically felt after not exercising for the first three weeks of retirement: “After three weeks, that’s when I started kinda falling in to this limbo area where it was super uncomfortable. I didn’t know what I was doing and stuff.” Lily and the other athletes did express some level of this mental confusion and discomfort during the first six months to a year of their initial retirement phase. Katherine echoed that the first six months were definitely the most difficult and uncomfortable time period for her after retirement as she said, “I guess like six months afterwards, I was like ‘This is, this is weird, I don’t like it.’”

In addition to the physical characteristics that participants mentioned, there were other aspects of the ideal body image that they looked for, yet more on the psychological side of body image. While participants focused on specific physical attributes they aimed for, they also recognized the importance that their mindset had on their perceptions of how they viewed themselves. Looking at Jasmine’s perspective, she mentioned that most women aspire to live with “the skin that you’re comfortable in.” Connecting this with Lily’s point of view, Lily says most women also aim for “being happy and healthy” in addition to having a comfort level in acceptance of what their body already looks like.

With the known risks of anxiety and depressive symptoms, the participants did express few and brief bouts of anxiety and sadness, but not the extent that Rice et al. (2016) and Giannone et al. (2017) eluded as a risk factor to retiring athletes. In addition to the physical aspect of what body image encompasses, this particular mindset was interesting to learn about in respects to the mental aspect of body image. Referencing Cash’s (2004) definition of body image, it is key to consider its “multifaceted” nature and understand the complexities behind how each participant internally processed and experienced their body as retired gymnasts. Having both emotional perceptions and physical descriptions of how they interpreted body image adds

extra layers of depth in discussing the topic overall. The cognitive and psychological aspects of body image are as much a part as the outward physicality of it. While there were both positives and negatives associated with the initial retirement experience to some degree in all of the participants, it was made clear that the positives outweighed the negatives that they encountered and still were able to function on an everyday basis. Despite their ambivalence and mixed emotions about their appearance and identity, they continued to press onward and face their emotions and realities in their own ways.

For example, Katherine mentioned her own internal struggle when it came to her working towards her goal of what she wanted to look like as a former athlete for her wedding. She specifically understood that she wanted to have a realistic goal of looking like her athletic self while also striving to look the best, feminine version of herself on her wedding day. To illustrate her perspective, Katherine shared, “I didn’t want to look like a gymnast. I was like, ‘I wanna look like a girl’... I want to feel like I look feminine: Toned and everything, but just like a more mature gymnast version of me.” She clearly sought out the best of both worlds in terms of maintaining her fit, athletic figure after retirement, while also implying that there was a portion of femininity that she desired as well for her wedding day.

These perspectives do match research that indicates the overarching “lean” and “fit” ideal among most women, but not necessarily “thin”. After analysis, even though the participants mentioned the initial broad cultural appeal to conform to the commonly mentioned Victoria’s Secret Model tall and thin body type, the participants recognized that more athletic body types are becoming more celebrated by media outlets and that the Victoria’s Secret Model look was not realistic and not necessarily seen as the most ideal to them. Citing Rudd and Carter’s (2006) findings regarding athletic body stereotypes, the “prepubescent” and generally “small” ideal

standard for gymnasts can be harmful and unrealistic to achieve. On the other hand, Katherine reinforced the positive strides in gymnasts' physical perception when she said, "I really think it's cool like, the body issue of ESPN, like Alicia Sacramone, Shawn Johnson, like all of that coming out I think has really changed, like these women that are big names that people who don't even know gymnastics are looking at..." This observation seems inspiring and promising for these retired athletes regarding the future of what American culture celebrates as physically ideal. This is important to discuss as Katherine emphasized valuing positive role models for young girls. Her perspective is likely due to the fact that she has an infant young daughter to raise herself and wants to teach her about having a balanced view of body image as her mother did for her.

To further discuss the results obtained from the participant interviews, Alex and other participants shared thoughts matching with the previous research discussing the body image ideals for young female athletes: avoid failing to fit the athletic "mold" implemented by coaches (Papathomas & Lavallee, 2010). While fear of failing coaches and parents by not maintaining the physical athletic ideal during the participants' careers was not at the forefront of the shared perspectives, it was understood that there was an existing pressure to remain fit and athletic once retirement took place. This mindset in avoidance of both excess fat and excess muscle while working towards a "lean fit" appearance is mirrored by George (2005, p. 318) as stated: "Normative conceptions of beauty impact elite women athletes to a remarkable extent as they work to find a balance between what their bodies allow them to do in sport with expectations of what their physiques should look like." Ogle et al. (2017) support this shared mindset among participants, finding that female athletes avoid the look of being too masculine in their feminine sport. Crissey & Honea (2006, p. 252) argue that since sports are already generally perceived as masculine in nature, female athletes find that "they have to compensate... and over-conform to

feminine stereotypes.” It was evident that the participants each felt this pull to maintain their athletic figure as a retired athlete as a result of various influential sources of pressure discussed in the next theme.

Diverse Sources of Body Image Ideals and Identity

The second theme highlighted the sources of retired gymnasts’ body image ideals and identity post-retirement. The participants’ responses focused on several external factors as sources that contributed to their body image ideals and perspectives. For example, social comparison, social media, and popular culture were influencers of how these retired gymnasts viewed and interpreted their body image. While there were some positive perspectives about body image and identity interpretations found from participant discussions, there were also some instances of difficulties associated with using external factors to judge body image and shape identity. Alex states:

I was never body conscious until I got to college which is, I don’t know, I guess it’s a novelty. I don’t really know...also, I have a scale complex where like I don’t want to get on a scale because I don’t want to know the number. I would rather just physically see myself... And so it’s kind of like this in between phase of like, ‘I need time off’ and ‘I just pushed my body to its limits.’

While some participants mentioned the negative influence that social media had on their body image, it was also an interesting note that some participants took social media as a positive influence on how they saw themselves. Lily in particular shared that social media was partly an avenue of inspiration as to how she desired to look. She elaborated:

Social media...it’s so powerful and it can be powerful in a good way, powerful in a bad way depending on how you use it. But definitely... you know seeing certain images getting more attention. And the trend with that and the more attractive get more attention. And the less attractive get less attention. So, like, of course, being (active) on social media I’m gonna try to push for that more attractive side so that pushes me to push myself physically and you know outer appearance-wise to be more on that side of the spectrum.

She continued to talk more in depth about the reasons behind how Instagram images of fit, yet lean women are what she looks up to achieve. Perhaps as a young woman who admitted to seeing “from all sides” and understanding other perspectives before forming her opinion, this discussion was a touchpoint that was not as strongly supported by other research. Having both positive and negative attitudes towards mass media outlets was the common ground that the participants shared. Mandy specifically shared her ambivalence about social media being both a positive and negative influence on her when she said, “...while I do hate the fact that body image is perpetuated on social media too much, I do appreciate that it’s more realistic in terms of what a woman should look like.” This shows that she recognizes the consistently promoted, unrealistic standards on social media sites, while also mentioning that there are efforts to balance this phenomenon by promoting other body image standards as well.

This led to the understanding that in the eyes of the participants, this ideal was recognized as the broad, socially-approved desirable aesthetic for most women to obtain, realistic or not. For example, Alex elaborated on this point when she talks about the internet and social media externally influencing her to look thin: “But like, not like the internet in the sense that like, I don’t want to look like a Victoria’s Secret model. I’ve never wanted to look like that because I know it’s unrealistic.” She continued to elaborate that the stronger influence on her comes from Instagram fitness gurus and other fitness models that tend to have more of the “lean fit” look instead of the runway thin Victoria’s Secret models. While Victoria’s Secret model was not necessarily ideal for her, she recognized that it is desired by most other women. She did not bother trying to achieve that look because she knew it was impossible for her to grow any taller than her current height. While maybe she might agree that they are considered “beautiful” or “desirable” she did not pursue that body type because of its impossibility to achieve for her build

and full-grown adult height. As a result, she tried to focus on those who tend to embody the discussed realistic “lean fit” ideal over extreme runway model thinness. Although critical of social media, it appeared as though she sought out more relatable body image types that suit her inspirational needs.

Diving deeper in the discussion, other participants shared that social media sites such as Instagram were responsible for introducing negative thoughts and ideas about how these retired athletes felt about the way they looked. After asking what body image most women believe is the ideal, Katherine shared her perspective and stated, “I feel like tall, skinny, maybe a little bit of muscle tone, but I feel like that’s not really widely accepted. Like, people see a girl who’s like muscular, and they’re like threatened by her maybe...” While she understood where social and mass media may be harmful for young girls who have not developed a full understanding of themselves, she also credited notable media outlets such as Sports Illustrated for attempting to celebrate and promote more athletic body types (e.g. retired Olympic champion gymnasts Alicia Sacramone, Simone Biles and Shawn Johnson) as previously mentioned: “I feel like the corner might be starting to be rounded with these girls who are muscular and fit and who are nice and positive role models for little girls.”

A similar understanding seemed to be reached among all participants in relation to understanding that the pressure for women to be thin and tall is still prevalent enough to be desired, yet there is also a cultural movement towards acceptance of other body image types that are not tall, thin or runway model-esque. There was a clear sense that participants saw both progress towards accepting and celebrating more female athletic bodies while also holding the Victoria’s Secret model as the highest ranked beauty standard. This brought mixed emotions about how participants interpreted their experiences.

Similar to Katherine's perspective, Mandy also shared that other notable popular culture figures who has positively influenced acceptance of more curvy body types for women were the ladies of the controversial Kardashian family. She stated it simply, "I think there is an ideal body image and, I know this sounds stupid and people hate them, but thank you for the Kardashians because they have made it ok to be curvy and to be an actual woman." With this statement, it goes to show that popular culture has a powerful presence and influence on young women's lives and personal body image constructs, including these retired athletes.

While social media and popular culture was a largely agreed upon source as a contributor to the participants' body image(s), of course, it is key to mention the aspects inside of their sport that also contributed to how these former athletes viewed themselves. The sport of gymnastics as a whole was a strong influence on how these athletes processed, created and interpreted their own body image over time and experience. The multiple aspects of gymnastics that were most discussed included the standard sport requirements to perform successfully and safely, coach interactions, judge interactions and social referencing among other gymnasts. Lily brought this notion up as she said,

I think you know, body image for me, came as a whole from gymnastics. It wasn't just one thing; it was a little bit of everything. Definitely from like when I was doing my skills, to comments coaches would make, to looking at myself in the mirror at the gym to seeing myself compared to... my teammates, you know it was a little bit of everything. It wasn't just like one thing.

Another aspect of the sport that Lily did not specifically mention was the fact that they all had to train in leotards every day. Alex brought up the point that putting on a leotard was an influential aspect to her body image perception: "... I mean, the obvious one (gymnastics related factor) says 'leotard.' To me. Like to me, I'm like 'ugh I had to wear a leotard every day.'" Speaking of influential adults, Katherine credited judges, coaches and her parents for

contributing to her a part of her own body image perspective as well. She emphasized that her mom was a specific, positive role model for her in terms of modeling a balanced view of reasonable standards for maintaining a healthy body image and identity. Katherine relayed that her parents were a guiding source of maintaining a balanced, reasonable view of body image and identity through their rational approach in balancing health while working to become a successful gymnast under her coaches. This seemed to be a very important aspect of life for her growing up as a gymnast, as she was thankful that her mom treated her that way so she could learn to be a better coach to her current gymnasts. To illustrate this, she said, “Yeah for sure judges and coaches (influenced me), like having my parents be like so supportive of everything that I’m doing and wanting me to be a healthy human being and not go one way or the other (to unhealthy extremes) I think really helped me.”

Leading to the outside of gymnastics influences, there were a few other important non-gymnastics focused factors that the participants identified as influencing their body image: parental support, personality and childhood upbringing. Right after her previous statement, Katherine specifically made the point that her mom allowed her to eat unhealthy foods in moderation as long as she also ate healthy food. This balanced perspective in approaching diet was evident when she said, “’cuz my mom has always said like, ‘everything in moderation. You want a cheeseburger? Go get a cheeseburger, but just don’t do it every meal of the day.’” This example of a balanced perspective and separation of sport and life was also mirrored among the other participants, even those who had their parent(s) as their coach like Mandy and Alex. For the second theme of this inquiry, it was fascinating to hear that every single one of these participants had supportive parents and positive family upbringings throughout their gymnastics careers. The support of family, peers and coaches, along with active coping strategies likely

resulted in their identities and body image perspectives being positively influenced and perhaps protected them from the aforementioned detriments such as depression, anxiety and identity loss/confusion associated with early stages of sport retirement (Haase et al., 2002; Nordin et al., 2003; Rice et al., 2016; Rudd & Carter, 2006).

External factors were clearly influential in how the participants made sense of and created their body image perceptions. Crissey & Honea (2006, p. 250) argue that social media and general mass media sites are generally seen as a confusing source of body image ideals for women in sports due to “multiple definitions of beauty and femininity.” It was clear that this ideal was relevant to these retired gymnasts in their hopes of maintaining their physical strength yet avoiding gaining fat and too much muscle after completing their gymnastics career. This complicated ideal was reinforced by George (2005) discussing the conflicting standards of obtaining both leanness and muscle mass in female beauty standard trends.

Regarding the underlying theme of social media and its prevalence in the participants’ lives, it is important to discuss the influence and power of its presence that it has on their body image and retirement experience. While not necessarily always viewed as a positive influence on young females (Ogle et al., 2017), it appeared as though the participants actively pursued social media with some form of literacy and understanding that the images they see are not always realistic or achievable. Simultaneously, they recognized that some sources of social comparison and aspiration are available, more reasonable and even inspiring for them.

Protective Factors

For the third and final theme of this inquiry, the gymnasts highlighted the importance of planning for their pending retirement before their career ended. The main indicators of this “planning” for retirement stemmed from their clear disassociation from identifying as a

“gymnast” for a period of time prior to their career’s end. While each athlete required different amounts of time for this disassociation of identifying as a gymnast prior to their graduation, the consensus between participants was agreed in that not placing one’s full identity in the sport was helpful for them to accept retirement successfully. Referring to previous literature, Varnes et al. (2013) discusses that while more objectified athletes, including gymnasts, may internalize a thin-ideal, they also maintain a level of protection from disparaging body image concerns due to their more stable feelings about the *condition* and *function* of their body.

Such protection of extreme discouragement of body image and self-esteem was seen throughout interactions with participants such as Mandy when she discusses that she never fully placed her full identity into the sport of gymnastics because of her parental influence:

So...I think my parents didn't want us to get our hopes up in a sense. And I know that sounds bad but... they always tried to make sure we knew like, what I'm good at outside of my sport or what even... what I liked, like if I liked to bake or if I liked to cook or if I liked to ride a bike like... (they) always pushed us to... find something else that you really enjoy like no matter what it is... I honestly think it was because kind of preparing for the worst in case like, what if I put my whole life into this gymnastics thing, and then I'm 18 years old and I'm not gonna make it to college and then like what do I do? I don't know anything...

Mandy continued to elaborate that this protection of completely embodying the “gymnast” identity worked for her down the road when it came to her retiring from the sport when she said, “...when I came to college...I didn't like fully immerse myself in the gymnast image and like, ‘this is what I am’ you know?” After she had mentioned that her parents emphasized to her that she should focus on her craft and not sacrificing her identity for it completely, she distinguished that she, “haven't really had like, that hard of a time. Like it has been very fluid and very easy...” This revelation was novel to hear and showed the power that her strong, positive relationship with her parents influenced her retirement from preparing for her

career to end at a young age. By specifically “not getting her hopes up” from her parents’ point of view, this mindset may have contributed positively to protecting her identity post-gymnastics.

In addition to planning for retirement to take place early on in the process, Lavallee & Robinson (2007) and Warriner & Lavallee (2008) mention that finding new, similar activities to do soon after initially retiring from gymnastics can provide another outlet of self-expression that gymnastics once gave the athletes. For example, Alex, Katherine and Jasmine found other ways to exercise that not only fit their physical desire to remain active but also fill their time that was no longer spent doing gymnastics. After trial and error, Alex specifically found that she enjoyed CrossFit and Olympic lifting, which helped fill her time and keep her feeling physically strong like in gymnastics: “I tried a bunch of different things. I do really still, like, I like dance... I hate to swim. Um, but my new things... most consistent thing is lifting, Olympic lifting and a little bit of CrossFit.” Katherine learned that she likes to do Pilates since it is a bodyweight focused activity similar to the muscles she used in gymnastics while avoiding the heavy pounding on her bones and joints:

I work out all the time. I do Pilates. Yeah, so it’s not like, so hard on your body because I can’t like, do running or I don’t want to do like CrossFit or anything like that. I need just something that keeps me going, so Pilates has been great. And I have been doing it for like, 3 or 4 times a week.

Jasmine and Lily both found that running and generally staying physically active benefitted them once they retired as well. Lily specifically said, “Um, definitely for me, working out has always been like something that’s helped me cope with any kind of stress. So, definitely working out like going on a run or something, going to the gym, just kind of getting out of my head a bit.” Most of the retired gymnasts credited finding other ways to fill their time with work, physical activity or spending time with friends and family allowed them to not only physically take care of themselves, but also emotionally distract themselves from “missing” the sport. Katherine

echoed this when she talked about filling her time with simply focusing on tasks like planning her wedding and focusing on other current academic demands: “And that really did help me, like focusing on other things and like school and everything like that. Like I had my thesis to write...”

These retired athletes intentionally had to set out and plan things to do in order to creatively fill their time with activities that not only kept them busy and distracted, but they also sought out things that filled the athletic identity that gymnastics created for them. This allowed for stability in their identities and lead them to satisfaction both physically and with their identities after time in retirement has been established.

Positive parental and coach relationships each participant experienced also provided identity and body image protection. Such social support was expressed as a positive impact on each participant over her career, thus remaining a protective factor for avoiding negative body image and poor identity outcomes since retirement. Each participant at some point during the interview process mentioned their parents and/or coaches as having some kind of involvement in their perception of their body image and process in making sense of it. For some participants, they had their parents as their gymnastics coaches, which was unique to Alex and Mandy. Alex illustrated her experience with her parents coaching her when she said,

I mean, like I said I don't think I had a body image complex until I was in college. Um, when I was growing up, I had my parents as my coaches, and I think that they were very aware of the negative things that could happen if they weren't conscious about the way they communicated how my body looked.

While she mentioned that her parents were aware of how they approached talking to her about her weight and appearance, Alex did mention that her parents also were initially concerned when she came back home for the holidays after her first semester of college and had lost 10 pounds.

Alex elaborated, “...the first semester I lost 10 pounds and my parents thought I... had an eating

disorder. They were really worried.” Even though she took a healthy approach to lose that weight, her parents were still concerned that she was doing the right thing and staying healthy.

For Mandy, she specifically mentioned that her parents never pressured her about her body or physical appearance: “I never had them (coaches or judges or parents) telling me I need to lose weight or I need to gain weight or anything or ‘do this’ ... like honestly they, I as far as I can remember, I never got told anything about my body.” This lack of pressure between parents, coaches and athletes regarding body image is confusing regarding the literature, especially since it has been documented that it is common that athletes face body image pressures to look a certain way according to coaches and judges, especially in aesthetically driven sports (Rudd & Carter, 2006; Stirling et al., 2012).

Giannone et al. (2017) found that athletic identity is associated with anxiety and depression within the first few months of sport retirement. With this said, the participants who may have felt these symptoms early on despite their emotional anticipation and planning of these emotions, at least managed to recover from the initially shocking phase of retirement. Over time, the participants had gained back their sense of confidence and finding other things to be a part of since the initial, sensitive six-month period post-gymnastics. Clearly, the athletes in this inquiry planned for their retirement from sport ahead of time and made efforts to find other activities to do in retirement.

While Plaza et al. (2017) does not necessarily support the same findings of this inquiry, it is key to note the possibility that more “feminine” and more objectified sports (Varnes et al., 2013) may have weakened protections in other cases due to their “feminine” nature. The complicated nature of being a part of feminine sports (George, 2005) is reflected in the opposing physical ideals and responses from participants in this inquiry (trying to balance leanness versus

muscularity). In regard to other data not matching with this inquiry's findings, Stephan et al. (2007) found that retired athletes who encounter body image perception challenges are led to feel loss of self-esteem, physical self-worth and worsened perception of their physical condition while also feeling worse about their athletic competence and physical attractiveness. While initially, again, these findings may have shown up briefly for the athletes within the first six months of retirement, these feelings of loss and generally negative associations with decreased self-worth and poor physical condition did not appear to last longer than that initial time frame. Additionally, the high volume of stress and anxiety that Stephan et al. (2007) brought up were not as apparent in the participants' outlook at time of interview. This shows that participants learned to at the very least cope with retirement in productive, positive ways, if not move on completely from most negative or troubling emotions associated with the process.

Conclusions

The findings from this study demonstrated how body image and identity were complicated in nature, but not debilitating for these retired gymnasts. There were examples of both positive and negative body image and identity outcomes for these newly retired athletes. A main conclusion for this investigation was that not all gymnasts have difficulties with their body image and identity in the early stages of retirement. These retired gymnasts showed that they could thrive beyond their time in the sport due to several influential and protective factors. While there are certainly multi-sourced pressures to conform to a thin ideal, these gymnasts did not internalize that pressure so deeply and negatively. Protective aspects were in place for many of these retired athletes, such as supportive family relationships, positive coach interactions, and social media awareness.

A second conclusion drawn from this inquiry demonstrated the thin line between body image and identity satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Participants illustrated that being super thin and tall was not necessarily a desirable look. Instead, there was a desire to be lean, toned, and fit, with a more athletic look. In some ways, this fit the mold of the changing sport specific body expectations for gymnasts (e.g., strong over thin). However, it was also clear that becoming too muscular or masculine looking compared to the average woman or non-athlete was undesirable. Even though the participants did not actively pursue the unrealistic tall and super lean aesthetic, they discussed this consensual ideal.

Regarding identity, it was also clear that avoiding immersing one's identity solely into gymnastics was a positive strategy that each of these participants shared in their lives. Being surrounded by supportive people, filling time with activities that distracted participants from getting caught up in emotions and not interpreting social media body image standards negatively

helped achieve a healthy body image and well-rounded identity. The participants were aware of their surroundings and keep control of what they could in order to benefit their identity and maintain healthy body image ideals. Not conforming to unrealistic body image pressures and standards was imperative for the participants to pursue. While there was brief bouts of discouragement and dissatisfaction regarding their body image, the participants did not let their thoughts about such pressures negate their positive mindsets. Each participant had their own way of coping with retirement, body image discrepancies and general transitional events that come with retiring from the sport they spent the majority of their lives competing in.

This study was not without limitations. For example, participants were all student-athletes at the same university. Participant responses, although shared privately and individually, demonstrated similarities that could have been influenced by their attendance of the same university as each other. Although, not all participants were originally from the same area and only two of the five graduated in the same year. The implication may show up in the similarity in responses regarding body image and identity as each participant likely shared common experiences and environmental influence by attending the same university. This lack of diversity in perspectives from collegiate athletes graduating from other universities may exclude insights that other student-athletes would share.

Interviewing a larger sample of gymnasts in the early stages of retirement would also benefit future research. Ideally, future researchers will interview a diverse set of athletes from Division I universities across all geographic regions in the United States. Finally, future research goals would be to gain more diverse perspectives and from other similar aesthetic and female gendered sports outside of gymnastics. While gymnastics is a specific sport at risk for high pressures to conform to a thin ideal, there could be more research done in a similar capacity with

swimming/diving, dancing, cheerleading among other sports that maintain a similar aesthetic standard. Additionally, budding research could also look into body image ideals in similar sports such as men's gymnastics, wrestling, swimming and other aesthetic-focused male sports. More research in this area can provide more insight to the gap that men's aesthetic sports overlook.

References

- Adams, V. J., Goldufsky, T. M., & Schlaff, R. A. (2016). Perceptions of body weight and nutritional practices among male and female National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II athletes. *Journal of American College Health, 64*(1), 19-24. doi:10.1080/07448481.2015.1062770
- Beckner, B. N., & Record, R. A. (2016). Navigating the thin-ideal in an athletic world: Influence of coach communication on female athletes' body image and health choices. *Health Communication, 31*(3), 364-373.
- Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). Athletic identity: Hercules' muscles or Achilles heel?. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 24*(2), 237-254. doi: [10.1155/2013/784249](https://doi.org/10.1155/2013/784249)
- Brown, Z., & Tiggemann, M. (2016). Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: Effect on women's mood and body image. *Body Image, 19*, 37-43. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.007
- Cash, T. F. (2004). Body image: Past, present, and future. *Body Image, 1*(1), 1-5. doi:10.1016/s1740-1445(03)00011-1
- Chang, W. H., Wu, C. H., Kuo, C. C., & Chen, L. H. (2018). The role of athletic identity in the development of athlete burnout: The moderating role of psychological flexibility. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 39*, 45-51.
- Crissey, S. R., & Honea, J. C. (2006). The relationship between athletic participation and perceptions of body size and weight control in adolescent girls: The role of sport type. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 23*(3), 248-272.
- DiPasquale, L. D., & Petrie, T. A. (2013). Prevalence of disordered eating: A comparison of male and female collegiate athletes and nonathletes. *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology, 7*(3), 186-197. doi:10.1123/jcsp.7.3.186
- Furnham, A., Badmin, N., & Sneade, I. (2002). Body image dissatisfaction: Gender differences in eating attitudes, self-esteem, and reasons for exercise. *The Journal of Psychology, 136*(6), 581-596. doi:10.1080/00223980209604820
- George, M. (2005). Making sense of muscle: The body experiences of collegiate women athletes. *Sociological Inquiry, 75*(3), 317-345.
- Giannone, Z. A., Haney, C. J., Kealy, D., & Ogrodniczuk, J. S. (2017). Athletic identity and psychiatric symptoms following retirement from varsity sports. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 63*(7), 598-601.

- Guest, G., Namey, E. E., & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Haase, A. M., Prapavessis, H., & Owens, R. G. (2002). Perfectionism, social physique anxiety and disordered eating: A comparison of male and female elite athletes. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 3(3), 209-222. doi:10.1016/s1469-0292(01)00018-8
- Kostanski, M., & Gullone, E. (1998). Adolescent body image dissatisfaction: Relationships with self-esteem, anxiety, and depression controlling for body mass. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 39(2), 255-262. doi:10.1017/s0021963097001807
- Lally, P. (2007). Identity and athletic retirement: A prospective study. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8(1), 85-99. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.03.003
- Lavallee, D., Gordon, S., & Grove, J. R. (1997). Retirement from sport and the loss of athletic identity. *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, 2, 129-147.
- Lavallee, D., & Robinson, H. K. (2007). In pursuit of an identity: A qualitative exploration of retirement from women's artistic gymnastics. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8(1), 119-141. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.05.003
- Nordin, S., Harris, G., & Cumming, J. (2003). Disturbed eating in young, competitive gymnasts: Differences between three gymnastics disciplines. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 3(5), 1-14.
- O'Dea, J. A., & Abraham, S. (2000). Improving the body image, eating attitude, and behaviors of young male and female adolescents: A new educational approach that focuses on self-esteem. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 28(1), 43-57. doi:10.1002/(sici)1098-108x(200007)28:1<43::aid-eat6>3.3.co;2-4
- Ogle, J. P., Reddy-Best, K., & Park, J. (2017). Socializing girls whose bodies may not align with contemporary ideals of thinness: An interpretive study of US mothers' accounts. *Body Image*, 23, 13-27. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.07.006
- Papathomas, A., & Lavallee, D. (2010). Athlete experiences of disordered eating in sport. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, 2, 354-370.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Plaza, M., Boiché, J., Brunel, L., & Ruchaud, F. (2016). Sport = male... but not all sports: Investigating the gender stereotypes of sport activities at the explicit and implicit levels. *Sex Roles*, 76(3-4), 202-217. doi:10.1007/s11199-016-0650-x

- Rice, S. M., Purcell, R., Silva, S. D., Mawren, D., McGorry, P. D., & Parker, A. G. (2016). The mental health of elite athletes: A narrative systematic review. *Sports Medicine*, *46*(9), 1333-1353. doi:10.1007/s40279-016-0492-2
- Rudd, N. A., & Carter, J. (2006). Building positive body image among college athletes: A socially responsible approach. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, *24*(4), 363-380.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 53–80). London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Stephan, Y., Bilard, J., Ninot, G., & Delignie`res, D. (2003). Bodily transition out of elite sport: A one-year study of physical self and global self-esteem among transitional athletes. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, *2*, 192–207.
- Stephan, Y., Torregrosa, M., & Sanchez, X. (2007). The body matters: Psychophysical impact of retiring from elite sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *8*(1), 73-83. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2006.01.006
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *63*, 224-237.
- Stewart, A. D., Benson, P. J., Michanikou, E. G., Tsiota, D. G., & Narli, M. K. (2003). Body image perception, satisfaction and somatotype in male and female athletes and non-athletes: Results using a novel morphing technique. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *21*(10), 815-823. doi:10.1080/0264041031000140338
- Stirling, A. E., Cruz, L. C., & Kerr, G. A. (2012). Influence of retirement on body satisfaction and weight control behaviors: Perceptions of elite rhythmic gymnasts. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *24*(2), 129-143. doi:10.1080/10413200.2011.603718
- Sundgot-Borgen, J., & Garthe, I. (2011). Elite athletes in aesthetic and Olympic weight-class sports and the challenge of body weight and body compositions. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, *29*(Sup1). doi:10.1080/02640414.2011.565783
- Sundgot-Borgen, J., & Torstveit, M. K. (2004). Prevalence of eating disorders in elite athletes is higher than the general population. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*, *14*(1), 25-32. doi:10.1097/00042752-200401000-00005
- Varnes, J. R., Stelfson, M. L., Janelle, C. M., Dorman, S. M., Dodd, V., & Miller, M. D. (2013). A systematic review of studies comparing body image concerns among female college athletes and non-athletes, 1997–2012. *Body Image*, *10*(4), 421-432. doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2013.06.001

- Warriner, K., & Lavalley, D. (2008). The retirement experiences of elite female gymnasts: Self identity and the physical self. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 20(3), 301-317. doi:10.1080/10413200801998564
- Weiss, W. M., & Weiss, M. R. (2006). A longitudinal analysis of commitment among competitive female gymnasts. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 7(3), 309-323. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2005.08.010

Appendix A. IRB Form



ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Briley Casanova
Kinesiology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: January 29, 2019

RE: IRB# E11460

TITLE: Retired Female Gymnasts' Reflections on Body Image and Sense of Self

Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.5983
irb@lsu.edu
lsu.edu/research

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 1/29/2019

Approved X **Disapproved** _____

Approval Date: 1/29/2019 **Approval Expiration Date:** 1/28/2022

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2b

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Introduction

I would like to thank you for spending your time answering questions about your transition from being a competitive Division I gymnast to retiring from gymnastics. We will talk about a variety of different issues. Your identity will be concealed throughout this process so our conversation will stay between us. Hopefully, this will allow you to feel comfortable sharing your thoughts openly with me. Our interview should last about 30 minutes, but we can talk longer if you would like. Additionally, if you feel uncomfortable about the direction of the discussion, please say so and we will move on to the next questions. Before we start, I have 2 questions for you: Do I have your verbal consent to record this conversation? Do *you* have any questions before we start? Great, let's begin.

1. When did you start participating in gymnastics?
 - a. Tell me more about those early experiences.
2. What was it like to get recruited to a Division I gymnastics program?
3. What was your collegiate gymnastic experience like?
4. How long have you been retired?
 - a. Do you still see yourself as a gymnast? Why do you think that is?
 - b. How would you describe your identity now?
 - c. How has your identity changed since your retirement?
5. What difficulties, if any, have you experienced during the transition into retirement?
 - a. How have you coped with those difficulties?
6. What kinds of strategies have helped you adjust to life after gymnastics?
7. How would you describe your current level of fitness?
8. How has your levels of fitness changed since you've retired?
9. How difficult have these physical changes been during your transition into retirement?
10. What is the ideal body image for women in general?
11. Is this the same for female gymnasts? Explain why or why not.
12. At this point in time, which body image ideal do you most related to? Why?
13. How do you think your gymnastic experiences have shaped your body image?
 - a. Are there any other gymnastics related factors that have influenced your body image?
 - b. Are there any non-gymnastics specific factors that have influenced your body image?
14. How would you describe your current satisfaction with your body image?

Thank you for your honest answers regarding your thoughts on your body image, your athletic identity and retiring from collegiate gymnastics. Is there anything you would like to add before we conclude our interview?

Appendix C. Higher Order Themes Chart

Category	Initial Themes	Higher Order Themes
<p>Identity Associations</p> <p><i>Self-assured, confident, disciplined, emotionally intelligent, type-A (perfectionist), competitive, family-oriented, faithful, student, driven and humble</i></p> <p><i>Shifts are made through natural breaks in time and life events (getting a job, marriage, children, finding new things to do, etc.)</i></p> <p><i>Gymnast identity does not always go away, but remains a part of who they are</i></p> <p><i>Sense of belonging to things outside of themselves (religion, athletic activities, jobs, community, family, etc.)</i></p>	<p>Experience and Upbringing Drive Identity</p> <p><i>High intrinsic motivation to achieve tasks (exercise and stay healthy, maintain job workload, take care of kids/family)</i></p> <p><i>Strong positive parental influence (extrinsic motivation)</i></p> <p><i>Positive experiences with coaches, peers and sport throughout career</i></p>	<p>Main Body Image Ideals</p> <p><i>“Fit, lean, and strong”</i></p> <p><i>Victoria’s Secret Model appeal/standard, Instagram/social media standard</i></p> <p><i>Both physical/psychological aspects are associated with overall body image</i></p> <p><i>Personal standards and ideals are similar among participants, even with attitudes on reaching/not reaching unattainable body standards</i></p>
<p>Body Image Ideals</p> <p><i>Fit, lean, strong, toned, healthy, but not too thin or too muscular</i></p> <p><i>Victoria’s Secret Model body type (very thin, toned and tall) was mentioned at least once by every participant (seen as unrealistic ideal but the unanimous symbol of desirability/beauty)</i></p> <p><i>Feeling comfortable within their own body (focused on emotion versus physical traits)</i></p> <p><i>Differences between average woman and gymnast/athlete ideals</i></p>	<p>Almost Unanimous Mention of “Victoria’s Secret Model” or “Instagram Fit” Desired Body Type</p> <p><i>Thinness Does Not Equal Satisfaction</i></p> <p><i>Participants recognized the unrealistic nature of attaining these body types, but still felt a desire to look that way at some point. (They did not necessarily take steps to achieve that ideal)</i></p> <p><i>Social media (Instagram) and media outlets influence BI and celebrate thin body types</i></p> <p><i>Different from gymnastics body type (conflicting ideals)</i></p>	<p>Body Image Ideals and Identity Stem from Several Sources</p> <p><i>Instagram/social media, judges, coaches, other gymnasts (teammates and other friends or social references), parents/upbringing, personality</i></p> <p><i>Overwhelming number of places to reference body image ideals</i></p>

Category	Initial Themes	Higher Order Themes
	<p><i>Strong fear of being “too muscular” (e.g. having “man arms”)</i></p>	
<p>Connecting Body Image, Identity and Past Experiences</p> <p><i>Family, experiences in the gym/college, competitions, recruiting</i></p> <p><i>Coaches and judges were mentioned as having an influence on perception and performance outcomes throughout career</i></p>	<p>Identity Traits/Orientations are Similar Among Participants</p> <p><i>Goals > process ?</i></p> <p><i>Competition > practice ?</i></p> <p><i>Personality may be a protective factor: “Type A,” “Perfectionist,”</i></p>	<p>Protective Factors from Negative Experiences with Body Image</p> <p><i>Planning for retirement (adjusting some identity traits over time)</i></p> <p><i>Not placing entire identity into sport</i></p> <p><i>Every participant had consistent, current, strong and positive relationships with their family and coaches (social support)</i></p> <p><i>Love for the sport</i></p> <p><i>Personality</i></p> <p><i>Environment(s) facilitated positive outcomes</i></p>
<p>Shared Theories/Orientations Among Participants</p> <p><i>Achievement goal theory</i></p> <p><i>Outcome goal orientation versus process orientation</i></p> <p><i>One foot in and one foot out... early termination of gymnast identity prior to retirement in order to plan for it (protective factor)</i></p>	<p>Coping with Difficulties</p> <p><i>Planning a schedule/routine: Finding other things to fill time (staying active, not sedentary or bored)</i></p> <p><i>Finding other references/sources for identity (exercise, extra-curricular activities, leaning on social support, etc.)</i></p> <p><i>Planning for retirement to take place is a protective factor (anticipating emotions and hardships beforehand allow for goal setting and time management early on)</i></p>	

Category	Initial Themes	Higher Order Themes
	<p><i>Creating healthy habits and scheduling help ease adjustment process</i></p> <p><i>Not running away from or avoiding intense emotions throughout the process, but thinking deeply and critically about why they feel the way they do and how they can take action to cope</i></p>	

Vita

Briley Casanova was born in Dallas, Texas and graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelor's degree in Psychology. She was a four-year full scholarship team member, Senior Captain and All-Around competitor of the women's gymnastics team. After graduating from the University of Michigan in 2016, she was an intern for the United States Military Academy at West Point with the Center for Enhanced Performance (CEP) before pursuing her master's degree in Kinesiology at Louisiana State University (LSU). At LSU, she continued her interest in body image and identity in retired athletes with her thesis project while maintaining a graduate assistantship and assisting the LSU women's gymnastics team during their 2018 season. Upon completion of her master's degree, she plans to work in the mental performance coaching/sport psychology field.